

THE DARK SIDE OF SPORTS

Why PE Classes Are Injuring Our Children

A look at the steady increase in injuries in physical education classes

BY DR. MARC RABINOFF

A study that appeared in the September 2009 issue of *Pediatrics* reported that from 1977 to 2007, there was a 150 percent increase in the injuries that occurred in physical education classes. Having been involved in physical education for over 40 years, I find this statistic appalling... but, unfortunately, not surprising.

The most common injuries were lower-extremity sprains and strains, which accounted for 23 percent of the total injuries. But the especially disturbing findings are that the majority of injuries, 52 percent, occurred to middle school children and that the number of head injuries to children of ages 5-10 years *doubled* in those 30 years! Those are the facts. Now the important questions are what is causing these injuries and what can be done about it.

Getting Back to Basics

In physical education there should be a progression in skills from kindergarten through middle school to high school. If basic-movement skills are not mastered in the early years and our children are not becoming progressively more fit, then later on they will be unable to handle more-difficult skills and the sports they want to start participating in. The *Pediatrics* study supports this idea and reports that approximately 70 percent of all the injuries occurred in running, basketball, football, volleyball,

Photo: Timeless Images Photography.



Gymnastics at any level can be a relatively safe sport if skills are taught progressively. Shown is Level 10 gymnast Chloe Van Tussenbroek, who represents the Black Diamond Gymnastics Club in Park City, Utah.

soccer and gymnastics.

Put another way, if a kid is not physically, mentally and emotionally ready to learn a skill, they are not going to learn it. And the result is that they are more likely to get injured. Today more kids are overweight than ever before, and it's really tough for an overweight child to walk along a balance beam because their center of gravity is off – and vaulting may be pretty much out of the question.

Despite recognizing that these kids have not learned many basic skills, teachers simply follow the PE curriculum without regard to ensuring that

prerequisite skills are taught. Let's say during the first two weeks of a PE class the students work on tumbling. If some kids can't tumble, they sit on the side or do something else. Then the next two weeks the class plays volleyball. If a kid or two can't do that well, they sit on the side or do something else. So although the curriculum is being followed, kids are being taken out of the equation because they are not learning the prerequisite skills needed to progress to higher levels of physical and athletic fitness. There is no progression.

This progressive series of skill learning is what we teach our PE majors

to do, and physical education programs are supposed to be accredited based upon how well they implement this type of program. One of the reasons injuries are so high in backyard trampoline is that those using this equipment do not follow the prescribed learning curve. I am currently doing a case that involves an 11-year-old girl who was double bouncing, which occurs when two individuals are jumping on the same trampoline – the type of activity often seen in circus shows. Because neither the children nor anyone supervising them knew what the progression was to perform double bouncing, which



A BFS clinic is a hands-on experience designed to further the education of physical education instructors and coaches. Perfect technique and optimal spotting methods are stressed to reduce the risk of injury.

is extremely tricky and requires professional coaching, one of the children broke her leg in four places.

Changes for the Worse

One cause of injury that was discussed in the *Pediatrics* study was collisions, which the article explains are injuries that can occur by contact with another person, a playing surface or a stationary structure. Collisions can occur because teachers are not storing away equipment after classes as they should, which can interfere with subsequent classes. Combine this problem with the fact that PE classes are getting bigger and bigger, making it more difficult for a single teacher to properly supervise the classes, and there will be an increased likelihood of collisions when kids run after lost balls or do whatever they are doing in a less-than-ideal environment.

The next issue is one of proper training of physical education teachers. I've noticed that many college programs for a PE major are being dumbed down, especially with online courses, with less science being required. I know of one college program that does not have a single class devoted to organization and administration – how can you possibly certify a physical education teacher if they never had to study how to organize a physical education class? This is absurd!

What's worse is that due to budget cuts or lack of qualified applicants, school districts often do what is called "emergency certifications," which means they allow individuals who are not properly trained to work with students. What's worse still is that they often put these people in the primary grades. It is absolutely critical to have the most skilled physical educators in elementary schools, as opposed to higher grades, where they can often learn sport skills from outside sources such as club sports



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or Little League.

Lara McKenzie, PhD, one of the authors of the study, said that the increase in PE injuries was unlikely to be "attributable to an increase in PE participation." This gives a false impression. Whether the number of students in PE is rising or not, it is a certainty that there are fewer PE teachers per number of students. I've heard of many school districts that have a teacher/student ratio of 1/40, but often the real numbers are up to 65 – and I just heard of one school that had up to 120 kids in one class! Allowing 40 kids in one class is outrageous, and there is no way a single teacher can supervise 65 kids in a single class. And from a legal standpoint, having 65 kids in one PE class is not just unacceptable; an injury that occurs in such a class is nondefensible in a court of law.

The "big three" legal complaints against PE teachers I've seen in the legal system are 1) lack of supervision, 2) failure to warn and 3) improper instruction.

Although many school administrators believe they have a governmental immunity against lawsuits, and this is true to some extent, most attorneys will tell you that there are exceptions to governmental immunity that would enable a lawsuit to occur.

The *Pediatrics* study has already garnered considerable national attention, and the authors are to be commended for bringing this research to the attention of not only physical educators but also the parents who put their trust in the school system. Hopefully, the end results will be a decrease in injuries and a more valuable education for our children. BFS

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