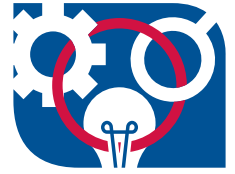




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Balancing Act

Staying focused at school, keeping connected to community

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It was one of those clear, bright, and brittle winter mornings, my breath oozing out in puffs of frost, when I had the epiphany. Despite the cold, despite the damp, despite the discomfort, this was exactly where I wanted to be; nestled inside a puffer jacket, gumboots on, cradling a hot latte and watching my son fly around the soccer field in front of me. I was firmly out of my comfort zone, (8:30am on a Sunday morning should be spent in one's warm kitchen, living room, or congregation in my view), but so too was my son. He had put himself on the line and



he was loving the challenge, and quite frankly, so was I. Many parents who I speak with share this same sentiment; yes, a cold soccer field on a Sunday morning is hard; yes, making sure everyone gets to every practice with all of the correct things each week is hard; but none of us would trade in any of that for the delight we feel knowing that our children are in their happy place. It warms the cockles of our hearts to see the sheer joy on their faces when they make that pass, or shoot that goal, or high five the success of a teammate. These sports field experiences are important, they are formative, and they deserve a place in our lives.

Once our children grow past the bustle of primary school and the secondary years loom ahead with greater expectation, it is, however, a common adolescent malaise to consider passing over the soccer boots for the study schedule. Many teens feel this pressure – to sport, or not to sport? To study or not to study? To part-time job or not to part-time job? That is the question being raised here, and in short, the experts say, do both, do it all, as often as you can. Maintain your networks: to your Church youth group, or your musical ensemble, or your sports communities. Take on the challenge of a Maccas shift or enjoy the wellbeing break that a pet or school dog can provide; essentially, maintain the balance. Because it is within this balance that we as individuals can feel fulfilled, appreciated, and a part of something bigger than ourselves, and this White Paper will explore the reasons for this.

Strike your balance.

Australians are typically, very active people. As the diagram below indicates, most of us are out there pounding the pavement each week, doing something physical to sustain our health. Whilst organised sport and swimming lessons rate highly for children under the age of 14, as people move into their adolescent years and beyond, more individualised fitness programs such as gym sessions enter our frame of reference. The World Health Organisation promotes that, “regular physical activity provides significant physical and mental health benefits”, (WHO, 2024), and it seems that most Australians are taking heed of that message. Interestingly, boys and men tend to be more greatly represented on the field than girls and women, with WHO reporting that, “adolescent girls were less active than adolescent boys, with 85% (boys) vs. 78%, (girls)” indicating that they participated in daily exercise. Whilst these statistics are not drastic, they are still worth a conversation. What are these girls doing rather than participating in organised sport, or joining a workout group? What are the boys who are not physically active doing in their recreation time instead? There are many competing factors in our modern world, but the significant contribution that physical activity can have on our overall health and wellbeing is paramount and worth considering.

Top ten most popular sports in Australia across ages

	0-4	5-14	15-24	25-34	35-54	55+
1	 Swimming	 Swimming	 Fitness/Gym	 Walking	 Walking	 Walking
2	 Gymnastics	 Soccer	 Walking	 Fitness/Gym	 Fitness/Gym	 Fitness/Gym
3	 Dancing	 Basketball	 Running	 Running	 Bush Walking	 Bush Walking
4	 Walking	 Australian football	 Bush Walking	 Bush Walking	 Swimming	 Swimming
5	 Soccer	 Gymnastics	 Swimming	 Swimming	 Running	 Cycling
6	 Running	 Netball	 Soccer	 Soccer	 Cycling	 Golf
7	 Cycling	 Dancing	 Basketball	 Pilates	 Yoga	 Running
8	 Australian football	 Tennis	 Tennis	 Cycling	 Pilates	 Yoga
9	 Bush Walking	 Cricket	 Cycling	 Basketball	 Tennis	 Pilates
10	 Athletics	 Running	 Netball	 Yoga	 Soccer	 Tennis

By sport data tables – July 2023 to June 2024

Table: The Conversation • Source: AusPlay • Created with Datawrapper

Confederation of Australian Sport, (2024)

The figure above showcases the many and varied ways in which people choose to ‘do sport’ over time, with the beautiful flamenco figure indicating the three-year-old dance class, and the pool revealing the primary school aged swimming lessons. But, what this figure does not unpack is the dip in daily physical activity at the Middle School aged bracket of 12-14 year olds, and it does not consider why there remains almost 7% of teens aged 15-17 who report that they do not undergo any sort of physical activity on any given day, (Ausplay, 2023). It is these gaps that are troubling, and it is these deficits that are worth our discussion.

Why do some swap Sport for Study?

Once secondary school appears on our doorstep, students sometimes start to feel the pinch of an increased academic workload. As a result, occasionally they will look to things to shed to make room for these new demands. The perceived ‘pressure’ of high school, the shifts in routine, the desire to succeed in all facets and across the board, can sometimes leave our adolescents in a bit of a tailspin, and as such, it is often things like an organised sport or a part-time job that take a raincheck when a Maths test or English assessment task threaten the next day. Researchers, however, will argue that as parents, this should not be our reaction, but rather we should encourage our children to keep shooting those basketball hoops, or walking their dog, or slicing those loaves at the local bakery. One such paper developed out of the University of Sydney has even discovered “that physical activity positively influences academic performance

in children and adolescents”, (Owen. K., 2021). As such we should be trying to keep our teens on the courts as they move through these precious youth years, not urging them onto the sidelines.

Reputable social psychologist Johnathan Haidt has observed the wellbeing patterns exhibited by teens worldwide and he has described what he views as “an epidemic of mental illness”, (Haidt, J., 2024), threatening to overtake our children. Haidt contends that modern parents and care givers are “overprotecting children in the real world and under-protecting them online,” (Haidt, J., 2024), with grave repercussions. This over-scheduling and over-protecting means that many of our young people are out of the house six or seven nights a week, which leaves little time around the edges for this free play. And yes, organised sport has many training requirements, and parents and teachers running the show do need to keep the balance in mind. However, it can be observed that these rehearsals and trainings may in fact provide the screen free ‘down time’ our bodies and brains require, and like many of his peers, Haidt believes that we need to unplug our children from the screen and re-instate them outdoors if they are to truly thrive. As such, the next logical step would mean encouraging our children, particularly those sedentary middle schoolers, off the couch and out the door with the family dog on a lead, or onto the sports pitch where they can throw away the day’s stress. By reducing sedentary screens and increasing physical activity, we are gifting our children time for growth, and this can only be a good thing.

In a similar manner, there are other recognised and fulfilling ways to assist students to decompress during their daily experiences and re-connect with their wellbeing. Whilst good friends, good food and good family can all play an active role in boosting emotional regulation and feelings of peace, pets and animals are also a recognised pathway for boosting our own human wellbeing. Studies across time have recorded the undeniable fact that owning a pet can increase a child’s physical and emotional state by being a consistent friend, playmate, and comforter when things go wrong. These studies have also found that pet ownership correlates with lower levels of depression and anxiety, and even further, these fluffy companions can prevent some chronic and long-term diseases in their humans through increasing the emotional disposition of their owner, (Gadomski, A., 2015).

Moving into the teen years, as hormonal shifts approach and mood swings increase, on occasion, sometimes they can trigger more serious and complex mental health conditions that require additional support. At Luther College we are fortunate to have recently re-opened our state-of-the-art Wellbeing Centre, where students can find sanctuary during their sometimes-overwhelming school day; take a pause, speak to the staff who work in this space, and re-set on their day ahead. One of the most exciting initiatives being developed in this department is the training of ‘Wellbeing’ dogs who are being taught on



the sidelines as we speak, and they will ultimately be available to Luther students who may need a little pat or snuggle to get them through the rest of their school day. Luther College’s Head of Counselling, Jodie Sleaf, believes that this program has such potential for success, as “*many young people experience a lift in mood, a sense of connection, and a reduction in stress when they spend time with animals. Having a wellbeing dog means that those students who feel better after interacting with a gentle, friendly golden retriever can have that opportunity within their school day, and during higher stress times such as before exams or assessments,*” (Sleaf, J., 2024).

Whilst the dogs are not ready to be on site just yet, Luther’s Head of Yarra House, Tom Schneider, believes that they will be a wonderful addition to the school community, and will “*give another avenue for students (to) engage in*

actions to support their wellbeing. It is important that we consider alternate avenues (when) caring for our students, and hopefully, these dogs may help break down some metaphorical barriers", (Schneider, T., 2024). Furthermore, Head of Wicklow House Ebony Cumming feels that *"the addition of our wellbeing dogs will provide the community with safe and non-judgemental (animals) for students who need the support. Sometimes people need warmth and companionship more than a conversation, and our wellbeing dogs will undoubtedly be able to provide this whenever needed"*, (Cumming, E., 2024). Ours Heads of House, combined with our experienced Wellbeing team, are here at Luther every day working with our young people in building their emotional buoyancy, and the dogs will only add to the remedies available for assisting students who experience distress on any given day. We are thrilled to be introducing the Wellbeing dog program here at Luther College, and we look forward to seeing Walter, or Remy, or whoever these furry friends might be, munching on their Kong toy inside the fenced area of the Wellbeing space in times to come.

Keep it Physical.

Whilst pets and pooches can bolster our emotional state, it is important to consider some of the reasons why our young people need these re-sets in the first place. The buzzword is 'resilience,' and the mantra is such: we should be allowing our children to feel discomfort and failure sometimes; we should be embracing the challenges that life throws at us rather than giving up; we should be encouraging grit in our children on any given day. And whilst dogs and animals can offer emotional reinforcement, it is connection to community that can teach us perseverance – these networks can inspire us to try and try and try again. Our sports teams can urge us to improve that shot; persevering with an instrument can teach us the power of patience; serving our community can give us a sense of worth beyond ourselves. Life was not meant to be easy, and sometimes things get hard, so making sure the foundations are made strong by our people, our values, and our community, can make all the difference to our personal happiness and success. Furthermore, it is often the most academically capable students who are also regular competitors at House carnivals, or constant members of a sport team, or an ensemble. These students know that keeping connected is important, and usually, they thrive from the opportunities.

I have had to recommit to the concept of 'grit' myself over the past 12 months, as a person in her 40's who has found herself back on the basketball court after a near 20-year hiatus. What my knees have lost in spring, my soul has gained in determination. No matter how many times I hit the ground, or miss the shot, or have my pass intercepted, I bounce back up, dust myself off and continue to persevere. I am not the fastest, or most agile, and I am certainly not the best shooter, but what I do each week is show up with a smile on my face, ready to take on the challenge. It can be hard to accept our failings and depletions as an adult, but the many teammates I have collected across these last few basketball seasons have all taught me the same thing – that giving it a go is better than not trying at all. This determination to 'show up' in turn leads to developing grit as a character strength; knowing how to bounce back up, or bunker down, and get on with the task at hand despite the setbacks. This grit is something that we can role model to the students in our care, and to our own children at home, because ultimately this grit is what makes the good basketball players even better; leads the capable students from being great to reaching and even exceeding their potential.

This year, a group of committed Luther College staff formed the Leopards basketball team as an opportunity to get fit, socialise and for some of us, reconnect to our sporting days of past. Head of Year 9's Will Scoble is an integral part of this team, and his mighty jump and accurate shot have led the team to many a close shave over recent months. As a PE teacher, Scoble firmly believes that *"physical activity is the foundation for ensuring success. The physical, mental, and social benefits prepare students (and teachers) to navigate daily activities more clearly and positively. Organised sport provides an exceptional platform for many young adults to improve organisational skills. These skills, whilst available in many other places, are strengthened by an interest in the sport, a good culture in the organisation, and a supportive community."* (Scoble, W., 2024). Whilst a sports enthusiast such as Mr Scoble may value competitive teams, I acknowledge that these forums may not be everyone's cup of tea, so to speak. It is important to consider that for some of us out there, there are other things that provide relaxation. Learning a musical instrument, or another language, or taking up knitting, for instance, all offer positive outlets for stillness, or reflection, or creation, which ultimately supports our wellbeing. No matter which community you connect with, the main message here is this: *stay connected*. Keep those threads alive, those links intact. Because it is this sense of community, of working towards a

common goal and spending time with like-minded others, that gives us our sense of place, our identity and ultimately, our purpose.

As educators we hope to inspire our students every day, we hope to spark their interest and their curiosity, we role model and show them a possible way to be. As the famous adage states, 'you can't be what you can't see', and by this token, we need to show our children the importance of staying connected to our friends, our clubs, our teams, our school. We need to model that participating in our Luther community is of value and can enrich our soul.

This role modelling is also something that we are influencing during our daily interactions with each other and the teens in our lives. Taking the space for ourselves and our wellbeing is essential, and we must show our children *how* we strike this balance if they are to do the same. We must let our children see that being a part of a team, or an ensemble, or a youth group, of something bigger than ourselves gives us social connections and time for reflection that we may not have otherwise made. These pathways can then in turn, bolster our emotional resilience when the daily grind of school and work becomes challenging. So, to sport or not to sport you may ask? In our view, do both, do it all, and do it with gusto!



The Leopards played their maiden season in the Domestic tournament this year.

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