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Authors

Murray, Grace

Godwin, Karrie

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”Give me a break”: Can brief bouts of physical activity reduce elementary children’s attentional failures and improve learning?

Grace Murray

Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, United States

Karrie Godwin

Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, United States

Abstract

In classroom settings, young children are frequently off-task, which may be due in part to childrens still-maturing attentional system. Lapses in attention may impede academic success by reducing the amount of time spent engaged in instructional activities. One popular strategy to increase on-task behavior is to provide brief physical activity (PA) breaks in between instructional tasks. Though PA breaks are hypothesized to increase on-task behavior, much is unknown regarding the effectiveness of breaks and their underlying mechanism(s). The present study systematically investigated the effectiveness of PA breaks, using direct measures of attention and learning. Break type (PA vs. Sedentary control) was manipulated within-subjects. Preliminary results indicate PA breaks benefit learning compared to the sedentary control ($p=.03$, Cohens $d=.389$). A marginally significant increase in on-task behavior was also found following the PA break. These results provide tentative support for the benefit of PA breaks for childrens attention and learning.