**Being fit doesn't just boost kids' physical health, it keeps their brains sharp too, says the latest research. Here's how to get kids to love exercise.**

By [Marie Suszynski](http://www.everydayhealth.com/contributing-writers-and-editors.aspx)

Medically reviewed by [Niya Jones MD, MPH](http://www.everydayhealth.com/medical-reviewers.aspx)



An hour on the soccer field, a hike through the woods, or a game of tag — how about that for homework tonight for your child? It may sound more like slacking off than schoolwork, but researchers are finding that exercise helps shape kids’ brains in ways that actually improve school performance.

According to a [**review**](http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1107683) of 14 studies published in 2012 in the journal JAMA Pediatrics, there is a clear connection between physical fitness and academic performance: Students who were physically active were more likely to get better grades, score higher on cognitive tests, or both. The latest [**research**](http://kch.illinois.edu/research/labs/neurocognitive-kinesiology/files/Articles/Scudder_2014_TheAssociationBetweenAerobic.pdf) on fitness and brainpower, published in 2014 in the journal Brain and Cognition, adds to those remarkable discoveries. Results showed that kids who were more aerobically fit had better language skills than kids who weren’t as fit.

“While earlier studies showed that fitness may help improve overall academic performance, the newest research is the first to use neuroimaging to look at the specific relationship between kids’ fitness levels and language skills,” says study author Charles Hillman, PhD, a professor in the department of kinesiology and community health at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In the study, the researchers recorded the electrical activity of the brains of 46 kids while they read sentences, some written correctly and some with mistakes. They also measured the kids’ aerobic capacity, known as VO2 max, which reflects how well the body uses oxygen for energy.

They found that the kids who were more in shape — those who were better at taking up oxygen during exercise — tended to have faster neuroelectric responses associated with understanding context and grammar while reading. These kids also performed better on tests that included the language skills they need for school.

**How to Get Your Children to Love Exercise**

Increasing children’s physical activity can help increase their fitness level. To measure current fitness levels, beyond getting a fitness test at a lab or using devices such as heart monitors, most schools perform fitness tests, such as the [**FitnessGram**](http://www.fitnessgram.net/). These are good estimates of physical fitness, Hillman says.

Hillman recommends following advice from the Institute of Medicine, which suggests children get 60 minutes of intermittent moderate to vigorous physical activity every day.

Here are several ways to create more opportunities for physical activity that your children will love:

* **Sign them up for sports.** Encourage your children to participate in a physical activity they are drawn to, such as running, biking, swimming, or skating. You could also consider signing them up for a soccer league or other activity, such as football, baseball, martial arts, dance, skating, skiing, or gymnastics. The key is to let children choose the activity, so they don’t feel like they’re forced to do it and end up abandoning it later.
* **Make exercise fun.** When kids are not involved in an organized activity, parents can plan time for other types of exercise, such as playing outside during the daylight hours after school. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) also suggests having active toys around the house, such as balls, jump ropes, scooters, bikes, and a basketball hoop.
* **Mind the schedule.** The AAP also advises not to let your kids become overscheduled with sedentary activities. That way, there’s enough opportunity throughout the day to get exercise.
* **Weave exercise into family time.** Parents who are good role models should instill healthy fitness habits in their children, Hillman says. That means going for weekend bike rides with your kids, squeezing in a game of tennis, or even turning household chores that burn calories — like raking leaves or gardening — into a family affair.
* **Support physical education.** Be sure to express support for physical education to your child’s school. The Institute of Medicine’s recommendations state that more than half of a child’s daily physical activity should happen during the school day.

“There is a wealth of data beginning to accrue that demonstrates physical activity is not only beneficial for the health of the body but also the health of the brain,” Hillman says. Recognizing the connection between exercise and brainpower and supporting your child’s healthy habits is a gift your child will benefit from for life.