

Back to the Basics in Sport and Physical Activity

Brent Heidorn

The promotion of physical activity is a constant theme within our field. Several professional organizations (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Heart Association, Institute of Medicine, American Alliance of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance) continue "rallying the troops" to help others engage in health and physical activity pursuits. Physical activity is a theme at many local, state, and national meetings. Schools embrace new opportunities for positive physical activity options for students, staff, and community members. New community playgrounds, enhanced recreation departments, large health and fitness facilities, and local walking and running clubs are continually being developed. In addition, some school districts are increasing the availability of interscholastic sport options for students. Priorities are focused on national initiatives with financial resources to support physical activity (e.g., *Let's Move! Active Schools*). As a health and physical education professional, naturally, I support these developments and opportunities. I praise the efforts of concerned community members and professionals to increase the level of physical activity in our society. In addition, I am thankful for the time, money, and energy investments made by all volunteers and participants. These are exciting times!

However, as many quickly recognize, we have not achieved greatness in relation to the amount of physical activity that our society as a whole is willing to engage in. Continued increases in obesity rates, cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, depression and anxiety disorders, and many other preventable diseases and ailments are consistently addressed in professional journals, webinars, local

broadcasts, and news media outlets. Youth and adults alike continue to live sedentary lifestyles, despite the wealth of opportunities and resources available. Many individuals do not enjoy moving, or they lack the knowledge and skills to safely participate in a variety of activities. Therefore, they choose not to be physically active. In addition, for a variety of reasons, some physical activity and physical education programs are being reduced or eliminated altogether. These choices negatively affect our progress. As a result, children and adolescents will continue to be sedentary, the percentages of overweight and obese individuals will continue to soar, and healthcare needs will continue to increase (rising costs, increased absenteeism, crowded hospitals, etc.), thus negatively impacting the overall economic status of our nation.

Therefore, despite the positive influence physical-activity promoters seem to have, there is still much work to be done. Many components of the physical activity dilemma need further attention. While it is not possible to address all of the needs at this time, this article focuses on current observations of physical activity and simple recommendations for improvement.

Based on the above information, I pose two questions: (1) What physical activity opportunities are most prevalent? and (2) How might we continue to improve? I will seek to answer these questions not through quantitative research or documented evidence but simply by observation of my local environment and regular discussions with others (professional colleagues, family members, friends, community neighbors, etc.). My intent is not to argue with or show a lack of support for research-based evidence. I applaud the significant efforts of so many professionals who

enlighten us with up-to-date physical activity citations and practical applications. I appreciate the expertise, time, and strategic plans that move us in the right direction. I support local, state, and national efforts that promote physical activity based on proven hypotheses. I encourage others to engage in research, and I participate in both quantitative and qualitative research endeavors of my own. Despite my own personal beliefs and actions to be physically active and encourage others to live a physically active lifestyle, I often wonder why many do not enjoy similar pursuits. So with that preface, I further explore the nature of physical activity in our society.

What Physical Activity Opportunities Are Most Prevalent?

Personally, I am an advocate of skill development for promoting a physically active lifestyle. I certainly understand that many people can develop and maintain a physically active lifestyle, without additional skills learned through specific instruction. I wish to focus on the most common physical activities that I observe youth and adolescents participating in. These include school-based physical education, school-driven physical activity programs, organized recreational opportunities, and family and/or neighborhood activities.

School-Based Physical Education. As we know, many children and adolescents participate in school-based physical education throughout their school years. Even though most schools do not allocate enough time for physical education, the opportunity for students to be physically active as a result of quality physical education in schools is evident. I regularly observe quality lessons,

student learning, and moderate-to-vigorous physical activity participation. Despite some negative messages, a lack of meaningful programs, and unengaged teachers and students, I am often encouraged by the quality of the movement experiences that take place. While there are programs that need improvement, school-based physical education continues to be a promising way to promote a physically active lifestyle among youth.

School-Driven Physical Activity Programs. Several years ago, if “school-driven physical activity program” was mentioned, one might immediately think of recess or interscholastic sport opportunities. However, the rise of school wellness and comprehensive school physical activity programs (CSPAPs) in recent years has shifted the focus in some ways. While recess is still a major player in school-driven physical activity programs, evidence indicates that there are many additional and successful ways in which students can be physically active. Similar to physical education opportunities, there is still some apprehension, lack of advocacy, and other problems associated with recess in elementary schools. In addition, while there are many quality interscholastic sport programs, we cannot ignore that improvements are needed in some of those programs as well. This includes addressing student participation rates, the overemphasis on winning, physical activity used as punishment, and other “hidden” concerns.

However, I am excited about the new opportunities that CSPAPs give school personnel and volunteers to lead students, faculty/staff, and community members to new heights in relation to physical activity. These programs provide numerous options for schools to promote physical activity in positive ways, including quality physical education, before- and after-school opportunities, in-class activities, staff involvement, and family and community efforts. I have seen firsthand how many students, parents, school staff members, and community members develop an increased awareness of the need for physical activity, participate in meaningful ways throughout the school day/year, and encourage others to do the same. I support the *Let’s Move! Active Schools* initiative

and believe that positive outcomes can be achieved.

Organized Recreational Opportunities. One can quickly see how much progress has been made in recent years related to organized recreation opportunities. Examples include sport programs at local recreation departments and pay-to-play teams, after-school physical activity clubs, walking and running groups, gymnastics centers, swim teams, boys and girls clubs, weekend and summer camps, church-affiliated youth groups, and more. Parents and guardians continually seek outside-of-school physical activity options for children and adolescents. Even in seemingly difficult economic times, communities support the development and maintenance of many organized opportunities for physical activity. Despite the percentage of children and adolescents who do not participate in the recommended levels of physical activity, programs are available to children and adolescents of all ages and abilities. Community members and other key stakeholders should be commended for their efforts to sponsor, organize, and promote these opportunities. While not all students nationwide have similar facilities, equipment, and resources, one can infer that programs and/or funding are available for interested participants. In addition, although there are some concerns with these physical activity opportunities (e.g., safety, administrative needs, supervision, cost), many parents and other highly involved volunteers provide meaningful chances for children and adolescents to enjoy movement.

Family and/or Neighborhood Activities. In addition to physical activity opportunities through school-based physical education, school-driven physical activity programs, and organized recreational opportunities, perhaps the most meaningful way for individuals to maintain a physically active lifestyle as they age is to pursue physical activity in their free time. I grew up in an era when my friends and I walked to school, played in our yards, and engaged in other physical activity pursuits with family and friends (e.g., picnics, hikes, throwing a ball). Even though not all children and adolescents have the same opportunities because of their

environment, family responsibilities, or interests, many youth still participate in family and/or neighborhood activities. I regularly observe parks filled with people throwing Frisbees, playing with their dogs, paddling a canoe, skateboarding, playing on playgrounds, or riding their bikes. Community-friendly facilities are common in several places (e.g., walking trails, basketball and tennis courts, other open spaces) and many others participate at home (e.g., gardening, yard work, walking). It is important for all of us to recognize the physical activity opportunities that are available and commonly used as a means to a physically active lifestyle. As we age, these simple community-based activities may be some of the best options to maintain our health and wellness.

Despite the strengths of each of the above areas, and even considering the challenges affiliated with those programs and opportunities, I believe there are ways to provide additional support for the benefit of those involved. My response here is based on five key elements.

How Might We Continue to Improve?

I applaud the consistent and far-reaching efforts of one of my friends and mentors, Dr. Judy Rink. Her contributions to the promotion of physical activity through research and effective teaching have greatly impacted my life. My thoughts are drawn from what she considers to be the five requirements for learning a motor skill (Rink, 2014). While the requirements emphasized in her work have a skill-oriented focus, I encourage us to also think about those requirements for the overall development and promotion of physical activity in a more general sense. If we are to truly help others in their pursuit of a physically active lifestyle, it may prove valuable to reflect on our efforts in this way. Each of the five requirements for learning a motor skill is described below.

Prerequisites. Some children and adolescents may not participate in physical activity because we expose them to activities they are not prepared for. Many students may lack the strength, size, or stamina to succeed. When an activity becomes too challenging for the students,

they may choose not to be physically active in that way. For example, some students are turned away from basketball because the 10-foot goal is too high. They lack the size and strength to succeed. Other students are not physically ready to hold a tennis racquet and make consistent contact to keep the ball in play, and some lack the ability to compete successfully with older teammates due to differences in size, strength, and speed. These students miss out on opportunities to participate because of a lack of prerequisites. Therefore, those of us who promote physical activity must consider how we might allow as many individuals as possible to succeed, based on the prerequisites they currently possess.

Clear Idea of the Task. It is possible, and even likely, that many students choose not to participate in physical activity because the opportunity is not clearly presented. Marketing and advertising efforts may not be adequately displayed, posted, or disseminated. Others might miss the registration process or sign-up dates because of a lack of information. Some students may not be interested because of unfamiliarity with the activity or because of the time and commitment needed, even when their parents or guardians are willing to support their participation in the activity. Therefore, those of us who promote physical activity opportunities for others must consider how we might help individuals to succeed by informing them of the opportunities that are available to them and promoting physical activity options.

Motivational/Attentional Disposition to the Skill. Some students may choose not to participate in physical activity because of an internal lack of motivation, as a result of negative past experiences with the activity, or perhaps even as a result of the lack of motivation of others. For example, I regularly observe youth sport practices in which the adult supervisor or coach asks students to run laps, participate in "suicide sprints," or stand around waiting for their turn for lengthy periods of time. Other activities require students to participate in tasks with little or no meaning, lack overall objectives for the task, or use random drills that diminish student enjoyment.

In some cases, the activity often becomes boring for the participants, which causes them to lose the intrinsic motivation to continue and to ultimately stop participating in the activity. Alternatively, some students get burned out from the activity because of too much participation and overtraining, an overemphasis on winning, or too much push to engage in the activity from one or more adults in their life. All students are different. Each student is motivated in his or her own intrinsic and, in some cases, extrinsic ways. Therefore, those of us who promote physical activity opportunities for others must consider how we might use the appropriate methods to motivate as many individuals as possible to succeed, even if they are contrary to the way in which we were/are motivated for physical activity.

Practice. With practice, students typically improve. More specifically, with appropriate practice, students are more likely to improve. Based on skill-development research, practice time is "the most important factor in motor skill learning in physical education" (Silverman, 2011, p. 30). Since this is true for physical education where student learning is the main goal, one can assume that students will also improve in settings outside of physical education. However, even though some physical activity opportunities provide lots of practice time for participants, the time is often not well spent. Quality practice, including maximal practice time and opportunities to learn, should be provided to all participants, so they can better learn the skills needed for participation. When performance improves, in most cases students are more likely to enjoy participation and to continue in the activity. Therefore, those of us who promote physical activity opportunities for others must consider how we might provide participants with the most meaningful practice time possible.

Feedback. There are many types of feedback, and there are different ways in which we can provide feedback to participants. Some students who engage in physical activity need positive feedback from others for their continued participation (e.g., "good job," "keep exercising"). One might consider this

from a skill-development perspective (i.e., feedback on a specific performance with the goal of helping the learner improve), or with a motivational goal to keep the participant engaged in the activity. Unfortunately, some participants never receive any instructional or motivational feedback; and even worse, some participants, especially in athletic settings, receive only negative feedback or critiques on their performance. Providing positive feedback to encourage students' physical activity pursuits is one way of promoting continued participation. Therefore, those of us who promote physical activity opportunities for others must consider how the things we say (i.e., our feedback) can further encourage (or hinder) participation both now and in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I encourage each of us to get back to the basics in sport and physical activity and to use effective methods for teaching skill development as a way to involve others in physical activity for a lifetime. As we reflect on the physical activity options available to each of us and to our students (i.e., school-based physical education, school-driven physical activity programs, organized recreational opportunities, and family and/or neighborhood activities), perhaps we can also use the five requirements for learning a motor skill (i.e., prerequisites, clear idea of the task, motivational/attentional disposition to the skill, practice, and feedback) to keep others engaged in physical activity for a lifetime.

References

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Brent Heidorn (bheidorn@westga.edu) is a program coordinator and associate professor in the Department of Leadership and Instruction at the University of West Georgia in Carrollton, GA.
