



Considerations for classroom physical activity during COVID-19

Physical activity should be integrated into classroom instruction, whether the classroom is virtual or in-person, while physically distanced. The link between academics and health has become even more apparent during COVID-19.^{1,2} As schools determine how they will reopen, it is important that schools continue to provide opportunities for students to be physically active throughout the school day, regardless of the instruction format.

Physical Activity during the school day promotes:

- **Physical health and wellness** by increasing the amount of time students are active and limiting the amount of time they are sitting;
- **Academic performance** by improving concentration, on-task behaviors, and test scores; and
- **Social emotional health** by increasing motivation and enjoyment of learning, reducing stress, anxiety, and social isolation brought on by COVID-19, and decreasing behavioral problems.

Classroom physical activity is one strategic approach to promote active learning and support students in achieving the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity per day.

This document provides district and school administrators, teachers, and caregivers and families with practical ideas to safely and equitably incorporate classroom physical activity to promote a culture of active engagement and learning.

¹ Loades et al. *Rapid systematic review: The impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents in the context of COVID-19.* *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psych.* 2020; preprint.

² Dorn E, Hancock B, Sarakatsannis J, Viruleg E. *COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: the hurt could last a lifetime.* Retrieved July 4, 2020.

Overarching considerations for both virtual and in-person classroom physical activity

1 Create a culture of physical activity in the physical or virtual classroom.

Physical activity can be more easily integrated and sustained in the school day when there is a culture of physical activity established. This might mean:

- Establishing [classroom norms or behavioral agreements](#) that both teachers and students develop for engaging in classroom physical activity (e.g., participating to the best of their ability, being respectful of different levels of ability, ensuring participants adhere to health and safety standards, etc.).
- Identifying regular intervals to engage in classroom physical activity so that it becomes a regular part of the class period or school day.
- Offering physical activity opportunities that allow students to share and learn more about each other and develop connections with each other.

Additional considerations for virtual learning:

- Talk with parents/caregivers about the importance of classroom physical activity to build buy-in. Share how physical activity can help improve students' feelings of anxiety and other challenging emotions heightened by the pandemic, and how it can increase engagement in learning.
- Encourage both youth and adults to participate fully in classroom physical activity. At home, parents/caregivers can be encouraged to participate in physical activity outside of academic instruction (e.g., movement breaks, energizers, etc.), if present.

2 Ensure approaches are equitable and inclusive.

Ensure classroom physical activity opportunities offered are inclusive of all abilities and equitably engage students from all backgrounds. This might mean:

- Considering the settings in which students are learning and identifying activities in which they all can easily participate. Every room is different and there may be limited space. Choose and/or adapt classroom physical activity ideas that would allow students to safely participate in all types of spaces. Communicate with students and parents/caregivers ahead of time when more space is required and ensure lines of communication are open if there are questions or concerns that arise.
- Considering students' individual needs and abilities and being inclusive of all students by offering movement modifications and options. For example, offer physical activities that have both a standing and seated option. Physical education teachers and special education teachers are a helpful resource for modification and other inclusion ideas.
- Choosing physical activities that consider and can be adapted for the demographics of students (e.g., race, gender, English language learners, ability, etc.). Classroom physical activity can be used as an opportunity to introduce music from around the world, integrate language learning, and allow students to modify movement.





- Choosing activities that consider the specific technological limitations of each student (e.g., internet connectivity, devices at home). Consider low-tech physical activities such as asking students to do a scavenger hunt around their home, taking a walk outside in between class periods, or providing written instructions for physical activity options that can be done at home.
- Choosing activities that do not require any equipment. For virtual learning, if equipment is necessary, suggest common household items as alternatives (e.g., water bottles or cans as weights) and give parents/caregivers and students advanced notice so they can identify alternatives in their setting.
- Observing patterns of student participation (i.e., who is participating and who is not) with respect to race, gender, language of origin, physical or learning ability, where they are seated. Explore reasons why they may not be engaged and find opportunities to more inclusively engage these students.
- Allowing students to choose and/or lead classroom physical activity, when possible. For lower grade levels, students might vote on their favorite videos or activities. Or, after the class has participated in a few classroom physical activity options and are familiar with the idea and expectations, they may be able to lead simple games or call out movement instructions. For upper grade levels, students can research classroom physical activity options (e.g., video resources, games found online, or activities introduced in physical education) and take turns leading them in class to teach academic concepts or as an energizer.

3 Adhere to protocols that promote the health and safety of students.

Whether in the classroom, in a community center, or at home, ensure the health and safety of students as they engage in classroom physical activity. This might mean:

Classroom physical activity selection:

- Choosing and encouraging activities that do not require physical contact between students and reinforce keeping students at a distance from one another.
- Limiting the use of physical materials or equipment that would be passed between multiple students. Ways to do this include:
 - Using music, instead of physical materials or equipment, to energize students and be a signal to start and stop activities.
 - Leveraging free, online videos or digital platforms to lead classroom physical activity in an interactive way with little to no physical materials/equipment.
- Identifying activities that can be done with minimal space, whether at a student's desk during in-person learning or in one's home during virtual learning. During virtual learning, work with parents/caregivers and students to ensure that activities can be done within the space they have available to them and that any hazards (e.g., breakable objects, sharp or large furniture, etc.) can be moved or avoided when engaging in movement.
- Identifying activities that can be done with headphones on or without projected sound. Students engaging in virtual learning may be in a shared space with family or students in other grade levels or classes. Therefore, they may not be able to project sound externally from their computer or audio device.

Space considerations:

- Conducting classroom physical activity outside if space and weather permits.
- Repurposing other large, unused spaces as temporary classrooms (e.g., cafeteria and auditorium) to help maintain physical distancing and allow more space for students to move in.
- If class is indoors and it is safe to do so, keeping the doors and windows open to maximize circulation and air flow to accommodate for increased respiration by students while participating in physical activity.
- Identifying ways to create and use classroom space for physical activity that adheres to [CDC's School Reopening Guidance](#), including modified layouts with seating spaced at least 6 feet apart when feasible and all desks facing the same direction. Use physical guides, such as tape on floors, to indicate safe distances and help remind students to stay at least 6 feet apart.

Other health and hygiene measures:

- Supporting students to properly wear face coverings at school at all times and keeping additional cloth face coverings for students, teachers, and staff in case a back-up face covering is needed during the day. Especially when indoors and spacing of at least 6 feet between students is not possible, it is important for everyone to wear a face covering during classroom physical activity. Use [CDC's Guidance on the Use of Face Coverings](#) for more information and practical recommendations.
- Cleaning any equipment touched by students with soap and water and then disinfect with an EPA-approved disinfectant that is effective against COVID-19 after each activity.
- Having students and staff wash or sanitize hands before and after class. Use CDC's downloadable resources on [handwashing](#) as visual cues and reminders.



Additional strategies for classroom physical activity during the COVID-19 pandemic

Identify who to engage and how to involve them in planning for classroom physical activity

- Engage physical education teachers as a resource to promote best practices, help modify activities for an in-person or virtual setting, and offer ideas on how to reinforce skills learned in physical education.
- Help parents/caregivers understand the importance of integrating physical activity into the school day and help them create a small, safe area at home for movement.
- Encourage teachers and staff to engage in peer-to-peer learning to identify solutions for integrating physical activity into an in-person and virtual classroom.

Identify when to integrate classroom physical activity to promote active learning

- Integrate physical activity into planned academic instruction to reinforce academic concepts.
- Provide physical activity, such as physical activity and energizers, outside of planned academic instruction.
- Identify opportunities and appropriate times to do physical activity. Ideally, the classroom physical activities should be supportive of positive classroom management, integrated throughout class time, simple and easy to organize, and adhere to [CDC's School Reopening Guidance](#).
- When possible, allow students to choose and/or lead classroom physical activity.
- Consider the settings in which students are learning and identify activities in which all students can easily participate.

Provide professional development or in-service training on classroom physical activity. Physical educators or community-based organizations may be able to provide these trainings. Relevant topics include:

- Reinforcing the importance and benefits of active learning for students.
- Practical ideas for how to promote and plan for classroom physical activity in-person with physical distancing and in a virtual setting;
- How to use physical activity to manage the classroom (to calm or energize students) and to meet other classroom goals;
- Classroom and at-home layouts that can best facilitate physical activity; and
- Physical activities that include all students, regardless of ability.

Continue to follow the [National Guidance on Classroom Physical Activity](#)

- Do not replace physical education and recess with classroom physical activity.
- Do not use or withhold classroom physical activity from students as a disciplinary approach.

