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Answer Sheet

# A therapist goes to middle school and tries to sit still and focus. She can't. Neither can the kids.

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By **Valerie Strauss** December 3 [Follow @valeriestrauss](#)

Students listen during a lecture in a same gender science class at G. James Gholson Middle School in Prince George's County Public School District earlier this year. (Photo by Michael S. Williamson/The Washington Post)

This is a follow-up to two popular posts about the problems kids face when they are forced to sit still in school for hours on end without a break. The first, written by pediatric occupational therapist Angela Hanscom, was titled "[Why so many kids can't sit still in school today](#)" and discussed how being inactive affects students' ability to stay focused and learn, and in some cases leads to

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improper diagnoses of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD. The next piece was titled [“The right — and surprisingly wrong — ways to get kids to sit still in class.”](#)

Hanscom has now written a third related piece, this one specifically about middle-schoolers. Hanscom told me that she was curious about the effects of restricted movement on students in middle school, so she went to a local middle school to observe what was going on inside classrooms and talk to teachers and parents. The following post explains Hanscom’s experience and findings at the middle school she visited. Hanscom is the founder of TimberNook, a nature-based development program designed to foster creativity and independent play outdoors in New England.

By Angela Hanscom

Except for brief periods of getting up and switching classrooms, I’ve been sitting for the past 90 *excruciating* minutes. I look down at my leg and notice it is bouncing. *Great*, I think to myself, *now I’m fidgeting!* I’m doing anything I can to pay attention – even contorting my body into awkward positions to keep from daydreaming. It is useless, I checked out about forty-five minutes ago. I’m no longer registering anything the teacher is saying. I look around the room to see how the children a few decades

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younger than me are doing.

I'm immersed in a local middle-school classroom environment. I quickly realize I'm not the only one having a hard time paying attention. About 50 percent of the children are fidgeting and most of the remaining children are either slouched in the most unnatural positions imaginable or slumped over their desks. A child suddenly gets up to sharpen their pencil. A few minutes later, another child raises their hand and asks to go to the bathroom. In fact, at least three children have asked to go to the bathroom in the past twenty minutes. I'm mentally exhausted and the day has just begun. I was planning on observing the whole day. I just can't do it. I decide to leave right after lunch.

There is no way I could tolerate six hours of sitting even just one day, never mind *every* day – day after day. How on Earth do these children tolerate sitting this long? Well, the short answer is they don't. Their bodies aren't designed for extended periods of sitting. In fact, none of our bodies are made to stay sedentary for lengths of time. This lack of movement and unrelenting sitting routine, are wreaking havoc on their bodies and minds. Bodies start to succumb to these unnatural positions and sedentary lifestyle through atrophy of the muscles, tightness of ligaments (where there shouldn't be tightness), and underdeveloped sensory systems – setting them up for weak bodies, poor posturing, and inefficient sensory processing of the world around them.

If most of the classroom is fidgeting and struggling to even hold their bodies upright, in desperation to stay engaged – this is a *really* good indicator that they need to move more. In fact, it doesn't matter how great of a teacher you are. If children have to learn by staying in their seats most of the day, their brains will naturally tune out after a while – wasting the time of everyone.

Are these teachers clueless to the benefits of movement? No. Most teachers know that movement is important. And many would report that they are downright and overwhelmingly frustrated by their inability to let children move more throughout the day. “We are expected to cram more and more information down their throats,” gripes one middle school teacher. “It is insane! We can no longer teach according to what we feel is developmentally appropriate.” Another teacher explains, “due to the high-stakes testing, even project-based learning opportunities are no longer feasible. Too many regulations, not enough time.”

They go on to explain that recess has been lost due to lack of space and time as well as fear that children will get injured. “Too many children were getting hurt,” says a teacher. “Parents were calling and complaining about scrapped knees and elbows – the rest was history.” Even their brief break from instruction during snack time is no longer a reality. These few minutes of freedom are now replaced with a “working snack” in order to pack in a quick vocabulary lesson. Physical education is held only

every sixth day, so technically this isn't even a weekly affair.

The children line up for lunchtime. "Come watch this," a teacher yells over to me. The children line up in pairs and are told to be quiet. Once everyone is quiet, two teachers (one in front of the line and one in back) escort the children down to the cafeteria. The thought of prison inmates quickly comes to mind, as I watch the children walk silently, side by side down the corridors of the school hallway. I'm told they are to remain quiet and seated throughout the lunch period. "I feel so bad for them," exclaims the teacher. "They are so ready for down time during lunch, but are still required to sit and be silent!"

Many parents are also becoming increasingly unsatisfied with the lack of recess and movement their children are getting in middle school. One mother states, "Middle school kids in particular are just coming out of the elementary school environment, consisting of multiple breaks throughout the day. These kids are still young, and depending on the district, could be just 10-years-old going into middle school. They are experiencing a great change already in the transition alone. A break during the day is what they need to re-group."

This same parent contacted the district's school board members who ultimately make many of the decisions regarding school policies. She also met with the principal and deans and created an online petition consisting of a

strong parent community advocating for more movement in school. The results? A brief five to ten-minute walk outdoors after lunch, which the teachers explain is really half a lap around the building and back indoors they go. “It may not be recess—but it’s a good start,” this mother states. “However, I still believe it’s necessary to make it school policy that all kids get a longer break.”

I ask the teachers what kids do when they get home from school. “About 60 percent of them are over-scheduled. The other 40 percent have no one home, so they do what they want – which often relates to playing video games,” a teacher complains. “I’d say we have only a handful of children that go home and find time to play.” Both teachers try to keep homework meaningful and under an hour, knowing kids need time to release after a long day of school.

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Even middle-school children need opportunities to play. This past summer, a teacher at one of our TimberNook camps brought along his 12-year-old daughter, Sarah as a “co-counselor.” Sarah was excited about being a counselor alongside a college student for their small group of five children. In the past, she had simply been a camper. However, as soon as the group set out into the deep woods, dispersed, and started to play, she quickly switched roles. She instantly forgot about her new status and jumped wholeheartedly into the pretend world,

alongside the younger children. What took place next, was quite remarkable.

Sarah climbed high onto a fallen log that ascended to the very top of their newly designed teepee, donned with fresh ferns to camouflage their rustic “living quarters.” She wore a brightly colored feathered mask on top of her forehead. “Listen,” she said to the group of children gathered around her. “We need to get ready for the opposing team’s attack.” She took the time to look each of the children in the eye. “You,” she said to one of the bigger kids in the group. “You are now appointed as top commander.” “Julie,” she said to a girl that is known to be one of the fastest runners in the group. “You are going to be our top spy.” She proceeded to roles for each of the children to play.

Her age, strength, and intelligence made her their natural chosen leader and the children respected her decisions. She played just as hard as the other children. She forgot about her new role as co-counselor for the rest of the week, except to occasionally lead a group song or chant during morning meeting. The fun of being a camper and free play trumped all responsibility. She was still a child. She was not ready to give up her right to free play. Who could blame her?

Why do we assume that children don’t need time to move or play once they reach sixth grade, or even fifth grade? They are only children! In fact, I would argue that we *all*

could benefit from opportunities to play, even up through adulthood. Everyone needs downtime. Time to move our bodies. Time to get creative and escape the rigors of reality.

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What can we do for our middle-school children? I asked Jessica Lahey, a middle school teacher, contributing writer at *The Atlantic*, and author of the upcoming book, “The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed,” to give her opinion on the matter.

“Teachers are often afraid that if they let children move, it will be hard to get them to settle back down again. This shouldn’t stop us from providing them with the necessary movement children need in order to learn. Middle-school children can always benefit from recess! Also, when I taught for Crossroads Academy, we had some great nature trails behind our school through the woods. I would often take my whole English class for walks. I’d give them a topic to ponder and then we’d walk for ten minutes to think about the question. We’d huddle and discuss the topic. Then, I’d throw out another question and we’d start to walk again.”

Jessica explains that this is also true for schools in urban regions. Children can walk to museums or local parks to

explore and learn. They can bring along their writing journals and assess the world and culture around them. Learning doesn't have to be done in a chair. Jessica goes on to tell me that one time, she had her middle-school children practice public speaking by taking turns standing on a small bridge over a rumbling brook. They had to learn to project their voice over the babbling brook in order to be heard by the rest of class. "It was a good practical lesson and there is something about nature that grounds the child, taking away the anxiety that typically comes with public-speaking," Jessica reports.

All people in decision-making positions for school policies should be required to sit through *at least* one school day and experience first-hand what is required of children today. Then they will have a better idea of what is appropriate and what isn't. Then they will start to think about what their decisions mean for *real* children in *real* schools. Maybe then, they will begin to value children's need to move, need to play, and the need to be respected as the human beings that they are.

Middle school-age children need to move – just like everyone else!

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Valerie Strauss covers education and runs The Answer Sheet blog.

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