



Physical Education and Physical Activity for Children and Teens

By Amy Winterfeld

Regular physical activity has many benefits for all ages.

Regular physical activity has many health benefits for people of all ages. It reduces the risk of heart disease, the nation's leading cause of death, and decreases the risk for diabetes, high blood pressure and some cancers. It also helps to control weight—an important factor, as being overweight has doubled for children and tripled for adolescents since 1980. Nine million U.S. children now are overweight. Physical activity also contributes to the development of healthy bones, muscles and joints, reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression, contributes to feelings of well-being, and may improve academic performance.

In spite of the benefits of physical activity, most school-aged children are sedentary. Only one in four U.S. children gets the recommended daily amount of physical activity: 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity such as brisk walking, or 20 minutes of vigorous activity. More than one-third of young people in grades 9 to 12 do not regularly engage in vigorous-intensity physical activity. Daily participation in high school physical education classes dropped from 42 percent in 1991 to 28 percent in 2003.

Physical education in schools is an effective way to improve physical activity and physical fitness levels among young people.

A systematic review of 14 published studies by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Task Force on Community Preventive Services found that enhanced physical education (P.E.) in schools is an effective way to improve physical activity and physical fitness levels among young people. Physical education curriculum and instructional strategies that increased the intensity and the number of minutes students spent in moderate or vigorous physical activity during P.E. class paid off. It improved physical fitness across diverse racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups, among both boys and girls at all grade levels, and in urban and rural settings.

Physical education taught by qualified P.E. teachers offers an opportunity for all children to engage in physical activity and to establish and maintain a healthy, active lifestyle.

Recommendations for High-Quality Physical Education

- Instruction periods totaling 150 minutes per week (elementary) and 225 minutes per week (middle and high school).
- Sequential curriculum that enables students to participate in progressively more advanced skills and movement.
- Qualified physical education teachers providing a developmentally appropriate program.
- Teacher/student ratio in physical education no greater than 1:25 (elementary) and (1:30 middle/high) for optimal instruction (similar to other classroom settings).
- Full inclusion of all students, including those who are not athletically gifted, and appropriate activities for children with disabilities.
- Physical activity should never be used as punishment.

Source: National Association for Sports and Physical Education.

Physical activity includes formal physical education and daily activities such as running, jumping rope, walking or biking to school, and free play. When children are physically active at an intensity that increases heart rate and produces heavier than normal breathing, they receive significant health benefits. Opportunities for physical activity during the school day include active play at recess, participation in intramural and interscholastic sports, recreational opportunities, after-school physical activity clubs, and physical activity breaks within the classroom.

CDC guidelines recommend daily physical education class for grades K through 12.

In 1997, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, with other federal agencies and public health organizations, produced *Guidelines for School and Community Programs to Promote Lifelong Physical Activity Among Young People*. The guidelines recommended daily, comprehensive physical education class for grades K through 12.

State Actions

Currently, 48 states require some type of physical education in schools. Individual state requirements are not always effective in ensuring regular physical activity for children, however, because they are not always enforced, may not require a defined amount of P.E. or because many exemptions are allowed. Other mandated curriculum requirements take precedence in some states. Increased emphasis on academic achievement by the No Child Left Behind Act may cause some school districts to reduce time for recess or for physical education classes.

Growing awareness that physical activity during the school day may increase academic achievement is drawing the attention of some state legislators. States are considering committing funds for physical education and considering ways to promote physical activity during the school day, such as recess. In 2005, 35 states considered a variety of bills requiring, encouraging or strengthening physical activity or physical education in school.

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State-by-state requirements for physical education vary. Illinois is the only state that in 2004 required daily physical education for grades K-12, but exemptions are allowed.

Selected References

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