Children are less physically active than they used to be. Scientists are now finding practical and effective ways to encourage children to move more.

(Credit: Getty Images)

Globally children are less active than they used to be. That could end up having lasting effects on their health, scientists say. This inactivity comes amid rising obesity rates, with one in 10 children and adolescents living with the condition. Increased sedentary time, stress, the quality of food and lower levels of sports participation have all contributed.

The good news is that understanding what makes children less active also presents opportunities to encourage them to move more, which will benefit them now and in the future. In fact, growing evidence now suggests there are practical and effective ways to do so, boosting their physical and cognitive health in the process.

Children should have 60 minutes of physical activity per day according to recommendations. Many do not meet them.

This can have lasting effects, as physical inactivity in childhood is linked to less activity in adulthood. Children that are more physically active are also more likely to be active as adults.

One longitudinal study following 712 World War Two veterans for 50 years found that participation in sports at high school was the strongest predictor for better health outcomes at 70, as well as being more physically active in older years. Those who played sports also had fewer visits to the doctor.

Numerous studies show similar effects. Exercise in childhood is linked to better long-term health too. Those who take part in youth sports have been shown to have a lower body mass index (BMI), smaller waist circumference and better mental health as well as better educational achievements and cognitive performance.

Cognitive benefits

Physical exercise benefits children in the moment too, says Nicole Logan an assistant professor of kinesiology from the University of Rhode Island in the US. "It improves body composition but also improves and maintains positive cognitive functions as children develop through adolescence," she says. "If we do more physical activity, we increase our cardiorespiratory fitness and that is good for our brain as well."

Given these benefits, there's an increasing focus among researchers on helping children and adolescents sit less and move more, according to groups like the World Health Organization (WHO).

Schools should be aiming for 60 minutes of exercise every day, according to some studies (Credit: Getty Images)

For instance, in one nine-month after-school exercise programme, Logan and colleagues found that children with obesity had better cognitive scores than those who were not part of the intervention. The activities took place after school and included moderate to vigorous activities five days per week.

This intervention was found to reduce body fat too, which is one reason cognition improved, Logan explains. That's because fat stored around our vital organs can produce inflammation – which in turn is linked to poorer cognitive function, whilst aerobic fitness and physical activity has been linked to better accuracy on complex tasks, better reaction times. and improved inhibitory control, which helps children resist impulsive reactions and is therefore key to concentration.

Logan proposes that schools should implement 60 minutes of movement per day, which would remove the burden on parents to facilitate access to sports (which can be expensive and time consuming).

Stopping stillness

Increasing physical activity doesn't need to involve structured sports either. In a study in Massachusetts in the US, simply increasing the opportunities around physical activity before, during and after school, as well as giving children better access to healthy food, resulted in lower BMIs among elementary school children. About one quarter of these children had not taken part in any sports in the year prior to the study.

"The most effective way to actually help prevent obesity among children is to improve the food environment around children, promote physical activity and have rules around screen time," says Ulla Toft, a clinical professor in the department of health at the University of Copenhagen who is undertaking a large-scale obesity intervention study in Denmark focusing on four key areas: diet, physical activity, screen use and sleep.

It wasn't about exercise, but about sitting down less – Flaminia Ronca

School-based interventions have shown promise too. One recent study which encouraged teachers to reduce sedentary time in 30 UK schools found 8% decline in waist-to-hip ratio (a measure of abdominal fat) among the children who took part, as well as a 10% increase in sports participation.

In the study, teachers were encouraged to ask children to stand when answering questions and to move around the classroom more than usual. "It wasn't about exercise, but about sitting down less," says Flaminia Ronca, from the University College London's Institute of Sport, Exercise and Health and lead author of the study. As children sit for large parts of the school day, implementing creative ways of adding movement could improve health, she says.

Parental support

It's unclear if this type of intervention will have long-term effects, but Ronca says fostering healthy behaviours early could have lasting benefits. In line with other studies, Ronca's study also suggests that the more active children were, the faster they reacted on cognitive tasks involving attention and inhibitory control.

Follow up research found that a single 30-minute physical activity session also improved children's performance on a cognitive task.

Given that physical activity often decreases among adolescents, especially for girls, parental support can also increase participation. In one US survey of both children and their parents, girls whose parents encouraged them and helped them find opportunities to participate in sports, were more likely to persist.

Similarly, as children often learn from the adults around them, research has shown that children are more likely to be physically active if their parents are active too – as well as if parents exercise with their children. This could be as simple as a bike ride in the local park or a short jog together.

Increased confidence

Another way to increase physical activity is to consider how children feel when they are moving.

Michaela James from Swansea University's medical school in the UK has found that when children feel confident and competent around movement, it increases their wellbeing. She has found that many schools focus heavily on structured physical activities, which can leave some children to feel excluded and can affect their confidence.

Giving children more choice over what activities they do could be life-changing she says. "It could be quite chaotic to hand over power to young people and say, 'just go with it' but I think that plays a massive part in raising kind and compassionate humans."

Increasing unstructured play should be simple to enact too, by encouraging active movement breaks and ensuring that break times are not removed as punishment, which has been used by some schools as a behavioural intervention.

In line with this, designing playgrounds more creatively to encourage free play, using objects like crates, tyres or wooden pallets could help increase activity levels too.

And crucially, we need to recognise that all movement is valuable, say James, whether climbing a tree, running around a playground or playing tag. "It's all about valuing what children want to be able to do," she says.

** Melissa Hogenboom is a senior health correspondent at the BBC and author of Breadwinners (2025) and The Motherhood Complex.* -**bbc,com, May 25, 2026**