PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN EARLY STAGES OF EDUCATIONAL LIFE: THE NEED OF ERA

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Today, education programs at all levels face intense criticism, and physical education programs are no exception. In fact, as school budgets shrink and administrators cut “frills,” physical education may be one of the first programs to go. If we are to secure a place for physical education in the school curriculum, we must answer two questions: (1) what are the physical, psychological, and intellectual effects of physical education upon the total development of the child? And (2) given these effects, can physical education be considered a frill?

THE PHYSICAL BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION:

Recent research has shown that degenerative diseases begin in early childhood. As Kaercher (1981) wrote, "There's increasing evidence in youngsters of high cholesterol in the blood, high blood pressure, obesity and other conditions that are associated with heart disease, stroke and other disorders" (p. 20). Bucher (1982) stated that medical specialists blame deaths due to heart disease, cancer, and stroke largely on "changes in lifestyle characterized by factors over which doctors have little or no control" (p. 13).

Research suggests that regular physical activity, begun in childhood, may help prevent degenerative diseases. According to Hanson (1974), "The necessity of physical activity for a growing child is well-documented in terms of growth and fitness needs. Physical activity increases muscle tone, improves respiration and circulation, benefits digestion, aids in controlling obesity, promotes rehabilitation after illness and surgery, and stimulates proper growth and development. Physical benefits alone could be sufficient reason for supporting physical education programs..." (p. 2). Reiff (1977, p. 26) reported that high school students involved in an eight-week program of physical activity showed gains in fitness.

In addition, Fentem and Bassey (1982) pointed out that "Exercise is a valuable adjunct to dietary control in prevention and treatment of obesity because it increases energy expenditure and improves energy balance" (p. 2).

Studies indicate that children in free play settings will not engage in physical activity vigorous enough to produce physical benefits or enhance health, thus supporting the need for physical education (Reiff 1977, p. 26).
PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Physical activity enhances a person's life both socially and psychologically. Studies have shown that physical activity may modify anxiety and depression (Sachs 1982, p. 44). Layman (1972, p. 5) gave evidence that poor physical condition predisposes individuals to poor mental health. Hanson (1974, p. 2) stated that "physical activity contributes to the general feeling of well-being .... It is an avenue for expression of anger, aggression and happiness. . A means for discovery of self as well as a social facilitator." Moreover, according to Espenschade (1960), "The status of the elementary school child with his peers is dependent to a great extent on his motor skills and his behavior in game situations" (p. 3). Clarke (1982, p. 10) added to these statements, suggesting that the child's realization of personal and social effectiveness relies heavily on guidance within the physical education experience. Guidance helps the individual adopt desirable modes of behavior and improve interpersonal relationships.

MENTAL AND INTELLECTUAL BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Research shows a positive relationship between physical activity and academic achievement. In one study, begun in 1951 in an elementary school in Vanes, France, the school day was divided so that four hours were devoted to academics and one to two hours to physical education, art, music, and supervised study (Bailey 1976). By 1960, not only were health, fitness, discipline, and enthusiasm superior in the experimental program, but academic performance also surpassed controlled classes. Similar experiments in Belgium and Japan produced comparable results (Carlson 1982, p. 68), illustrating the importance of physical education to a successful academic program.

ACADEMIC BENEFITS AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

A study was conducted in Trois Rivieres, Ontario, Canada with 546 primary school students who received an additional five hours per week of physical education (additional time was taken from academic subjects, with the exception of English). At the end of six years and throughout the last five years of the study, the children in the experimental group (extra physical education) had consistently better academic grades and achievement in physical education as compared to their counterparts in the control group.

LANGUAGE SKILLS CAN BLOSSOM IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASS

Want to teach your preschooler the difference between near and far, left and right, blue and purple? Ensure that physical education is part of his or her early curriculum. According to a preliminary study of kids aged 4-6 from groups as varied as special education, Head Start, and a typical preschool, the physical education environment helps kids - even those with speech or language delays - to understand language concepts and apply appropriate labels. Since speech and language problems are fairly common among preschoolers and since correcting these problems early is essential to a child's later academic success, these findings have particular significance.
Physical education classes provide a natural opportunity for children to learn concepts like around, over and under, front and behind, and above and below. They also learn about such things as speed, distance, height, shape, color, direction, and position - concepts which lend themselves to a physical learning experience.

Even children whose cognitive or language abilities were impaired showed improvements when language skills were taught during physical education classes without sacrificing the physical skills they're teaching or requiring additional time. Fortunately for teachers, the study also found that language skills can easily be implemented into physical education classes without sacrificing the physical skills they're teaching or requiring additional time.

**SPORTS CAN ACCELERATE BONE GROWTH**

Osteoporosis, a painful, disfiguring disease affecting 25 million people in the United States alone. 80% of who are women, continues to make headlines as researchers learn more about risk factors, possible treatments, and preventive measures.

With no ready "cure" for osteoporosis, and no luck in reversing the disease, the medical community has redoubled its efforts at prevention. A likely formula for risk reduction in women includes physical activity combined with adequate calcium intake and sufficient estrogen levels. And according to researchers at Purdue University, earlier in life, rather than later, may be the best time to ward off this debilitating disease. By examining the physical activity history of 204 minimally-active women aged 18-31, they were able to determine that previous activity, especially participation in high school sports, significantly and positively affects bone growth.

In fact, high school athletic activity, but not occupational and leisure activity over a five-year period, correlated with bone mineral density in the hip. Because osteoporosis is the most common cause of hip fracture, often leading to permanent disability, loss of independence or death, efforts to build bone in this region are particularly needed. And since research suggests that bone growth in the hip may reach its peak by age 16, high school physical activity may represent the best, if not last, line of defense.

**FEELINGS OF COMPETENCE LINKED TO EXERCISE BEHAVIORS IN KIDS**

Numerous reports, including Healthy People 2000 and the recently released Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health, have established the benefits of an active lifestyle for people of all ages. Unfortunately, little is known about what motivates folks, kids in particular, to participate in the types of moderate-to-vigorous physical activities stressed in the objectives of these documents.

Careful study of this issue, however, is beginning to yield some clues. So, how can we get kids to exercise regularly? Not, it appears, just by stressing the importance of an active lifestyle. Consider this: When researchers asked a group of 11-15 year olds whether participation in a fitness program was more or less important than alternative activities like taking music lessons, watching TV or videos, or playing with friends, fitness programs got high marks. Surprisingly, however, the value that kids placed on fitness activities in comparison to other pursuits had no relation to their level of activity.
The best predictor of exercise behavior in kids, researchers found, was something called "perceived competence". Kids who felt good about their fitness abilities were more likely to participate in the type of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity necessary to improve their health and fitness. And although the solution to helping kids feel more capable may not be as simple as it seems, the results of the study also suggest a place to start: kids' beliefs were closely related to whether they thought their parents viewed them as competent.

THE EFFECT OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT OF WHOLESOME RECREATION HABITS

The importance of wise use of leisure time was supported as early as 1918 in the Seven Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education (National Education Association). Children need recreational skills and a positive attitude toward exercise to enhance their use of leisure. Indeed, "Research indicates that motor skills learned in physical education classes may be the stimulus for increased activity during leisure time (Seefeldt 1977, p. 3). Gilliam and others demonstrated that physical education programs involving vigorous activities encourage participants to use leisure time more actively (p. 3). Thus, physical education can play a major role in promoting an active, healthy lifestyle.

CONCLUSION

Research indicates that regular physical education, included in children's school curricula, produces physical, psychological, and intellectual benefits. Physical education may help prevent degenerative disease, improve overall physical condition, maintain emotional balance, promote a sense of social effectiveness, contribute to academic performance, and establish positive recreation habits. Therefore, physical education must not be considered a curricular frill; rather, it must be supported as an integral part of comprehensive education.

BIBLIOGRAPHY