

Hand-out for Parents

THE MENTAL BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

“C’MON, HONEY, just five more math problems,” Razan’s mom urges. The seven-year-old can’t seem to focus. She throws her pencil in frustration. “No! I can’t!”

Dan has been having trouble getting to sleep at night. The preteen is tired, but he feels tense and anxious in bed. “I can’t stop thinking about things,” he complains.

Laura’s not sick, but she’s bored and unmotivated. She’s spent half the afternoon whining about having nothing to do, asking for treats, or flopped on the couch.

The problems are different, but there is one thing that is likely to help all these kids, and that’s physical activity.

Physical activity and mental health

We all know that regular physical activity is great for our physical health. But did you know it is also a good stressbuster and helps with self-regulation?

- Physical activity can change your mood and energy level. If you are feeling sluggish, exercise makes you feel more energized and alert. If you are upset or agitated, it can help you feel more calm and settled.
- It stimulates the release of feel-good brain chemicals, reduces the level of stress hormones, and helps relieve anxiety.
- Focus, learning and recall are all improved after exercise. Teachers have observed that after physical



activity, their students are better able to stay on task.

- People sleep better when they have exercised during the day.

Getting things moving

How can we use this information to help our kids? We should all be trying to build regular, enjoyable physical activity into our families’ lives anyway. But you can also use it strategically:

To improve focus: When Razan was struggling to

complete her homework, her mom was tempted to try to push her through it. But instead she said, “Let’s take a break. How about I turn the rope for you and you show me how many skips you can do in a row?” She was careful to suggest an activity Razan likes. After ten minutes jumping rope, Razan was able to finish her math quite quickly.

To raise energy levels: Mopey Laura was starting to drive her dad crazy. He decided it was time to take the dog to the park. Laura resisted at first, but once she was out in the fresh snow the dog’s excited antics drew her in and her mood improved. Soon she was playing chase with the dog, making snow angels, and planning the fort she would build when they got home.

To improve relaxation: Dan loves basketball, so when his parents suggested that exercise after dinner might help him relax at bedtime, he tried shooting baskets in the driveway for a half-hour. That, plus turning off all his screens an hour before lights out, helped him fall asleep more easily most nights.

To learn more about the connections between physical activity, learning, mental health and stress management, read *Spark: The revolutionary science of exercise and the brain*, by Dr. John Ratey (Little Brown, 2008). Visit psychologyfoundation.org for more resources to help you support your children’s mental health.