

Does the PE curriculum encourage 'activity for life'?

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Active lifestyles: fighting the teenage switch-off

There is much concern about the activity levels of young people, especially with respect to their future health and preventing illnesses such as heart disease.

Professor Neil Armstrong and his team in the Physical Education Association Research Centre, at the School of Education in Exeter University, have shown that children are no less fit than they were in the past. In fact, as might be expected, they are the fittest section of the population (1).

Are people who share our concern for young people's future health aware that in the prevention of heart disease, daily physical activity plays a more important role than fitness? The additional benefits of physical activity towards general well-being, such as easing stress and anxiety, should also not be forgotten in the emphasis on getting children 'fit for life'.

The Exeter research showed conclusively that many children do not even achieve a level of activity that is normally associated with adults who are at risk from heart disease. Children's generally high level of fitness is more because they are children than because they are engaged in activities that make them 'fit'. Whereas fitness in adults is highly correlated with activity, the effects of young people's current inactive lifestyle have yet to reveal themselves as a negative influence on their fitness.

We hope that readers can now see why regular

physical activity in children should have a direct effect on their future health as adults.

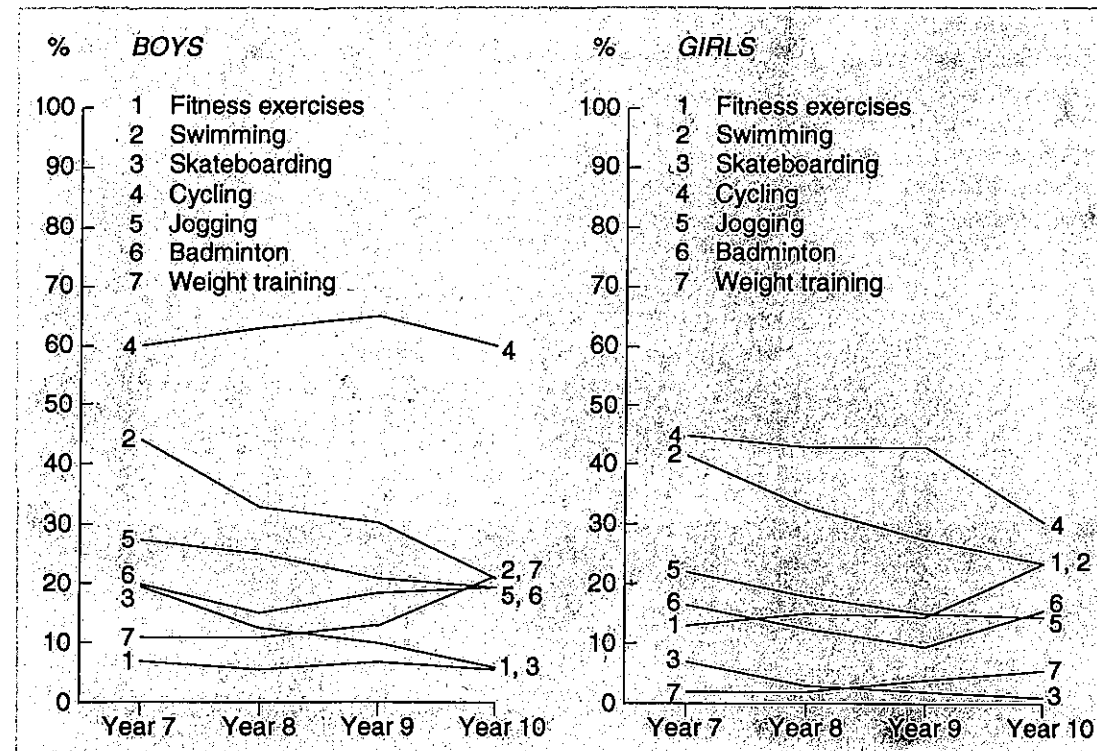
Looking at data acquired by the Schools Health Education Unit in the course of nationwide surveys carried out in 1992 (2), we can see that the level of participation in some of the more 'traditional' sports falls off with age, and also that these levels are lower for girls than boys (Fig. 1).

However, in the case of activities which have a less 'sporting' label attached to them, in terms of competition and the involvement of organised teams, we can see that the levels of involvement in activities such as fitness exercises and weight training are maintained or even increase with age in both sexes.

It is interesting that these two more popular activities with the older pupils are non-competitive solo activities. Smith (3) suggests that the problem centres on too narrow a perspective of what physical activity is. He suggests that there is too much emphasis on structured, organised competitive team games such as football and hockey, and not enough on non-competitive activities such as cycling or aerobics, where individuals can participate as individuals, without being reliant on others to 'make up a team'.

Is the problem, then, that PE is preoccupied with 'sport', to the detriment of activities that most children are likely to want to pursue into adult life, to the benefit of their future health?

Fig. 1. Active pursuits outside school, recorded by 20,000 young people surveyed in 1992. The values record the 'weekly' and 'twice a week or more' categories combined. The data is taken from *Young People in 1992*.



If one objective of PE is still to 'promote some sense of achievement and positive attitudes towards participation in post-school recreation', as suggested by the Schools Council Physical Education Committee in 1972 (4), then these facts suggest that the experience of physical activity by school pupils is not suitably structured to stimulate them towards a higher level of physical activity outside school. Secondary schools need to do much more to offer all pupils the chance of exploring activities which are not normally associated with the PE curriculum, but which could have an enduring attraction beyond the confines of the compulsory curriculum.

The Schools Council quotation is now part of history, of course, but the germ of the proposal is still to be found in the current National Curriculum orders for PE, that pupils should:

Be shown how to gain access to local leisure opportunities for different areas of activity. [Key Stage 3: Programme of Study (General)]

Be able to prepare, carry out and monitor personal programmes for a healthy and enjoyable lifestyle, considering the use of community resources where appropriate. [Key Stage 4: Programme of Study (General)]

It could well be that physical educators need to re-think the current approach taken within their school, with the long-term aim of including activities within their current programme that

take into account the facilities available within the local community. The aim should surely be to try to get some of these activities within the young people's lifestyles.

Geoffrey Meek and Paul Meehan, in *The Community Resource Guide: From supermarket to shopping mall!* (5) suggest that one approach could be to take the trouble to 'educate, inform and initiate' the pupils into using what resources are available locally. The product would be a Community Resource Guide for that area. In this way, school is not their only experience of organised physical activity, and becomes part of a much bigger facility which they realise they are entitled to use and are keen to exploit.

A 'Balancing Act' workshop

The Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire has now been in use for 13 years. Over 270,000 pupils in over 1000 surveys have completed the questionnaire.

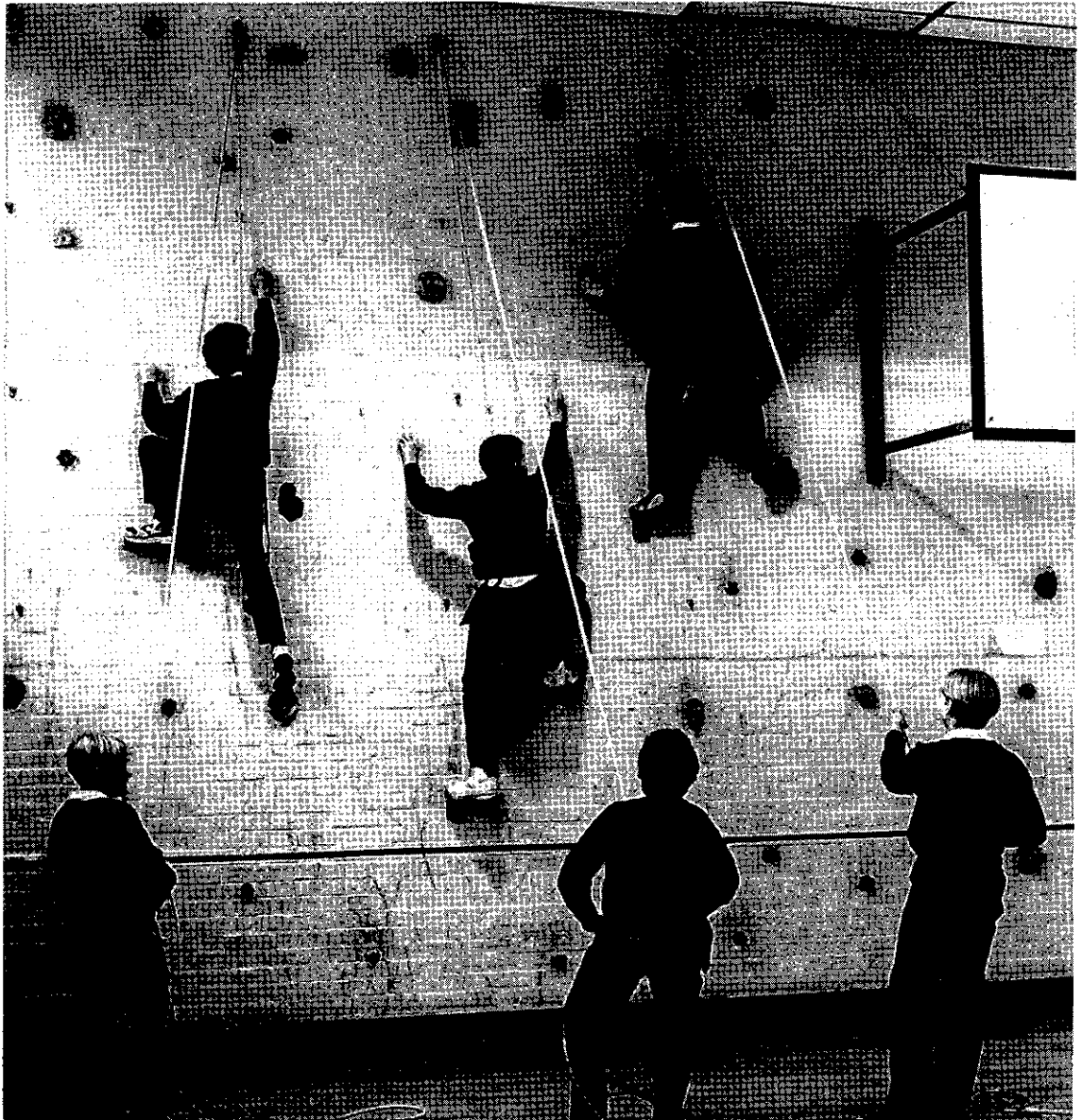
One of the principal aims in the development of the questionnaire was to enable staff to be more reliably informed about their pupils' lifestyles and health behaviour, and thus be better positioned to plan an effective personal and social curriculum from the derived survey data.

Once the data was back in the school, its use quite naturally became extended to the class-

In preventing heart disease, physical activity plays a more important role than fitness

PE planning should take account of the facilities available within the community

Fig. 2. An innovative 'indoor mountain' devised by one of the staff at St Peter's High School. This is an example of a facility that may *not* be available outside the school!



room and the young people who had supplied it. Often, quite by chance, the Schools Health Education Unit becomes aware of initiatives within schools stimulated by the survey data and involving all aspects of the curriculum. In an attempt to give these original uses of the data the widest possible circulation, some of them have been incorporated in a series of *What Next?* workshops for use with pupils, staff, or parents.

Attention has always been paid to the levels of participation by pupils in physically active pursuits, which typically lessen with increasing age. The 'Balancing Act' workshop, which we have developed to enhance the PE curriculum, aims to get the children much more committed to active pursuits before the typical 'switch-off' occurs in the early or mid-teens. The personal importance of exercise and regular physical ac-

tivity should be emphasised from the beginning of their secondary-school careers, and more needs to be done to make them aware of attractive local opportunities to achieve this.

This, of course, suggests a review of the PE provision in the school, not just in the 14–16 age range, when sporting activity tends to drop noticeably, but even while they are more committed to physically active pursuits in the earlier years.

The workshop is subtitled *Encouraging and promoting pupils' physical activity levels — use of outside groups and clubs*.

The staff workshop commences by looking at a typical set of sports and activities records from a 15-year-old girl. The questions for discussion include:

Is she active enough?

NAME:

TUTOR GROUP:

St Peter's High School

ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL DURING THE PAST 12 MONTHS

This questionnaire is a follow-up to a question from the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire that your year group completed as Year 8 students. The PE department at St Peter's school would like to find out more about these sporting and leisure activities. The aim is to encourage more of the school's pupils to take part in exercise and activities outside of school.



Consider those physical activities that you take part in at least once or twice a week. Remember to include it, even if it is out-of-season at the moment.

Please list the activities here (only those activities done once or twice a week)

<u>Summer</u>	<u>Winter</u>
1.	4.
2.	5.
3.	6.

If you are a member of this club or organisation, can you please give details that someone would want to know if they were interested in joining. Take your most popular and regular one (no more than 2). Use the guidelines below to help you with this.

CLUB NAME

VENUE/ADDRESS
(if known)

TELEPHONE NUMBER TO
CONTACT ORGANISER (if known)

NAME OF THE
COACH/PERSON
IN CHARGE (if known)



Fig. 3. The questionnaire given by the school to 226 pupils in Year 9.

SUBSCRIPTION (Do you have to pay money every time or yearly or both?)
If yes - how much and how often?

DO YOU NEED YOUR OWN EQUIPMENT?

WHAT TIME DO YOU MEET,
AND FOR LONG?

DAY(S) OF WEEK

HOW GOOD DO YOU HAVE TO BE AND FOR EXAMPLE, COULD YOU BE A COMPLETE BEGINNER, OR WOULD YOU HAVE TO BE OF A SPECIFIC STANDARD? Please state...

If there is anything we have missed out, then please say what this is and give more details...



Would you be willing to consider introducing pupils from this school, as new members to this activity?

NO YES MAYBE

If NO, please give the name and address of someone who would, in the space below:

Name:

Address:

ANY OTHER COMMENTS:

THANK-YOU FOR YOUR HELP IN COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE - THE PE DEPARTMENT.

Fig. 4. The activities display as set up in the entrance hall of the school. All the sports played by the pupils are listed, and their venues indicated on the map. The cards give further details for pupils wishing to follow them up.

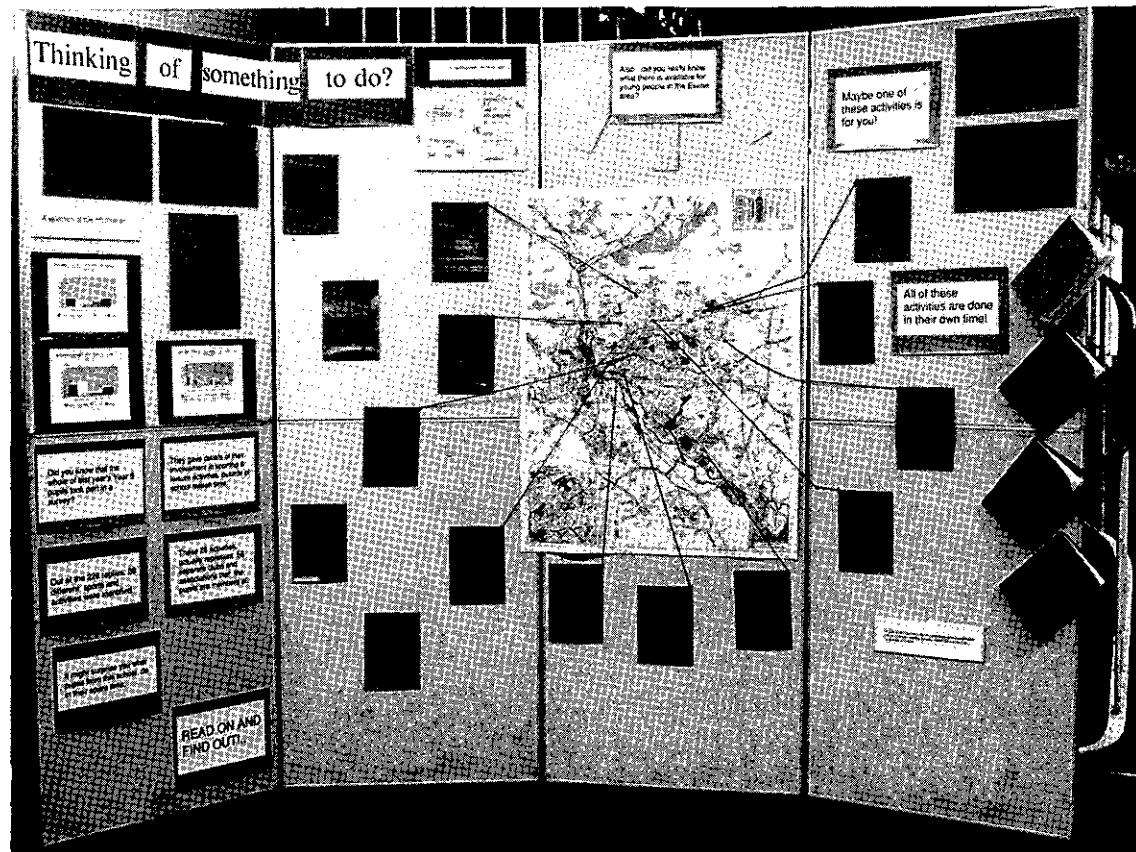


Fig. 5. One of the completed activity cards.

Name of club DEVON & EXETER SQUASH CLUB

Pupil contact in school: TOM SMITH

Location: PRINCE OF WALES ROAD, EXETER

Club contact number: EXETER 436100

Times: ANYTIME - MEMBERSHIP NEEDED

Adult in charge: CASUAL MEMBERSHIP

Other information: PHONE ABOVE TEL. NUMBER OR SPEAK TO TOM SMITH

How many sports clubs might she belong to in or out of school?

Are there sports not listed that she might be doing?

If the school has no survey data of its own, attention is then paid to tables of nationwide data, and a picture of general activity levels is developed and discussed.

Finally, in the light of known local facilities and the pupils' interests, ways of promoting the young people's greater involvement are examined. (The reason for the title of the workshop is revealed in one of the discussion statements, that tension or even conflict can occur between teachers and outside clubs if involvement with the latter could detract from the school's extra-curricular activities.)

This workshop is therefore seen to model itself on the Community Resource Guide strategy described by Meek & Meehan, but in practice every school undertaking a review of its PE provision will come up with a model suited to its own circumstances.

A school reviews its own PE strategy

A recent use of the Balancing Act workshop is described here. In the case of this particular

Fig. 6. The 26 outside-school activities identified by the school's Year 9 questionnaire enquiry (numbers indicate the number of pupils involved).

1. FOOTBALL: 7
2. HORSE RIDING: 7
3. DANCE: 5
4. SWIMMING: 4
5. TENNIS: 4
6. GOLF: 3
7. ATHLETICS: 2
8. BOXING: 2
9. CANOEING: 2
10. DRAMA: 2
11. JUDO/MARTIAL ARTS: 2
12. HOCKEY: 2
13. SAILING: 2
14. SQUASH: 2
15. BADMINTON: 1
16. BASKETBALL: 1
17. CRICKET: 1
18. FISHING: 1
19. GYMNASTICS: 1
20. JUGGLING: 1
21. RAMBLING: 1
22. ROLLER SKATING: 1
23. RUGBY: 1
24. SKIING: 1
25. SYNCHRONISED SWIMMING: 1
26. WATER POLO: 1

school, the data from the Health Related Behaviour survey had been in the school for several weeks. The workshop was taken on by a member of the PE department, and brought about a commonly-observed reaction: surprise at the number of activities in which the pupils participated, both in and out of school, and at their diversity and variation. They were, in fact, struck by the high levels of involvement, especially within activities that they had no idea the children pursued.

Staff were surprised at the number and diversity of activities pursued outside school

Through the use of the workshop they decided to find out more about these activities, and to use the information as a resource to enable other pupils to take up new activities beyond the ordinary provision within the school. There was also the hope that they would then maintain the activity beyond school-leaving age.

To find out in more detail what the out-of-school activities involved, it was decided to re-survey the original Year 8 pupils, who were now in Year 9. This was done by means of a questionnaire devised by a member of the PE staff. One of the aims was to obtain information which would be helpful to any newcomer wishing to

take up one of these activities. The questionnaire is shown in Fig. 3.

Analysis of the results showed that 26 different activities were identified by the pupils, while no less than 58 separate clubs or associations were represented within them. The number of individuals involved in each of these activities is shown in Fig. 6.

As a result of this, it was decided to provide a display for all pupils in the school, located in the entrance hall. The display consisted of a large map of the local area, with pointers leading from the location of the activity on the map to written information about the activity. The display was easy to arrange and put up — with the involvement of pupils within a cross-curricular approach, as suggested below, this aspect could become the responsibility of the pupils themselves.

This information enabled pupils to get an immediate feel for different aspects of the sport. For example, details of cost, skill level, practice nights and times were displayed. An additional encouragement given to any interested pupil was the name and tutor group of the pupils who already were members, and who would be willing to accompany and introduce any newcomer on their first two visits.

Pupils have been keen to participate and co-operate in the project, and it is now felt that there is a need to promote the opportunity offered by the information displayed. Some suggestions include:

- Make use of contact pupils within the school — could they talk about the activity as part of Health Education/tutorial work?
- Allow the pupils to discuss within smaller groups what they like or dislike about different activities — feed this back to the PE department.
- Allow the display to 'grow' — begin to include activities that might have been missed, perhaps because they are done by a pupil in a year group not surveyed. Also consider including other activities within the school, such as Expressive Arts, so that it begins to cross curriculum boundaries, and is not just restricted to the PE department.
- Media coverage, again to boost the profile of the project within the school.
- Cross-curricular work — drama and music, 'Sport of the month'.
- Work alongside the tutorial programme,

perhaps inviting outside speakers from the clubs and associations to promote their activity further, which could fit within the planned programme for Health Education within the school.

- Follow up the survey with a repeat in the future.
- Involve the Maths or Technology department, for example with data handling and presentation of data.
- Carry out a comparative study, looking at the results of the survey for their own school and those from another local school, or from nationwide data.

As with much of the data collected through the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire, the work actually begins once the data is back in school. So it is the task of this workshop to stimulate further investigation in order to clarify the picture. It might well be initiated from within the PE curriculum, but extending it to involve other curriculum areas will increase the number of children and staff involved, perhaps becoming a whole-school project led by the PE department.

The increased profile and backing would be significant factors in its success, ensuring that 'everyone understands and appreciates the importance of physical activity as an integral part of life' (6), with the ultimate goal of extending young people's physical activity into their adult lives.

References

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Further details about the school initiative described here, and the use of the 'Balancing Act' workshop as a follow-up to a Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire survey, may be obtained from Anne Wise at the Unit.