

Exercise reduces suicide attempts by 23 percent among bullied teens

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As high schools across the country continue to reduce physical education, recess, and athletic programs, a new study shows that regular exercise significantly reduces both suicidal thoughts and attempts among students who are bullied.

Using data from the CDC's National Youth Risk Behavior Survey of 13,583 high school students, researchers at the University of Vermont found that being physically active four or more days per week resulted in a 23 percent reduction in suicidal ideation and attempts in bullied students. Nationwide nearly 20 percent of students reported being bullied on school property.

Previous studies have shown that exercise has positive effects on various mental health measures. This is the first, however, to show a link between physical activity and a reduction in suicidal thoughts and attempts by bullied students, who are also at increased risk for poor academic performance, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, sadness and substance abuse.

Overall, 30 percent of students in the study reported feeling sad for two or more weeks in the previous year while more than 22 percent reported suicidal ideation and 8.2 percent reported actual suicidal attempts during the same time period. Bullied students were twice as likely to report sadness, and three times as likely to report suicidal ideation or attempt when compared to peers who were not bullied. Exercise on four or more days per week was also associated with significant reductions in sadness.

"I was surprised that it was that significant and that positive effects of exercise extended to kids actually trying to harm themselves," said lead author Jeremy Sibold, associate professor and chair of the Department Rehabilitation and Movement Science. "Even if one kid is protected because we got them involved in an after-school activity or in a physical education program it's worth it."

High schools cutting physical education programs nationwide

The release of Sibold's study in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* comes at a time when 44 percent of the nation's school administrators have cut significant amounts of time from physical education, arts and recess so that more time could be devoted to reading and mathematics since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, according to a report by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. The same report showed that the percentage of schools offering physical education daily or at least three days a week has declined dramatically between 2001 and 2006.

Overall, it is estimated that only about half of America's youth meet the current evidence-based guideline of the U.S. Health and Human Services Department of at least 60 minutes of vigorous or moderate-intensity physical activity daily. In its biennial survey of high school students across the nation, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reported that nearly half said they had no physical education classes in an average week.

"It's scary and frustrating that exercise isn't more ubiquitous and that we don't encourage it more in schools," says Sibold. "Instead, some kids are put on medication and told 'good luck.' If exercise reduces sadness, suicide ideation, and suicide attempts, then why in the world are we

cutting physical education programs and making it harder for students to make athletic teams at such a critical age?"

Sibold and his co-authors, Erika Edwards, research assistant professor in the College of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences, Dianna Murray-Close, associate professor in psychology, and psychiatry professor James J. Hudziak, who has published extensively on the positive effects of exercise on mental health outcomes, say they hope their paper increases the consideration of exercise programs as part of the public health approach to reduce suicidal behavior in all adolescents.

"Considering the often catastrophic and long lasting consequences of bullying in school-aged children, novel, accessible interventions for victims of such conduct are sorely needed," they conclude.

More information: The article "Physical Activity, Sadness, and Suicidality in Bullied US Adolescents" by Jeremy Sibold, Erika Edwards, Dianna Murray-Close, and James J. Hudziak ([dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2015.06.019](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2015.06.019)) appears in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, Volume 54, Issue 10 (October 2015)

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