



The Education of Physical Education

By David Geslak, BS, CSCS

Do you remember your grade school math teacher giving a test and saying, “First person to finish gets the best grade?” To an extent, this has been the philosophy behind physical education for the past 20 years. Since the 1980s, the way our children have been physically assessed in physical education (i.e., the President’s Challenge) has not changed. The President’s Challenge physical fitness test recognizes students for their level of fitness in sit-ups, the shuttle run, an endurance run/walk (the mile), pull-ups, push-ups, and the sit and reach. With these exercises, our children are being assessed on *quantity* of exercise (e.g., how many push-ups, how fast can you run) not *quality* (e.g., proper form and body mechanics). When we are working with the developing human body, this method of education does not support a child’s physical needs, and, more importantly, this does not meet the needs of a child with autism. Each child should be considered unique, differing in size, shape, and ability. What can be considered notable progress for one child may not represent a significant achievement for another. If we simply teach excesses and numbers, then we are coaching, but we are not educating children about the human body and not giving children

more of a reason to enjoy physical activity.

For the past 20 years, we have seen detrimental changes in our children’s physical development. Children as young as 5 years old are being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, postural imbalances, obesity, heart disease, and, more recently, autism spectrum disorders. The physical needs of our children are changing, and most school administrators, parents, and students are *aware*, but there is still no change. As Ed Arranga, founder of Autism One, once told me, “Raising awareness raises questions . . . increasing education provides answers.”

In 1989, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who is now the governor of California, was named as the council chairman of the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports by George W. Bush. It was Arnold’s goal to use his celebrity status as a body builder and Hollywood celebrity to give maximum exposure to the Council and its messages.

During Arnold’s time as chairman, he traveled to all 50 states advocating to governors the need for daily physical education in American schools. Arnold’s attention and popularity brought much needed attention to the cause; however, during his time as chairman and following, the increase



David Geslak has been designing fitness programs for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders for the last five

years. David attended the University of Iowa and received a bachelor’s degree in health, leisure, and sport studies with an emphasis in health promotion. He is certified by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) as a Health Fitness Specialist and by the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) as a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist.

In 2004, he co-founded, Right Fit, a fitness facility that serves children with special needs. Currently, he works at Giant Steps, Inc. of Illinois, a school for children with autism, along with his role as president of the Exercise Connection Corporation. He has worked in all levels of fitness including as University of Iowa football assistant strength coach and as a private NFL strength coach. David found his passion when working with children with autism and will continue to educate others about how they can be leaders in health and fitness for all our children.

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in physical activity was not seen. Unfortunately, increases *have* been seen in the waist size of our nation's children, parents' health care costs, and atypical development.

Nearly 20 years later, the "Governator's" mission towards exercise has apparently changed. In 2008, Arnold passed a bill to cut the \$41 million Physical Education Teacher Incentive Grant Program from the budget. This former leader in physical education may now be leading other governors, superintendents, principals, and school districts to believe that our children's bodies have no connection to their minds.

If parents, schools, communities, and the national media are aware of the physical changes in our children, then why is physical education one of the first classes to be cut? The brain does not become keener only as a function of reading books all day. Academics are only a component. The brain does not exist in a vacuum; it receives benefits downstream of other positive health conditions in other parts of the body. Our children need to move their bodies to develop the nervous system. And they need to exercise to benefit their lymphatic and circulatory systems, thus both ridding their bodies of toxins and providing an optimal environment for strengthening their minds.

In a study completed of 500 neurotypical school children, it was found that those who spent an hour each day in gym class performed better on intelligence tests than those who were inactive (Howard, 2006). You may be saying to yourself, "My child isn't typical," or "My students aren't normal." In a study conducted on children with autism following moderate physical activity, increases were seen in attention span, on-task behavior, and levels of correct responding (Rosenthal-Malek &

Mitchell, 1997). We must view our children with autism for their capabilities, not their disabilities. They have the potential to exercise their capabilities if we give them the tools – and one of those tools is exercise.

That is the philosophy I have been implementing the past 5 years and one that I emphasize at Giant Steps Illinois as fitness coordinator. Giant Steps Illinois is a therapeutic day school providing programming for primary, intermediate, junior high and high school students with autism spectrum disorders. Giant Steps strives to improve a child's ability to interact, communicate, and develop academic and daily living skills through a one-on-one integrated holistic approach of services: speech/communication therapy, occupational therapy, music therapy, social work, and education programs.

Within the past year, we have adopted a special recreation/fitness program. The focus of the class is movement of the body – not sports like many physical education programs, although sports are taught through movement. Special recreation class lasts for 45 minutes and each class participates three times per week. While exercise is the main component of the class, students also work on improving living skills, leadership activities, and social skills while continuing to work on their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals. The program is also experimenting with a musical fitness class.

When the students begin, they are put through a physical assessment that is much different from the traditional President's Challenge test. Students are measured on body composition (height, weight, body mass index, body fat percentage, circumference measurements, and blood pressure) and are put through a movement assessment focused on improving gross-motor movement and the ability to cross the midline of the body. The assessment is focused on the quality of movement and looks to improve the student's weaknesses and challenge their strengths for the remainder of the school year. A physical assessment is vital to our children, and as teachers we need to have a starting point as well as data to track improvement and set goals for ourselves and our students. This is also an opportunity to educate parents and students.

Many schools for children with autism have a mission to improve children's ability to communicate and live in our world. I have seen the improvements of many children when exercise is integrated with speech, occupational, and music therapies within the framework of a concrete IEP plan. I hope that all schools can understand the importance of a fitness plan and that those that have removed it will again make it a priority.





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TIPS FOR PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITY CENTERS

1. Be a leader

Most of you reading this are already leaders in autism for your own children and the children with whom you work. However, are you a leader in physical activity? I want you as parents to have another means of engaging with your sons and daughters. One day you may go into the basement and do a quick workout, and your child may watch you go down . . . And one day he or she may follow you down. You need to be the leaders in health and fitness – if your children see you do it, they may be more inclined to do so, as well.

2. Use your voice

At your children's schools, your voice needs to be heard on the issue of physical education. Explain the importance to your parent teacher organization and talk with school administration, finding out their reasons for a fitness program not being a priority. Having spoken with many physical education teachers, I know they know the importance. Employ a team approach for physical education, and make sure it is a part of your child's education.

3. Assessments are positive

Many parents don't want to have their child's height and weight measured, and many schools agree because the parent's voice is so strong. Physical assessments are not only about height and weight but also understanding the function and capabilities of your child's body. You should be educated on your child's health, and they should be, too. Without assessment and an initial

understanding of their body, how are we going to measure improvement and educate?

4. Music is great

I cannot tell you how many times I have heard the song "Spoonful of Sugar" from the *Mary Poppins* soundtrack while working with one of the students at Giant Steps. Each time I hear it, my smile gets bigger. Music is a huge motivator for many when they go to the gym; for example, look around at all the iPods you see next time you are there. Music is also a huge motivator for a child with autism. If it works, use it, even if it is the same song for an hour.

5. Family is strong

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. At home, the family must stick together to improve the health of the child in need. Dads, brothers, and sisters: physical activity may give you a means to connect with your child or sibling. Moms: your actions are being watched – not just fitness activities, but everything that your family does – including the food on the table; your child is observing your every move.

There is no better time than now to start educating our children about physical activity. Our children should not be forced into physical activity nor should it be used as a form of punishment (e.g., "go run a lap"). Physical activity is a time for our children to let their bodies be free, rid themselves of toxins, and help improve cognitive ability. It is not about how fast you can run or how many push-ups you can do – it is about educating and instilling a lifetime activity for our children that improves their quality of life.

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