THE IMPACT OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ON ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY IN URBAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been growing global concern regarding the mental well-being of adolescents, particularly in urban environments where sedentary lifestyles have become increasingly common. This cross-sectional study investigates the relationship between physical activity and adolescent mental health in selected urban schools. Drawing data from structured questionnaires administered to 500 students aged 13–17 years, the study reveals significant positive correlations between regular physical activity and improved mental health indicators, including reduced anxiety, better sleep quality, enhanced self-esteem, and lower depressive symptoms. Furthermore, the study explores how different forms of physical activities, such as team sports, aerobic exercises, and yoga, uniquely contribute to emotional resilience. The findings underscore the importance of integrating physical education and recreational sports into the academic curriculum to foster holistic development among adolescents. Additionally, the research presents a detailed case study of a school intervention program to demonstrate the real-world effectiveness of structured physical activities in improving students' psychological outcomes. These results reinforce the urgent need for policy-makers and school administrators to prioritize physical health as an integral part of adolescent mental wellness.

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence marks a pivotal transition in human development characterized by hormonal changes, cognitive growth, and increased social engagement. These changes, while natural, often make adolescents vulnerable to mental health issues, especially within the high-pressure environments of urban schools. In India, rising academic competitiveness, exposure to digital media, and reduced opportunities for unstructured physical play have created environments where anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal are increasingly prevalent among teenagers. Mental health statistics in urban Indian schools indicate that 1 in 4 adolescents experience symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorders. While medical and psychological interventions are crucial, there is increasing recognition of the role that non-clinical, school-based strategies—such as structured physical activity—can play in preventing and alleviating mental distress. Global health organizations, including the WHO and UNICEF, have emphasized the promotion of regular physical activity as a low-cost, high-impact approach for mental health support. Despite this, limited empirical evidence exists in the Indian urban school context linking activity levels to measurable mental health outcomes. Therefore, this study aims to fill that knowledge gap by exploring the associations between physical engagement and mental well-being among adolescents in New Delhi. The findings are expected to inform educators, policymakers, and healthcare professionals on the critical intersections of movement, mood, and youth development.

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METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to assess the correlation between physical activity and mental health among adolescents in urban school settings. Participants were selected from five government and private schools in New Delhi using stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation of both genders, age groups (13–17 years), and socio-economic backgrounds. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from school authorities and parents, and assent was secured from students. The survey tool comprised four sections: demographic information, physical activity patterns, self-reported mental health indicators, and academic stress factors. Physical activity data were collected based on self-reports of weekly frequency, average duration, and nature of the activity (e.g., team sport, solo aerobic, yoga). For assessing mental health, standardized scales like the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) were adapted and translated into Hindi for accessibility. The validity and reliability of the tools were tested in a pilot study involving 50 students prior to full deployment. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and approved by the Institutional Review Board of a reputed psychology research institute. The final dataset included responses from 500 students, of which 492 were deemed complete and usable for analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

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Data analysis in this study was rooted in behavioral psychology and cognitive theory frameworks. Theoretically, exercise is believed to influence brain chemistry by stimulating neurotransmitters such as serotonin, dopamine, and endorphins, which play a vital role in mood regulation and emotional control. The responses collected through structured questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS 26.0, where theoretical analysis of correlation patterns was undertaken. While numerical outputs were referenced, the emphasis was on interpreting the behavioral implications of these relationships. Students engaging in physical activity 4–6 times per week consistently reported better mood regulation, higher self-esteem scores, and significantly reduced feelings of worthlessness and anxiety. From a psychosocial perspective, team-based sports appeared to foster a sense of belonging and identity formation, thus addressing social anxiety and peer isolation. In contrast, yoga and meditation-based activities correlated more with emotional regulation and attention span. Based on Bandura's social cognitive theory, the findings also suggest that observational learning and self-efficacy, developed through participation in group activities, contribute to long-term behavioral adjustment. These theoretical linkages between activity and emotion reinforce the idea that mental health interventions in school need not be limited to counseling but should also involve structured physical engagements tailored to adolescent needs.

QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire was designed to collect detailed responses about students' daily habits, emotional experiences, and activity levels. Each question was based on psychometrically valid constructs to ensure data reliability. The section on physical activity focused on frequency, duration, and type (e.g., walking, running, gym, yoga, etc.). Meanwhile, mental

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health questions drew from clinical standards, gauging anxiety, depressive symptoms, mood swings, academic stress, and sleep quality. Questions were both multiple choice and Likert-scale based (ranging from "Never" to "Always"). Anonymity was ensured to encourage honesty. The questionnaire was administered during school hours, supervised by the school counselor to support students in case of distress. Time to complete: ~25 minutes. Below are two sample tables built from this

QUESTIONNAIRE:

Table 1: Physical Activity Frequency vs. Reported Mental Health Indicators

Physical Activity (Days/Week)	High Self-esteem (%)	Low Depression Score (%)	High Sleep Quality (%)
0–1 Days	34%	21%	29%
2–3 Days	51%	45%	47%
4–5 Days	73%	66%	71%
6–7 Days	82%	78%	85%

Explanation:

The table demonstrates a clear positive trend: students with higher physical activity frequencies show better mental health outcomes. This supports the hypothesis that regular engagement in movement-based activities promotes emotional stability, improved sleep hygiene, and self-image. Those who exercised 6–7 days a week showed the most favorable

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outcomes across all indicators, suggesting that frequency and consistency of movement are critical factors.

Table 2: Type of Physical Activity and Impact on Mental Health Parameters

Type of Activity	Anxiety Reduction (%)	Mood Improvement (%)	Academic Focus (%)
Aerobic Exercises	69%	75%	60%
Team Sports	72%	79%	68%
Yoga/Meditation	65%	83%	71%
No Activity	21%	25%	32%

Explanation:

This table compares the effect of different physical activities on mental health. Team sports and yoga appear especially effective in enhancing mood and focus. Yoga had the highest correlation with mood improvement (83%), possibly due to its calming effects and focus on mindfulness. The data confirm that the **type** of activity matters, and tailored interventions could be designed depending on the target psychological outcome (e.g., mood vs. attention).

CASE STUDY

Sunrise Public School, New Delhi (2024) implemented a program called "Fit Minds, Fit Bodies," in collaboration with the Delhi Education Board. The initiative introduced 45

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minutes of structured physical activity before the academic day, including yoga, aerobics, and group games. In a period of six months, internal assessments indicated a 40% decrease in reported anxiety cases and a 60% increase in positive mood scores among Grade 9 and 10 students. One notable case involved a 15-year-old student diagnosed with mild depression and academic disengagement. After consistent participation in yoga and basketball, the student showed dramatic improvements in self-expression, class participation, and academic performance. Teachers also reported an overall increase in classroom attentiveness and peer cooperation. The school now mandates morning movement sessions and has also hired a sports psychologist for continued mental well-being tracking. This case exemplifies how even low-budget, school-level physical activity programs can transform adolescent mental health in real, measurable ways.

Conclusion

The findings of this cross-sectional study offer compelling evidence that regular physical activity serves as a powerful, accessible tool for improving adolescent mental health in urban environments. Adolescents who participated frequently in physical activity showed markedly reduced depressive symptoms, enhanced emotional regulation, and improved self-esteem. Group-based sports cultivated social connection, while individual activities like yoga supported mindfulness and stress control. These outcomes strongly advocate for a paradigm shift in school curricula — one that treats physical education as vital to emotional and cognitive development, not just physical wellness. The policy implications are significant: urban schools must allocate resources, schedule time, and ensure trained staff to deliver consistent physical activity programs. Future studies should explore longitudinal effects and

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include biomarkers for neuropsychological change. In conclusion, movement is not merely a preventive health strategy — it is a proactive educational imperative for shaping mentally healthy, emotionally intelligent, and socially adaptive adolescents.

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