

Using Exercise Balls Instead of Chairs To Improve Students' Focus

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Exercise Balls in the Classroom
Abstract

This action research project examines the effects of stability balls on student behavior and ability to focus in the general education, fourth grade classroom. 12 students participated, three with varying disabilities. The findings of this study revealed an increase in students' ability to focus and complete their work.

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Using Exercise Balls in the Classroom in Lieu of Chairs

A student's ability to pay attention in the classroom is becoming a real struggle. In the world today children are spending more time in front of video games, T.V., and various other stimuli. Children are becoming accustomed to the constant need for visual and sensory stimulation, which in turn can cause them to be less apt to be able to pay attention in classrooms and classroom type situations.

This is becoming a huge problem for students and for teachers. The lack of focus makes it hard for students to sit for an extended amount of time and be able to concentrate on the information being taught in the classroom. The students in turn are not retaining as much of the content being taught. If students aren't getting the information they need in the classroom then their grades start to fail and then they start to fall behind. The change in children's ability to focus also presents a problem for teachers. Teachers are starting to spend more time on classroom management, and less time on teaching because of attention issues. Teachers then struggle to get all of the information that needs to be taught, finished in the time allotted. Thus, causing the students not to learn all of the material that they need to cover before moving on to the next grade.

Studies are now being done to show that using exercise balls instead of hard desk chairs is improving students' ability to focus. Although the research is a bit slim and still being accumulated students and teachers are reaping the benefits.

This concept began in the 1990's, in Europe. (<http://www.ballodynamics.com>) The schools in Europe that exercise balls have been used in have recognized that allowing positive movements for students has become more important because of the rise in sedentary children. (<http://www.ballodynamics.com>) Studies are showing that by having students sit on exercise balls during class they are able to focus better. In an article titled "The Health Bounce," Lisa Witt states that "Actively sitting benefits students by energizing them, promoting blood flow and enhancing core strength." Occupational therapist Sally Geerlings said, "The ability to pay attention increases when given the opportunity to move." These seats provide children with a tactile stimulation while they are working on balance, assisting their brains to be ready to learn. (<http://www.advantagepress.com>)

John Kilbourne, from Grand Valley State University, conducted a study on a college class using exercise balls instead of chairs. Kilbourne's hypothesis was that using the exercise balls as seats would be a positive experience for students in his university lecture class. Results concluded that students so liked using the exercise balls instead of chairs that they asked if they could use them in other classes. The university students answered a questionnaire that addressed the seven aspects of college student classroom behavior after sitting on exercise balls. These seven aspects include: ability to pay attention, ability to concentrate, take notes, engage, take exams, posture, and engage lower body. All of these categories score at a four point zero or above with five being the highest. (www.ballodynamics.com)

There are also an increasing number of children with ADHD/ADD, which means that these students need the type of movement that an exercise ball will provide. These children who require extra movement could do so in a quiet manner without disturbing other students. (<http://blog.mlive.com>) A study on students with ADHA/ADD was conducted during a Language Arts activity. Results showed that these students' in-seat behavior improved and their work was much more legible. (blog.mlive.com) By actively sitting your brain in turn is more engaged. When a person's brain is engaged they are learning more in and essence that is what we, as teachers are looking for.

Write up: Procedures and Reflections on Project

Project Description

This particular project was conducted with a class of 12, fourth graders that are taught in a small public school in Illinois. The project was introduced shortly after Christmas break in January of 2011, and concluded at the end of May 2011. The population that was included was predominantly white, and middle to upper class families. There were seven girls and five boys. The students ranged from nine to ten years old with a variety of personal behavioral/motor issues including: 1 - doctor diagnosed, case of severe ADHD, 1 - psychologist tested case of ADHD (parents refuse to take the child to the doctor for official diagnosis), 1 - case of large and fine motor deficiencies, and nine other students that you could call "average." As a result, with the variety of different personal differences, this particular class was a good choice for finding out whether or not using exercise balls in the classroom will help improve student' focus.

In order to gather data for this project, students will sit on exercise balls for two 30-minute class periods for the first few days. The students will then progress to three/four – 30 minute class periods, allowing the students a break when needed. Students will continue to up the time by 30 minutes a week until the students are sitting on the exercise balls during all class work time. Students will never sit on exercise balls for a full day because of P.E, Music, Art, etc. The maximum amount of time that students would possibly sit on them, at their seats for class work time would be four hours a day. This would be throughout a seven-hour school day with breaks throughout. Student behavior will be monitored for the entire second semester, approximately 12 weeks. Students will not be forced to use exercise balls. Traditional desk chairs will always be available.

The project began the day the students returned from Christmas break. It started with a discussion about using exercise balls instead of chairs in the classroom and the possible benefits of using them including: being able to better focus, allowing movement without getting up and walking around, good for posture and physical fitness, and they are just kind of fun! It was then explained that there were four exercise balls in the room that would be switching between all of them. The students were told that if they decided they would like to use one all the time they could purchase their own and bring it in. From there, a note was sent home to parents explaining the use of exercise balls instead of chairs, and the possible benefits. Also included, was an article about a school that already uses the exercise balls instead of chairs that talked about the benefits experienced. The note also informed parents that their child may choose to bring in their own ball if they would like so it may be used all of the time. The cost, ball dimension/size, and where to purchase them was also included in the letter.

Introduction of Exercise Balls

The fourth graders started using the exercise balls on Tuesday after Christmas Break. They first started using the four exercise balls that belonged to the fourth grade room, and followed a subject-to-subject switch system that had been set up. The students were each given a little copy to put on their desks so that everyone knew who would be switching with whom. This helped immensely! All of the students were able to make quick, quiet, smooth transitions when needed, and then no time was wasted.

Before starting to use the exercise balls, students spent about 15-20 minutes discussing the rules to using exercise balls and the proper way to sit on them: with feet on the floor and good posture. The students had a lot of good input on things they had seen on T.V., or seen parents/grandparents do with them while exercising. The fourth graders also talked about being able to move around and bounce on the balls. Appropriate times to bounce, lightly, were during work time and free time. Rolling around/moving around could be done at their seats back and forth and forward and backward within a couple inch radius. The students were all very excited and inquisitive.

Exercise Balls-The First Six Weeks

The first group that got to use the exercise balls was extremely giddy. It was the newness and the excitement of trying something that was completely out of the box. Students almost couldn't contain themselves. The class ended up having to have a quick reminder "chat" about remaining focused even with the excitement of having a "new toy." The class had actually said that being able to try the exercise balls was just like

getting a “new toy” only at school! The children in this class were so open minded and willing to try new things.

After the first couple of days, the class settled into a daily routine that included using the exercise balls. The system of switching balls worked well, and there were many noticeable differences starting to show in students when it was their turn to use the exercise ball. The students’ posture was also much improved. Students were now sitting up nice and straight, instead of slouching down in their chair. There was also no teacher time being wasted, like in the past when telling students to sit up straight, and put their feet on the floor. When sitting on a ball, there really isn’t any place else to put your feet but on the floor, because if feet aren’t on the floor you will lose your balance and fall over. Luckily no one got hurt, but this did happen several times. This particular incident happened to a couple of students that liked to slouch in their seat. and put their feet up on the crossbar of their desk. These two students had to concentrate very hard in order not to fall the first several times they used the balls. This didn’t frustrate them though; it just made them work harder. These particular students really enjoyed sitting on the balls even though they had a little tumble.

The new “exercise ball” fad took the fourth grade room by storm, and according to one of the high school teachers, the room looked a bit like Romper Room. By Tuesday of the next week, seven days later, seven out of 12 students had already brought their own exercise ball to use in the classroom. By Wednesday, three more students had brought their own exercise balls, making that 10 out of 12 students. The last two students that did not bring their own ball to use were the students’ whose parents were not financially able

to afford them. These students were told right away, privately of course, that they could use the exercise balls in the classroom, as their own throughout the end of the year.

These students were very appreciative and chose to do so.

Exercise Balls - The Second Six Weeks

After a little while, the newness of using the exercise balls wore off and students became just as normal as using a chair on daily basis. The students came in and sat down and get to work with little mention about the exercise balls. The student that takes medication for ADHD truly benefited from using the exercise balls (let's call him student A), as did the other students. Student A in particular, was a very high-energy student that has a very hard time staying seated, especially on his bottom. He was notorious for sitting on his knees and moving all around on his chair to the point that he had to be seated in the back row, with no one behind him, because then their view was blocked. Student A took to the ball immediately. The fact that he could comfortably move on this type of seat, and exert some of his energy was ideal for him. Student A also had a tendency to want to bounce more often than the other students. This was fine, as long as he was again, placed at the end of the row with no one behind him, and if he was bouncing lightly, and under control. The extra bouncing took some of the pent up energy he had and put it to good use. The only time he went back to using a chair was when he chose to use the exercise ball inappropriately, such as using it as a basketball. The time back in a regular chair was almost torturous for him, but a good reminder for when he was able to use the exercise ball again.

Student B was the student with some large motor and fine motor skill deficiencies. This student has overcome major hurdles in her early lifetime and needs to work continuously on core strength and large motor coordination. By using the exercise balls in the classroom she was able to continue to work on these skills throughout the day. Student B used the exercise ball full-time, and never chose to go back to a chair. As the days passed, this student became more aware of her body core, and how to use her muscles. This was noticeable because at first, she would hold on to her desk while sitting on the ball, and by about five or six weeks she barely hung on and she could sit up straight, move from side to side, and bounce a little. On top of all that, she was on task more often, which helped her to stay a bit more organized.

Student C is the student that was given a Conners Evaluation for ADHD. According to that particular test, student C's scores showed a definite yes for ADHD and it shows greatly in the classroom. She constantly struggled to stay focused and rarely could finish a book for her AR goal. This particular student is not medicated and struggled to stay focused. When using the exercise balls with student C, there was also improvement, but not quite as much as student A and B. The exercise balls seemed to give student C an outlet for some of her energy. Student C was very distracted by items in her desk and by things around her. Using an exercise ball is not going to completely solve a person's ability to focus. It did however help after all of those items were all collected, because then student C would sway back and forth, and watch and listen to me. It almost looked like she was on a rocking chair, but it kept her attention for a longer period of time.

There were two students whose exercise ball usage was very interesting. These two students in particular are academically at the top of the class and have no behavior or other issues. These two students brought their own exercise balls to use in the classroom. What was different about these two was that they would randomly put their exercise balls in the back of the classroom, and use a chair instead. When trying to figure out if there was a reason, there never seemed to be any. When asked, the students didn't seem to have an answer either. It just depended on their mood that day, or the time of day was all they said. They did say they liked the exercise balls better than chairs.

The remaining seven students really enjoyed using the exercise balls, and didn't want to go back to chairs, but their usage and success of the exercise balls was less noticeable than the others. The remaining seven are, in general, attentive students that range in the high to average grade level. These seven continued to be attentive after using the exercise balls, and stayed on task.

Exercise Balls – The Last Six Weeks

Throughout these last six weeks, students continued to have noticeable, steady, positive results in using the exercise balls instead of chairs. Throughout the last six weeks, the students never wanted to start using regular chairs again. The students were actually wishing they could use them the next year in fifth grade.

Conclusion

This project has been a great experience to venture out and try something new.

Throughout this experience, I learned that children are so very willing to go “out of the

box,” and experiment and try new things. Each of the students took this challenge by storm with open minds.

Using exercise balls in the classroom proved to be a successful project in my eyes. The exercise balls allowed the students the movement that many of them need, without distracting others. By being able to roll around a little bit on the exercise balls the students’ bodies were engaged, which in turn their brains were engaged. The students loved the freedom of movement with the exercise balls. When using the exercise balls the students’ posture also improved. They also thought they were more comfortable, and just plain fun. Everyone looked forward to using them and never seemed to lose the enthusiasm. They were a benefit all around.

Anyone that is considering using exercise balls in the classroom should definitely try it. Start with a few and see how it goes, and if that works then add to them. Exercise balls really make a difference for the students that have extra energy they need to get rid of. Make sure to really sit down with the students and talk about the rules to using them, and be very firm with the punishment. Make sure there are no exceptions, because that is when you run into problems. The exercise balls are to be used as a tool in the classroom, not a toy. Last, make sure to leave the option open to use a chair if they would prefer. It was nice for students to change back to a chair if they needed to take a break.

In closing, in the future the researcher will definitely leave the option open for students to use an exercise ball instead of a chair in the classroom. Children’s behaviors are constantly changing and many need more movement. Sitting for extended periods of time isn’t as feasible as it was in the past. Giving students an easy way to stay actively

engaged is definitely worth trying. Not only will students reap the benefits, but teachers will too!

Goal of Using Exercise Balls in the Classroom

Using exercise balls in the fourth grade classroom will help students be able to:

- Focus better because their body is actively engaged.
- To get some of their wiggles out at their seat, without disturbing others.
 - Improve posture, balance, and coordination.

Rules For Sitting On Exercise Balls

1. Both feet must remain flat on the floor.
2. Sit up straight.
3. You may bounce, but your “bottom” may never leave the ball.
4. They are **NOT** basketballs so do not bounce them like one.
5. They are **NOT** kick balls so don’t kick them.
6. You may switch to a chair anytime. You never *have* to sit on an exercise ball. Please try to switch during work/free time.
7. Please ask if your ball needs to be pumped up and I will fill it back up.
8. You may only use your ball.



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