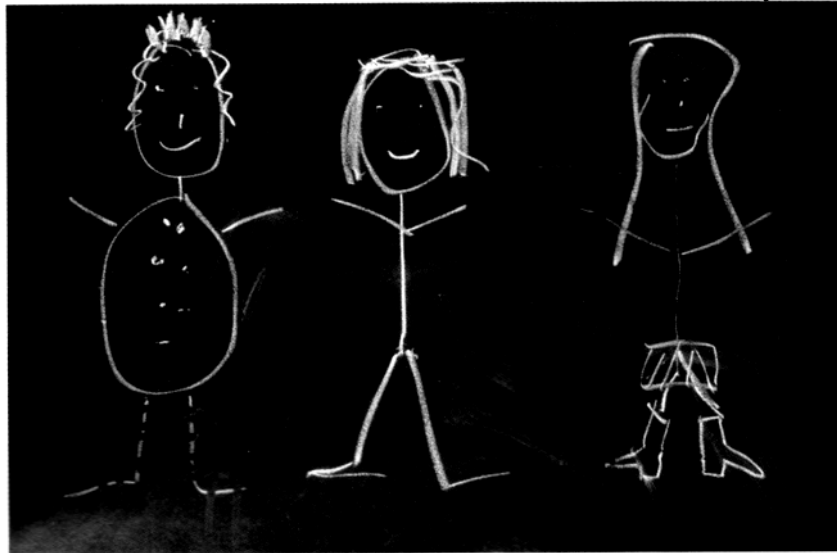


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The Reason for Recess. Children who are more physically active may do better in school

By Alice Park

FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA IS CONSTANTLY PROMOTING HER “LET’S MOVE” message to Americans, and she may be onto something. Physical activity does the body good, and there’s growing evidence that it helps the brain too.

Researchers in the Netherlands report that children who get more exercise, whether at school or on their own, tend to have higher GPAs and better scores on standardized tests. In a review of 14 studies that looked at physical activity and academic performance, investigators found that the more children moved, the better their grades were in school, particularly in the basic subjects of math, English and reading.

The data support earlier research that linked exercise with greater productivity and fewer sick days among adults and will certainly fuel the ongoing debate over whether physical-education classes should be cut as schools struggle to survive on smaller budgets. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, students need about one hour of physical activity every day to remain healthy; only 18% of high school students met this requirement in the week before a 2009 survey, and 23% had not exercised at all during that period.

Ironically, the arguments against P.E. have included concerns that gym time may be taking away from study time. With standardized test scores in the U.S. dropping in recent years, some administrators believe students need to spend more time in the classroom instead of on the playground. But as these findings show, exercise and academics may not be mutually exclusive. Physical activity can improve blood flow to the brain, fueling memory, attention and creativity, which are essential to learning. And exercise releases hormones that can improve mood and suppress stress, which can also help learning. So while it may seem as if kids are just exercising their bodies when they’re running around, they may actually be exercising their brains as well.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MARCIA LIPPMAN—GALLERYSTOCK; NERC PHOTO CONSORTIUM; SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY