

PRESS RELEASE

Wednesday 1 February 2017

Can changing the nature of PE lessons help children do better at school?

That is the question researchers from the University of Oxford and Oxford Brookes University will be trying to answer in the 'Fit to Study' project.

Physical exercise has been shown to have positive effects on the brain and to improve cognitive performance, both immediately and in the long-term. The 'Fit to Study' project is being conducted with Year8 pupils, for a period of one academic year (2017/18), in 100 schools, to better understand how the content of school PE affects brain function and academic performance.

A programme of activities for PE lessons has been developed by Oxford Brookes University (in collaboration with Oxfordshire Sport and Physical Activity) to try to optimise the benefit of PE for brain function. Staff from Oxford Brookes University will train PE teachers to deliver this programme, and the research team will assess the impact, at the end of the year, on pupil fitness, wellbeing, cognitive function and academic attainment.

The 'Fit to Study' project is looking to recruit 100 state-funded secondary schools from within a 75 mile radius of Oxford. Participating schools will be randomly assigned to either an Intervention Group (IG) and be asked to deliver the new PE programme, or to a Control Group (CG) and asked to continue with their normal PE lessons.

Professor Heidi Johansen-Berg from the Oxford Centre for Functional MRI of the Brain (FMRIB) at the University of Oxford, with Professor Helen Dawes from the Oxford Institute of Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Research at Oxford Brookes University, is leading a team of researchers to deliver the project.

Professor Johansen-Berg said: "There is growing evidence of links between the body and the brain. The aim of this research is to better understand how school PE impacts on academic achievement."

There will be a number of activities for school pupils to undertake, both at the start and at the end of the study, including cognitive tests, wellbeing questionnaires, fitness (beep) tests, and a maths attainment test at the end of

the academic year. Once a term, a researcher will attend each school to check on progress and record physical activity in a PE lesson.

By participating, schools will be helping the research team to increase understanding of the importance of PE in the curriculum and this could potentially have a major influence on future education policy.

Professor Dawes added: "There is an increasing need for educational policy to be informed by evidence. Our study will be an important component of the way we think in future about PE in schools".

In addition to the main study, the University of Oxford will be conducting a sub-study with a small number of pupils from schools within Oxfordshire. This will involve MRI brain scanning, as well as additional fitness and cognitive tests. Further detail will be made available to participating schools from May 2017.

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For more information, please contact Natalie Gidley on 01865 484630 or ngidley@brookes.ac.uk.

Notes to Editors:

- NatCen Social Research have been commissioned by the project funders to conduct an Independent Evaluation of the 'Fit to Study' project, including analysis of its impact on academic attainment.
- For more information, and an application pack, schools can either register their details at <http://www.oxinahr.com/get-involved/fittostudy>, or can contact Keren Beddow [National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)] on 01753 637338 or email fittostudy@nfer.ac.uk
- The project is jointly-funded by the Education Endowment Foundation and the Wellcome Trust, under their 'Education and Neuroscience Programme'. For further details visit <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/our-work/projects>
- Oxford Institute of Nursing, Midwifery & Allied Health Research (OxINAHR). For further details visit <http://www.oxinahr.com/get-involved/fittostudy>
- Oxford Centre for Functional MRI of the Brain (FMRIB). For further details visit www.ndcn.ox.ac.uk/divisions/fmrib
- NatCen Social Research. For further details visit www.natcen.ac.uk
- Oxfordshire Sport and Physical Activity. For further details visit <http://www.oxspa.co.uk/>
- Set in a historic student city, Oxford Brookes is one of the UK's leading universities and enjoys an international reputation for teaching excellence and innovation as well as strong links with business and industry. More information is available on the Oxford Brookes website at www.brookes.ac.uk