

If We Are To Survive

PHYSICAL fitness of American youth is currently a problem of national concern. Evidence of this fact is provided by all communications media. The indicting captions and headlines, such as "A Nation of Weaklings," "The Soft American," "The Flabby American," have had impact in nearly every home in America.

From a national level, President Kennedy did not wait for his inauguration to go on record with a definite plan to make the promotion of physical fitness of all Americans a matter of national policy. Those who share his concern enthusiastically salute his vision for soundness, so early in his regime, such an urgent and eloquent plea in behalf of the need for increased attention to the physical fitness of our youth.

Likewise, the American Medical Association at its 1960 meeting passed strong resolutions urging the maintenance and expansion of physical education programs at all educational levels. Many other nationwide, statewide, and local groups and organizations have expressed vigorous and enthusiastic support for the improvement of the physical fitness of American youth.

The American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (AAHPER) has been concerned about this matter for some years. Until re-

cently, however, this organization's diligent attempts to alert parents, educators, legislators and the public in general have in a measure gone unheeded.

Why the Physical Fitness Squeeze?

Extensive statistical evidence is now available which positively supports the claim that the physical fitness of American youth is presently not what it should be and that a further deterioration is imminent unless adequate preventive measures are taken. In 1954, two eminent physicians clearly illustrated the decline of physical development of American youth through a fitness test (Kraus-Weber test) administered to American and European children. By comparison it was found that 58 percent of the American youth failed one or more components of the test while less than 9 percent of the European children failed.

A chief contributor to the mounting statistics in this area is again the AAHPER through its Youth Fitness Test developed in 1956. This test has been used very effectively to ascertain the status of basic physical fitness ingredients in youth. Millions of American

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youth have been given this test repeatedly and its use has spread to other nations in the world. In 1959, for example, the AAHPER National Fitness Test was administered to 20,000 Japanese children and youth. The Japanese were found to be substantially superior in all but one component. More recently the test was used with 10,000 youth in England, Scotland, Wales, and Cyprus. The comparison of test results has been the subject of banner headlines. For example, it was noted that at some ages British girls were superior to American boys in some elements of fitness. Additional statistical evidence has been developed by the President's Council on Youth Fitness, schools, state departments of education, various organizations, and others through the use of the AAHPER Youth Fitness Test, modifications of this test, or other measuring devices.

From many quarters comes a determined willingness to defend the premise that more than adequate statistical evidence is available in support of a greater need for programs designed to improve youth physical fitness. In fact, many educators concur that statistical adequacy in defense of the concern for youth physical fitness is substantially greater than is the evidence currently available in support of a need for pressures to be exerted for several years toward academic proficiency in certain curricular areas while in reality other equally important aspects of the school program have been on a "starvation diet." Did not such an added emphasis on these areas, for example, result in part from a fear that the Russians would not only surpass us but conquer us? In the long run it is doubtful whether we as a nation can survive by virtue of intellectual achievement alone. The Russians would conquer us much sooner if we as a nation permitted

ourselves to become physically soft and lazy. Mankind has known for a long time that the intellectual process cannot be divorced from the physical aspect: the mind cannot be separated from the body. What affects one also affects the other!

From a philosophical standpoint there is much to support the current alarm concerning the physical fitness of American youth. One point is particularly noteworthy. Not too many years ago physical exercise was associated with making a living or with carrying on the normal duties of life. Out of this pattern of life a strong, vigorous population was developed which conquered the wilderness and the Western frontiers. Modern day developments in the areas of technology, sociology and economics have created a vastly changed America. With the acquisition of wealth and more leisure time, Americans have become less active and less responsive to the need for wholesome physical activity which is basic to both physical and mental well-being.

It is quite evident that all the progress made in the pursuit of happiness and a richer and fuller life has been in the direction of less physical activity and toward a more dormant and sedentary life. In short, we are moving in the direction of less and less physical activity. On the basis of irrefutable evidence now available, the physical fitness of American youth must be of concern to citizens in all walks of life and all institutions of our nation, within our respective states and local communities. Those who do not concur that a creeping but very real national emergency exists, those who are yet skeptics on the subject, will no doubt continue to seek the comforts of an easy chair within reach of a TV set. By so doing, statistical evidence, which now indicates that the average American devotes four hours daily to watching tele-

vision, will soon need revision. The movies took us away from home, the radio brought us back, and television has glued us there. Despite President Kennedy's appeal to parents, citizens, teachers and administrators, it must be recognized that it is becoming increasingly more difficult to interfere with the American's thoroughly comfortable and pleasant process of physical deterioration.

"Crash" Programs Not Needed!

The President's Council on Youth Fitness, aided by the AAHPER and other national, statewide and local groups, has been exceptionally successful in driving home to parents and lay groups an image of fitness. Moreover, readers of newspapers, magazines, or those who watch television and listen to the radio have felt the impact of the communications media's cooperative efforts to inform, to build the image, and to generate interest on the part of all citizens. The important factor now is that there must be certain basic understandings and interpretations of national recommendations without which the tendency and temptation to jump on the first bandwagon become all too evident. In our own state there are instances in which physical education programs in schools are reverting to mass calisthenics and "physical training." These "new" approaches are proudly, though mistakenly, hailed as "physical fitness programs."

It is apparent on every hand that there are differences of opinion among school administrators, physical educators, and parents with reference to interpretation of the program developed by the President's Council on Youth Fitness. In such an atmosphere, it is reasonable and logical to anticipate a cleavage in the public image as to desirable programs for

improving the physical fitness of American youth.

The terms fitness (or total fitness), physical fitness, and physical education have thus far been referred to. Discussion has waged during the past few years over the meaning and interpretation of these terms. Additionally, there has been a plethora of literature attempting to clarify the issues. The following comments represent one more effort to bring these topics into proper focus.

The basic purpose of education in American society is to provide the most desirable educational experiences which will enable the individual to attain and maintain optimum physical, social, emotional, moral and intellectual growth. Physical education is definitely a part of this experience. It has as its aim the development of physically, socially, emotionally, morally and mentally fit individuals who will be able to take their places in society as worthy citizens of a democracy. *This constitutes fitness or total fitness.* Total fitness, then, is a worthwhile aim of education and it involves every aspect of the educational panorama.

Briefly, physical educators must share with their educational brothers the contributions to mental, social, moral and emotional fitness. There is little to be accomplished by entering into controversy with other areas of the curriculum as to who among us contributes most to the *four* aspects of total fitness just named. It should be noted, however, that physical fitness was not mentioned. This is quite another story.

Physical fitness—what is it? Certainly physical fitness is a vital aspect of total fitness, and in many ways is basic to other forms of excellence. It is not merely muscular development or the ability to pass one of the physical fitness tests

which are being used more and more in our schools. Maintaining the proper level of physical fitness does not depend solely on following a predetermined exercise routine. It is true that exercise is indispensable to achieving physical fitness. Coordination, stamina, speed, strength, endurance, agility, skill and other related qualities are only developed through vigorous activity.

It is none the less true that good health practices and knowledge, proper nutrition, adequate sleep and rest, dental and medical care are just as essential to physical fitness as is exercise. In truth, the boy or girl who is malnourished or who is overweight is likely to be much more ineffective physically than a child who fails to participate in the prescribed period of vigorous activity each day. Physical fitness is a desirable combination and blending of the best possible bodily health plus the physical condition to perform everyday tasks efficiently and still have sufficient reserve to meet whatever emergencies arise.

We have no physical fitness programs. Instead, we have physical education programs which have as their chief objective physical fitness. To emphasize the "physical" in physical education in no way negates the concept of the whole child, for certainly every effort should be made through physical education activities to develop the mental, emotional, social and moral facets of the individual. In fact, physical education's contribution to these elements of total fitness can best be made by putting emphasis on the physical. Such emphasis, however, in no way delimits the scope of the program to include just calisthenics, conditioning activities in general, weight training, or other forms of developmental activities. Physical education is a program of many dimensions thus precluding the neces-

sity of jumping on the first bandwagon that comes along. Certainly physical education programs should include vigorous conditioning activities, calisthenics, and other "muscle" building activities. These, however, are merely supplemental to a vast program of games, sports, relays, gymnastics, rhythms, physical fitness testing, coeducational activities, intramurals, and sports clubs. Through the medium of these activities, physical education makes its contribution to the general objectives of education. In physical education we rely on the unique ingredient of physical activity and it is the *only* curriculum area where all endeavors are based on physical movements which contribute to growth. The kinesthetic aspect of the individual represents the domain of physical education.

We do not need "crash" programs in physical fitness! We do, however, urgently need to revitalize the physical education program so as to better meet current demands. We need curriculum revision and enrichment in physical education. We can no longer be satisfied with the same choice of activities "warmed over" and repeated every year. *We need more vigorous activity—more perspiration—and higher standards of performance* which will bring greater satisfaction of accomplishment to the individual student. All this can be attained and still make the program enjoyable for all participants. Physical fitness has captured the imagination of many people—*young and old. The time for action is now!*

Statistical evidence now available indicates that over 60 percent of the elementary schools either have no physical education programs, or have only inadequate programs at best. A very small percentage of our secondary schools have daily classes of physical education. Fur-

thermore, some of our schools are now afflicted with a new contagion referred to by some as "minimum-itis." As implied in an earlier paragraph, these are the schools which have misunderstood the President's plea for a minimum of 15 minutes each day and have established the figure as a maximum goal.

It is not within the scope of this discussion to delineate in detail the kinds of programs we should have in our schools. There is a spate of literature which provides full descriptions, combined with outlines of standards or goals toward which schools should strive to attain excellence. Since physical education should be part of children's educational experience from the first day they enter school, a few comments are made with reference to program adaptation for the primary grades. Children at this level are, first of all, individualistic, possessive, dramatic, imaginative and imitative. Full advantage of these characteristics must be taken in the basic curriculum through the elements of fundamental movements such as walking, running, hopping, skipping, climbing, balancing, sliding, catching and throwing. The creative and imitative inclinations provide the spontaneity for movement exploration during all grade cycles of primary grades. Vigorous developmental and wholesome activity is provided through rhythm of all types, tag, "it," and goal games, simple relays, mimetics, rope jumping, stunts, and self testing, catching, throwing and kicking games of low organization in preparation for more complicated game skills at higher grade levels. Moreover, the selection of activities for primary grades should be based on the urgent need to develop coordination, speed, agility, strength, poise, and moderate endurance. Particular stress should be placed on climbing, running,

skipping, and jumping activities. It is important to recognize that music and rhythm fascinate primary grade children.

More important, however, is the fact that children cannot be "turned loose" to play. *There must be direction and instruction if the experiences in physical education are to make their maximum contribution to the physical fitness of youth.*

To bring the physical education program for all levels to full fruition, leadership and emphasis from the national level is not enough. A concerted effort must also be made by the home, church, community organizations, and the school toward the attainment of high levels of physical fitness on the part of all youth. The schools, however, must bear the greater responsibility for this effort through the organization and administration of sound and revitalized physical education programs. Steps have been taken to improve the quality of instruction in special academic areas. All concerned with education agree that this needed to be done. *Does this not also apply to physical education?*

Across the nation we have provided an excellent program for the physically gifted—the participants in interscholastic athletics who already possess a high degree of physical fitness and skill. This select group comprises approximately 10 percent of our school enrollment. The question now facing administrators, teachers and parents is, "What are we doing for the other 90 percent?"

Certainly the challenge for better physical education programs rests with those administrators and teachers charged with the responsibility of determining curriculum content and improvement in all areas. Intellectual achievement and proficiency are not enough. We must also be physically fit if we are to survive.

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