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Please cite this publication as follows:

Bailey, R., Howells, K. and Glibo, I. (2018) Physical activity and mental health of school-aged children and adolescents: A rapid review. *International Journal of Physical Education*, LV (1). pp. 1-14. ISSN 0341-8685.

Link to official URL (if available):

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Physical activity and mental health of school-aged children and adolescents: A rapid review.

Background

Mental health problems among children and young people are recognised as major threats to their well-being and are associated with significant costs to them and to wider society. The World Health Organisation described mental health problems as “the most significant health concern for children and adolescents in developed countries” (Scuhrcke et al. 2008, p.43). If untreated, these conditions can have severely detrimental effects of young people’s development, their educational attainments and their potential to live fulfilling and productive lives (Kieling et al. 2011).

Methods

This study examined the evidence regarding the effectiveness of physical activity as a non-medicinal treatment for mental health concerns among school-aged children and young people. Using a rapid review methodology, which is a shortened form of systematic reviewing, this paper identifies 16 suitable papers published between 1st January 2007 and 20th August 2017, that were conducted in school physical education or school based physical activity contexts that presented evidence on direct association between physical education or school based physical activity and identified outcomes; and was an empirical study or a review of a cluster of connected empirical studies.

Results and Conclusion

The evidence gathered and to be presented within this paper suggests that school-based physical activity has an important role to play in protecting young people from mental illness, and has the potential to save lives through helping to reduce feelings of hopelessness, suicide and self-harm. Social interactions and resilience are particularly important and could be supported through a provision of appropriately devised physical activities, and especially team sports. Physical activity is especially valuable for girls in combatting mild to moderate depressive symptoms. Activity selection deserves serious consideration, as inappropriate provision can worsen, rather than help, psychological problems.