

Adolescent Fitness: Implications for a Lifetime

M

ost of us marvel at the exploits of athletes at the Olympic games and other such events. Despite these outstanding achievements, the physical fitness of many people—including our youth—continues to deteriorate. As young athletes become more skilled, the fitness level of the average student continues to decline. In the United States, some 40 percent of children aged 5 to 8 already have at least one coronary heart disease risk factor.¹ Furthermore, between the 1960s and the 1980s, the prevalence of obesity in children increased 54 percent, while extreme obesity increased by 100 percent in the same age group.²

According to the 1996 Surgeon General's Report, only 19 percent of American high school students take physical-education classes every day in which they are active for 20 minutes or more. The report also notes that enrollment in daily physical-education classes has dropped from 42 percent in 1991 to 25 percent in 1995.³ This significant decline in just four years shows the reduced emphasis on physical education that has gradually occurred over the past several decades.

Young people are less active at home as well. Instead of playing active outdoor games after school, children are spending more time in front of the computer, playing video games, or watching television. This lack of activity is further compounded by an increased intake of fast food, high fat/calorie-laden snacks, and excess food consumption in general. In fact, researchers report that childhood obesity is becoming a concern in many parts of the world.⁴

Through commitment and planning, Adventist schools can take their place in the forefront of physical education by developing programs that improve the overall health and fitness of our youth. Appropriate activities, taught on a daily basis in a nurturing environment, offer a prescription for success.

Promoting Physical Activity

Many physical-education classes are just extensions of recess time. The teacher who actually gives

BY JENIFER J. MASON,
BRYAN L. HADDOCK, AND
SUZANNE E. PERRIN

skills instruction and gets students physically active is the exception rather than the rule. This is caused by (1) inadequate training of physical-education teachers, (2) a lack of support from school administration, and (3) a lack of mandatory physical-education curricula focused on improving student health and fitness. These areas must be addressed when developing a comprehensive physical-education program.

Helping children enjoy physical activity early in life goes a long way toward ensuring that they will continue to participate in adulthood. It has been estimated that by the age of 8, children make up to 70 percent of their decisions to participate in any activity, based on their competence or perceived competence.⁵ Therefore, we must find ways to help children feel enthusiastic about participating in a variety of physical activities.

From 5 to 8 years of age, children should develop basic motor skills like running, jumping, hopping, throwing, and kicking. Being proficient at basic skills will enhance the child's confidence and ability to participate in more advanced games and activities. As with all experiences relating to physical education, teachers need to stress activities that are fun. Obstacle courses work well with this age group. The obstacle course can be designed to include each skill mentioned above. The student runs from one activity to another, improving his or her basic skills and aerobic fitness. Skills should start out very simple and gradually become more complex. Each child can compete against his or her own time, which eliminates feelings of inadequacy due to competition.

Once students reach 9 to 11 years, they can be introduced to more complex skills and team sports. Team sports develop motor skills and help students work toward a common goal. The teacher should determine who will be on each team prior to each game. Thus, students who are usually chosen last will not feel incompetent and unpopular.

Small-group activities can also encourage student participation and decrease down time. For example, instead of one basketball game with two teams, have three basketball games with six teams. Multiple games also help to en-

From 5 to 8 years of age, children should develop basic motor skills.

sure better skills development. In a one-game situation, the athletically inclined often dominate, while those who need the

activity and skill development the most are left out.

About the age of 12, there tends to be an "adolescent slump" in which physical activity decreases, especially for girls.⁶ Handicapped and minority youth also tend to have much lower physical activity and fitness levels.⁷ Furthermore, opportunities for physical activity at school begin to decrease as students move into junior and senior high. At this point, schools should stress individual activities in which students can participate throughout their whole lives. Walking, jogging, and

RESOURCES

Schools can contact a variety of organizations to obtain educational materials, testing protocols and norms, exercise/activity programs as well as expertise in the area of adolescent fitness. The four national organizations listed below are especially helpful for K-12. Many of their programs, services, and publications are free.

American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (AAHPERD)

Division: National Organization of Sport and Physical Education
1900 Association Drive

Reston, VA 22091

(703) 476-3400; Fax: (703) 467-9527

Programs: "Physical Best"

Publications: *Research Quarterly*; *Health Education*; *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance*

American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM)

Public Information Department

P.O. Box 1440

Indianapolis, IN 46206-1440

(317) 637-9200; Fax: (317) 634-7817

World Wide Web: <http://www.acsm.org./sport/sportmed>

Programs: ACSM Youth Clinics

Publications: Numerous professional and lay publications/position statements are available.

Certification: Health and Fitness Tract

Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research (CIAR)

Fitnessgram Department

12330 Preston Road

Dallas, TX 75230

(800) 635-7050, (972) 701-8001; Fax: (972) 458-1675

Publications: *Fitnessgram* and *The Aerobics News*

President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (PCPFS)

450 Fifth Street NW, Suite 7103

Washington, DC 20001

(800) 258-8146, (202) 272-3421; Fax: (202) 504-2064

Programs: The Challenge Program, Testing Protocols, and Norms

bicycling are excellent ways to achieve and maintain physical fitness. Other sports such as tennis and racquetball can be taught if facilities are available at the school or in a nearby community.

For every age group, physical education should be fun. Too often, coaches or teachers discipline students by assigning laps or pushups. This makes students associate exercise with punishment instead of enjoyment.

Physical-education classes can be more than just playing games. They can also be *educational*. Students can learn that regular exercise helps them to achieve and maintain optimum health, all the while having fun.

Determining Fitness

When schools use tests to monitor

We must find ways to help children feel enthusiastic about participating in a variety of physical activities.

physical fitness, they need to compare students to their previous fitness level, rather than against other individuals or a group. It is unfair to compare the scores

of athletes and non-athletes. To help ensure that students continue to participate in exercise and physical activity, avoid these types of comparisons and focus on each individual's progress.

The Importance of Role Modeling

In his book *Kid Fitness*, Dr. Kenneth H. Cooper, an internationally recognized leader in fitness and health, gives sound advice for role models, especially those who feel hopelessly out of shape themselves. Here is a summary:⁸

- Get involved in an exercise program. Look for practical ways to improve little by little.
- Teach children the skills you know, and develop additional skills to pass on to them.
- De-emphasize winning and keep the

Picture
Removed

fun in fitness.

- Decrease television time. The average household spends seven hours a day staring at a television set.

- Eat fewer fast foods, which typically lead to fast fat.

- Get parents involved. While adult role modeling is crucial, "parental participation may be the prime prerequisite for a successful kid fitness program."⁹

- Enlist the support of a friend or family member to help with the mentoring process.

What a tremendous responsibility we as Christian educators have: "Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6, NASB). Although we often quote this scripture to refer to the spiritual, mental, and intellectual aspects of modeling, we tend to ignore its physical dimension. This promise can help to redirect our focus to one of the foundations of Adventist education—wholism.

Conclusion

According to the National Children and Youth Fitness Study, one-third of American youth ages 10 to 18 do not engage in enough physical activity to provide them with any aerobic or endurance benefits. Therefore, school and community activity programs need to focus on including all children, not just an elite few. The blame for the current adolescent couch-potato syndrome does not lie with

For every age group, physical education should be fun.

physical-education instructors alone. Every teacher, administrator, parent, grandparent, and extended family member must serve as a positive role model. This mentoring process will be challenging, but an interested and involved parent or teacher can make the activity fun.

Tom McMillen, co-chair of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sport, says, "We need to get the message out loud and clear that quality physical education is necessary—not a luxury—for the health and well-being of every child."¹⁰ The lives of our youth—both present and future—may indeed depend on it. ✍

Jenifer J. Mason, Dr.P.H., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Health Promotion and Education at the School of Public Health (SPH) at Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, California. Bryan L. Haddock, M.S., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Health Promotion and Education at LLU's SPH and works as an Exercise Physiologist at the Loma Linda Center for Health Promotion. Suzanne E. Perrin, M.P.H., is currently with the LLU doctoral program in Preventive Care. She also

serves as a Graduate Research Assistant for the LLU SPH and works at the Center for Health Promotion.

REFERENCES

1. Nicholas A. DiNubile, "Youth Fitness—Problems and Solutions," *Preventive Medicine* 22:4 (July 1993), p. 590.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 591.
3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, (DHHS) *Historic Surgeon General's Report Offers New View of Moderate Physical Activity* (Washington, D.C., 1996).
4. From December 1996 *Journal of Nutrition*, cited in Sally Squires, "Obesity in Children Increasing Globally," *Washington Post* (December 17, 1996), Health, p. 5.
5. DHHS.
6. DiNubile.
7. *Ibid.*
8. K. H. Cooper, *Kid Fitness* (New York: Bantam, 1991).
9. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
10. National Association for Sport and Physical Education, "Moving Into the Future: National Standards for Physical Education" (Reston, Va., 1996).

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Gober, Billy E., and B. Don Franks.** "Physical and Fitness Education of Young Children," *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance* 59:7 (September 1988), pp. 57-61.
- Grineski, Steven.** "What Is a Truly Developmentally Appropriate Physical Education Program for Children?" *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance* 63:6 (August 1992), pp. 33-35, 60.
- Kuntzleman, Charles T.** "Childhood Fitness: What Is Happening? What Needs to Be Done?" *Preventive Medicine* 22:4 (July 1993), pp. 520-532.
- Petersen, Susan C.** "The Sequence of Instruction in Games: Implications for Developmental Appropriateness," *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance* 63:6 (August 1992), pp. 36-39.
- Ross, James G., Russell R. Pate, Charles B. Corbin, Lisa A. Delpy, and Robert S. Gold.** "What Is Going on in the Elementary Physical Education Program?" *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance* 58:9 (November/December 1987), pp. 78-84.
- Weiller, Karen H.** "The Social-Emotional Component of Physical Education for Children," *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance* 63:6 (August 1992), pp. 50-53.

Picture
Removed