

## Phys Ed in Schools Has Changed With the Times

**Emphasis has shifted from sports skills to fitness and wellness.**

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There was a time when gym class was forgotten once it was over. Kids weren't taught to take the long view of lifetime fitness.

In high schools and some middle school physical education classes, girls wore loose, bloomerlike uniforms and guys donned short shorts and long socks.

How they dress isn't all that's changed.

Plenty of research has gone into the P.E. curriculum. In today's classes, not only are rules and skills taught for particular sports, but overall fitness and wellness are even more important.

"The biggest evolution has been that we went from skills-based, sports-based (P.E.) to emphasis in lifetime fitness and wellness," said Kathleen Wright, physical education coordinator for Polk County schools.

"It's been a paradigm shift. We still teach sports skills, but the emphasis is on fitness and wellness."

"We integrate math, science, reading into exercise," said Tammy Corn, who for 15 years has taught P.E. at Lincoln Avenue Academy in Lakeland, a public magnet school emphasizing science and math.

But not everything has changed.

"We do calisthenics, yoga for stretching, running," Corn said. "Sometimes I change it up. It's important to be active, have fun, be outside. We have an activity of the day, requiring skills we've taught, keeping everybody moving."

An example of today's methods is that soccer in P.E. it is not just playing the game. Students are taught how the cardiovascular system and large muscle groups are used.

"As they come into adulthood, they know of sports and activities to improve their strength, flexibility, endurance," Wright said. "That gives them multiple choices.

"If a doctor says you need to build endurance, you have some basis of how to do it, remembering what you learned. If you need to lose weight, you know that calories going in have to be less than calories expended. We start teaching that around fourth grade — caloric balance and nutrition."

Away from school, how can parents help to keep kids fit? How can they combat the



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Highland City Elementary School students made use of soccer balls as part of the school's fitness program.

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trend of sedentary youths with video games, computers and cable TV?

Again, times have changed considerably over the decades. Once upon a time, most moms were home all the time and simply sent kids out to play. They were, on the whole, more fit than today.

Now, for the most part, neighborhoods are not as suitable for kids to play in. There can be more traffic and crime, and less available space in which to play than many years ago.

Helping to offset that are many more programs, venues and opportunities in communities for physical activity.

There are trails for walking, running or biking, along with parks, recreation centers and swimming pools. Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCAs offer opportunities for physical fitness.

“I always try to keep the kids informed about things going on in the community, using The Ledger, the runs or walks that are held (such as 5ks),” Corn said. “I really encourage them to get outside, even if just in their own neighborhood, walk around.

“They might see me. I run three times a week and I’m at the gym early every morning. You try to be a good role model.”

Research is showing that P.E. goes beyond healthy bodies to facilitate learning, Wright said.

“Aerobic capacity and endurance for better learning — a lot of correlation has been shown that students achieve better,” she said. “If you’re healthier, not fighting other (physical) things, you have more energy for learning. Exercise primes the brain for learning. It’s like miracle growth for the brain.”

She said research on the subject has been done by Dr. John Ratey at Harvard University. He is a psychiatrist and on the Harvard faculty and has a website on the subject.

During exercise, “dopamine receptors are increased, and chemicals in the brain prime it for gathering and storing information,” Wright said. “If a class is difficult, taking P.E. before it helps. Naperville, Ill., (schools) has a program before school for treadmill exercise with struggling kids.”

Yes, P.E. has changed.

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