

Building Cooperative and Competitive Skills in Children: The Physical Education Model

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Occasionally school administrators, teachers, or parents wonder why the education system engages in high school sports events, middle school physical education courses or elementary school playground activities. A reasonable response could be that these experiences allow children a controlled outlet of diversion and energy release that at the same time is directed toward the improvement of the child's health. No doubt these observations are true. However, could there be more, much more value to these types of curriculums?

Recently, Urban Meyer, the football coach at the University of Florida, was interviewed by the media concerning the Gators' positive win and loss record and their premier national ranking. The coach explained to the media that football games were less about winning and losing and more about building leadership capacity of the players. He pointed out that football consisted of developing lifetime skills that would serve the players and society well outside of a football game. Specifically he stressed that football was about setting goals, working daily on an action plan to achieve those goals and setting high standards. That success on the field relied on teamwork, individual focus, responding under pressure, leadership and fellowship and going beyond oneself for the good of others. He reminded the media that a coach was more about teaching success skills for life than about football championships.

No one could argue with these values and how they benefit the person and society.

The National Association of Sport and Physical Education have created seven physical education curriculum standards that also speak to cooperation and competition skills development using physical activity as the vehicle. Many elements of these standards focus on development of the student beyond the physical education activity. For example, Standard Five states that the student, "Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others in a physical activity setting." The intent of this standard is to help students with self-initiated behaviors that promote personal and group success, safe practices, adherence to rules and procedures, etiquette, cooperation, teamwork, ethical behavior and positive social interactions. Key to developing these skills are intense physical activity that allow the student to respect others similarities and differences through positive interaction. Other standards also highlight cooperation and competition skills that go beyond the activity of the moment.

Even elementary school age children have opportunities to acquire higher order skills through curriculums designed for school yard playground equipment. The PlayWell Group Inc. (<http://www.playwellgroup.com>) has developed an activity curriculum for use by teachers that brings together cooperation and competition skills to the free play time of children. They state that, “Essential to the maximum effective use of playground equipment is the need for a customized curriculum that is designed specific to the developmental age of the child, the structure of the equipment, safety issues, challenge opportunities and important student learning development skills. The curriculum consists of activities that, combined with teacher centered direction, speak to key physical education learning standards. These activities are fun, age appropriate and focus on motor forms, skills and patterns; movement concepts, principles, strategies and tactics; physical fitness; personal and social behavior; and values for health, enjoyment, challenge, self expression and social interaction.”

What is necessary to ensure that children and young adults can build these essential cooperation and competition skills through physical education? The following is a start:

1. School administrators, teachers and parents need to be committed to the value of sports, physical education and playground activities that are designed to accomplish skills that use physical activities as a vehicle but also are designed for life success. These leaders need to stress the necessary resources and philosophy that underline the greater value of physical education and sports.
2. An assessment of the physical education facility, curriculum and programs is necessary to determine that all elements are in place that would allow for the maximum of success. Such assessment issues as qualified teachers, appropriate time allocation for physical education, appropriate class size, necessary equipment and materials, use of technology, appropriate facilities, well designed curriculum and evaluation systems should be considered.
3. Use the array of existing curriculums that speak to cooperation and competition skills within the physical movement context. There are a significant number of these curriculum programs that highlight different aspects of decision making, leadership, teamwork, following of rules while under time and space pressure and the like.

4. Seek additional funding that is available in the sport, physical education, playground and equipment area. There are a multitude of government agencies, non profits and foundations that are dedicated to advancing this important discipline area.

Children and young adults are at a critical age and development stage of life. As adults we recognize that certain skill sets will not only be helpful but vital for their future success. There are a number of ways to advance these important skills and sports, physical education and free play should not be ignored as a successful way to make a positive difference.

If further information concerning Physical Education is of interest, please contact

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