Dodgeball Is Not an Appropriate Physical Education Activity

Position
SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators reasserts its position that dodgeball is not an appropriate activity for K-12 physical education programs because it does not support the goal of physical education and, in fact, undermines many students’ pursuit of a lifetime of healthful physical activity.

Rationale
Traditional dodgeball, in which a hard-thrown playground ball knocks sometimes-terrified non-aggressive or lower-skilled students out of the game, subverts the goal of physical education, which SHAPE America considers is “to develop physically literate individuals who have the knowledge, skills and confidence to enjoy a lifetime of healthful physical activity (Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2014, p. 11).

Physical educators have a wide array of appropriate physical activities from which to choose in their efforts to build such knowledge, skills and confidence within all students — including those who possess modest physical skills — whereas playing dodgeball in physical education class provides those benefits primarily to students who are highly skilled.

Even with modifications such as using softer balls and recycling eliminated players back into play, dodgeball still uses students as targets and promotes bullying behavior, both of which SHAPE America considers inappropriate teaching practices (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2009).

In addition, including dodgeball in the physical education curriculum:

- Conflicts with what SHAPE America considers an essential component of physical education: “The physical education teacher employs instructional practices that engage students in moderate to vigorous physical activity for at least 50 percent of class time” (Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2015);

- Does not support SHAPE America’s 50 Million Strong by 2029 initiative, whose goal is to ensure that all of America’s young people are empowered to lead healthy and active lives through effective health and physical education programs; and
Does not meet the criteria for being a reasonable choice for ensuring that all students have a positive, supportive physical education experience, develop physical and health-related competence and confidence, and engage in moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity for the recommended 50 percent of class time (NASPE, 2004; Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2015).

Supporting Evidence
While little, if any, research exists on the topic of how playing dodgeball in physical education affects students’ pursuit of other physical activity, stories from far too many adults about the physical and emotional damage caused by playing dodgeball in middle or high school makes it painfully clear that dodgeball has no place in today’s physical education classes. For those of today’s students who are chosen last and eliminated first, dodgeball is far from an empowering experience and surely does not encourage them to engage in other physical activities, which only contributes to troubling health-related trends among America’s young people.

Research does show that many U.S. children and adolescents do not engage in enough physical activity to build the foundation for a healthy lifestyle, indicating that physical education teachers should focus on offering lessons that keep all students moderately to vigorously active for at least half of all instructional time. For example:

- Roughly three-quarters of U.S. children and youths ages 6-19 do not meet the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Department’s 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommendation of at least 60 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity per day (National Physical Activity Plan Alliance, 2016).

- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention categorizes dodgeball as a moderate-intensity activity, meaning that participants burn an average of 3.5 to 7 kilocalories (kcal) per minute. For comparison, CDC classifies other common physical education activities such as kickball, field or rollerblade hockey, running, skipping, jumping rope and performing jumping jacks as vigorous-intensity activities, meaning that participants burn an average of 7.0 or more kcal per minute (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). Because low-skilled participants often are eliminated from the game after only a few minutes (or seconds), only some game participants engage in moderate-intensity activity long enough to be of benefit.

- Some 18 percent of U.S. young people between ages 6 and 19 are overweight; a 260 percent increase since 1980 (Ogden & Carroll, 2010).

Helping students build a commitment and desire to be physically active and make healthy choices — especially in the face of increasing sedentary behavior — is a huge challenge. Offering dodgeball as part of physical education only adds to that challenge. Situations created by playing dodgeball in physical education class often encourage low-skilled students to find ways to disengage from all physical activity. Given the minimal amount of time that most
physical educators have in which to prepare students with the confidence, competence and desire necessary for being physically active, even modified dodgeball is not a reasonable choice.

Activities that allow all students to practice skills are more likely to increase enjoyment of physical activity and promote physical literacy across students of all skill levels.

Countering Common Arguments
Here are some arguments that some physical educators use to defend their use of dodgeball in physical education, along with the negative outcomes that outweigh each argument:

- “Students won't be hurt playing dodgeball because we use foam balls.” This argument goes to the heart of a misconception about bullying behavior. Bullying does not have to include physical pain. Students who are targeted first in dodgeball often are those who have no “power” within the class, and they’re targeted by the students with the power. This is classic bullying behavior. Allowing dodgeball in class could appear to the game’s victims as the teacher’s endorsement of bullying behavior.

- “Dodgeball provides a means of practicing some important physical skills, including running, dodging, throwing and catching.” While this is true for those students who are highly skilled in the game, those who are poorly skilled spend their time practicing hiding behind other players or just trying to keep out of the action. Many other activities provide opportunities to practice those skills without using human targets or eliminating students from play.

- “We’ve changed the rules so that students who are eliminated are recycled into the game.” Being eliminated from a game over and over can be demoralizing, even if one is able to return to game play repeatedly.

- “Students like dodgeball.” Some students do like it: typically, the most skilled and the most confident students. But many students do not like dodgeball: certainly not those who are hit hard in the stomach, head or groin. It is not appropriate to teach students that one wins by targeting or hurting others.

Conclusion
One has only to ask a few adults about their experiences playing dodgeball in physical education class to hear from some of them how humiliated and discouraged it made them feel. Likely, some would say that the experience prompted them to dislike physical education and physical activity.

SHAPE America acknowledges that playing dodgeball enables some students to practice the skills of throwing, catching, running and dodging, and that some students enjoy the game. SHAPE America also acknowledges that it’s possible to play dodgeball with soft balls and use procedures that recycle players rather than eliminating them from the game. The reasons that teachers might find to include dodgeball in physical education class, however, do not outweigh
the reasons outlined in this position statement for prohibiting it from the K-12 curriculum and class activities.

If health and physical educators are charged with empowering all students to live active, healthy lives, as they are in SHAPE America’s 50 Million Strong by 2029 commitment, they must make activity choices that help all students become physically literate individuals, and that allow students to feel safe in class throughout the entire experience.

References


Suggested Citation

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