

Making Sound Decisions about Nurturing a Sound Mind and a Sound Body

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Several magazine, newspaper, and website articles about physical fitness and physical education have caught my attention in the past few months. A few of the most prominent stories described the alarming increase in obesity in American children and adolescents. A recent Newsweek article noted, “Baby fat has morphed into a national health crisis. Nearly 15 percent of kids between 12 and 19 are overweight—up from 5 percent in the late 1970s.”

The article continued, “They’re also more sedentary than ever. Less than 25 percent of school-age children get even 20 minutes of rigorous daily physical activity, well below the minimum doctors prescribe.” Public health officials warn that this inactivity will lead to “costly, debilitating illnesses like high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes even in their 20s and 30s.” Relatedly, the American Diabetes Association published a report noting that about 20 percent of childhood diabetes cases are type 2, non-insulin dependent diabetes, which is linked to being overweight.

These warnings have prompted some physical education teachers to re-evaluate the purpose of physical education classes; they no longer devote most of their time and energy on students who demonstrate the greatest athletic talent. Newsweek quoted Peggy Hutter, a physical education teacher at Kearsarge Regional Middle School near Concord, New Hampshire, who observed, “We were taught that if kids want to sit on the side and not participate, too bad, that’s their problem. But now gym teachers are looking at all those kids on the sidelines and saying, ‘Hey, maybe we’re the ones who have the problem.’”

Phil Lawler, who teaches at Madison Junior High School outside Chicago, found that physically out-of-shape students were expending as much energy as the best athletes, but because they were poorly conditioned, their performance was compromised. Lawler recognized that instead of teaching students how to win a race, he should concentrate on educating them about how to remain in the “fitness zone,” that is, the most efficient heart rate for maintaining good health, for as long as possible. Lawler’s goal is to provide

“students the knowledge, training, and experiences they need to keep themselves fit for their entire lives.”

I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of physical education classes, especially when they focus on enhancing the fitness of all students and not just those who are already fit. However, during my visits to numerous schools I have spoken with many physical education teachers who have described the low regard shown for physical education activities. (I should note I have heard some of the same laments from music and art teachers.) Unfortunately, in today’s world of high-stakes testing in which the worth of a student and a teacher is measured by a test score, we are in danger of drifting away from the concept of the “whole child” or “whole adolescent.” A false dichotomy has emerged in some quarters that views time devoted for physical education as diverting time and monies from academic pursuits.

This dichotomy is reflected in actual practices. As the Newsweek article reported, “Gym is often the first class cut when budgets get tight. Last year only 30 percent of high-school students had a daily gym class. And many elementary and middle schoolers have gym only once a week if at all.” Judy Young, head of the National Association for Sports and Physical Education, said, “We need to convince parents and school boards that PE has evolved. It can be a valuable part of a child’s development. With rising rates of obesity, it can also save their lives.”

To some, the phrase “a sound mind and a sound body” may seem trite, but I would contend that appreciating the interface of mind and body is an essential ingredient of a fulfilling, resilient lifestyle. Physical activities for our children (and ourselves) that are developmentally realistic and appropriate enhance their mental capabilities. I believe that to limit the physical activities of students in school is to invite situations in which most students will be less likely to concentrate; restricting the normal need for movement will detract from paying attention and result in behaviors that disrupt learning.

Although some school districts shortchange physical activities for students except for those on varsity teams, others understand the role of physical fitness in a child’s development. There are schools that have initiated “PE report cards” along with traditional ones, in order to inform parents of their child’s physical fitness. The PE report card assesses such factors as a student’s flexibility, endurance, cardiovascular output, and

body fat and offers parents suggestions for what their children and adolescents need to do in order to achieve and/or maintain their health. Sarajane Quinn, physical education coordinator for the Baltimore County Public Schools, observed, “For a lot of parents it’s a wake-up call.”

Obviously, the issue of helping our youth to be physically fit is not confined to our schools. If anything, healthy practices must begin in our homes. Similar to the importance of parents and educators collaborating about a child’s academic success, they must also work together to maximize a child’s physical well-being. Physical well-being is not synonymous with being an outstanding athlete but rather with leading a healthy, active lifestyle.

The following are some suggestions about providing opportunities for our children to develop sound minds and sound bodies:

1. Consider the kinds of foods you serve your children from the time they are very young. Many articles have been written about the dangers of our children becoming “addicted” to fast foods and sweets that offer far too many fats and calories. Of course, parents must model healthy dietary habits. I once saw a child in therapy who was struggling with his weight. At the recommendation of his pediatrician, the parents placed this boy on diet, restricting desserts and other high calorie foods. However, the parents, both of whom acknowledged that they could afford to shed some pounds, continued to indulge in foods that were high in sugar and calories. When the child asked to have some of the desserts his parents were eating, they answered, “You are on a diet, we are not.” It is difficult for a child to adhere to a healthy diet if the parents do not. Healthy diets are truly a family affair.

Those who know me are aware that I am not against sweets (I have loved chocolates for as long as I can remember). I am not suggesting that we ban sweets from our children’s lives (a task that would be difficult to accomplish anyway) unless our children are allergic to such foods. What I am recommending is that for the most part we serve our children food that would garner the label “healthy” by dieticians.

2. Build in time for physical activity with your children. This can involve something as simple as a short walk or running in a park. Have you noticed that most young children are exhilarated as they move rapidly in their quest to explore their ever-

widening environment? Parents often find themselves pursuing their young children at an impressive pace. I frequently recommend that parents schedule a “special time” alone with each of their children as a way of communicating caring and love. While this special time could involve a more sedentary activity such as playing a board game or reading, it could just as easily include a walk or tossing a ball.

Most of us have witnessed parents pushing a stroller as they go for a jog. While the child is not actually running, he or she is moving along and at the very least benefiting from observing parents engaged in physical activity. I remember with fondness coaching and playing basketball with my sons, Rich and Doug. I also recall that when I began to jog regularly when Doug was 9 years old and Rich was 12, they joined me on different occasions for the first half-mile to mile of the run. If our children perceive us as couch-potatoes, it is more difficult to encourage them to engage in physical activities. For our own health as well as the health of our children we should not confine our activities to typing on a computer or moving from the couch to the dinner table and then back to the couch again or playing with the remote (research would probably support that the latter is a male-dominated behavior). Develop a consistent, reasonable exercise regimen.

3. Support youth sports activities in your town or city. You can volunteer as a coach or serve in some other capacity to ensure that this experience enhances your child’s development. Remember that youth sports are not restricted to youngsters who are athletically gifted but rather should benefit all children. You may wish to read my February and March, 2002 website articles that detail my thoughts and vision of what youth sports should and should not entail.

Also, encourage your children to go out and play (hopefully, there are several other children in your neighborhood with whom they can play). Obviously where you live will determine the physical activities available to your children. When I grew up in Brooklyn the only organized sport I played outside of school was in the Police Athletic League (similar to Little League but organized by the police in our community). However, I remember spending hours playing in “pick-up” basketball, stickball, and touch football games. Somehow even in the absence of referees or umpires we were able to settle disputes in a nonviolent fashion. Involvement in sports and physical activities

was a way of life, not interrupted by playing videogames or sitting for hours in front of the television or at the computer.

4. Work closely with your child's school to support the inclusion of physical education activities on a regular basis—activities that strengthen both the physical and emotional lives of your children. As I emphasized earlier, such physical education should not be seen as taking time away from academics but rather as providing experiences that enhance learning. Also, physical education activities and sports can be used to teach children about respect for their bodies, about cooperation and teamwork, about winning and losing with grace, and about the importance of developing well-rounded, lifelong habits.

As you examine your own lifestyle as well as the lifestyle of children you are raising, teaching, coaching, or interacting with, it might be wise to think of the following words written more than 300 years ago by John Locke: “A sound mind in a sound body, is a short but full description of a happy state in this world.”

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