

Physical Activity: Benefits of Mental Health in Preteens

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DESCRIPTION

The pre-teen years, typically between the ages of 9 and 12, are an important period in a child's development. During this time, children experience physical, emotional, and cognitive changes as they transition from childhood to adolescence. It is also a period when mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and social stress, may start to emerge. While genetics, environment, and family dynamics all play a role in shaping mental health, physical activity has proven to be a powerful tool in supporting the emotional well-being of pre-teens. Engaging in regular physical activity during these formative years not only promotes physical health but also has significant positive effects on mental and emotional health, helping pre-teens build resilience, manage stress, and enhance their overall well-being.

Physical activity, whether through structured sports, free play, or simple outdoor activities, has been shown to improve mental health in various ways. Exercise triggers the release of endorphins-chemicals in the brain that promote a sense of happiness and relaxation. Regular movement also reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol, helping children feel more balanced and less anxious. In addition to the biochemical benefits, physical activity improves sleep quality, boosts self-esteem, and fosters social interaction, all of which contribute to better mental health outcomes.

Benefits of physical activity on mental health in pre-teens

Reduced anxiety and stress: Many pre-teens experience stress due to schoolwork, peer pressure, and social challenges. Exercise acts as a natural stress reliever by reducing tension in the body and helping the mind relax. Physical activities such as running, swimming, or even simple outdoor games help channel nervous energy into positive outlets, providing an effective way to manage anxiety. Aerobic exercises, in particular, have been shown to lower anxiety levels in pre-teens. These activities promote deep breathing, increased heart rate, and better oxygen circulation, all of which help calm the mind and body.

Improved reduction in depression symptoms: Depression can affect children, and while its symptoms may manifest differently in pre-teens than in adults, they can still have a profound impact. Regular physical activity has been shown to improve mood and reduce symptoms of depression. Exercise stimulates the release of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine, which are linked to feelings of happiness and well-being. For pre-teens experiencing low mood or lack of motivation, incorporating fun physical activities into their daily routine can help boost their mood and energy levels. Team sports, in particular, offer opportunities for social bonding, which can provide emotional support and reduce feelings of isolation.

Boosted self-esteem and confidence: Pre-teens often begin to develop a stronger sense of identity and self-worth, but they can also be sensitive to criticism and comparison. Participation in physical activities can help build self-esteem and confidence. As pre-teens learn new skills, improve their abilities, and achieve personal milestones, they gain a sense of accomplishment that enhances their self-image. Whether it's scoring a goal in soccer, mastering a new dance move, or improving a personal best in running, these successes foster a sense of competence that can positively impact how pre-teens view themselves.

Better focus and cognitive function: Physical activity is not only beneficial for emotional well-being but also for cognitive function. Pre-teens who engage in regular physical exercise tend to perform better academically. Exercise increases blood flow to the brain, which supports cognitive functions like memory, concentration, and problem-solving skills. For pre-teens struggling with attention or hyperactivity, physical activity can provide an outlet to release excess energy and improve focus. Activities like swimming, cycling, or playing basketball require attention to detail and coordination, helping to strengthen cognitive skills.

Enhanced social skills and relationships: Pre-teens often face challenges in developing social skills and forming relationships with their peers. Physical activities, especially team sports, offer opportunities for social interaction, cooperation, and teamwork. These settings provide valuable lessons in communication,

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empathy, and respect for others. Participation in group activities also helps pre-teens build friendships, which are important for emotional support and a sense of belonging. Being part of a team fosters camaraderie and helps children feel connected to a group, reducing feelings of loneliness or isolation that can negatively impact mental health.

Encouraging physical activity in pre-teens: Encouraging pre-teens to engage in physical activity doesn't necessarily mean enrolling them in structured sports programs, although these can be beneficial. It can also involve more casual forms of exercise, such as riding a bike, playing tag with friends, dancing, or even walking the family dog. The key is to make physical

activity fun and engaging, ensuring that children stay motivated and enjoy the process.

CONCLUSION

Physical activity is a powerful tool for improving mental health in pre-teens. It not only supports physical development but also plays an important role in managing stress, boosting mood, building self-confidence, and enhancing cognitive function. By encouraging regular movement through fun and engaging activities, parents and caregivers can help pre-teens develop healthy habits that will benefit both their mental and physical health as they continue to grow.