

FROM 'BRAIN BREAK' TO 'BRAIN BOOST'

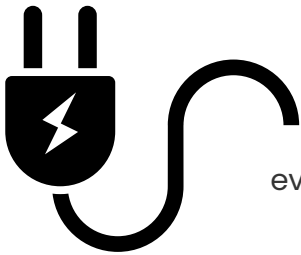
WHY MOVEMENT FUELS LEARNING



Marisa McKay, Primary physical education advisor Physical Education New Zealand

Let's be honest – the term brain break makes it sound like our brains need to switch off for a while. But that's not what we're doing when we get kids moving during class time. In fact, the opposite is true – we're switching the brain on. That's why it makes much more sense to think of these short bursts of activity as a **brain boost**.

Research tells us the brain and body are deeply connected. Movement isn't just about keeping fit – it actually helps the brain work better. Neuroscientist John Ratey (2008) calls exercise “miracle-grow for the brain,” because it stimulates growth and wiring that support thinking, memory, and focus. Other studies have found that even short bursts of physical activity can sharpen attention, improve behaviour, and reduce stress in students (Donnelly et al., 2016). In Aotearoa, the Ministry of Education highlights movement as vital for learning and wellbeing, noting that physical activity helps ākonga stay engaged and ready to learn.

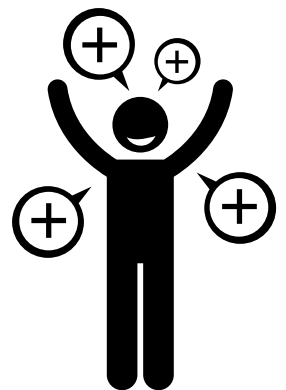


So instead of seeing these moments as time away from learning, we can see them as an investment in learning. A quick brain boost acts like plugging the brain into a charger – giving kids the energy and focus they need to tackle the next challenge. For busy teachers, this is a simple, evidence-based way to lift learning without needing extra time in the timetable.

Links to the Curriculum

When physical activity is treated as an “add-on” – like sending students for a run around the field when they get restless – it can feel disconnected and, for some tamariki, even discouraging. Research consistently shows that when movement is woven meaningfully into learning, students are more engaged, more motivated, and retain knowledge better. The Ministry of Education highlights that movement is not only vital for physical wellbeing but also enhances thinking, focus, and social interaction (MoE, 2020). Similarly, Ratey (2008) in Spark notes that exercise “prepares the brain to learn” by improving mood, attention, and memory. By integrating purposeful movement into maths, literacy, or inquiry, teachers can create experiences that are not only enjoyable but also deepen learning.

Imagine measuring perimeter by pacing it out, acting out the water cycle, or using games to explore fractions – suddenly physical activity becomes a tool for understanding, not just burning energy. Purposeful movement supports hauora, builds connection, and ensures every child sees physical activity as something positive and meaningful. By embedding it across the curriculum, teachers can help students experience learning as active, engaging, and memorable – and give physical activity a much richer role in the school day.



Integrated Brain Boosts to Try Tomorrow

Mathematics

- *Fractions Relay*: Students run, hop, or skip to collect fraction cards, then work in teams to match equivalent fractions or order them on a number line.
- *Geometry Walkabout*: Head outside to identify and photograph real-life examples of 2D and 3D shapes, symmetry, and angles around the school grounds.

Literacy

- *Action Verbs Drama*: Students act out verbs from a story or their writing, then use movement to explore how action words add impact.
- *Story Pathways*: Create a movement-based story map on the floor or field. Students walk, crawl, or jump through each part of the story as they retell it.

Science

- *Life Cycle Dance*: Students use movement to represent the stages of a plant or animal life cycle (seed sprouting, caterpillar crawling, butterfly flying).
- *Forces in Action*: In pairs, students push, pull, roll, and slide different objects around the classroom to explore gravity and friction.

Social Studies / Inquiry

- *Human Timelines*: Students line up and physically represent a timeline of events, taking steps forward as they explain their part.
- *Migration Journeys*: Map journeys of early settlers or explorers by moving around the room or outdoor space to show distances travelled.

These approaches make learning active, memorable, and purposeful, while showing tamariki that movement is part of everyday life and learning – not just something done in PE.



Small shifts in language can make a big difference. Moving from brain break to brain boost helps both teachers and students see movement as purposeful, not optional. It's not downtime – it's fuel for learning. And the bonus? It keeps the classroom fun, connected, and full of energy – while directly supporting the goals of the NZ Curriculum.

Glossary:

Physical Education is a learning area within Health and Physical Education. It is about more than just “doing sport” or “being active.” Through PE, students learn movement skills, develop understanding of their bodies, explore teamwork and leadership, and make sense of how physical activity connects to wellbeing, identity, culture, and society. PE is intentional, curriculum-driven learning.

Physical activity, on the other hand, is the movement itself—running, jumping, dancing, games, or sport. It can happen in or out of school, with or without a learning focus. In PE, physical activity is the medium for learning, not the end goal. For example, a game of tag in the playground is physical activity; when a teacher uses tag to teach strategies, fair play, or movement concepts, it becomes part of PE.

