

THE KEY TO A BRIGHTER, HEALTHIER, HAPPIER CLASSROOM

A Primary Teacher's Guide to Improving Children's
Mental Health and Wellbeing

By

Imogen Buxton-Pickles

Contents

Introduction -

Chapter 1 – The Key to a Brighter, Happier, Healthier Classroom

Chapter 2 - Step 1 Eating for Energy, Health and Learning

Chapter 3 – Step 2 Using Activity for Improved Health, Mood and Behaviour

Chapter 4 – Step 3 Growth Mindset

Chapter 5 – Step 4 Mental Toughness and Resilience

Chapter 6 – Step 5 Mindfulness

Chapter 7 – Step 6 Social Wellness

Chapter 8 – Step 7 Healthy Environment

Chapter 9 – Step 8 Good Sleep

Chapter 10 – Step 9 How to Become a Truly Active, Well School

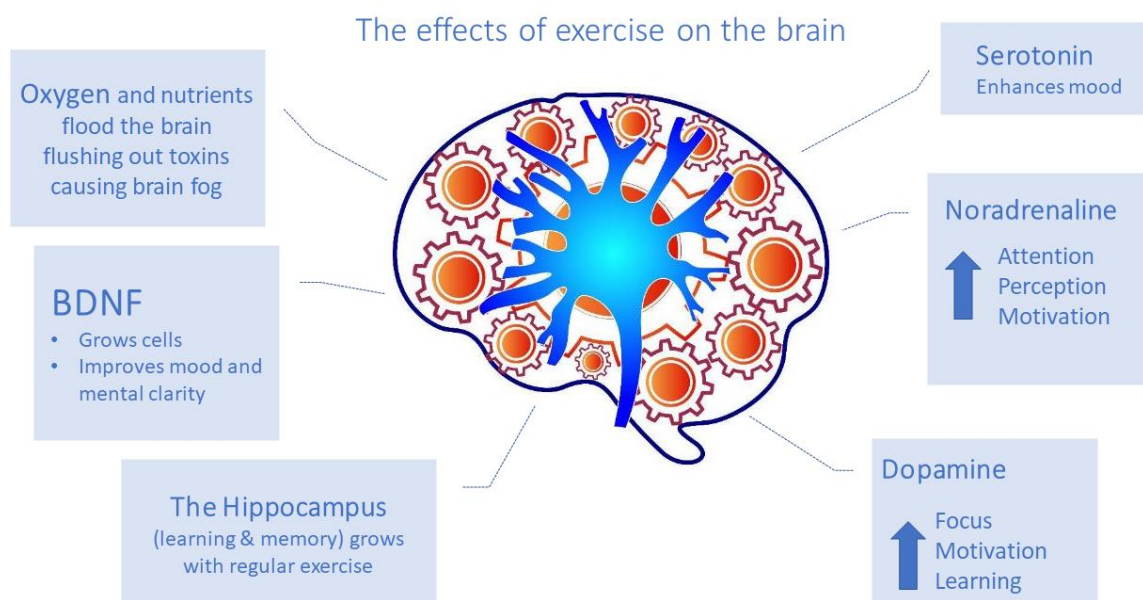
Chapter 3 – Using Activity for Improved Health, Mood and Behaviour

When children are sedentary for too long, they lose focus and can start to become agitated. Regular bursts of activity in class, ideally linked to their topics will refocus the brain, reduce brain fog and improve their mood and behaviour. “Brain fog” is a term that relates to the inability to focus, pay attention, and concentrate on mental tasks. Brain fog is caused by unhealthy lifestyle choices or a is side effect to medication. Lifestyle related causes fall under inactivity, poor nutrition and poor sleep quality. However regular burst of activity pumps oxygen into the brain flushing out toxins and clearing brain fog temporarily. Therefore, I would recommend short 2 to 3-minute active blast built into each hour of learning to ensure maximum focus from your children.

Many teachers I have worked feel they lack the skills, confidence and above all the time to figure out how to get their children more active throughout the day without losing valuable learning time. This chapter will help you understand the benefits of more activity and how to roll it out in your class or school with many examples you can start using from today.

Using activity to improve physical health, focus, mood, behaviour, relationships and build resilience is easy with my teachers’ toolkit of goodies I’m about to share with you.

Knowledge is power, therefore understanding how activity effects the body and the brain will help you to choose the perfect type of activity for your class depending on the outcome you are delivering.



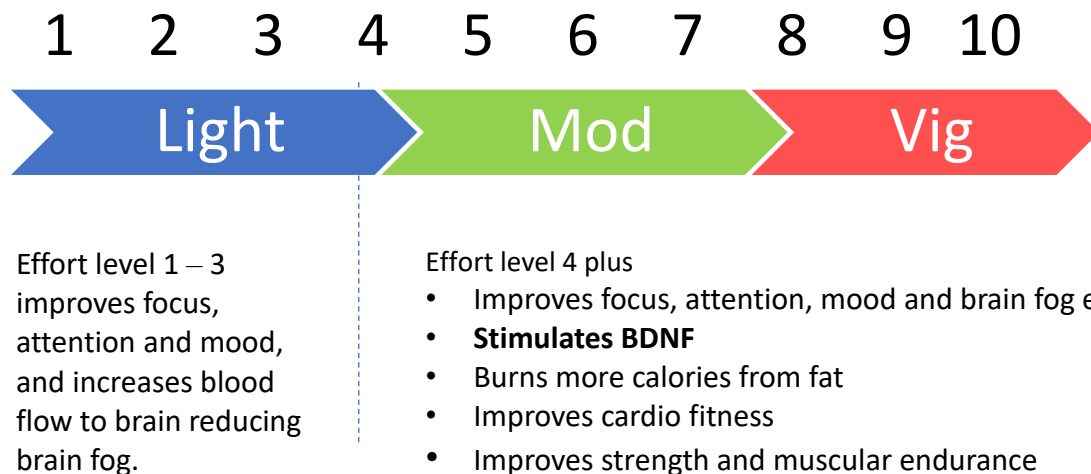
The diagram above shows that, exercising for just a few minutes will enhance mood, focus and motivation as the happy hormones are released and blood flow to the brain pushes out the all the ugly toxins that build up causing the dreaded BRAIN FOG, where children zone out and seem disengaged in class.

Longer term the hippocampus will grow larger with regular activity plus proteins are released

into the brain during exercise that causes brain cells to *sprout the structural branches required for learning* called **BDNF (Brain Derived Neurotropic Factor)** catchy eh! BDNF has been likened to fertilizer for the brain. Learn more about this from a brilliant book called *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* by Ratey, John J. (2013)

Below demonstrates the how effort level effect mood, behaviour and health.

Imagine a scale of 1 – 10 illustrating light to vigorous activity and effort level.



So, every 'active' session doesn't need to be all out sweaty activity. Pilates and Yoga are great ways to get the children active; or maybe getting them to walk around; it's anything that gets them off their chairs and active. Below are some ideas to help you get your head around what's achievable in your classroom. Each idea is covered in more depth later in the chapter.

Light activity ideas (1 – 3)

- Slow movement around the room like data collection for flash cards placed in random places in the classroom. More about data collection later in this chapter.
- Standing around their desks when problem solving or creating something in a team.
- Stretching, bending, twisting for example data collection from randomly placed cards.
- Using movements to answer a set of choose between questions for example, if the answer is TRUE, they must stand on one leg, if the answer is FALSE, they must crouch down low.

Moderate activity ideas (4 – 7)

- Brisk movement around the room with intermittent bending and stretching whilst collecting data.

- Repeated bending and stretching like standing up and sitting down.
- Classroom dance or fitness activities behind their chairs.

Vigorous activity ideas (8 - 10)

- High impact on the spot activities like jumping, high knees, star jumps etc.
- Circuit training (yes, this is possible in the classroom).
- Total body blast “plug and play” style workout using space around the tables and chairs.

Children love learning actively as it’s fun AND it helps their brains to absorb more information and as a bonus - it improves their mood, focus and behaviour. Get them moving as regular as possible and NORMALISE ACTIVITY in the classroom!

Now let’s take a dive in to building activity into your classroom without fuss.

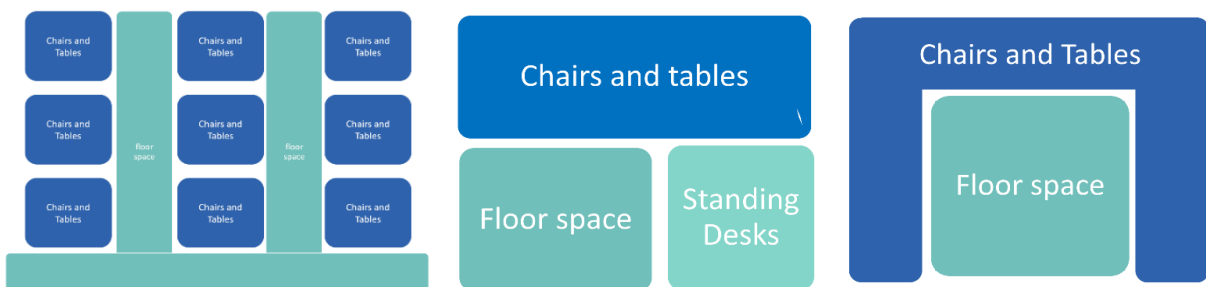
3 Areas of Active Learning

There are 3 areas of active learning I would like to share with you.

1. Active Blasts
2. Active Learning
3. Standing in Line Activities

Review your learning space - by decluttering your classroom and creating space to be more active around the tables and chairs sends a message to children that active learning will take place most days.

Below are some examples of how teachers are arranging their classrooms for to create active learning spaces.



Another great way to get the children more active is by doing a 15-minute run, jog or walk around the school grounds! It really doesn’t matter how quickly the children complete the activity, and it’s not about competition either - it’s about getting them up and moving and enjoying it! I’ve seen teachers trying to get children moving as quickly as possible in order to

complete an exercise quicker, and I don't believe that this is the way to go. If you're finding your children don't want to do it, then maybe it's the specific activity which needs to be changed, or perhaps it's the location or set-up. Have a think about how you can shake things up to make it as enjoyable for them (and you!) as possible.

Set Expectations - When anything new is introduced, you'll know there is always the potential for children to become over-excited and hyperactive.

Firstly - set **their expectations** and lay out some ground rules so the whole class knows when and where they will be exercising during the day. Explain how they will feel during the activity, for example slightly warmer and maybe a bit sweaty, and that they'll likely feel more energised afterwards. Remember that's normal and a GOOD thing!

Secondly - set **your expectations** around how you would like them to behave during and after the activity. For example, they should be mindful of tables, chairs and other children moving around the classroom. After the activity, they should immediately grab a drink and sit down quietly, ready for the next stage of learning. Remind them that if they can't behave, in-line with the principles of active learning, they will not be able to participate in all the fun activities you have planned for them!

Let's dive in to the 3 areas of active learning

1. Active Blasts

These are a great way to get short, quick bursts of activity into the school day. These are the easiest way to get the children active as well and you'll see increased focus from the children after one of these. Use a short movie on your interactive whiteboard to get 2 –10 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity behind their chairs in class to introduce the idea of being active in the classroom. Either lead a simple activity yourself or try the iMovement free weekly movie-based activities which are easy to facilitate without fuss or prep or cost. Access FREE RESOURCES from imoves.com/the-imovement.

2. Active Learning

Once your active blasts have been introduced effectively, you can introduce active learning outcomes as part of your ongoing lessons. Gradually build up the amount of active learning outcomes you do in the classroom over your first 4—6 weeks, as this will help to build up your confidence and let children adapt to new teaching methods.

A. Choose Between | This is where the children answer a question using a movement, for example — jumping up if the answer is true or crouching down if the answer is false.

B. Word Action Games | These work well in literacy, especially to dramatize stories or poems. Or, they could be used for something more specific, for example, teaching children about using formal and informal speech, the teacher could read out a word and the children should either MARCH on the spot and salute if they think the word is typical of FORMAL speech, or FREESTYLE dance for words typical of INFORMAL speech.

C. Top and Tail | This is when a learning outcome always begins and ends with a short dance

or set of moves. I've seen this done effectively with timetables and fractions, for example, children do a short two to three-minute dance to warm up their brains and body, ready to solve math problems. Then the same dance is repeated at the end as a celebration of learning. So simple, yet so effective. Movie based plug-and-play activities work incredibly well by enabling children to follow along.

D. Circuits | Use a set of 10 or 12 cards, placed around the classroom, where each one has a problem to be solved in literacy, math or science. Children in small groups spend a short time at each circuit card before they must move on. One, two or three minutes per station work well, depending on the types of problem they are solving. I've seen this work brilliantly where children had to punctuate sentences correctly on each card, and then do an action relating to the sentence they had just punctuated.

E. Data Collection Circuit | Another easy concept, using simple data flash cards. Stick a selection of your data cards all over the classroom using various heights and harder to reach (but still safe!) places, for example, the underside of tables or on top of shelves. They should not be hidden, but they should be placed so that the children must do lots of bending, stretching and crawling to see them. Children move around collecting data and solving maths or literacy problems as they go.

F. Team games | They can work in classrooms, however the more space the better for this teaching style. If I asked you to create an active game for your year group around a learning outcome you were preparing to teach next lesson or term, I bet you'd be able to come up with something amazing. In one of my recent Active School workshops, a teacher came up with a brilliant idea for a science learning outcome around everyday materials. The concept was a relay race with children in teams of five, and one team member collected one object per round from the centre of the room, deciding on if it was made of plastic, glass, metal or wood, then deposit said object in the correct hoop.

Hot Tip: You should start adding movement into sedentary lessons with one of the easiest concepts which is Choose Between, where the children must answer a question using a movement for example> Answer A =one leg balance, Answer B = a star, Answer C = crouching low. This could be a math question for higher, lower or equal too, or literacy punctuation activity. This activity can be easily introduced into lessons as a warmup or plenary activity for a learning outcome.

3. **Line activities** - The next layer to consider is to introduce corridor and active line activity. We ask our children to stand in lines and wait quietly, but why not use this time to cram in an energising, refocusing activity like this!

Sing and perform actions to the melody of The Grand Old Duke of York:

Oh, we're standing in a line, (marching on the spot)

And we're waiting to move, (marching on the spot)

We can touch the floor, (touch the floor)

We can touch the sky, (reach up high)

We can do a funky groove! (freestyle dance)

Repeat as many times as you like!

This type of activity is fun, it keeps children engaged and switches on their brains ready for learning.

By this point you may be thinking that I've completely lost the plot OR that you think this approach could really work for you, if it's the latter, read on as there's more bonkers stuff ahead.

Corridors - I love this idea which I believe is being used in an academy chain in Birmingham (UK). This Head Teacher is responsible for encouraging students to run in the corridors, jump down the corridors, sidestep down the corridors. Yes, each corridor in school has its own activity children should try to perform when moving about the school. Guess what, he's created a happy, healthy environment where children learn more, are happy and want be part of.

Another teacher in Sheffield (UK) started their active school journey with NO CHAIRS Tuesday! He reported that his students were in shock for the first 20 minutes then had a wonderful day working without their chairs. Maybe you could start with no chairs for just one lesson and build up stamina over a half term.

A final thought...when you have ignited the "Active Community" in your school, it's time to convince others of your success and gather evidence of how children are responding to the changes for example, are children more focused on tasks after activity? Are they happier and in a brighter mood? Are they better behaved in class? I can bet you a large glass of Pinot that they'll be all the above and then some. This kind of evidence based in YOUR school, impacting on YOUR children, will resonate so much more to YOUR teaching staff as you will have overcome most of their barriers, changing their perception (mindset) from, "this is too difficult," to "I can do this too," making it easier for them to take the next steps.

Please take inspiration from this "out of the box" thinking, even if the activities described may not work in your school or classroom, you will be able to adapt them and introduce initiatives that excite and motivate the children to learn actively.