

Children's Fitness

Remember your physical education (PE) classes in school? If your experience was anything like mine, it was a class you truly hated. And if, like me, you were not a natural athlete, your painful memories may have actually discouraged you from exercising later in life. A recent New York Times article, "Putting the Gym Back in Gym Class" (October 13, 2005), explores this problem and examines what some PE professionals have proposed to improve the situation. In part this re-evaluation is due to the sharp curtailment of school PE programs in recent years. As the article explains, "School administrators began cutting physical education programs...because of the way many classes were taught. Budget cutters who remembered playing dodge ball and Red Rover came to view gym class as dispensable." But there is also a genuine understanding that PE has not, for the most part, been successful in promoting health and fitness. Only a tiny percentage of students continue playing the sports they learned in gym class after graduating from high school. (When was the last time you and your friends enjoyed a game of dodge ball?) And many of the sports emphasized in gym failed to help those who needed it most. As Anne Flannery, the president of PE4life, a PE advocacy group, points out, "In dodge ball it's the very child that needs exercise the most who's picked off first...in a game of soccer probably four or five of the most athletic kids touched the ball, and everybody else just stood there." This certainly describes my own PE experience. I quickly learned that if I kept a low profile, and was discreet in minimizing my participation, I could still get by with a grade of "B", or at worst a "C". During our weekly outdoor runs, I would disappear for a few rounds into a shallow ditch behind a row of hedges, out of sight of the gym teachers. My dodge ball strategy was to pretend I was hit early in the game when there were still enough players in the game that nobody noticed. Today, there is a growing emphasis on teaching skills that are useful beyond gym class. Instead of learning how to dodge a ball or climb a rope, children in some schools are taught to lift weights, balance their diets and build cardiovascular endurance. There is also a movement towards fewer competitive activities and more activities that emphasize personal achievement such as rock-climbing, kick-boxing and tai-chi. As Ms Flannery says, "It's about giving these kids the tools and skill and experience so they can lead a physically active life the rest of their life." This approach certainly makes a lot of sense. Its usefulness is also backed up by a recent study published in the October 2005 issue of the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine. University of Wisconsin researchers observed 50 overweight children and found that they lost more weight when they cycled, skied cross-country and walked than when they played sports during class time. They also found that sports like football and kick ball produced less overall movement, in part because reluctant students were able to sit on the bench much of the time. The new approach to PE is certainly to be welcomed as a major improvement over the old system. But if the goal is truly fitness for life, I believe these new developments leave out a crucial ingredient: They fail to train kids HOW to do whatever physical activities they engage in - whether it be sports, or everyday activities like sitting at a desk, standing, walking, driving a car - in a way that minimizes harmful strain and risk of injury. Promoting cardiovascular fitness is fine as far as it goes, but this kind of grading system has a serious flaw in that it both mirrors and reinforces the preoccupation of most adult fitness programs with the quantity of activity performed, rather than the way participants use their bodies while performing those activities. We tend to be interested in how many laps we swam, the amount of weights we lifted, or the speed of our runs rather than how well we used our body in performing those sports. In other words quantity rather than quality. To see what this leads to, take a look at any group of runners or joggers. You will probably see tight necks, hunched shoulders and painful expressions on many of their faces. These runners may be getting a cardiovascular workout, but in the process they're putting a lot of unnecessary and harmful pressure on their bodies. No wonder so many people who begin fitness programs drop out after a few weeks, often due to pain or injuries. Of course it's important that children engage in vigorous physical activity; we don't want them to grow up to be couch potatoes. But making "effort" the primary basis for grading students - even if it's as easy as reading a heart monitor - does our children a great disservice. What makes this particularly sad is that we now know how to help people improve their movement quality. The twentieth century saw the development of numerous somatic therapies and teaching methods that have proven effective in helping people of all ages perform all their activities, from everyday ones like walking and using a computer right through to vigorous sports, with greater ease, efficiency and safety. The method I know best, first as a student and then, for the past twenty years as a teacher, is the Alexander Technique. It has a long history of helping people with stress-related conditions like back pain and stiff necks and shoulders and it is often used by musicians, dancers and actors to improve the quality of their performance. The Alexander Technique is taught by specially-trained teachers, but some of its principles could easily be included in PE classes. Take for instance the Alexander-related process that has come to be known as "body-mapping". This approach includes learning, on your own body, just where important joints are located and how they function. It turns out that most of us have serious "mis-maps" of our own body which cause us to move in ways that attempt to reinforce those incorrect ideas. For example, many people think their hip joints are at waist level when, in fact, they are located far lower on our torso. Correcting this mis-map is quite easy to do and almost always results in much smoother bending, walking and running patterns. Wouldn't it be wonderful if PE programs included teaching this kind of useful self-knowledge to our kids so they could go through life using their bodies as nature intended? And look back on their PE experiences with fondness and gratitude? RESOURCES "Body-mapping" is a term coined by Alexander Technique teachers William and Barbara Conable. You can read a short introduction to the process at <http://www.alexandertechnique.com/articles/bodymap> The Conables have written a wonderful book describing the process in detail, "How to Learn the Alexander Technique - A Manual for Students". As the title implies, the book was written mainly for people taking Alexander Technique lessons, but I have found it to be a valuable resource for anyone prepared to spend a little time exploring the operation of their own body. Another book, full of practical suggestions, is "Mind and Muscle - An Owner's Handbook" by Elizabeth Langford. It covers some of the same ground, although she does not use the term "body-mapping". Both of these books, along with a great many other books, videos and CD's about the Alexander Technique can be ordered at The Alexander Technique Bookstore at <http://www.alexandertechnique.com/books> Robert Rickover is a teacher of the Alexander Technique living in Lincoln, Nebraska. He also teaches regularly in Toronto, Canada. Robert is the author of

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Aloyd Fitness has the widest selection of fitness equipment on Vancouver Island and we are constantly updating our product line to bring you the most recent.

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