

Improving physical fitness strongly linked to lower absenteeism for New York City middle schoolers

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Increasing physical fitness among middle-school children attending schools in New York City was associated with decreasing absenteeism from school, according to preliminary research presented at the American Heart Association's Epidemiology and Prevention | Lifestyle and Cardiometabolic Health Scientific Sessions 2019, a premier global exchange of the latest advances in population-based cardiovascular science for researchers and clinicians.

"In a previous study we found a strong relationship between middle schoolers' health-related fitness improvement and [school](#) absenteeism reduction. In this study, we looked specifically at whether the fitness-absenteeism relationship changed in middle schoolers exposed to different types of [poverty](#)," said study author Emily D'Agostino, Dr.P.H., M.S., M.Ed., M.A., senior researcher and epidemiologist, Miami-Dade County Dept of Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces in Miami, Florida.

"We found that children who started the study as chronically absent were no longer missing enough school to be at high risk for the negative factors associated with chronic absenteeism, such as substance abuse, increased rates of teen pregnancy or juvenile delinquency," D'Agostino said. "We saw the biggest improvements for youth attending schools in high poverty neighborhoods and in girls attending schools with a high proportion of students qualifying for free/reduced-price school meals."

Researchers studied available information on more than 360,000 6th through 8th graders in public schools within the five boroughs of New York City over a seven-year period, all of whom received annual physical fitness assessments. Of that group, 67 percent were black or Hispanic, 51 percent were male, and 69 percent qualified for free or reduced-price school lunches. Poverty was assessed by individual [student](#) household income, percent of students qualifying for free/reduced-price school meals and/or by neighborhood statistics.

Although all students showed reductions in absenteeism if they had improvements in fitness, boys and girls experiencing high poverty in their home, school and/or neighborhood experienced a dose-response relationship between being more fit and being less likely to be absent from school. Girls in high-poverty neighborhoods experienced the greatest reduction in absenteeism—an 11 percent improvement in attendance a year after they had a large increase in [physical fitness](#).

The findings point to the need for more research looking at interventions that might help all children and teens—particularly those exposed to poverty—to improve their [fitness](#) and how those interventions impact [absenteeism](#).

The American Heart Association recommends providing all students with 150 minutes per week of physical education in elementary schools and 225 minutes per week in middle schools and high schools.

Provided by American Heart Association

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