

## Developmentally Appropriate Physical Education Aldebra Schroll MD

The United States is facing an obesity epidemic and our children are not spared. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics approximately 15 % of children and adolescents ages 6-18 are overweight or obese. Many healthcare advocates consider this to be the most pressing public health issue of our time. Nationwide efforts are being made to raise public awareness to the potential consequences. Many factors play into this increase in obesity including more sedentary hobbies, less emphasis on school physical activity and easy access to foods high in fats and sugars. Along with the increase in obesity, we are seeing an unprecedented rise in cases of type II diabetes among children. Once referred to as adult onset diabetes, it is closely associated with excess weight. Additionally, medical professionals are diagnosing high blood pressure and high cholesterol among children and teens, once a rarity in the young.

In response to these growing concerns, recent national legislation with the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act requires schools to establish policies addressing the issues of childhood wellness, including nutrition standards and physical activity goals to enhance the health of students. The deadline to submit these wellness policies is approaching in June 2006. The current recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control are 60 minutes daily of moderate to vigorous physical activity for children, but what constitutes appropriate activity?

I turned to the Kinesiology Department at California State University Chico for answers. Professor Craig Buschner is an expert in the field of children's physical education. For over twenty years he has been preparing the specialists who teach physical education to our children. Developmentally appropriate physical education is a philosophy emphasizing children as individuals and gearing activities that factor in their social, physical, mental and developmental levels. The emphasis is on learning motor skills and then progressing to higher levels of interaction. The department's statement of purpose "guiding youngsters in the process of becoming physically active for a lifetime" is emblazoned on the wall reminding prospective teachers daily of their goal.

Guidelines for teaching school physical education have been developed by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, (NASPE) the leading authority on school PE. They advocate daily participation for all children in quality physical education experiences led by teachers who are trained as physical education specialists. NASPE has identified six key standards summarized below:

A physically educated person

1. should be competent in a variety of motor skills and movement patterns
2. should understand concepts and strategies in the learning and performance of physical activities
3. participates in regular physical activity
4. maintains a health-enhancing level of physical fitness
5. demonstrates responsible personal and social behaviors and respect of others

6. develops an understanding of the value of activity for health and enjoyment

With the above standards in mind, NASPE emphasizes quality physical education comprising 150 minutes weekly for elementary children and 225 minutes weekly for the middle and secondary levels, taught by qualified teacher specialists. Classes should be small enough, approximately 25 children each, to be safe with adequate facilities and age appropriate equipment for all, allowing everyone to participate at his/her personal level of ability. For example in the younger grades children are learning to develop their skills and basic movement concepts such as catching and throwing before moving on to the more complex activities and games. Emphasis is placed on planning activities that all children can participate in, avoiding a lot of “down time” when children are waiting to take turns or use equipment or games of elimination where children end up sitting out. Additionally, there is an emphasis on avoidance of activities that exclude children; for example letting students choose their team-mates which invariably leads to the less skillful being chosen last. Instead, if we want to encourage a life time of regular activity, the classes must be structured so all children can achieve a sense of accomplishment in a supportive environment. With this in mind, exercise as punishment should be avoided. Children need to learn to enjoy physical activity if we expect them to grow up and continue to participate at health enhancing levels.

In addition to structured daily physical education classes, recess is an important part of childhood but needs to be separated as it serves another purpose. As unstructured activity, recess is a time for stress relief, to explore the imagination, and learn through the social interaction with other children. Play is a critical part of a child’s development.

Furthermore, school physical education is independent of athletics which focus more on a specialized activity providing an opportunity for those children and youth who may excel in a particular area. It does not however replace school physical education which gives children a broader experience of movement and activity.

As we look to reverse the current trend of obesity among children and youth, an understanding of quality physical education is going to be an important tool. For more information and to see how your child’s school measures up go to [www.naspe.org](http://www.naspe.org) and take the school checkup.