BG Pulse Journal USA
ISSN:1947-2536 http://www.bgpulseusa.com/index.php/bg

PHYSICAL INACTIVITY AMONG SCHOOL-AGED STUDENTS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Master's Student, Department of Physical Culture
Asia International University
Suvonov Oybek Odil o'g'li
suvonovoybek47@gmail.com
doi:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23275996

Abstract: Physical inactivity among children and adolescents is a major global health and educational concern. Most adolescents do not achieve recommended levels of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, while sedentary time and screen-based behaviors occupy a substantial portion of daily life. This review examines individual, social, environmental, and institutional factors that contribute to inactivity and analyzes the role of physical education in addressing the problem. Physical education cannot compensate alone for insufficient movement across the entire day, but it provides an equitable setting in which all students can develop skills, knowledge, confidence, and motivation for active living. Effective programs maximize active learning time, offer a varied curriculum, use inclusive teaching, connect lessons with out-of-school opportunities, and avoid practices that alienate less-skilled students. The review supports a coordinated approach combining quality physical education, active breaks, extracurricular opportunities, active transport, family engagement, and supportive community environments. Physical education should be treated as a core educational component of public health promotion rather than as an optional recreational period.

Keywords: physical inactivity, adolescents, physical education, sedentary behavior, school health

Introduction

Physical inactivity has become one of the most common behavioral risk factors affecting children and adolescents. International estimates show that a large proportion of young people do not achieve the recommended average of at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day. This widespread lack of movement is a major public health and educational concern because habits established during childhood and adolescence can influence health and activity patterns later in life. Insufficient physical activity is associated with several negative outcomes. Young people who remain inactive may experience lower cardiorespiratory fitness, weaker muscular endurance, reduced bone development, and greater cardiometabolic risk. Physical inactivity may also be connected with poorer emotional well-being, higher stress, lower mood, reduced self-confidence, and fewer opportunities for positive social participation. These effects show that inactivity is not only a physical health issue but also a broader developmental concern [1].

Modern living environments often reduce opportunities for spontaneous movement. Many students travel by car or public transport rather than walking or cycling. Academic pressure and

long periods of seated study can limit time available for activity. In some communities, a shortage of safe parks, sports facilities, or public spaces makes outdoor movement difficult. Concerns about traffic, crime, weather, or supervision may further restrict independent play and active travel. Screen-based entertainment also shapes daily routines. Smartphones, computers, social media, streaming platforms, and digital games can occupy large amounts of leisure time. Although technology itself is not always harmful, prolonged sedentary use may replace movement, outdoor activity, sleep, and face-to-face interaction. For many students, physical inactivity results from the combined influence of school demands, transport systems, family routines, neighborhood conditions, and digital habits.These influences cannot be addressed through individual motivation alone. Telling students to "be more active" may have limited effect when they lack safe spaces, time, confidence, equipment, or social support. Effective responses therefore require changes in school organization, community environments, family practices, and access to inclusive activity opportunities. Physical activity should be made realistic, enjoyable, and available rather than treated only as a matter of personal discipline. Physical education has a unique role because it is the only school subject in which purposeful movement is the central medium of learning. Through PE, students can develop motor competence, confidence, knowledge, motivation, and experience in different forms of activity. Lessons may introduce sports, dance, fitness, outdoor activities, active games, and recreational movement that students can continue beyond school [2].

However, the impact of physical education depends on its quality and frequency. A limited number of lessons, excessive waiting time, repetitive activities, or narrow emphasis on competition may not provide sufficient benefit. Quality PE should maximize meaningful movement, offer progressive learning, include students with different abilities, and help learners experience success. It should also develop understanding of why physical activity matters and how it can be integrated into daily life. Inclusion is especially important. Students who feel embarrassed, excluded, or unsuccessful may become less willing to participate both in school and outside it. Teachers should therefore provide varied activities, flexible challenge levels, cooperative opportunities, and assessment based on progress rather than comparison. Positive experiences can strengthen confidence and increase the likelihood of continued participation. The contribution of PE is also stronger when it is connected with broader school policy. Active breaks, after-school programs, safe walking and cycling routes, access to facilities, family engagement, and movement-friendly school routines can reinforce the lessons learned in PE. A coordinated whole-school approach is more effective than relying on one subject alone. Overall, physical education can play a central role in reducing inactivity, but it cannot solve the problem independently. Its greatest contribution lies in providing high-quality, frequent, inclusive, and meaningful movement experiences while supporting wider school and community strategies. When students gain competence, confidence, knowledge, and access to enjoyable activity, they are more likely to develop active habits that continue beyond the school years.

Factors Contributing to Physical Inactivity

Individual factors include low confidence, limited motor competence, health conditions, fatigue, and previous negative experiences. Young people who feel unskilled may avoid activity,

reducing opportunities to improve and creating a cycle of disengagement. Social factors include family habits, peer norms, gender expectations, and the availability of supportive adults. Adolescents may stop participating when activities conflict with identity or when environments tolerate teasing. Environmental factors include safe parks, walkable routes, sports facilities, weather, cost, and transport. Opportunities are distributed unequally, making inactivity partly an equity issue. School factors include limited curriculum time, long seated lessons, unsuitable facilities, narrow sport offerings, and assessment practices that reward high performers. These are modifiable through policy and pedagogy [3].

Table 1.

Factors influencing physical activity and possible school responses

Level	Example barrier	Possible response
Individual	Low confidence	Progressive tasks and private feedback
Social	Peer exclusion	Cooperative norms and careful grouping
Environmental	Limited facilities	Flexible use of spaces and partnerships
Institutional	Insufficient curriculum time	Protect PE and add active opportunities
Economic	Cost of participation	Free clubs and shared equipment

The Educational Role of Physical Education

Quality PE develops physical literacy: the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding needed to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activity. The goal is broader than producing fitness during one lesson. Lessons can expose students to diverse forms of movement including games, athletics, dance, outdoor activity, fitness, martial arts, and recreational pursuits. Variety increases the chance that students find meaningful options. PE also teaches how to plan activity, monitor intensity, warm up, recover, manage risk, and evaluate information about health. These competencies support independent participation. Active lesson time matters. Administrative delays, elimination games, and long queues reduce movement. Small-sided games, stations, sufficient equipment, and clear routines can increase participation without sacrificing learning.

Inclusive Strategies

Tasks should include multiple difficulty levels and allow success for beginners. Grouping should avoid repeatedly exposing lower-skilled students. Cooperative goals can complement competition. Girls, students with disabilities, larger-bodied students, and students from less active families may face specific barriers. Consultation with students can reveal concerns about clothing, privacy, facilities, or curriculum relevance. Assessment should emphasize progress, knowledge, effort, and application rather than genetic advantages or prior sport experience. Fitness testing should be educational, confidential, and used cautiously.

Beyond the Physical Education Lesson

Because one or two weekly lessons cannot provide all recommended activity, schools need a whole-of-school approach. Active classroom breaks, recess, extracurricular clubs, active transport, and community partnerships extend opportunities. PE teachers can contribute expertise to school planning, but responsibility should not rest on them alone. Administrators, classroom teachers, families, municipalities, and health services all influence activity opportunities. School initiatives should avoid assuming that all students can join fee-based clubs. Free or low-cost options and access to equipment are important for equity. Policy discussions should distinguish between increasing activity during lessons and developing long-term participation. A lesson can produce high step counts without teaching students how to choose, plan, and enjoy activity independently. Sustainable impact requires both sufficient movement and meaningful learning [4].

Discussion and Practical Implications

From a curriculum perspective, the topic should be connected with explicit learning outcomes rather than treated as an occasional enrichment activity. Teachers need to identify what students should know, perform, explain, or evaluate after the learning sequence. This alignment helps prevent attractive activities from becoming disconnected from physical literacy, health understanding, or responsible participation. Implementation should proceed gradually and include student feedback. A small-scale trial allows teachers to observe participation patterns, technical or organizational difficulties, and unintended exclusion. Students can explain which features support confidence and which create pressure. Their perspectives are especially important because engagement may differ according to prior experience, gender, disability, socioeconomic conditions, and confidence.Professional learning is another requirement. Teachers need opportunities to examine practical examples, plan adaptations, and discuss ethical dilemmas with colleagues. One-time technical training is rarely sufficient. Sustainable change is more likely when schools provide time for collaborative planning, access to support, and freedom to modify approaches according to local conditions. Future research should move beyond short interventions and self-reported enjoyment. Longer studies are needed to examine learning retention, transfer to out-of-school behavior, inclusion, teacher workload, and possible negative effects. Mixed-method designs can combine activity or performance data with interviews and observations, providing a fuller understanding of how and why an approach works for different learners.

Recommendations for Schools and Teachers

At school level, implementation should be supported by written principles that clarify educational purpose, responsibility, safety, accessibility, and evaluation. These principles do not need to be complex, but they should prevent inconsistent practice between classes and ensure that innovations remain connected to curriculum expectations. Teachers should prepare alternative pathways before the lesson. Equipment failure, student discomfort, injury, limited space, or unequal access should not stop participation. A well-planned alternative can address the same objective through different materials, roles, or levels of challenge, protecting both inclusion and instructional time. Assessment should combine several sources of evidence. Observation, student explanation, reflection, peer interaction, and performance can reveal different dimensions of learning. Reliance

on a single score may conceal progress and disadvantage students whose strengths are not captured by standardized measures. Finally, the value of any approach should be judged by its effect on the least engaged students as well as on the class average. An intervention that raises overall participation while increasing embarrassment or exclusion for a smaller group cannot be considered fully successful. Equity, dignity, and meaningful learning should remain central criteria [5].

Conclusion

Physical inactivity develops through the combined influence of personal, social, environmental, and institutional factors. Individual motivation is important, but it cannot fully explain why some students are active while others are not. Confidence, previous experience, family support, peer relationships, school schedules, transport systems, access to facilities, neighborhood safety, and digital habits all shape opportunities for movement. For this reason, inactivity should be addressed as a complex educational and public-health issue rather than as a simple failure of personal responsibility. Physical education is essential because it reaches nearly all students and provides structured opportunities to develop the knowledge, competence, confidence, and motivation required for active living. Through high-quality PE, learners can experience different forms of movement, discover activities that suit their interests, and understand how physical activity contributes to health and well-being. These experiences may be especially important for students who have limited access to sport or recreation outside school.

The contribution of PE is strongest when lessons are frequent, inclusive, physically active, and educationally purposeful. Students need sufficient time to move, but movement time alone is not enough. Lessons should also develop motor skills, decision-making, self-regulation, health knowledge, and positive attitudes toward participation. Activities should be adapted so that learners with different abilities, confidence levels, and backgrounds can experience progress and success. Schools should protect curriculum time allocated to physical education and avoid treating it as secondary to academic subjects. Reducing PE time may limit one of the few regular opportunities many students have to be active. At the same time, PE should not operate in isolation. Its impact is greater when it is connected with active classroom breaks, after-school opportunities, school sport, active travel, accessible facilities, and supportive family and community initiatives.

Comprehensive school activity policies should therefore place physical education at the center of a broader movement culture. Teachers, school leaders, families, and local organizations can work together to create more frequent and varied opportunities for activity throughout the day. Such coordination helps reinforce the skills, confidence, and habits developed during PE lessons. The overall aim should not be limited to increasing the number of minutes students spend moving. Although activity volume is important, sustainable participation depends on whether students find movement meaningful, enjoyable, achievable, and personally relevant. A student who develops competence but dislikes every activity may remain inactive, while a learner who discovers an enjoyable and accessible form of movement may continue participating beyond school. For this reason, physical education should help students build long-term and personally meaningful relationships with physical activity. This requires choice, variety, progression, inclusion, reflection, and opportunities to connect school learning with everyday life. When PE is protected, well taught,

and integrated into wider school policy, it can contribute not only to immediate activity levels but also to lifelong engagement in active living.

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