

# Acknowledgement of Country

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I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today, and pay respect to their Elders past, present and emerging. I extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today.



# ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR NARELLE EATHER

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THE VALUE OF SPORT FOR  
PSYCHOLOGICAL AND  
SOCIAL OUTCOMES:  
EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD

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# UNIVERSITY PRIORITIES

**Contribute to Global Sustainable Development Goals**

**Student success** and retention

**Student and staff health and wellbeing**

Promoting civic responsibility and social impact

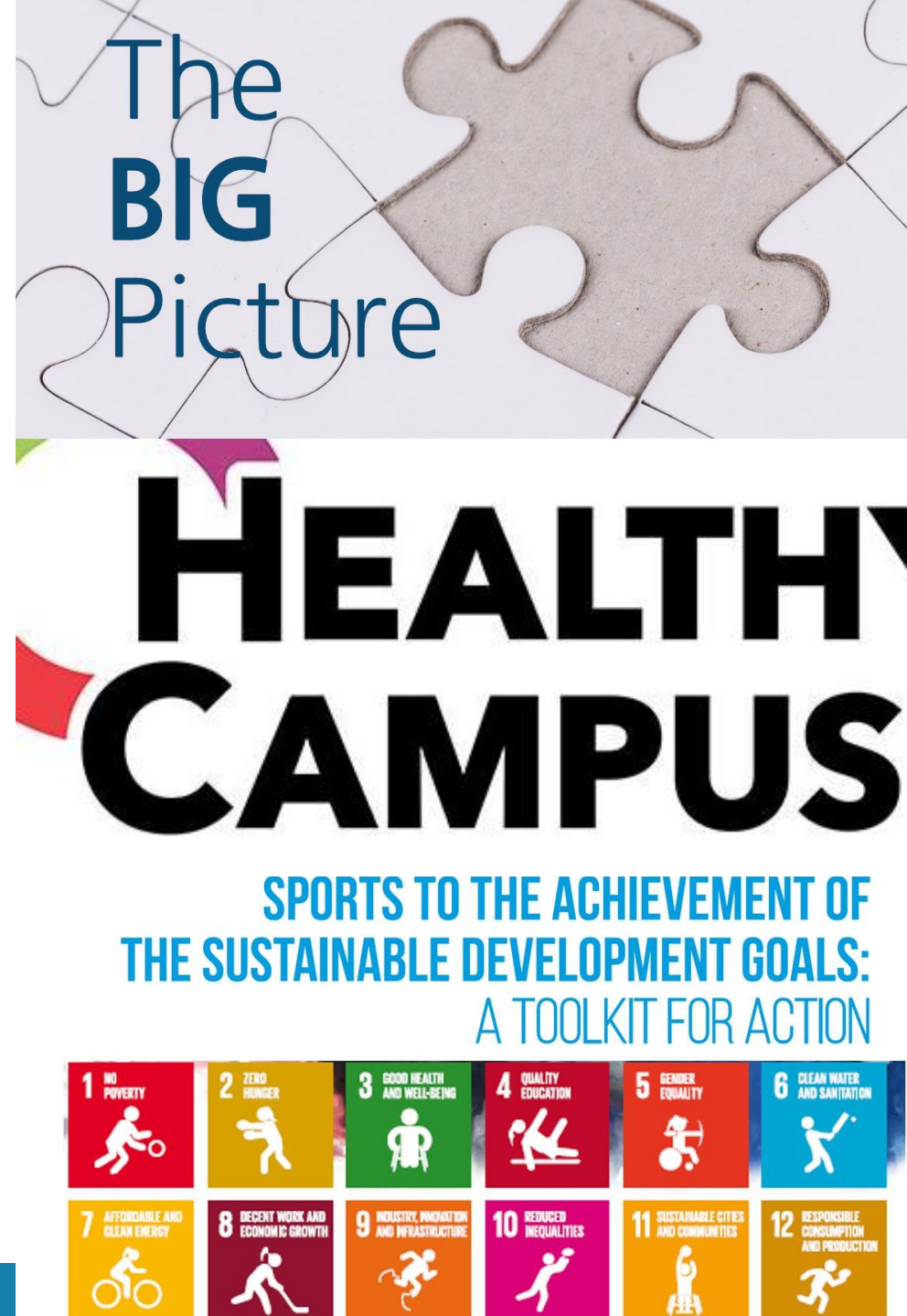
Building local, national, and international partnerships and collaborations

Attracting international students and scholars

Contributing to global challenges (e.g., health, education)

Creating a safe, welcoming, and inclusive campus culture

**University reputation**



# 1) MENTAL HEALTH: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Mental health encompasses **psychological, social and emotional health**, and includes two discrete indicators:

- 1) psychological **wellbeing** (e.g., self-esteem and quality of life), and
- 2) psychological **ill-being** (e.g., psychological difficulties, high levels of stress and anxiety)

(Ryff et al., 2006; Keyes, 2014)



# MENTAL HEALTH OF AUSTRALIANS



- Almost  $\frac{1}{2}$  adolescents report at least moderate distress (Lawrence et al, 2015; Wuthrich 2021; Wuthrich 2020)
- 42.9% of Australians aged 16–85 have experienced a mental disorder at some point in their lives
- **Greatest rates of mental health issues (psychological distress, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts) in senior school years and during university (1 in 3)** (AIHW 2024; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020–2022)
- International students report additional stressors such as cultural adjustment & visa insecurity
- Academic stress, financial pressure, and social isolation are leading contributors to poor mental health (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Australian Bureau of Statistics)



# BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY FOR MENTAL HEALTH

## Reduces Symptoms of Depression & Anxiety

Boosts endorphins and serotonin levels  
Natural mood enhancer

## Improves Cognitive Function

Enhances focus and memory  
Supports brain plasticity and mental sharpness

## Decreases Stress

Lowers cortisol levels  
Encourages relaxation and emotional resilience

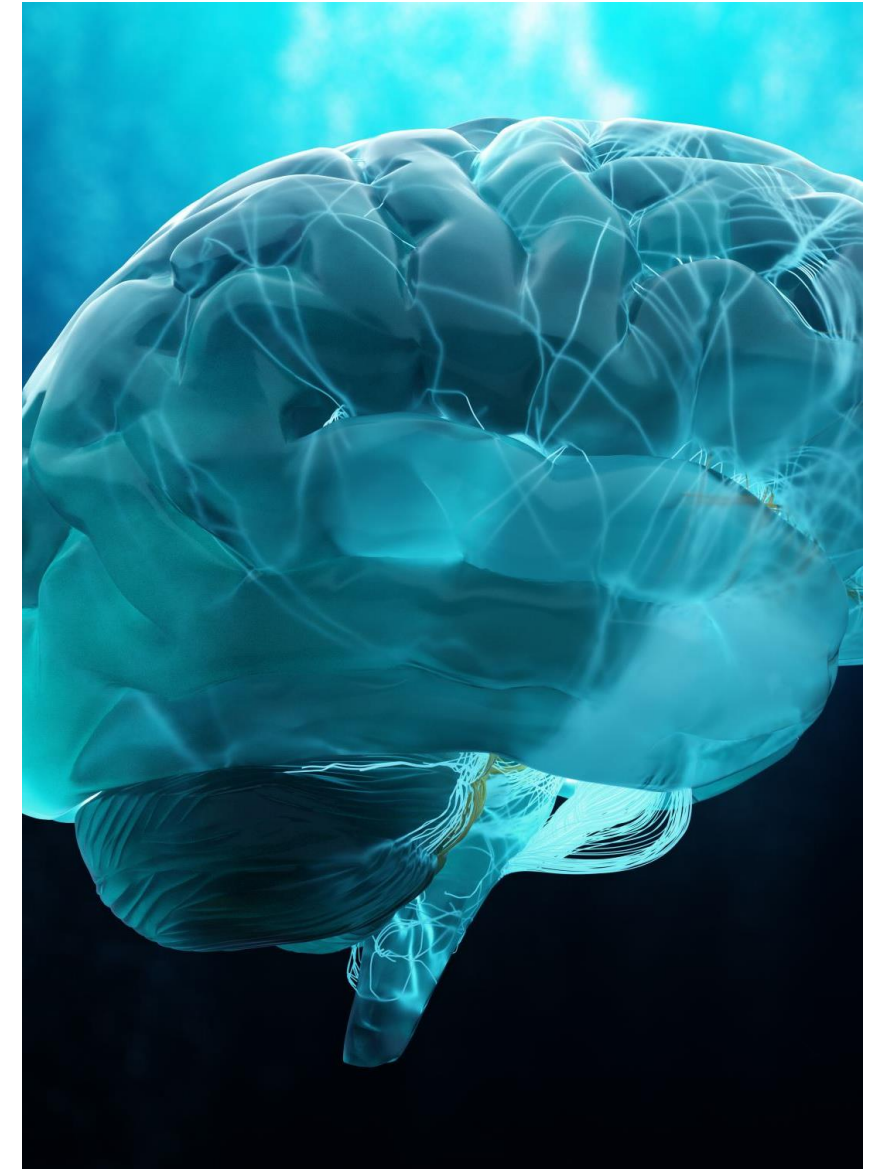
## Improves Sleep Quality

Helps regulate circadian rhythms  
Leads to deeper, more restorative rest

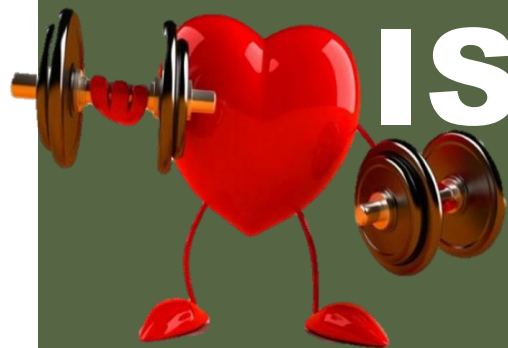
## Boosts Self-Esteem & Social Interaction

Fosters confidence and social support through group activities

 “Even 30 minutes of moderate activity most days can make a difference.”  
(Aust Dept Health & Aged Care)







# IS SPORT THE SOLUTION?

- + Opportunity to be physically active
- + Improved physical fitness
- + Improved movement and sport skills
- + Reduction in the risk of developing non-communicable diseases & illnesses
- + Opportunity for social interaction
- + Beneficial for mental health and wellbeing
- + Development of life skills
- + Economic benefits through reduced health care costs linked to inactivity
- Sport participation carries injury risk

## ▲ Psychological wellbeing

- self-esteem
- life satisfaction



## Psychological Ill-being

- depression
- anxiety
- Stress

## Social Outcomes



- self-control
- pro-social behavior
- interpersonal communication
- fostering a sense of belonging

Eather et al. *Systematic Reviews* (2023) 12:102  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-023-02264-8>

Systematic Reviews

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW UPDATE

Open Access

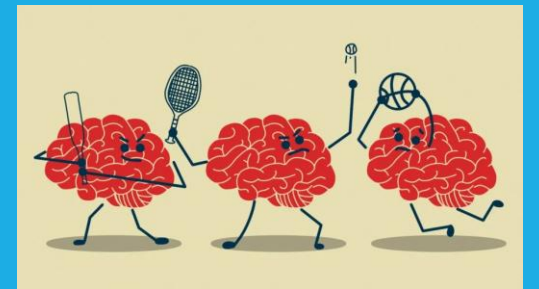


The impact of sports participation on mental health and social outcomes in adults: a systematic review and the 'Mental Health through Sport' conceptual model

Narelle Eather<sup>1,2\*</sup> , Levi Wade<sup>1,3</sup> , Aurélie Pankowiak<sup>4</sup> and Rochelle Eime<sup>4</sup>

**Team sports**  
are most  
beneficial

# SPORT AND THE MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS FOR ADULTS: THE EVIDENCE





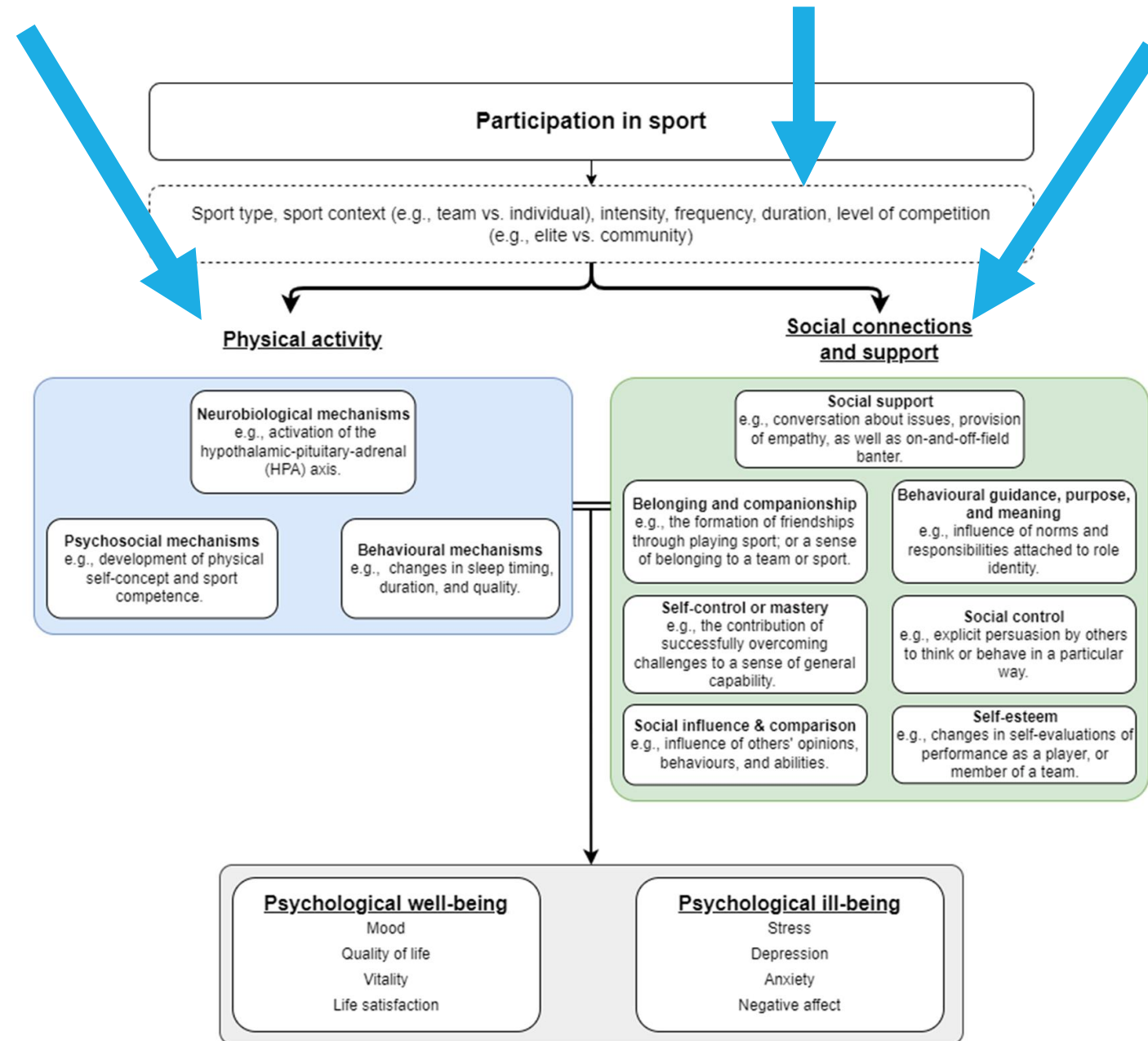
# THE MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH SPORT CONCEPTUAL MODEL



Moderators

Proposed mechanisms

Mental health outcomes



# SPORTS PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES

- +social integration
- +peer support
- + social acceptance and social competence
- +social self-efficacy
- + social integration
- +prosocial behaviours
- + interpersonal relationships
- +higher peer belonging
- + greater social connections
- +positive youth development
- +peer victimisation, aggression, conduct problems (team sports)





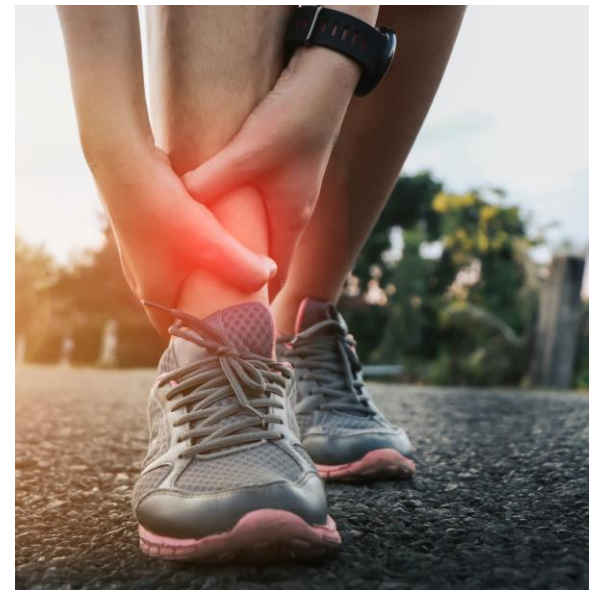
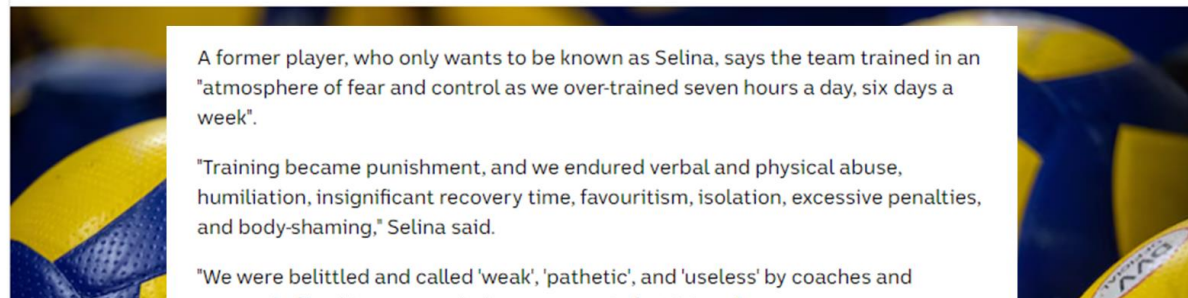


SPORT

## Volleyball Australia apologises to former players for physical and psychological abuse

By national sport reporter, [David Mark](#)

Posted Thu 18 Jul 2024 at 1:56pm, updated Thu 18 Jul 2024 at 2:31 pm



# COGNITIVE HEALTH BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

- Physical activity improves cognitive and academic performance  
(Chang et al., 2012. Brain Res)

- Potential **mechanisms**:

- Changes in brain structure and function  
(Hillman et al., 2014. Pediatrics)

- Improved cognitive control  
(Chaddock et al., 2010. Dev Neurosci)



*"I've been working out for six months, but all my gains have been in cognitive function."*



# COGNITIVE BENEFITS OF SPORT / PA



## Improved Memory and Learning:

- Boosts hippocampal function and memory retention



## Enhanced Concentration and Attention:

- Sharper focus and better task-switching ability



## Better Executive Function:

- Improves planning, inhibition control, and decision-making



## Neuroplasticity and Brain Health:

- Supports neurogenesis and protects against cognitive decline



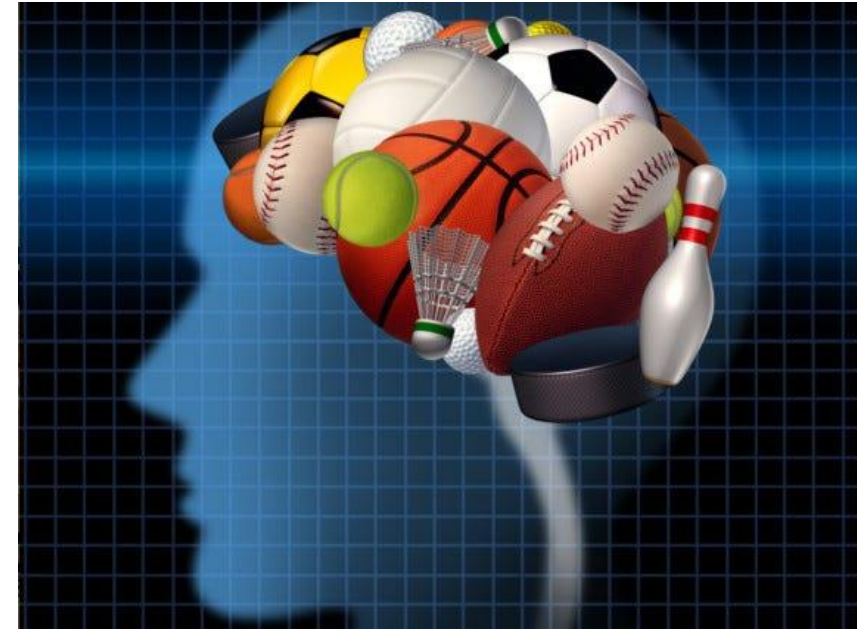
## Mood-Linked Cognitive Boost:

- Improved mood enhances mental performance



## Faster Reaction Times:

- Enhances cognitive speed and motor coordination



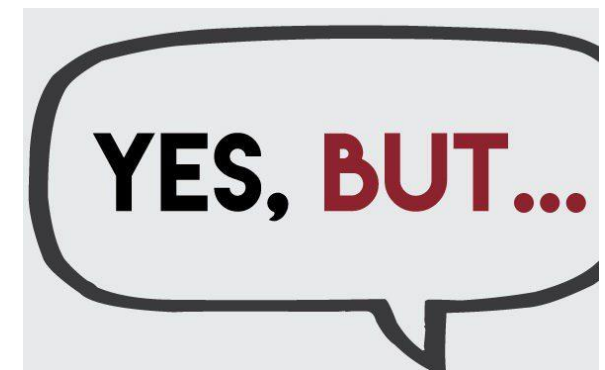
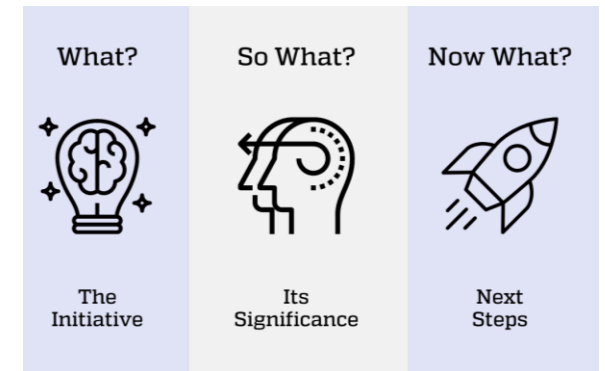
(Hillman, C. H. 2008; Erickson, K. I. 2019.; Stillman 2020)

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.05.005>

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0170845>

# COGNITIVE & MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS THROUGH SPORT ARE RELEVANT FOR.....

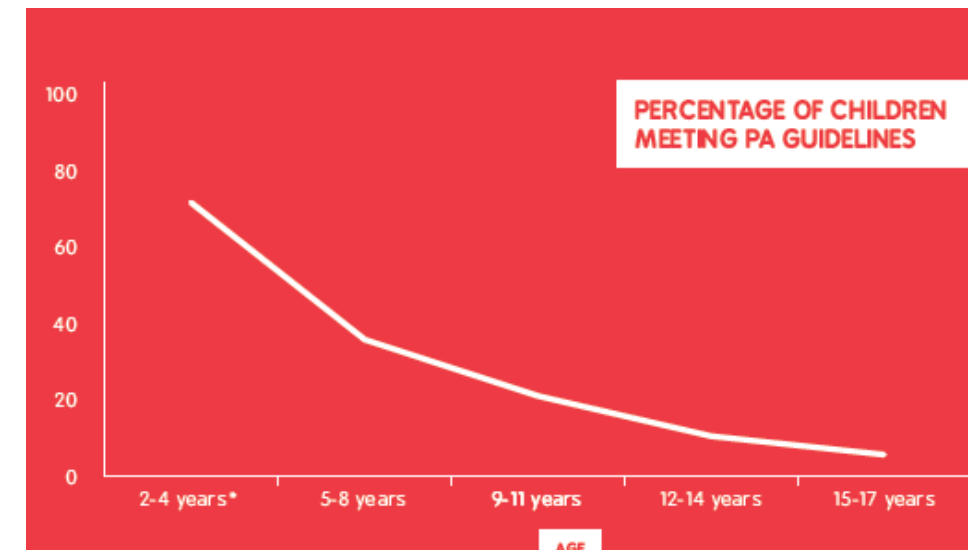
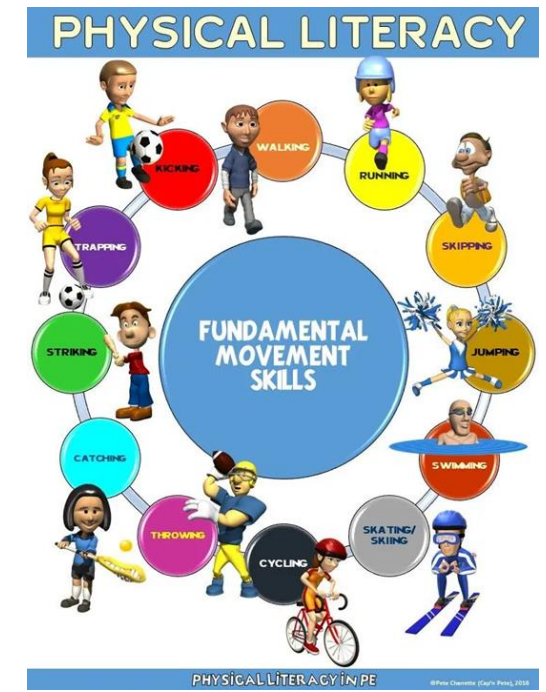
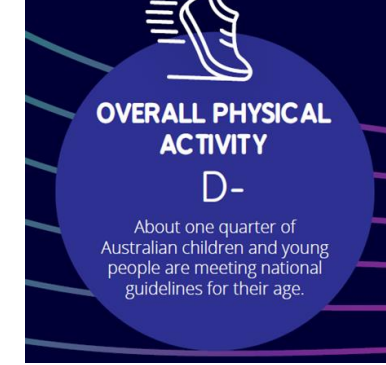
- Students:** Better academic outcomes and focus
- Staff:** Improved productivity and stress management
- Older adults:** Delay in age-related cognitive decline
- Athletes:** enhance cognitive processing speed and motor coordination

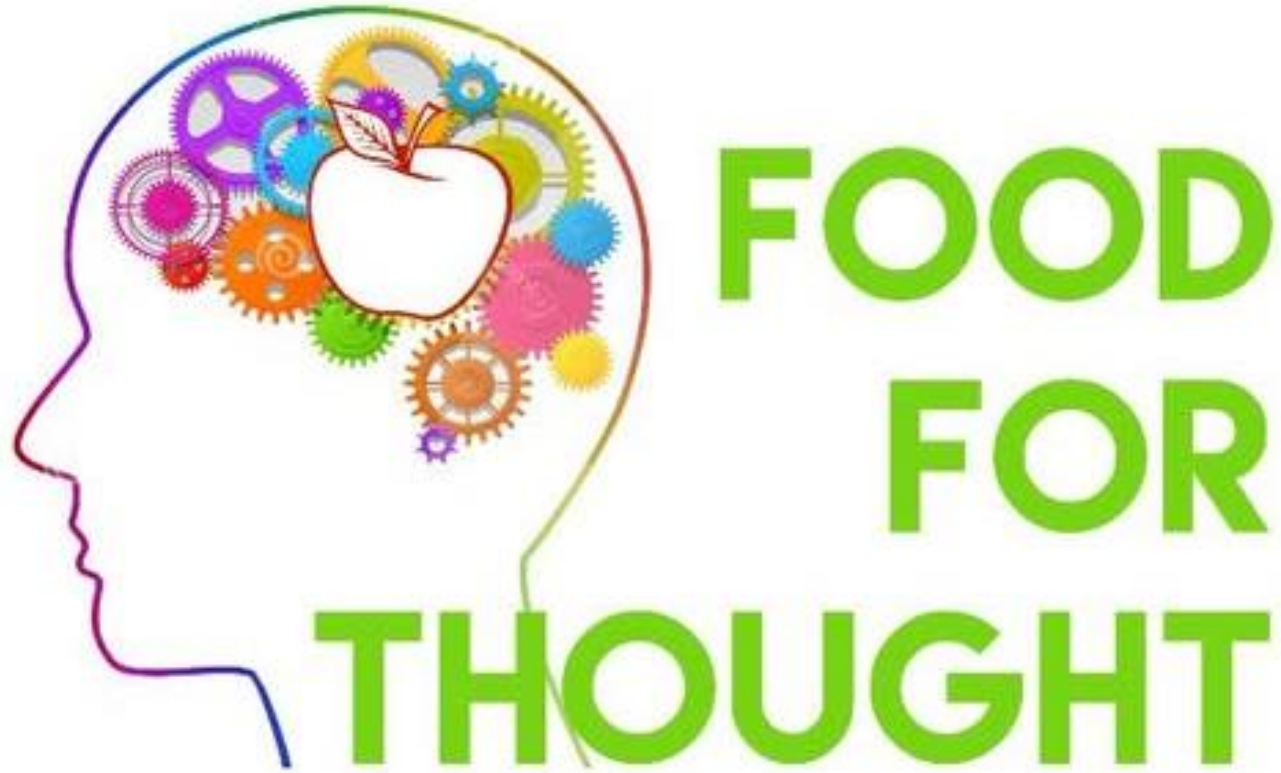




## 2) PA, FITNESS, SPORT PARTICIPATION TRENDS

- PA & Physical Fitness among children is poor
- PA declines dramatically throughout adolescence (Dumith et al., 2011. Int J Epi)
- **Older adolescents** and **young adults** are highly susceptible
- <6% of older adolescents & 50-80% of young adults (18–25 years) fail to meet PA guidelines
- Behaviours continue into and throughout adulthood (Telema et al., 2009)
- 50-70% adults considered sedentary/low active
- **Low FMS skill mastery in children**
- Girls: run 30%; vertical jump: 33%; kick 13%; over-arm throw: 14%)
- Boys: run 32%; vertical jump: 32%; leap 13%, kick 50%; over-arm throw 53%; catch: 59%)





WHAT CAN UNIVERSITIES DO?

Most Australians aren't active enough or fit enough to achieve good physical and mental health

AND

They don't have the skills to try

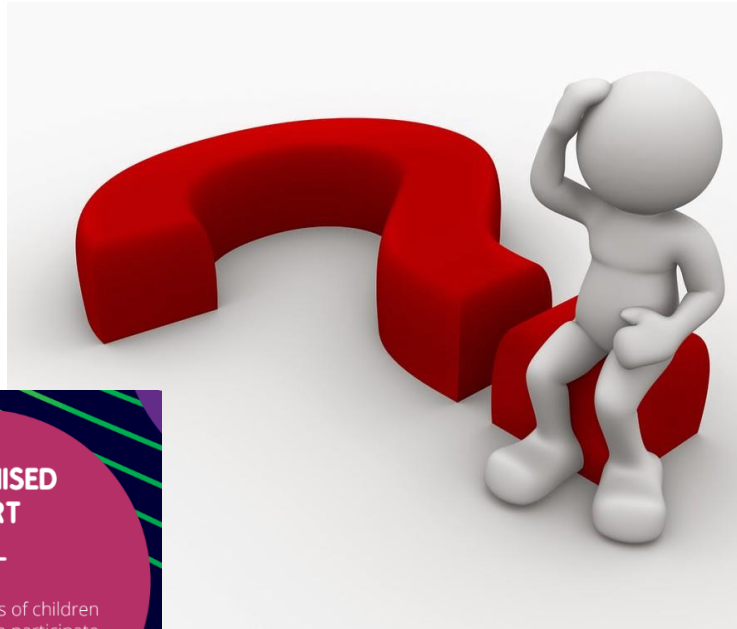
(let alone have confidence, fitness or competence to experience success in a range of activities or sports)





 **ORGANISED  
SPORT  
B-**

Around two thirds of children and young people participate in organised sport (outside of school hours) at least once per week.



GIRLS DROP OUT OF SPORTS AT

1.5x

THE RATE THAT BOYS DO BY AGE 14.

BY AGE 17, MORE THAN HALF OF GIRLS  
WILL QUIT PLAYING SPORTS ALTOGETHER.



**Problem:**  
“Kids join youth sports programs in  
droves - and drop out in droves”

# hoped Brisbane 2032 will get them back

By [Paul Kennedy](#)

Posted Thu 22 Jul 2021 at 5:01am, updated Thu 22 Jul 2021 at 10:34am







Source: Sport Australia – AusPlay Survey 2022, Crossman 2024 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1469029224000207>

# Summary

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University Sport / PA programs provide a platform for....

- ✓ Achieving broader university goals
- ✓ Specifically improving student and staff, and community participants' **physical, mental, and cognitive health**
- ✓ Creating new/innovative opportunities to create active and healthy campuses

BUT we need to

- ✓ Consider current PA levels / fitness of participants (poor)
- ✓ Address barriers and facilitators of participation (time, motivation, skills, enjoyment)
- ✓ **Promotes social interaction, connection and belonging (key driver for mental health)**







THANK  
YOU