

# Researchers make case for teen physical activity

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Canadian youth are standing still. In fact, they're one of the most sedentary groups in society. And while there has been research on classroom-based physical activity, very little study has been done

specifically on physical activity in adolescent classrooms.

This is according to a new study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* from education professor Barbara Fenesi and co-authors: Madeline Crichton and Jasmyn Skinner from the Faculty of Education; Jeffrey Graham from Ontario Tech University; and Michelle Ogrodnik from McMaster University.

Fenesi attributes the lack of research about classroom-based physical activity and adolescence to several factors, including environmental, experiential and systemic barriers, such as a lack of physical space; a misconception that developmental changes don't continue from adolescence into adulthood; systemic messaging by [school boards](#) that physical activity is less relevant for teens; and an increase in self-consciousness during adolescence.

"A cultural shift is required for such classrooms to be established and truly accepted," Fenesi said. "Advocating for a culture of encouragement and acceptance for more physically active environments in schools is a good place to start."

As part of increasing knowledge in this age group, Fenesi and her team will evaluate the effectiveness of a combined Grade 9 mathematics and [physical education](#) class. Their goal is to provide a model that other schools and classrooms can adopt.

A lack of movement is a serious problem for Canadian adolescents. Only less than 20 percent of boys and girls in Canada meet the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines of 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous physical activity, Fenesi said. She added sedentary time for Canadian youth has increased from about 51 percent at seven years of age to between 62 and 74 percent at 15 years of age.

"The most recent ParticipACTION Report Card gave Canada an 'F' grade for 24-hour movement behaviors," Fenesi said.

Cuts to after-[school programs](#) and to physical education are some reasons why adolescents are inactive. In addition, many teenagers don't think physical education is essential to academic success and they prefer focusing on getting career-related skills. This is counterproductive, Fenesi said, because physical activity and being healthy are important for [academic success](#).

"Physical activity has many benefits, such as improved brain functioning, cognitive performance and [mental health](#)," Fenesi said. "For children in classrooms, incorporating [physical activity](#) has also been shown to improve overall well-being."

Physical activity early in life is also important because highly active adolescents are more likely to become highly active adults. In fact, teenagers who've been physically active during the pandemic have maintained their activity levels throughout COVID-19. This reinforces the importance of adolescents becoming physically active, which allows them to have healthy lifestyle habits even in times of crisis, Fenesi said.

**More information:** Barbara Fenesi et al, Physical Activity in High School Classrooms: A Promising Avenue for Future Research, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph19020688](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19020688)

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