

Sticking with sports during school years linked to academic success

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As school and summer sports resume, a new study from the University of Sydney finds links between kids' long-term participation in sports and increased academic performance, including impacts on NAPLAN

scores, absenteeism and likelihood to attend university.

In the first long-term study of its kind, [published](#) in the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, the researchers followed the sports participation of more than 4,000 Australian children from age 4 to 13. They then matched this with academic trajectory up to 21 years-of-age.

Overall, they found that continued sports participation during school years was linked to lower absenteeism, better attention and memory, higher NAPLAN and end-of-school scores, and higher odds of studying at university.

Lead author Dr. Katherine Owen said many factors influence a decline in sports participation during adolescence, but this study showed the importance of finding ways to keep young people active and engaged.

"We know all too well the link between [educational attainment](#) and improved health status. This study suggests that making sport more of a priority in school could be one way to influence this," said Dr. Owen from the University's Charles Perkins Center and School of Public Health.

"To achieve that we also need to see sports adapt and become more flexible and inclusive to allow more children to play the way that they want to, whether it's just for fun or for social reasons."

Differences between team and individual sports

The authors write that while the beneficial link between sports and academic performance is likely due to sustained physical activity, the study also highlights differences between those involved in individual sports (such as swimming or running) versus team sport.

Those in team sports had better performance on attention and working memory tests, fewer absent days without permission and were more likely to be awarded the HSC or equivalent.

"This is in line with other research that shows [team sports](#) develop important social and mental skills in children and teens," Dr. Owen said. "It provides opportunities to work together, which often fosters a sense of belonging. Unsurprisingly, these kids show lower absenteeism, which is also linked to school completion."

In comparison to those who did not participate in any sport, those with ongoing participation in individual sports had higher NAPLAN literacy results and higher academic performance on end-of-school scores (ATAR).

"We suspect this may be because individual sports tend to encourage responsibility, self-reliance, goal setting and a higher level of preparation. On a psychological level, many of these skills also carry over into preparation for school exams," Dr. Owen said.

The study also showed that continued sports participation was beneficial for academic performance for socioeconomically disadvantaged children. However, these children were less likely to continue involvement in sport.

Earlier research, study method and limitations

The results of the new study are in line with an earlier systematic review led by Dr. Owen in 2022. The review analyzed 115 international studies (predominately from the United States) totaling more than one million students and found a positive link between participation in sports and [academic performance](#).

The new study used data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and included a nationally representative sample of children from throughout Australia.

Sports participation was self-reported from parent and caregiver surveys that identified if children regularly participated in sports for 12 months, as well as whether it was individual or team-based. Sporting codes, and whether sports took place within school or elsewhere, were not accessed. A series of cognitive tests and normal schooling results (for example NAPLAN, HSC, ATAR) were used to record academic achievement.

While the cohort was selected at random, and adjustments were made for factors like private school attendance and previous academic success, the researchers say they cannot claim that sports participation is the direct cause of increased academic success.

They note that some important variables, like mental health data, were not available and that could partially explain the link. It may also be that children who continue to play sports have inherent personality characteristics and motivations that also lead to higher educational attainment.

"There is still much that we don't know. This also includes the role of different types of sport, and the influence of frequency and intensity of sport participation on academic results," Dr. Owen said.

"Ongoing studies will be important to flesh this out and to help us understand how we can tailor educational environments to foster and promote [sports participation](#) in a way that might improve [young people's](#) physical activity levels, health and educational success."

More information: Katherine B. Owen et al, Sport Participation for Academic Success: Evidence From the Longitudinal Study of Australian

Children, *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1123/jpah.2023-0506](https://doi.org/10.1123/jpah.2023-0506)

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