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Barefoot SA kids better balanced than Germans

SOUTH African children — who usually do not wear shoes during physical activity — have better balance and can jump farther than their German counterparts, who are almost always shod, a pathfinder study has found.

But the wider feet that seem to go with being barefoot could easily become a big disadvantage later in life, one of the study authors said, when those feet are forced into too-narrow shoes designed for Europeans.

It is even possible that broader feet and narrow shoes could combine to make adolescents less active, and so exacerbate problems for those who are overweight to begin with.

That will now be the subject of further studies; but even without more data one need is clear, said the study's co-author Ranel Venter, from the Stellenbosch University's sport science department.

"We need SA-developed school shoes," Venter told Business Insider SA.

Venter and five German colleagues from various institutions tested a total of 810 children between six and 18 years old for balance, speed and jump distance, split roughly half and half between the Western Cape and northern Germany. All the children were healthy and active, but the German group almost always wore shoes during play and exercise, while the South African group went to school and exercised barefoot.

In one test, the children walked backwards on balance beams as narrow as three centimetres, and in another they were asked to make a standing jump. In both cases the South Africans came out tops. A 20-metre sprint test showed that the shod Germans were faster, though.

"Regular physical activities without footwear may be beneficial for the development of jumping and balancing skills, especially those in the age of six to 10 years," the study authors wrote of their findings, which they link to evidence that

growing up barefoot impacts posture, gait, and even physical foot structure.

Barefoot children tend to develop higher arches, and to have wider feet, the authors say, which would make for better balance.

But that comes at a price. Measuring children's feet has shown that 76% of the South African group had shoes that were too narrow, Venter said. European and American sizing seem to favour narrow feet, leaving South Africans to either squeeze into too-small shoes or buy shoes that are too long — both of which could lead to long-term problems.

The authors believe the German-SA comparison to be the first of its kind. Venter now plans to build on its findings by comparing rural and urban populations in SA, with a bigger sample size and more detailed examination of the impact of wearing shoes.

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