

# **Physical Activity for Middle School Students**

By Nancy B. White, Ph.D.

In elementary school, children have regular opportunities for physical activity, active play, and moving their bodies to expend energy. Although there have been reductions in the number of hours of physical education programs over the past several years, elementary schools generally have playgrounds with swings, composite structures, slides, and climbing components. Open areas ideal for unrestrained physical activity are commonly centrally located on elementary school grounds. Recess and lunch periods allow the children time to engage actively. As students progress to middle school, the opportunities and facilities available to the majority of students for physical activity decline. Physical education classes are provided and there is often a gymnasium and playing fields on middle school campuses. Participation in competitive individual or team sport is available for some middle school students. However, there is a noticeable lack of resources that allow middle school students to be active on a regular basis. Traditional playground equipment is no longer age-appropriate for middle school students, and it may have no appeal for them, yet they don't have access to equipment traditionally used by adults to stay active. Given the widely accepted benefits of physical activity, school boards and middle school administrators should consider developing outdoor physical activity areas to encourage an increased level of physical activity for students.

Being physically active has physiological, psychological, social and cognitive benefits. For children, being active can enhance normal growth and development affecting the body and mind. Lack of physical activity, along with unhealthy eating habits and smoking, contributes to a number of chronic diseases according to the Centers for Disease Control. An active individual has a reduced risk for premature mortality, hypertension, obesity, coronary heart disease, diabetes, and colon cancer. Strengthening muscles and bones and laying the groundwork for lifelong fitness and health are achieved through an active lifestyle. Self-confidence, a sense of psychological well being, enjoyment, and reduction of stress are all improved through physical activity. Being physically active provides opportunities for building or strengthening interpersonal relationships and helps increase motivation. A positive correlation between physical activity and academic achievement, memory, concentration and classroom behavior has been shown through research.

The Surgeon General Physical Activity Report shows that almost half of the youth in the United States between the ages of 12-21 are not vigorously active on a regular basis. Adolescence is a critical time for the creation of lifelong habits, yet this is the time of a dramatic decline in physical activity for youth. The Physical Activity Guidelines provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provide science-based recommendations for physical activity. The guidelines for ages 6-17 include one hour or more of physical activity daily. The majority of the activity should be moderate or vigorous aerobic activity. The recommendations also state that youth should engage in muscle and bone strengthening activity at least three days per week. Consistent

movement and activity for this age group is necessary for youth to meet the minimal requirements for health and wellness.

Working toward regular physical activity for middle school students begins with physical education classes. According to the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, the intention of physical education at every level is to assist learners to become physically educated persons who participate regularly in physical activity. In order to build skills, knowledge and habits that lead to lifelong health and wellness, physical educators are rethinking their curriculum. There is a shift from a team-oriented sport emphasis in some middle school physical education classes to integration of lifetime leisure activities. Introducing and developing skills in leisure activities that are practical and accessible for youth and adults will help create a foundation for lifelong health and wellness. Physical education classes, individual and team sports, and intramural activities provide middle school students with physical activity. More opportunities are needed at the middle school level to meet the minimal guidelines for physical activity.

Key components for increasing the physical activity level of middle school students are providing opportunities that are age-appropriate, varied, and fun. Building skills and healthy habits that last throughout the lifetime requires access and motivation. Adolescents enjoy activities that are not highly structured, provide choices, and allow freedom. It makes sense to build on lifetime leisure activities being taught in physical education classes and provide equipment and areas to encourage physical activity for middle school students. Many school administrators and school boards place a priority on provision of activity spaces for elementary school students; the same should be available for students in middle schools.

Given limited budgets and available open space on many middle school campuses, one answer for increasing physical activity is placement of exercise areas or equipment outside buildings on the school grounds. Outdoor running or walking circuits that included a series of exercise stations were very popular in the 1970s and 1980s and some are still in use. The idea is experiencing a resurgence today. Being active outside in the fresh air and sunshine is very appealing. The space requirements for development of a physical activity area outside vary. An outdoor space similar to the size of a playground could be developed, or equipment could be placed at intervals around a running or walking track. Schools can design the space to meet their specifications, selecting different components to build cardio-respiratory endurance, muscular strength, and flexibility. Outdoor activity equipment specially designed for safety and low maintenance that is age-appropriate for elementary age students through adults and can withstand the elements is a good investment for school districts to consider.

An outdoor activity area with a variety of components would provide a fun, accessible and safe mechanism for increasing activity levels of middle school students. It could be used by students during or outside of physical education classes. Other children, adolescents and adults in the community could also benefit from the outdoor activity area if it was available outside school hours. Similar to a playground, an outside activity area

should include equipment that meets applicable safety standards. Appropriate signage, regular inspection, and maintenance/repair that meet manufacturer's specifications are necessary. As with any activity area, school personnel may decide to control access to the area by fencing and locking it to decrease the chance of vandalism or injury.

In addition to creation of an outdoor activity area with specialized equipment, school districts could consider developing or increasing after school programs that include a physical activity component every day for at least 60 minutes. Clubs provide another way for adolescents to be social and physically active in the school environment. Regular participation and interaction with peers in a leisure activity that the student enjoys can be motivational and increase activity levels.

A strategy for success when working with adolescents is to obtain their input and use that input as a basis for decision-making and future action. Conducting a survey, focus groups, or town hall meeting to obtain input from the students, parents and school personnel can provide the information necessary to set a course of action. After determining what type of programs, services, equipment, or activity areas are needed, it is time to look at how those items will be obtained. Collaboration between school districts and local recreation agencies is one place to start. Pooling resources such as land, personnel, and equipment can allow agencies to provide services that otherwise would not be possible. Creating synergy and effective collaborations is dependent on clear delineation of the responsibilities and contributions of each agency.

Due to national concerns regarding health and obesity, there are a wide number of grants available to schools, recreation agencies, and other organizations. A grant finder is available at [sparkpe.org](http://sparkpe.org) to help organizations locate grant funding available to help increase physical activity, reduce obesity, and improve health. The grant finder identifies hundreds of state and national grants and provides information about the funding and application process. One example of a national grant is the Carol M. White Physical Education Program Grant sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. The purpose of the funding is expansion or enhancement of physical education programs. The awards range between 100,000 to 750,000 dollars. This type of funding is ideal for school districts seeking to implement a plan for increasing physical activity of middle school students.

Seeking input, investigating options, building collaborations and securing funding are some concrete steps that can be taken to develop new initiatives that will lead to an increase in the level of physical activity for middle school students. With the knowledge that physical activity enhances health and wellness, it is important to provide access to fun, safe and physically challenging activities. Encouraging and providing opportunities for regular physical activity during adolescence will help build the knowledge, skills and habits that contribute to lifelong health and wellness.

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