

Dodgeball Should Not Be Part of Any Curriculum, Ever

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Making kids play team sports in PE is neither healthy nor educational.

As a kid, I wanted desperately to be good at sports. This was not because I enjoyed playing them. I did not. It was because I'd learned that physical education classes were key to my social survival. I knew my failure to make a basketball hit the backboard would have ramifications throughout the school year. In anticipation, as each summer waned, I'd do drills in my backyard. I'd practice dribbling balls, swinging rackets, serving volleyballs over a tree branch.

Once each school year started, it would take less than a week to re-establish my utter failure in sports and my place as an object of ridicule to my peers.

Every PE unit was a means for me to prove just how useless and uncooperative my body was. The cycle began with cautious optimism—maybe I'll hit/kick/serve it this time!— followed shortly by a missed kick or fumbled serve that showed the class and teacher that I was terrible at everything. The culmination of each class was the annihilation of my self-confidence.

Every new sport was a fresh hell. I spent the majority of the time either on the sidelines or waiting to be picked for a team by one of the popular kids, the ones who already knew how to swing a bat and give unselfconscious high-fives. I ended up in the outfield with the boy who picked his nose.

I spent most classes trying to disappear. I had the tricks down: move as subtly as possible away from the ball; attempt a bathroom break when your team is called to the infield; when all else fails develop allergies or limp (this one rarely paid off).

After this ordeal, I'd shuffle through the rest of the school day deflated, sure that the students who'd watched me flounder at kickball now expected me to fail at life. Long division? Who, me? You must be mistaken; I can't even catch. With the weeklong exception of archery in high school (my singular time to shine), this agony went on for 12 years.

Calling the class "physical education" was some sort of sick joke. The lesson I was learning about my physical body was that it was useless, inferior, and quite possibly infected with a cootie-like virus. We should have been learning about how complicated and capable our bodies were and how to make them healthier. Instead we were playing dodgeball.

Richardson, the senior director of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, the organization that produces national PE standards, says "Dodgeball should not be part of any curriculum, ever." But she admits it is difficult to know how many schools are adhering to the standards, which are not federally mandated. Richardson says NASPE advocates for a more balanced approach to physical education than that which many of us grew up with, one that teaches children good sportsmanship, builds on their motor skills, and helps them find a role in a group setting. But they do still advocate for competitive team sports.

The proponents of team sports in schools say it helps kids learn that they have a place in a team. In this, for me, sports were very effective. I learned early on that my place on a team was similar to that of the elderly antelope with a gimpy leg on a nature program. I was a good distraction, being mauled and eaten so the other, less obviously damaged could get away.

I had not been subjected to such effective team-building exercises, maybe as an adult I would not be such a loner. Experiences in school can have a devastating effect into adulthood. A British study from Loughborough University showed that physical education in school can be so traumatic that it turns women away from physical fitness for the rest of their lives.

Needless to say, my physical fitness did not improve over the course of my school career. Instead, I developed a slouch and the impression that my perfectly normal body was disabled. A notion that, despite being in perfectly good shape, I held onto until I was 30.

As an adult, I certainly haven't played any of the varsity-style sports that I was expected to take quite seriously as a 10-year-old. For kids who do want to play sports, there are plenty of other opportunities. Most schools have programs outside of gym class for those who want to try their hand at team sports or work toward becoming a professional. Sports are certainly not so underappreciated in our culture that they need to be the standard by which we judge kids and teach them how to take care of their bodies.

To make matters worse, sports in a school setting are not even an effective way to get exercise. According to a 2006 investigation, high school students got an average of 16 minutes of actual exercise in an hour of gym class. The notion that our school gymnasiums are the breeding ground for our nation's professional athletes has kept physical education from actually educating children about their bodies or how to use them.

Some schools have changed their curricula to reflect a healthier, more inclusive view of physical education. Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" initiative promotes healthy eating and a positive outlook to combat childhood obesity. However, many schools still teach that fitness has to be a competitive venture, which rewards those who are already comfortable in their bodies while making others flounder their way into adulthood needlessly diminished and damaged.

Due to budget constraints, some schools are doing away with physical education altogether. This would have looked like a miracle to me as a kid, but as an adult I can appreciate the value of physical fitness and how detrimental it is for children to remain focused and immobile all day.

Many states have passed bills to extend physical education time, adding 200 minutes a week. But according to a study from Cornell, 200 minutes translated to a measly eight-minute increase in active time. The study, based on an annual survey of high schoolers by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, showed that even students did not believe gym class was serving its purpose.

The solution seems pretty simple. Start teaching kids how to do the things they can do, better. Most kids can run and jump and skip. Let them. They don't have to race or see who scores the most points. Teach them about what they can do rather than what they can't. Show them their bodies can be a key to their future happiness, not an obstacle to it.