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[Home](#) / [lifestyles](#) /

Fitness: Exercise to optimize brain function

By Maria Howard

It's a proven fact that exercise enhances brain power. So make sure you and your children get plenty of it every day.

As we approach another school year, it's more apparent than ever that our children need to get as much exercise as possible. We're facing unprecedented obesity rates among children. And we want their bodies — and their brains — to work as well as possible.

Consider this statement by John Ratey, a Harvard Medical School professor and psychiatrist who has dedicated his career to research on this subject: "Exercise is the single most powerful tool you have to optimize your brain function."

I met Ratey a few years ago when he came to Richmond to speak at a forum sponsored by Riverside School. Ratey was inspiring, to say the least. His work has prompted schools across the nation to implement exercise programs that have proven to enhance academic performance and cut down on behavioral problems.

For example, the test scores of high school kids in Naperville, Ill., took a significant leap after the physical education teacher there implemented a before-school running and circuit-training program that boosted heart rates and, in turn, improved their ability to learn.

Across the nation, schools that specialize in kids with learning disabilities have woven more movement into classroom activities. They have found that the increased activity helps children focus and learn more easily.

Here in Virginia, at least one principal has mounted a bicycle on a stationary trainer in his office. When a problem kid pays a visit, he asks the child to ride the bike awhile, thus getting out some of that excess energy and making the child more prepared to go back into class.

That story was shared with me by Vicki Miller, the immediate past president of the Virginia Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance. She retired a few years ago as physical education teacher at Crestwood Elementary in Bon Air, where she had implemented a variety of groundbreaking programs to encourage children to bike, walk and run more.

When she retired, she kept moving on this push.

She lobbied hard for the state to mandate 150 minutes of physical education per week for elementary and middle school students, but the bill was vetoed by Gov. Bob McDonnell, largely due to funding concerns.

Miller hasn't stopped pushing for increased activity, though. In addition to before- and after-school exercise options, she's hoping more classroom teachers will adopt "brain breaks" where they allow kids to get up from the desk to move.

"I think sometimes the classroom teachers think that the kids will get too rambunctious... and they're not going to be able to get them back in their desks," she said.

But there are ways to move — maybe yoga stances beside the desk or tricep dips off the edge of the chair — that don't get kids so revved up that they can't settle back down, she said.

The use of resistance balls for children to sit on, instead of chairs, has allowed for increased movement in many classrooms. Some teachers are even using "Dance, Dance Revolution" video games and Wii Sports as breaks. That works for some kids.

"That's what they know and that's what they like," Miller said.

Overall, Virginia schools are headed in the right direction, Miller said, with increased emphasis on movement throughout the day.

"I think everybody is really looking at more creative ways to get kids exercising and moving."