Text 18 BIKE RIDING AND MENTAL HEALTH

Middle school is a good time to encourage kids to embrace the benefits of bike riding, according to Outride, a nonprofit which promotes cycling at school. Teaching middle schoolers bike riding skills as part of physical education classes may help improve their mental health. That's according to a new study that looked at the effects of a 6-8 week cycling class taught in schools across the U.S.

The mental health benefits of exercise are well-documented. And anyone who's lived through middle school knows those years can be particularly challenging. The new study comes at a time when research shows that youths across the U.S. are struggling with mental health.

The study involved more than 1,200 students, aged 11 to 14, enrolled in middle schools across the U.S. that offered a program called Ride for Focus from the nonprofit Outride, which conducts research and provides cycling programs and equipment for youths – primarily middle schoolers.

Students participated in a cycling class for at least three days a week, for a minimum of 6 weeks. They learned cycling safety and maneuvering skills outdoors while raising their heart rate and just having fun. The students completed standardized screening questionnaires before and after the program designed to measure their well-being.

Middle school is a good time to encourage kids to embrace the benefits of bike riding, because they're starting to experience all sorts of social pressures, anxiety, stress from school, stress from home. So it's a really important time to provide additional outlets to explore not only physical activity, but also the freedom and relief that can come with going out for a bike ride during the day.

Exercise in general is "the most evidence-based, cheapest form of prevention and intervention that human beings can do for their mental health," says a professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at Stanford University School of Medicine.

While many forms of moderate-intensity exercise offer brain benefits, aspects of cycling give it a leg up on other physical activities, he says. "It engages all of these other parts of brain function, such as sensory perception," Reiss says. "You are looking at your hearing, you're balancing, you're navigating and turning. Oftentimes, you're doing it with someone else, so there's the positive effect of company or group activity."

Of course, while exercise has powerful mental health benefits, it's not a panacea. For example, research has shown that adolescent girls are at higher risk of mental health problems like depression and anxiety than boys... The study found that adolescents who didn't limit screen time to a maximum of two hours a day, or who got less than the recommended 8.5 hours of sleep, saw less improvement in their well-being.

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