

Moving It... Just a Little Bit

Deanna Macioce, MS, OTR/L

In many parts of the country we are starting the 'Back to School' phase of the year. After a few months of less structured day-to-day chaos and homework, it is time to send our children back to school. Heading back to school means that our children are, once again, required to sit and focus for long periods of time. In turn, we can plan to see increased tiredness and more behavioral issues because their bodies are seeking one important element: MOVEMENT. The school day is tough on our children, especially the younger ones whose bodies are made to move, explore, and not really wired to sit for such long periods of day.

Due to the high academic demands of our school systems, there has been some oversight to helping students be the best learners. Although it would be ideal for school systems to change the "structure" to include more exploration, movement, and recess time, it is seen as 'difficult' for them to do in an effort to meet their needs. There are always other options to the conventional school based environments, such as home-schooling or specialized schools, but those options are not fit for everyone, just the same as the conventional school system is not best for every child. More importantly, providing our children with what their bodies need should not have to be an "extra" in the educational system. Therefore, instead of looking for the "big change" or the initiation of a new program, let's look at ways, even in small doses, to add more movement into our children's day to help improve the building blocks required for learning.

In the school environment:

Transition with movement - Have kids play a quick round of Simon Says or Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes, do a walk around the room in between subjects, or simply let them stand up, stretch and move positions. Integrate animal walks (bear crawls, kangaroo hops, crab walks) as a way they navigate through the classroom during a designated time. Simply take a 2-3 minute walk around the building as a class. Consideration is given to the minutes that these activities may take, but in the long run, most children will have improved focus, participate more and learn better.

Change the position - In the middle of a lesson, let children simply stand for 2 minutes during it, do a lesson where they can sit on the floor, or even take it outside on nice days. Take turns for allowing children to participate in an activity at the board, either as a class or just by letting them complete a worksheet that is taped to the board. Changing the position helps to change the focus.

Just add movement - Rotate daily through classroom duties, such as errand runner, passing out papers and supplies, and collecting items.

Although an orderly classroom is ideal for learning, allow children to get up to turn in papers versus passing them forward. Or make it a group effort by having them turn in items by playing a game...ie. students who are wearing red, sit in this row, have brown hair, etc.

Do not forget recess and breaks - Encourage participation in recess and always allow time for it. Do not use taking away recess time as the punishment for poor behavior. Most times this is what the students need, and poor behavior comes from their bodies needing more time for movement and unstructured play, so taking it away defeats helping them succeed for the rest of the day.

Do not wait until the children are squirming, attention is lacking, or behavioral issues are increasing...integrate these ideas and you will see that kids are better able to handle the day.

And these thoughts and ideas are not recommended blindly, knowing that initially these changes will increase some of the energy level and cause chaos, but once students learn that they are just part of the day, then those issues will calm down and better focus and learning will begin.

In the home environment:

Take a break before homework - As parents, it is best to not require homework to be done as soon as children walk in the door, especially if they just sat on a bus for a long time. Yes, schedules are busy, and the homework demands are often unrealistic, but letting children move a bit before homework will improve their focus and participation. Let the kids play outside, take a walk, set up an in-house obstacle course, for 15 minutes. It is amazing how even a short amount of time, 15 minutes will help. Leave the mail for your child to get if a walk is included.

Do homework in short spurts - In addition, just like at school allow them to work in short periods of time. When they are already exhausted, 15 minutes is a good recommendation with a 1-2 minute movement break. Ideally, it would be nice if you could get them to help you carry a laundry basket during that time, but you probably would get more luck out of letting them shoot 10 baskets at the basketball hoop or dancing to a favorite song.

Encourage movement - Throughout the evenings and weekend, provide and encourage more opportunities to help out with small chores; sweeping floors, taking out garbage, carrying groceries. Many natural jobs around the house help improve child's proprioceptive system, which in-turns improves their focus and ability to sit for periods of time.

For children who are not participating in sports encourage family time to take a bike ride, go on a walk, or just get out and move. Children learn best by example, so always telling them to do something does not work...take some time to join in!