

## Youth Sports and Academics

*The relationship between exercise and performance in the classroom*

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As a parent of three children, I constantly ask myself “what can I do to help my children develop academically for the long term?” All parents go the extra mile for their family’s academic growth. Unfortunately, what’s good for one child may be bad for the next. Do I push my child? Do I allow my child to follow their own path? Do I force the reading, writing and arithmetic? Or do I emphasize what my child wants to do?

The answer may be as simple as signing up for a recreation sports program. As a full time tennis professional, I started researching topics within neuroscience back when I was a full time CPA. I have now applied this science to teaching and coaching tennis. This has been my life’s work.

I have spoken on RIGHT BRAIN versus LEFT BRAIN Dominance in multiple settings in multiple cities. Each year, brain studies are becoming more sophisticated. Brain imaging technology is allowing us to WATCH the brain operate during different tasks. We simply know more.

Although controversial, many recent studies are trying to correlate athletic participation and IQ. The concept being tested is whether athletes or non athletes tend to be smarter. What is the problem with this kind of analysis? The concept of “smarter” is relative.

One study actually found that ATHLETES tend to perform at a higher rate in the classroom than NON athletes. This study had difficulty separating the competitive nature of athletes and its impact on classroom performance. Academic performance is a competitive process.

Another article summarized a study at Baylor University that determined chewing gum caused a **statistically noticeable** improvement in the math scores of eighth graders. This same study showed that the attention span of “Chewers” was higher!

You may ask what could a gum chewer have in common with an athlete? **They both move!** Yes, movement of any kind has an impact on the brain. Why? The brain controls movement by using BOTH Hemispheres of the BRAIN. That means there is a coordination OR dance between the RIGHT and LEFT brain during movement. Both hemispheres HAVE to work together to achieve these movement goals.

Let’s extend this discussion to our premise of improving the academic mind of our children. The LEFT BRAIN is generally accepted as the LOGIC hemisphere of the BRAIN. It controls STEP ORIENTED activities. PROCESS is a great way to describe the LEFT BRAIN. The RIGHT BRAIN controls the VISUAL and SPATIAL processing functions of the BRAIN. Taking something as a WHOLE is another way to describe the RIGHT BRAIN function. Although the LEFT BRAIN has been given credit for being

the LANGUAGE center of the BRAIN, research is showing that emotional and creative language function may reside in the RIGHT BRAIN. Creativity is considered to be a RIGHT BRAIN trait. On the other hand, completing a project that was VISUALIZED in the RIGHT BRAIN falls under the responsibility of the LEFT BRAIN. You can see where I am going with this? You need BOTH HEMISPHERES working side by side to accomplish anything academic.

Now back to our sports model. The BRAIN is a largely empty vessel when we are born. This is one of the few things that make HUMANS unique from OTHER creatures. Therefore, what we fill it with develops the person. Much of this is LEARNED through experiences. Exercise and sports force the BRAIN to exercise the coordination between right and left brain activity. Each time we run, catch or throw we are using a combination of fine and gross motor skills on BOTH sides of our body. The brain becomes comfortable shooting messages over neuro-receptors. This means we are improving communication between both hemispheres of the brain. In fact, research is showing that the more you send messages between the RIGHT and LEFT brain, the MORE RECEPTORS that GROW!

Therefore, the impact on your child's BRAIN is holistic and long term. I am not saying that taking one SOCCER recreation program will raise you child's score in MATH. On other hand, a lifetime of exercise and sport will likely develop your child's brain for the LONG TERM. These benefits will likely come out in COLLEGE and ADULTHOOD.

In the end, isn't that our GOAL for our children? We want children that are developed HUMAN beings that "peak" in their adulthood.

Thank you for your time. Your comments are always welcome. See you this summer!

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