

GROSS MOTOR DEVELOPMENT, SPORT PARTICIPATION AND THE BENEFITS OF ACADEMIC SKILLS IN THE CLASSROOM

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Written by Elani Fourie

For many children over the last year, the effect of not being able to participate in sport during the national lockdown due to COVID-19 must have had a major impact on not just their physical development, but also their social and academic performance. Part of what makes the school years enjoyable and memorable are the sports that children participate in – not only for the competitive aspect, but also for the many benefits that go along with it. Think of the fresh air that children take in on a daily basis, the friendships formed alongside a sports field and the joy they find in learning or accomplishing a new skill. This affects older children who have already learned the basic skills, but also impacts pre-school children who are learning to use their bodies and developing gross motor skills for the first time.

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What are gross motor skills and why do we need them?

Gross motor skills (GMS) are the ability to activate the large muscles and limbs that we use during everyday activities. Competence of motor skills may indirectly influence physical activity through increased enjoyment of physical activities. Importantly, increased enjoyment and participation of actual physical activity during early childhood may have an influence on physical activity during later years. Gross motor skills use the larger muscles in the body to conduct movements such as rolling, sitting up, crawling, walking, running, jumping, leaping, hopping and skipping.

Regular participation in physical activity has been associated with improved academic performance and daily functioning at school. This includes improved attention and memory, both of which are required for academic performance.



Physical benefits of developing gross motor skills

Positive associations exist between physical activity, cognition and academic performance in children and adolescents. Working on the development of gross motor skills helps a child to gain strength and confidence in his/her body. It also motivates exercise and physical activity, which is important for a healthy lifestyle. Developing these skills will assist when it comes to participating in skills that are more complex in future activities.

While people are becoming more aware of the physical benefits of exercise, such as strengthening of the heart and lungs, preventing weight gain, healthy bones, good posture and more, many however are still not aware of the potential brain-boosting benefits of physical activity with regard to school performance.

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How does physical development affect learning?

So many students are missing opportunities to accomplish important physical activities. Physical education class and break times are usually the first things cut when more academic time is required for lessons in reading and math's skills. For example, years ago pre-school meant to teach children how to play, listen, follow rules and interact with peers.

Today though, pre-school teachers spend more time on structured, academic lessons. This frequently translates into more seatwork time and less movement and active free playtime. Sports participation engages students in physical activities as a means to increase educational engagement and achievement. This might be through organised afterschool activities or a programme organised by a local sports club. At the end of the day, children are spending too much time in a sedentary mode and too little being physically active. Research indicates that this sedentary lifestyle has a negative effect on cognitive development, which affects school performance on a daily basis.



The impact on academic skills

During early childhood, stimulation is required to develop gross motor activities through physical exercise. The physical-motoric aspect consists of both gross motor and fine motor skills. Delays in gross motor skills can also lead to problems with fine motor abilities. A student's ability to maintain upper body support, for example, will affect his/her ability to write and read. Writing and reading (holding a book) are fine motor skills, but many aspects thereof rely on gross motor movements.

When looking at all of these aspects together, it is clear that children should be able to participate in physical activities on a daily basis to clear their head in order to refocus on academic achievements. Kinderkinetika programmes are specifically designed to help children focus in classrooms by using gross motor activities and development programmes to stimulate these aspects. COVID-19 has greatly affected the lives of children – and not just their physical aspects, but also their emotional and cognitive states. Being able to participate in Kinderkinetika sessions will enable children to be physically active as well as to participate socially with friends in a safe space. Let us hope that this uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic will soon be something of the past.

About the author

Elani Fourie completed her honours in 2016 at the NWU, Potchefstroom. She moved to George 3 years ago where she started FourieKinderkinetika focussing mainly on Perceptual motor programmes and baby stimulation. She also owns a Rhythmic Gymnastics club working with gymnasts from age 4-18. Movement and children have always been her passion.

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