



# ASSESSING PROGRESS

in grant funded  
fitness programs

## *How to meet the “assessment requirement” to obtain a grant*

In grant writing, there's no greater disappointment than missing out on badly needed funds because of one crucial omission in your application. Teachers, school officials and children's group leaders who are seeking grants for their fitness programs quickly encounter what is often called the "assessment requirement" in their applications. Completing this section properly can mean the difference between winning a grant and having to look for other ways to fund your athletic and fitness programs.

The assessment requirement of most grant applications addresses the need for a practical and accurate measurement of the goals of the program. For grants to fitness programs, this portion of the application generally will include a description of the method proposed to determine progress towards the attainment of the program's fitness goals, including the rate at which you expect this progress to be made.

This requirement brings up important questions: Exactly how do we know that our children are becoming more fit, healthier, and stronger? Does "thin" mean fit and healthy? Does a slow heart mean fit and healthy? What is the best way to measure typical markers of these attributes? In your proposed program, which measuring tools are accurate and helpful as motivators, rather than merely accepted or

interesting? To cut through the confusion, you'll need a way to clearly evaluate the assessment options you have available to you.

### **The Bottom Line**

Fitness grants are based on the premise that they assist schools or other groups increase the physical fitness of children and improve their health. These can include programs that promote general health or programs that target specific groups suffering from health problems related to a sedentary lifestyle. Being able to demonstrate progress towards the attainment of these goals is essential in obtaining grant money. Let's have a look at how this application or proposal requirement might be written.

For the PEP grant, the progress evaluation description of the application accounts for 25 percent of the total score given to the application in the rating process. This is no less than the percentage applied to the other three parts of the application (need for the project, significance, and quality of the project design).

Even if you have designed the best possible program, if you have not given adequate thought to how you will monitor progress towards the stated goals, your application stands little chance of being award-

ed a PEP grant. The PEP grant committee considers two factors in assessing the quality of the project evaluation methods in an application. These are as follows:

- The extent to which the methods of evaluation include the use of objective performance measures that are clearly related to the intended outcomes of the project and will produce quantitative and qualitative data to the extent possible.

- The extent to which the methods of evaluation will provide performance feedback and permit periodic assessment of progress toward achieving intended outcomes.

Look for similar requirements in other grant notices, and be sure to give this section due consideration.

One of the most common tools used and proposed in grant applications and proposals for the evaluation of progress toward the stated fitness goals is a heart rate monitor. Although this device is easy to use and is an effective method for evaluating a decrease in the working heart rate under certain conditions, it is not an effective method to evaluate overall fitness or to reach many of the objectives that grantors are looking for.

## Generally Accepted Goals of Fitness Programs

Fitness programs generally have some or all of the following objectives:

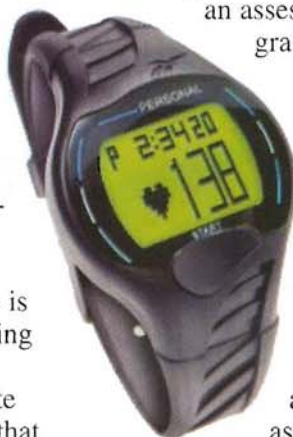
1. Improve insulin resistance levels
2. Improve blood lipid (fat) profiles
3. Decrease body fat
4. Increase strength
5. Increase flexibility
6. Increase endurance
7. Improve cardiovascular fitness and health
8. Increase bone density
9. Increase muscle efficiency and oxygen consumption

Your choice of an assessment tool depends on the objectives of your proposed program and must measure your specified goals.

Let's have a look at the most common assessment tools. We will consider here the various indicators of fitness and evaluation methods that may prove

helpful in proposing your program for funding, as well as actual assessment of progress once the program is underway.

**THE HEART RATE MONITOR.** This enormously popular device is included on everything from treadmills to stair climbers. A device that measures the rate at which the heart is beating, the heart rate monitor takes the usual pulse-counting procedure of the typical aerobic class to a high-tech level. It is sold by many fitness equipment companies specifically as an assessment aid for grant-financed programs.



The heart monitor has several advantages as an assessment tool. It is relatively inexpensive. It is easy to use. It tracks readily quantifiable data such as if whether or not a heart rate slows over time under the same physical exertion pressures (typically with strictly aerobic exercise). But the big question is whether or not it is really helpful as a tool to measure *fitness and health*, as opposed to measuring only the efficiency of the heart muscle. That raises the issue of whether a slow heart rate equals fitness, and many fitness experts say that it does not.

In his book *Facts and Fallacies of Fitness*, the late sport scientist Dr. Mel Siff noted that it is a myth that heart rate monitors provide accurate information on the training effect of fitness programs. Siff also pointed out that studies have shown that heart rate monitors often have minimal benefit in determining intensity and training effect. Further, optimal heart rates differ greatly among individuals, even those of the same age and fitness levels.

While the monitors can show a decrease in pulse rate, which can correspond somewhat with overall improved fitness, it is a better measure of heart efficiency than of arterial health or of any of the other important fitness markers listed earlier. Certainly, it serves no use as an indicator of factors contributing to the general well being of children, including stronger bones, decreased rates of obesity and lower susceptibility to injuries and diabetes. Clearly, the heart rate monitor is of very limited value in meeting general fitness grant objectives. It also is deficient in satisfying the typical grant proposal assessment requirement of the PEP grant, which requires that the

assessment method will be "clearly related to the intended outcomes of the project and will produce quantitative and qualitative data to the extent possible."

Clearly indicating your reasons for using a different method of assessment than the heart rate monitor in the assessment section of your proposal may increase your chances of winning a grant by making the application stand out from the crowd. It will also indicate that you have serious intentions of reaching complete fitness objectives rather than just recording superficial markers.

**BLOOD PRESSURE MONITORS.** Blood pressure is a very important health marker. High blood pressure correlates closely with stiffness in the arteries, which causes the arteries to be more prone to injury and indicates higher levels of plaque buildup and calcification. These factors are known to increase the risk of heart disease.

Monitoring blood pressure to protect the overall health of the entire cardiovascular system – as opposed to just the efficiency of the heart muscle – makes sense. A blood pressure cuff is a relatively inexpensive and easy-to-use assessment tool. It's extremely worthwhile to assist children to become more aware of the health of their cardiovascular systems and the methods to control their blood pressure by easy collection of readily quantifiable data with a simple and inexpensive tool.



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**In addition to measuring bodyfat, scales that use electrical impedance analysis, such as the TANITA Scale shown here, can also determine bodyfat levels, a critical health marker in physical fitness and health.**

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**ELECTRICAL IMPEDANCE SCALES.** Electrical impedance scales measure the percentage of body fat by an individual standing on the plates and passing electrical current through the body. The resistance of this current flow then determines the level of fat to lean body mass. Although such devices might appear to be a simple, accurate and effective method to assess this critical health marker, they must be used properly.

The electrical current flow through the body depends on hydration levels, and it is necessary to maintain hydration levels that are stable enough to

obtain adequately consistent readings that would be helpful in assessing progress towards reducing body fat. For example, eating a large pasta meal or other high-carbohydrate meal will cause the body to retain more water and will dramatically affect the reading of such a device.

The electrical impedance device can be an ideal way to monitor a child's progress toward reduced body fat, a critical health marker for today's often overweight child. However, it must be administered properly to be useful as an assessment tool.

**SKIN CALIPERS.** Skin calipers are simple devices for gently pinching the skin folds of various body areas and measuring the thickness of the folds to determine the amount of subcutaneous fat. The level of subcutaneous fat corresponds generally to the level of visceral fat around the body organs.

A consistent schedule that measures between

eight and ten different areas can provide a relatively accurate measure of decreases of overall body fat percentages. Further, skin calipers are easy to use and the method is easy to teach. Skin calipers are also relatively inexpensive.

As high body fat levels are highly correlated with cardiovascular health risks, diabetes and joint problems, skin calipers can be extremely helpful in measuring this very important health marker in any fitness program.

**VO2 MAX MEASUREMENTS.** While a measurement of the increase in the body's ability to utilize

oxygen is a helpful indicator of fitness levels, it may be impractical to use this indicator in many fitness programs. VO2 max levels are determined by having the athlete perform a highly aerobic activity while blowing into sensors that measure the oxygen consumed. This involves expensive and specialized equipment not easily available to most youth fitness program providers. So although this equipment is an excellent means to measure muscular and cardiovascular fitness and efficiency, it is simply impractical as an assessment tool.

**BONE SCANS.** Bone scans are another method of assessing health by measuring bone density and the susceptibility to osteoporosis. The scans must be performed in a medical environment. Such equipment might be readily available to professional athletes or health care practitioners, but as a program assessment tool it is completely impractical for children. So although bone density is an important consideration in any fitness program, increased bone health will have to be assumed by a program's emphasis on weight-bearing exercises, a critical component of any fitness program.

Keeping bone health in mind, it is important to point out that simply having children work on

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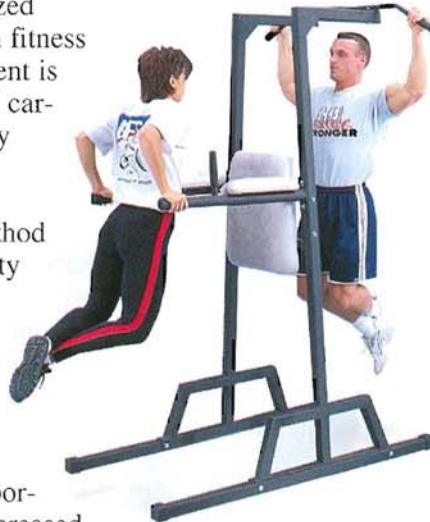
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a cardio machine and assessing their progress with a heart monitor will do little to contribute to this important indicator of health.

**PRACTICAL ASSESSMENT TESTS.** Traditional fitness tests such as vertical jump tests, sprints, chin-ups, push-ups and so on are perhaps highly underrated as fitness indicators. These tests can easily indicate increased strength, endurance and power. Further, they are easy to conduct and can indicate consistent progress over time, and there are considerable data available to establish standards. They cost nothing but provide the same encouraging progress reporting as expensive methods.

A careful consideration of appropriate performance tests would be useful in finding ways to assess progress under your proposed program. However, performance tests cannot measure such factors as body fat and blood pressure.




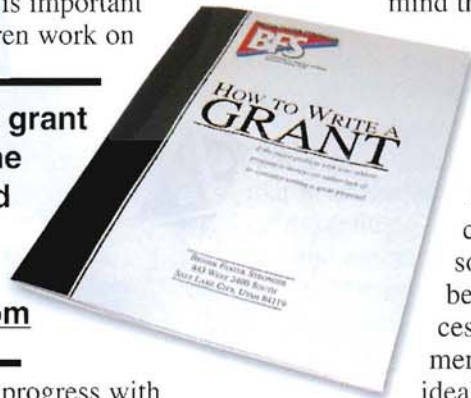
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**Traditional fitness tests such as chin-ups and parallel bar dips have been underrated as fitness indicators. These tests are easy to conduct and can indicate consistent progress over time, and there are considerable data available to establish standards.**

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While each device or method has its advantages, some are clearly more helpful than others in evaluating your group's progress toward attaining overall fitness and health. Keep in mind that although aerobic training programs are among the most popular proposals of those applying for grants, such programs may leave out vital elements of fitness that could be addressed by a weight training component. Also, assessing fitness solely through aerobic testing may be inadequate to measure the success of your program. The assessment method for a fitness program ideally would involve more than one approach. A combination of practical assessment tests, skin calipers for body fat measurements and a blood pressure assessment would give a far more accurate picture of progress in a physical education program.

Knowing the benefits and complementary aspects of each of these assessment methods will help you in writing an effective grant application. A clear proposal that explains these factors, along with describing specific assessment tests and expected results, will be a *compelling* reason for grant providers to fund your fitness program. 



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