

Youth who are physically active less vulnerable to depression

April 8 2021, by Steinar Brandslet



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Most young people between the ages of 11 and 14 are generally doing well. Some, however, struggle with mental health problems, for which physical activity could be a help.

"Children and teens who do sports have fewer depressive symptoms than

those who only participate in [cultural activities](#)," says Else Marie Lysfjord, who defended her doctorate in January at NTNU's Department of Psychology.

Depression occurs in [children](#) as young as age 11. Questionnaire results show that physical activity and exercise are strongly related to lower risk of depressive symptoms. Girls appear to fare worse than boys.

Girls especially vulnerable

Girls in particular are prone to depression, according to Lysfjord's article, which is based on her [doctoral dissertation](#). Her research compiles the results of three studies.

"Twice as many girls as boys report depressive symptoms already as 11-year-olds," says Lysfjord, who is an assistant professor at Nord University.

Not only do girls more often have depressive symptoms, but their ailments often last longer as well.

"Three times as many girls as boys at this age report persistent symptoms over the course of a year," Lysfjord says.

Worst for girls who only choose cultural activities

Youth who engage in both sports and other cultural activities have the lowest degree of depressive symptoms. In this group, about 15 percent of girls and 7 percent of boys have numerous symptoms of depression.

Girls who participate exclusively in cultural activities have the greatest number of depressive symptoms at almost 26 percent, compared to more

than 21 percent for boys.

Young people who don't participate either in sports or other cultural activities end up in the middle.

What we can do

"In order to prevent depressive disorders among children and adolescents, [girls](#) in particular should be prioritized," says Lysfjord.

Her study results also indicate that depression prevention work should promote physical activity and exercise among children and adolescents.

"Children and teens need trusted adults present in their [leisure activities](#) to provide support to youth who are vulnerable," Lysfjord says.

Children and adolescents need to experience closeness with their peers, whether in sports or other activities. It's important to facilitate opportunities for all youth to participate in activities.

"For children and teens to participate in activities, they have to want to participate. Therefore, they should be asked and involved in deciding which activities to offer youth," says Lysfjord.

Limited research available

The prevalence of depressive symptoms and the importance of participating in leisure activities among younger adolescents have not been researched much.

Lysfjord's dissertation dealt with the occurrence and duration of depressive symptoms, the incidence and variation of depressive

symptoms among children and adolescents who participated in various leisure activities, and the connections between [physical activity](#) and exercise, cultural participation and depressive symptoms.

The findings are the result of a survey among students in 6th to 10th grade (11-14 years) in two municipalities in Trøndelag county. The various parts of the survey included from 1429 to 1748 student respondents.

Students were asked about [depressive symptoms](#), psychosocial stresses and participation in sports and other cultural activities. Depressive symptoms were recorded using a Norwegian version of "The Short Mood and Feelings Questionnaire." The same data material was used in all three studies.

More information: Lysfjord, Else Marie. Ungdom og psykisk helse. Hvilken betydning har helsefremmende strategier som idrett og kultur for forekomst og utvikling av depressive symptomer blant barn og unge i alderen 11-14 år. hdl.handle.net/11250/2724309

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