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Improving Mental Health in Kids with Exercise



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Children and adolescents with good mental health allows them to think clearly, develop emotionally, learn healthy social skills and develop the resilience to cope with problems that may arise. Mentally healthy children experience a greater quality of life and can function and develop well at home, in school and in their communities.

Unfortunately, the Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/health/children-with-mental-illness>) reported almost 1 in 7 children and adolescents aged 4-17 experienced a mental health disorder in the previous 12 months. The most common mental health disorders were attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (<https://www.adhdaustralia.org.au/what-is-adhd/>) or ADHD (7.4%), anxiety disorders (<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/mental-health/youth>) (6.9%), major depressive disorder (<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/mental-health/youth>) (2.8%) and conduct disorder (2.1%).

What are the benefits of exercise?

As well as improving children's physical health (e.g., fitness and muscle strength), regular exercise also improves their cognition, brain development and function, and their mental health. Research ([https://participation.cdn.prismic.io/participation/e6cb2b35-2d29-4539-80ee-](https://participation.cdn.prismic.io/participation/e6cb2b35-2d29-4539-80ee-515a0ae9dfb3_2018_expert_statement_on_physical_activity_and_brain_health_in_children_and_youth)

[515a0ae9dfb3_2018_expert_statement_on_physical_activity_and_brain_health_in_children_and_youth](https://participation.cdn.prismic.io/participation/e6cb2b35-2d29-4539-80ee-515a0ae9dfb3_2018_expert_statement_on_physical_activity_and_brain_health_in_children_and_youth)) in physical activity and brain health in children and adolescents indicates that exercise plays an important role in preventing and reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety, in helping with stress management, and in improving self-esteem. Additionally, there is some evidence (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1469029218303315>) that children who participate in regular exercise at a young age may experience decreased rates of anxiety and depression in childhood and adolescence.

- Exercise benefits relating to mental health include:
- Improved focus, school performance, sleep and energy levels
- Improved relationships, social skills and more positive body image
- Decreasing symptoms of depression, anxiety, pain and loneliness
- Improved ability to cope with stress and have increased resilience
- Increased self-esteem and self-worth

Things to remember

When encouraging children and adolescents to participate in exercise, remember:

- Find something they enjoy. Whether its swimming, playing football or running at the park, enjoyment of exercise is important to build a positive exercise experience and can help improve motivation.
- Get the whole family involved. Parents and guardians are great role models and provide the needed support for children to get involved in regular exercise. Organising active family outings such as a walk around the neighbourhood or a bike ride is a great way to increase physical activity levels and explore the local community.
- Keep track of what works. Different types of exercise can feel different to each child. Competitive sports may increase mental distress in some children, so involvement in non-competitive sports such as martial arts or skateboarding might be a better option. Other children may thrive in social situations so team sports that they enjoy are ideal to build fitness and friendships. Just remember every child is different and they change over time, but if they are not enjoying or engaging in physical activities then explore other strategies to get them moving.

Ask the professionals

Exercise is effective for promoting positive mental health, brain development and function in children, and it is equally beneficial in the treatment of mental health disorders in children and adolescents. Finding and engaging with an Accredited Exercise Scientist (AES) or Accredited Exercise Physiologist (AEP) with experience in working with adolescents and mental health disorders can be helpful to improve exercise engagement and ensuring a positive exercise experience.

Parents and guardians: If you are concerned that your child is not getting enough physical activity to benefit their brain function and mental health, speak to an AES or AEP in your local area. (<https://www.essa.org.au/find-aep/>)

If you are concerned that your child may be experiencing a mental health disorder, speak to your local GP who can refer you to the appropriate health professional.

Read more in the Exercise for Kids eBook! Download here.

(<https://mailchi.mp/essa/exerciseforkids>)



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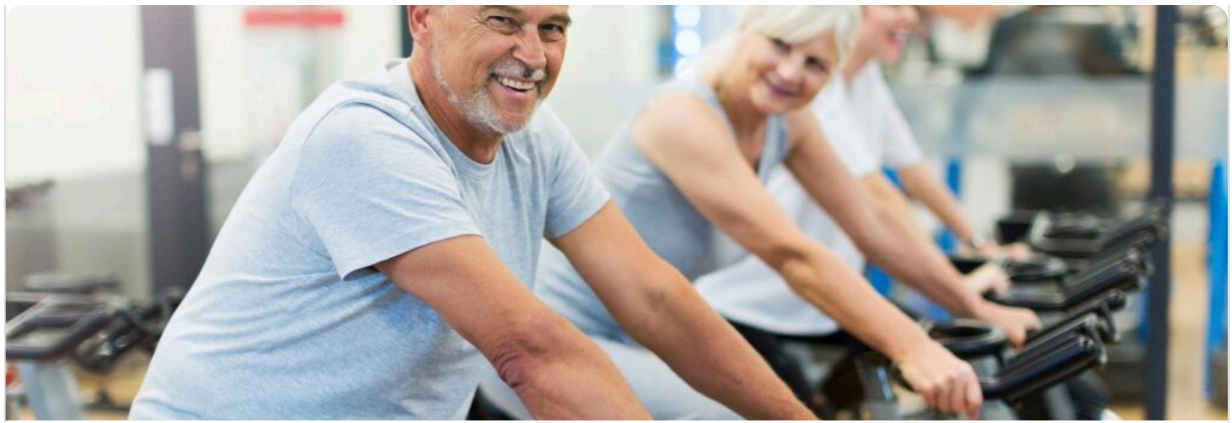
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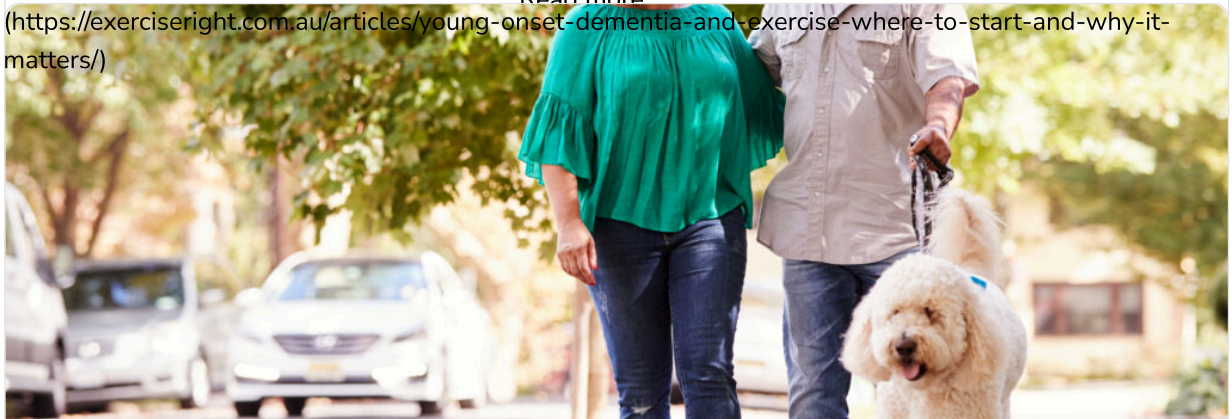


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This article was written by Alister MacInnes, Senior Exercise Physiologist and Exercise Scientist at The Biomechanics. Dementia is one of the most significant health and aged care issues facing Australia, and it is now the leading cause of death in the country.¹ In 2026, an estimated 446,500

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