

9-2017

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Ashley Schoenfeld

Bowling Green State University, alschoe@bgsu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Schoenfeld, Ashley (2017) "The Importance of Healthy Eating and Exercise in Children and Adolescents," *WRIT: Journal of First-Year Writing*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25035/writ.01.01.06>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/writ/vol1/iss1/6>

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The Importance of Healthy Eating and Exercise in Children and Adolescents

By Ashley Schoenfeld

alschoe@bgsu.edu

My name is Ashley Schoenfeld, I am a high-schooler at Lakota Local Schools. In the future, I plan on majoring in biomedical engineering and minoring in graphic design or journalism. I took GSW 1120 my freshman year of high school, in which I was required to write a research essay based on the theme of "living well." Coming from a hard childhood, I have always turned to exercise to release any negativity I felt, which is what inspired me to write about this topic. My goal for my writing is to inspire other people to act on problems so that we can see changes in the way the broken world is right now. If given more time on this project, I would potentially conduct my own research, expand on the information I found, and include more detail to produce it into a fully written article.

Obesity rates are increasing at an alarming speed across the world. Children and adolescents make up a large percentage of the growing obese population. Over the past 30 years, the percentage of children and adolescents who are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight has more than tripled to 37% and 34% in the U.S. alone (Harris, Bargh, and Brownell 404). This is dangerous to the well-being and functioning of our society in the future. Children and adolescents are the most important people to focus on when working to lower obesity rates, because they are the ones who will keep the world functioning smoothly when older generations pass away. Scientists and researchers have studied many techniques to lose weight, but the most common and effective ways are also the oldest ways: diet and exercise. Eating healthy and exercising require hard work and a lot of willpower, but the overall benefits are endless. Although there are common barriers to dieting and being physically active, it is still important for children and adolescents to overcome the adversities, because eating healthy and exercising will improve their physical and medical health, cognition and academic performance, and future adult life.

One of the leading causes of the overwhelming obesity rates today is the numerous barriers one may have to overcome when dieting and exercising. It is true that there are many difficulties to eating healthy and exercising. It requires a lot of dedication and hard work, which can often lead to discouragement if one does not reach his/her goal as fast as he/she wanted. Common barriers that can deter children and adolescents from eating healthy and exercising include unpleasant tasting food, wanting to perform sedentary activities, and not having the willpower to live a healthy lifestyle (Lopez-Azpiazu, Martinez-Gonzales, Kearny, Gibney, and Martinez 213). Children are being raised around technology today where not only are they influenced to engage in sedentary activities such as playing video games, but the media even encourages unhealthy behavior. In the article, "Priming Effects of Television Food Advertising on Eating Behavior", three psychologists, Jennifer L. Harris, John A. Bargh, and Kelly D. Brownell (404-413), reveal the truth behind television food advertising. During a study, they found that "food advertising to children portrays unhealthy eating behaviors with positive outcomes" (Harris, Bargh, and Brownell 404). Food commercials use transfer techniques to gain business, and although it works, it is giving children false knowledge about what foods are

actually healthy. With the release of false information, children and adolescents will often not have and/or lose the willpower to eat healthy, because their concept of “healthy” is unhealthy. The main reasons children and adolescents have an unhealthy perception of how to be healthy is because parents and schools do not provide children with the proper knowledge, food, and resources they need to execute dieting and exercising. The barriers children and adolescents endure has led to the argument that they should not eat healthy and exercise, because it is too hard of a goal to accomplish.

On the other hand, if parents and schools influenced their children from a young age to live a healthy lifestyle by eating healthy and exercising, children and adolescents would be more likely to adopt those habits and not accumulate barriers in the first place. As studied in the book, *Introduction to Sociology 2E*, children and adolescents resemble their parents and other adults like teachers, in many aspects of their actions and choices (OpenStax 100-101). Because parents and schools are the most influential on kids, it can be concluded that unhealthy parents and schools may be a main cause for the overweight trend in children and adolescents. Parents and schools can help reverse the growing obese population as well. Children and adolescents frequently have barriers because they simply do not know how to be healthy. Parents and schools can help with this issue by educating them from an early age on what foods they should choose. Authors David R. Just and Joseph Price studied a creative way that parents and schools can make children and adolescents learn how to choose the right foods on their own (868). Just and Price found that providing rewards, or incentives, to children who make healthy food choices at lunch can influence them to make healthy choices every time they eat (868). Barriers can also be prevented if parents taught children and adolescents how to manage their daily schedules so that they have time to engage in a proper amount of physical activity. Although there can still be barriers to eating healthy and exercising, it is important for children and adolescents to overcome them because the benefits are endless.

One reason it is important for children and adolescents to eat healthy and exercise is because it can improve their physical and medical health. The authors of the article “Exercise Acts as a Drug; the Pharmacological Benefits of Exercise” affirms that “exercise is one of the most frequently prescribed therapies both in health and disease” (Vina, Sanchis-Gomar, Martinez-Bello, and Gomez-Cabrera 2). Children and adolescents’ physical health will benefit because they will see a gradual improvement in their body structure. A tremendous advantage on a child’s body structure is the significant amount of weight they will lose. Like a domino effect, children and adolescents will gain toner muscles and experience an increase in the amount of the muscles they have. Deborah Geering, a research journalist, shared the weight loss success story of a mother of ten to prove that there are countless advantages to weight loss (Geering). Geering explains how dieting and exercising changed Jamie Flanigan’s life and the benefits she gained from living a healthy lifestyle. Even though she is an adult, she allows her kids to see the benefits that they could gain from living a healthy lifestyle. She claims that she has more energy and her body feels better, which is something her children are able to experience too (Geering). This chain of benefits that children and adolescents can also encounter is why doctors deem exercise and healthy eating greatly important.

Along with the physical importance of exercise and healthy eating, a child and adolescent’s medical health can also improve greatly. By living a healthy lifestyle, diseases can be prevented and/or even improve the symptoms of certain illnesses. A survey of a Spanish population, distributed and researched by Isabel Lopez-Azpiazu, Miguel Martinez-Gonzales,

John Kearney, Michael Gibney, and J. Alfredo Martinez, unveils that 73.6% of the tested population acknowledged disease prevention as the most beneficial outcome of diet and exercise (Lopez-Azpiazu, Martinez-Gonzales, Kearney, Gibney, and Martinez 214). Physical activity and healthy eating is known to lower the risks of getting diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, and even diabetes. As asserted by J. I. Wolfsdorf, “exercise [and healthy eating] acutely lowers the blood glucose concentration [...] owing to an increased regional blood flow and the massaging effect of contracting limb musculature” (1216). Wolfsdorf is explaining that exercising, along with dieting, allows blood to flow easier and insulin to generate more properly through the body, which can prevent blood clots and insulin deficiencies. If the blood and insulin regulation from exercising and eating healthy are implemented in children and adolescents from a young age, there is a greater chance that cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes will not be an issue because harmful clots and cancer cells will not form, and insulin will be regulated. Cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes are just a few of the many diseases and medical conditions that dieting and exercising can improve (Chester). The goals that eating healthy and exercising accomplish in benefitting children and adolescents’ medical health even leads doctors to believe that living a healthy lifestyle should be considered a drug (Vina, Sanchis-Gomar, Martinez-Bello, and Gomez-Cabrera 1). It is important for children and adolescents to live a healthy lifestyle because their body will continue to be benefitted for the rest of their lives.

Another reason it is important for children and adolescents to eat healthy and exercise is because their psychological health, cognition, and academic performance will improve. A famous quote by L. Hunt says, “the groundwork for all happiness is good health.” Psychologists Martin Rasmussen and Karin Laumann revealed that a trend was seen in which exercise benefitted emotional well-being in those with depression and anxiety (956). This shows that even those with the most severe forms of unhappiness can emotionally benefit from physical activity and healthy eating. Children and adolescents who eat healthy and exercise may also have a higher self-esteem. Even children care what others think about their appearance, and those who are skinny often judge and bully others if they do not fit their preferences. Children and adolescents who get bullied at school for not being skinny frequently have a low self-esteem, because they want others to accept them. Exercising and eating healthy can help with this problem, as it will improve the way they look and feel about themselves, no matter what others think. With a higher self-esteem, children and adolescents who lose weight by eating healthy and exercising will have a better attitude too. Exercising releases a hormone called endorphins, which are the chemical hormones in the body that make people feel happy. The more endorphins that are released in children and adolescents, the better of attitude they will be more apt to have (Vina, Sanchis-Gomar, Martinez-Bello, and Gomez-Cabrera 7). Eating healthy with exercise will also help because children and adolescents will have more energy from nutrients found in healthy food that will provide them with better energy. For the world to be happy, children and adolescents must think positively, and the answer to positive thinking is exercise and healthy eating.

Cognition is another characteristic in the human body that can be improved in children and adolescents who eat healthy and exercise. Physical activity and healthy eating have been discovered to improve cognitive abilities such as memory and reasoning (Khan 15). Asif Khan discusses a health researchers’ findings in his article, “The Potential Benefits of Aerobic Exercise on Cognition and Affect in Children” which reveals that “Hogan et al. (2013) found that involvement in exercise elicited faster reaction times on tasks involving working memory” (30). This finding can also lead to the conclusion that exercise improves the ability to reason because

similar tasks that determine how fast a child or adolescent can remember something are also used to determine how fast a child or adolescent can reason and think clearly when choosing an answer to a problem. The improvement in memory and reasoning can help young people make the right decisions. They will be able to better choose what foods they should and should not eat, and even make better life choices such as refraining from drugs and alcohol. It is important that children and adolescents get enough physical activity and healthy food because improving cognition can help engage the world in making smarter decisions.

Exercise and healthy eating is crucial to children and adolescents' psychological well-being because they will also have the ability to see tremendous improvements in their academic performance. By eating healthy and exercising, children and adolescents will be able to better behave in the classroom, which will decrease the amount of times one may get in trouble. Children and adolescents who exercise and eat healthy are less likely to get in trouble because they release stored energy that can cause them to be hyperactive, and they maintain sufficient energy from eating healthy food, allowing them to concentrate better. An experiment was conducted on children with Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) by Viviane Grassmann, Marcus Vinicius Alves, Ruth Ferreira Santos-Galduroz, and Jose Carlos Fernandes Galduroz, in which they studied how physical activity and eating healthy affected their symptoms (367). ADHD is a cognitive syndrome where children and adolescents are typically more impulsive, hyperactive, and less attentive, which brings about greater difficulties with learning (Grassmann, Alves, Santos-Galduroz, and Galduroz 367). Their study shows that exercise and healthy eating even provided the same beneficial effects in children and adolescents with some of the most severe learning difficulties as those with no learning disability at all. The authors affirm that there are "positive effects of acute exercise on the [cognitive function] of children with ADHD, particularly with impulsivity, vigilance, reaction time, inhibitory control, selective attention, and problem solving," including a reduction in the need for the use of medications (Grassmann, Alves, Santos-Galduroz, and Galduroz 368). With the improvements that exercise and healthy eating make on children and adolescents' behavior in school, teachers are likely to see a rise in grades and standardized test scores in those who choose to forego the actions of living a healthy lifestyle. Children and adolescents will not be disappointed with their grades if they work hard, eat healthy, and exercise regularly.

The most important reason children and adolescents should eat healthy and exercise is because the betterment of their future depends on it. In childhood, grades and state test scores depend on college acceptance and, in the end, how successful of a career one has. Eating healthy and exercising has many psychological benefits and can allow children and adolescents to achieve the grades they will need to have a successful career in the future. Having a profession that they are able to benefit from as adults can ultimately "cause less stress and job strain" while having better financial stability at the same time (Rasmussen 6). For example, let's say the parents of a boy named John taught him to live a healthy lifestyle that consisted of healthy eating and an efficient amount of physical activity. John does better in school because his healthy habits improve his cognition, problem-solving abilities, and attention. John gets good grades all throughout grade school, then goes on to graduate college at the top of his class. Because of his successful grades and high level of intelligence, he finds a well-paying job in which he makes enough money to achieve great financial stability. John is not only making good money, he is also happy at the same time because his body and mind is healthy. Further, better financial stability will open a wide variety of opportunities such as being able to afford nicer things, do fun activities outside of home and make memories, and also buy the essentials for the

continuance of living a healthy lifestyle. Just by eating healthy and exercising, children and adolescents can have a lifetime of good fortune. Those who do not take advantage of their ability to live a healthy lifestyle as a youth will most likely never have these kinds of opportunities in their lives because if a successful base is not built from a young age, it can be very hard to work their way up in the future. It is detrimental that children and adolescents perform well in school from eating healthy and exercising. Their choices in childhood will affect their future, and eating healthy with exercise can help get them where they want to be as an adult.

Eating healthy and exercising can also benefit children and adolescents' future physical health. They will be less apt to diseases and obesity, because their body will have the proper nutrients and healthy vitals it needs. Even in adult and elderly years, exercising and dieting while at a young age can prevent diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes (Chester). Although it is a good preventative measure, some diseases and conditions may not be avoidable hereditarily as people get older. But regular exercise and dieting can help ease the symptoms and/or even make the condition disappear completely, allowing children and adolescents to continue enjoying their lives. One of the most advantageous aspects of exercising and eating healthy as a child is the lengthening of lifespan. Ultimately, those that live a healthy lifestyle will live longer (Rasmussen 6). Without exercise and healthy food, people would be stuck in a society where premature and early death are common.

It has also been found that people who eat healthy and exercise during childhood also live a happier adult life. Martin Rasmussen discusses this in his article, "The Influence of Adolescent Exercise on Adult Happiness and Positive Emotions." Rasmussen researched the connection between exercise in children and adolescents and adult emotions, in which he finds that "adolescent exercise increases the chance of continued happiness in adulthood, which again leads to greater happiness (25) [...] however, studies show that possessions do not provide lasting effects" (5). In other words, the act of exercising at childhood alone can cause everlasting happiness, whereas material possessions such as clothes and jewelry make people happy, but only for a short period of time. People often are happier when exercising and eating healthy, because their bodies are receiving proper care, and in turn feel better. The advantages show just how much exercise and healthy eating as a child and adolescent benefits the human body, not only in childhood, but adulthood as well. Exercise and healthy eating during childhood are extremely important because their whole lives count on it.

As you may now recognize, obesity rates are increasing at an alarming rate, and the world needs to do everything possible to stop the rise. Children and adolescents make up a large population of the obesity rates today, which is why it is crucial to focus on influencing them to eat healthy and exercise. The future depends on children and adolescents, because they will be the only ones to maintain the functioning of the world when older generations fade away. Exercise and healthy eating may be the oldest ways of weight loss, but they are the most effective and beneficial. Even though there may be common barriers, it is still important that children and adolescents overcome the adversities, because eating healthy and exercising can improve their physical and medical health, cognition and academic performance, and future adult life.

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