

Movement for Mental Health in Schools

Why should children move more for mental health?

Regular movement during the school day helps children to:

- Feel less tension, stress, and mental fatigue.
- Feel more energised after a natural energy boost.
- Experience a sense of achievement.
- Gain focus and motivation across all areas of learning.
- Feel less cross or frustrated.
- Build a healthy appetite.
- Have fun and boost endorphins.

How schools can encourage movement

Active habits and daily routines:

- Implement The Daily Mile from Nursery through Year 6 — encouraging children to run, jog, or walk a mile during the school day.
- Build mini movement breaks into classroom time: calf raises, shoulder rolls, torso twists, knee lifts, bouncing or jumping on the spot.
- Use fun whole-class instructions to create movement breaks in assembly or lesson time, reducing the risk of cognitive overload — for example: "Everyone with a birthday in August, stand up and sit down."
- Create circuits for children to follow, including balancing, jumping, squatting, lifting, and hanging.
- Have a skipping competition — who can skip for 30 seconds, or complete 100 skips?
- Encourage hopscotch and French skipping during break times.
- Play duck, duck, goose in the hall or playground.

Breathing and mindfulness:

- Practise breathing exercises: four counts in, eight counts out; humming bee breath; mountain breathing.
- Get outside and walk or run in nature, then pause and ask children to mindfully notice what they can feel, see, smell, and hear.
- Practise basic yoga moves to strengthen the body and calm the mind.

Outdoor and cross-curricular activities:

- Create a scavenger hunt with clues that encourage running around school grounds — link it to a current class topic, or to maths and science questions.
- Go on a bug or tree hunt: give specific things to find and work as a team to complete the list.
- Make art in nature using materials from the local environment — encouraging movement, creativity, and curiosity.
- Draw a giant grid with chalk on the playground and play battleships, linking the activity to coordinates in maths.
- Create an outdoor learning environment and develop your own version of a Forest School, with activities such as making a mini pond, a bird feeding table, or a bug hotel.
- Build a waterproof den and link it to the science topic of materials, letting children discover which materials work best.

Further resources

- The Daily Mile: thedailymile.co.uk
- Mental Health Awareness Week: mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/public-engagement/mental-health-awareness-week
- Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition: cypmhc.org.uk
- PE with Joe Wicks: youtube.com/thebodycoach