

Mental health wins when teens play school sports

July 2 2014, by Glenda Fauntleroy



Adolescents who play team sports in grades 8 through 12 have less stress and better mental health as young adults, finds new research published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

"It is important that [school administrators](#) recognize the importance of sport participation and physical activity," said lead author Catherine M. Sabiston, Ph.D., of the University of Toronto. "The associations we have found show a long term impact. School sport from ages 12 to 17 protects those youth from [poor mental health](#) four years later."

23 to 40 percent of youth report feelings of depression and high stress, the researchers noted. Their research investigated whether [school](#) sport

participation could offer some protection against this trend.

Almost 850 students from 10 Canadian schools were surveyed in each grade during the five years of secondary school about their participation in school [sports](#), such as basketball, soccer, track and field, wrestling, and gymnastics. Three years after graduation, participants were asked about how often they experienced depressive symptoms, the amount of stress in their lives, and how they rated their mental health on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

The results found that those who were involved in school sports had better scores on all three mental health assessments compared with those who did not play sports at all. Playing school sports during adolescent years was significantly linked to lower depression symptoms, lower perceived stress, and higher self-rated [mental health](#) in young adulthood.

Sabiston said their research focused on school sports—rather than extracurricular sports in general—because students are a potential "target" population for tailored intervention strategies. Sports offered by schools generally require less commitment of time or money from students and their parents or guardians.

"There is surprisingly little known about school sport, so we can only speculate as to the unique effects, but we suspect it might be due to school sport providing adolescents with opportunities to bond with other students, feel connected to their school, interact with their peers and coaches, thus, really providing a social and active environment," she explained.

Jack Raglin, Ph.D., a professor in the department of kinesiology at Indiana University-Bloomington agreed, adding that there is considerable evidence that exercise provides significant psychological benefits.

"Single sessions of activity reduce anxiety, improve mood, and raise

feelings of energy that last for several hours," he said. "Long-term participation can significantly improve conditions such as clinical anxiety and depression to a degree that rivals medication, both in adults and adolescents."

Raglin added there are also meaningful protective psychological changes, including the feelings of mastery and accomplishment that result from gaining a sports skill.

More information: Jewett R, Sabiston CM, et al. "School sport participation during adolescence and mental health." *Journal of Adolescent Health.*, 2014.

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