

Get the bodies in motion: Non-athletic kids can do other things to raise fitness levels ; ; ; Chatham Daily News ; 08-19-2004 ;

**Get the bodies in motion: Non-athletic kids can do other things to raise fitness levels**

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TORONTO (CP) -- While rising childhood obesity rates stress the need for young people to exercise, experts warn that a society that often equates physical activity with physical competition is unlikely to motivate children averse to sport.

"Kids often think that physical activity is all about playing sports," said James Mandigo, an assistant professor of kinesiology at Brock University in St. Catharines. "Those who aren't as skilled, or don't enjoy the sport element but enjoy the activity element, sometimes get left behind."

That's not to say competitive sport isn't a valuable pursuit. On the contrary, it offers constructive lessons in teamwork, sportsmanship and dedicating oneself to achieving goals - not to mention the health benefits.

It's just that sports aren't for everyone.

Unfortunately, the trend has been toward "institutionalizing" physical activity, says Mark Tremblay, a senior scientific adviser at Statistics Canada.

"In order to be active you must participate in some sort of league or organized sport that involves a coach and a facility," is how Tremblay characterizes the mindset. "I think that deters the overweight, obese or unco-ordinated child."

The point is driven home in studies that show that childhood obesity rates have tripled over the past 20 years, and in estimates that 10 per cent of school-aged children worldwide are overweight.

"But there are lots of other physical activities they can do as well," said Mandigo. "Cycling, hiking, canoeing, kayaking, dance and other types of activity are just as valuable as team sports."

The challenge is to make physical activity welcoming to those children.

Tremblay, one of Canada's leading researchers on child obesity, advocates a return to unorganized sport.

"When I grew up there was sport, but it was more spontaneous, make up the rules as you go, keep score yourself, and customize it to accommodate the smaller kids," he said in a phone interview from Fredericton. "I think we're losing that a little bit, and we need to get it back."

While lacking a natural ability for sport may seem a hindrance, it can actually be a blessing in disguise as far as weight management goes, Tremblay says.

"The wonderful thing about not being talented is, you burn more calories doing any particular activity than anyone else," he said, only half-jokingly. "If weight control is one of your concerns, the worse you are, the better."

Tremblay would also like to see kids participate in school physical education programs, which he says should be non-competitive, non-threatening environments where movement - rather than winning - is the reward.

"We're getting there, but change takes a long time," said Mandigo, who also serves on the board of directors for the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance. "There's still that sort of sport model, sport mentality in the school system in our phys-ed programs."

The key is to make sport part of the fitness curriculum, but not the whole thing. British Columbia introduced guidelines in 1990 to do just that, and other provinces have followed. As part of the new mindset, students are encouraged to support each other on the field, play fair and include everybody.

Emphasis is also placed on leadership, in the hopes of fostering a climate in which the gifted athlete supports - rather than belittles - their less athletic classmates.

More than a decade later, teachers are expected to carry out this curriculum. But many schools lack the funding for full-time, physical education instructors.

"The research is really clear on the importance of having teachers with training in physical education," said Mandigo.

Despite that, there are a limited number of jurisdictions that insist elementary phys-ed teachers be trained in physical education. Only Quebec, P.E.I. and the francophone division in New Brunswick have such requirements.

"Elementary is so critical," said Mandigo. "By the time they get to the secondary level, kids have already made decisions about whether they're going to take physical education and be active or not."

The key is to get them active when they're young, and keep it fun.

So encourage a kid to go for a hike, make up their own playground games, or run around aimlessly in a field.

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