



Filling Our Buckets: A Reflection on Energizing the Body and Mind in COVID Times

Story by Eva Gabel Sippola

“Good morning second graders! Today we are going to learn about fitness. Does anyone know what fitness means? How about endurance? What did you all do this weekend to stay active? Excuse me, please stop sending emojis in the chat. And please mute yourselves. I hear feedback.”

I glance up from my laptop and over to my son, August, and his iPad to see what the scene is for class this morning. I see lots of up close-up shots of second grade nostrils, some cats and dogs, and one boy sipping on a berry-colored smoothie. This poor teacher. I really feel for him.

I take a sip of coffee and watch August begin his morning virtual PE class. He is now red in the face with his breath deepening as he moves through this mini boot camp routine of jumping jacks, squats, lunges, and push-ups. I join him on the ground for his final planks because I'm feeling lazy just watching him. In this moment, I'm extremely grateful for this PE teacher, because I know the value of the movement and activity he's giving August.

As we near August's return to school, I am reflecting on what I learned over the past 10 months of distance-learning as we worked to support our son through this period of isolation. Yes, there have been many virtual Minecraft/ Roblox playdates, lots of family Zooms, nature walks, magic shows, and strange cooking experiments. But most days, I experience exponential admiration and appreciation for August's 2nd grade teacher and all of the educators and administrators supporting him during this challenging year. From Zoom instructional time to a virtual lesson that included drumsticks and the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies to a holiday drive-by parade—all of these new ways of reaching students and building community were critical to supporting August during a time of isolation.

However, one of the most basic and most important lessons from this year is that children need to take movement breaks in order to learn. In the same way they need water and food, they need time to move their bodies in order to function. To fill their buckets with kindness, joy, and happiness—to process frustration and anxiety.

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With my son a few short days away from returning to school, I want to share a few parting thoughts on the 455,160 minutes that I lived through distance-learning.

Kid who move are able to open their minds to learning. On the days when my husband and I plowed through the school day as quickly as possible, the whole crew in our house was exhausted and drained. In contrast, on the days when we took dance party breaks every hour, went on lunchtime walks, and kicked the soccer ball around—suddenly the bucket was full again with more energy and more enthusiasm. Now that I've had this front row seat into my children's learning experience, I see even more clearly how vital it is that there is movement throughout the day. Advocating for movement in the classroom is being an advocate for better learning outcomes—not just for your specific child but for all children, who especially depend on movement to regulate their brains. When we strip our kids of the natural instinct to move, we deprive them of what they need to function.



When kids move their bodies, they discover new passions, skills, and gain important tools to self-regulate their emotions. When my son was five, I signed him up for soccer, but very quickly we saw how much he hated soccer practice. The structure, the drills, the order— none of it was fun for him. Where he fell in love with the sport was during casual pickup soccer games during morning drop-off, recess, and after-school programming. A whole year passed of this casual play before August expressed interest in joining an official team. If it wasn't for these unstructured opportunities for free play, there might not have been the interest or excitement surrounding participation in a team sport.

By providing time for movement through the days, schools give young people the opportunity to explore, to experiment, to learn how to have fun with friends through exercise, and to navigate rules and cooperation without an adult as the constant referee. Playing during the pandemic presented unique challenges, but there are many ways to introduce your children to new forms of activity. This summer we planted a small garden (yes, weeding is exercise) and re-introduced the 1980s sprinkler that not only watered our small yard but was also a wonderful motivator for August to run laps for an hour. In the winter, he helped our older neighbors move firewood. Also, believe it or not, mopping your floor can be fun exercise for an eight-year-old.

Integrating movement into learning can be simple. It can be as basic as turning up the volume of your child's favorite song. Or your own. Impromptu dance parties in your kitchen during distance-learning or before or after learning is a wonderful way to release energy. GoNoodle provides fantastic content that we access at home. During a particularly rough winter, August and I spent hours competing against each other in the Just Dance Now app. We also like to end our day with meditations from the Peloton app to calm down and relax.

Be open to flexible seating. Do I prefer to stand while completing math homework? Well...no, not particularly, but when I would tell my son to sit at the kitchen table to work on his assignments, I am ignoring his need to stretch his body out so that he can stretch his mind. For August, his brain sometimes functions and connects better while standing. As adults, we have the autonomy to move our bodies however we want, whether it's with a standing desk or moving around a classroom all day. Easy modifications might help students be more comfortable while they learn, and we can help support them when they verbalize what they need to be the best learners they can be.

To all of the educators – both in school and the accidental teachers at home – I salute you and send you strength. Keep doing your best in a year that tests each and every one of us. Keep giving our children the movement breaks they need and to take them for yourself too. Be an advocate to ensure that kids are given opportunities to move their bodies. It is what our kids need to keep those buckets full so that they have energy to be the best version of themselves.

Eva Gabel Sippola, MPH has worked in the nonprofit sector for 20 years to support the health and well-being of children and families through programs that improve access to physical activity, sports, nutrition, health, and education in underserved communities across the United States. When she isn't training for marathons, or exploring the trails surrounding her home in Central Oregon, she can be found practicing dance moves with her son in between baking experiments in the kitchen. She serves as the Vice President of Philanthropy at Action for Healthy Kids.

