

'THIS IS THE NEW PE'

## Psychiatrist Urges Exercise to Boost Children's Brains

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LAKELAND | Want healthier, smarter children?

Make exercise a consistent part of their lives.

Dr. John J. Ratey, a Harvard University psychiatrist who specializes in exercise and the brain, can provide evidence from a growing number of studies that exercise boosts brain power.

"We have to start young," Ratey said Monday night in a program at Florida Southern College in Lakeland.

"It's really hard to change people's minds once they get set. That's why I'm a missionary for the schools, to get our schools to change."

He shared studies, some from medical centers and others from school districts, to illustrate the importance of ongoing physical activity.

Dressed casually in jeans, the associate professor, 64, delivered statistics like raisins spread through a tasty cake, heavily laced with humor and examples of improvement.

He got chuckles and applause when he discussed the pressure put on educators by "what I call the no child helped at all law."

Ratey and members of Polk Vision's Building a Healthier Polk, see two key elements of change:

Get physical education, recess and break time re-instated in schools that abandoned them while focusing on improving test scores.

Offer exercise tailored to all students, not just the ones who excel in sports.

Fitness and lifestyle change are the goals they promote.

Some programs taking this new approach occur before and after school, some led by parents and volunteers, others by school staff.

Monitors measure how well students do at meeting their target heart rates, which gives students without sports skills the ability to shine in walking, running, dancing



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Dr. John Ratay, associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, speaks Monday during the 'Strengthening our Schools' program at Florida Southern College in Lakeland.

"This is the new PE," he said. "It's not just throwing the ball out. It's not focused on sports. It's focused on every kid moving as much as possible."

Sports aren't forbidden, but a soccer game that once had two 12-person teams instead might become eight games, each with two three-person teams competing.

That keeps more children moving, said Kathleen O'Leary Wright, senior coordinator of physical education for Polk County public schools.

A handful of Polk schools, through grant money, are having positive results by using these new methods, she said.

"We're getting away from sports education and toward fitness education," Wright said. "PE for all students."

At Crystal Lake Middle School in Lakeland, for example, up to 150 students arrive early to take part in its fitness program. A fitness center and zumba, a form of dance, are part of what's available, she said.

Morning discipline problems at Crystal Lake have declined since the program began, Wright said.

She is part of Building a Healthier Polk, which collaborated with Florida Southern's School of Education to bring Rately for the talk on "Strengthening our Schools."

He is the author of "Spark, the Revolutionary Science of Exercise and the Brain," which has more details on some studies he mentioned Monday.

Among them is the educational achievement in a Naperville, Ill., district that became a model of promoting fitness.

After years of fitness, the district took Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study testing.

Ninety-seven percent of its eighth-graders were tested. The district placed first worldwide in science and sixth in math, Rately said, adding that districts less affluent than Naperville also improved after copying its fitness approach.

Schools in Titusville, Pa., started the new method in 2000. Its standardized test scores, then below the state average, improved to 17 percent above the state average in reading and 18 percent above in math, Rately said in his 2008 book.

The California Department of Education found over several years that students with higher fitness scores also had higher test scores.

"It helps regulate our minds," he said Monday. "It helps improve our attention. It increases our motivation."

When asked how a teacher could quickly promote activity, he suggested "brain breaks," having everyone stand up 20 minutes into the class and do four minutes of exercise.

"Get everybody doing it and you leading them," he said, stressing the importance of teachers being active, too.

Patty Strickland, a member of Building a Healthier Polk, appreciated his suggestions.

"If we don't start with our kids, how are we going to cut obesity down?" she asked.

mental benefits of exercise apply also to adults who want to keep their mental acuity sharp and their productivity high.

"It's never too late," he said.

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