

Using Physical Activity as Punishment and/or Behavior Management

Position

SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators opposes administering or withholding physical activity as a form of punishment and/or behavior management.

Purpose

This position statement addresses the inappropriate use of or withdrawal from physical activity as a disciplinary consequence, both within and outside of the school environment.

Intended Audience

The audience for this position statement includes school administrators, physical education teachers, classroom teachers, coaches, parents and others working with children and young adults in physical activity settings (e.g., youth sport, interscholastic sport, YMCA, Boys' and Girls' Clubs).

Supporting Information

Children and youths have many opportunities to be physically active in the school environment, including physical education class, recess, and before- and after- school programs. In addition, more than one third of children ages 9-13 participate in organized youth sport (Corbin, Pangrazi & LeMasurier, 2004). It is imperative that these experiences promote the importance of physical activity to one's health. To become active adults, children and youths need to encounter positive physical activity experiences, as supported in SHAPE America's *Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines* documents for elementary, middle and high school physical education (NASPE, 2009).

A student's motivation for being physically active by engaging in the important subject matter content of physical education and sport should never fall victim to the inappropriate use of physical activity as a disciplinary consequence. SHAPE America supports that view in its *National Standards for Sport Coaches: Quality Coaches, Quality Sports*, which states that coaches should "never use physical activity or peer pressure as a means of disciplining athlete behavior" (NASPE, 2005, p. 17).

Examples of the inappropriate use of physical activity include:

- Withholding physical education class or recess time for students to complete unfinished school work or as a consequence for misbehavior;

- Forcing students to run laps or perform push-ups because of behavioral infractions (e.g., showing up late, talking, and disruptive behavior);
- Threatening students with physical activity or no physical activity (e.g., no recess, no game time), and then removing the threat because of good behavior; and
- Making students run for losing a game or for poor performance (e.g., missing a foul shot, dropping the football).

Core Issue

The core issue is that administering or withdrawing physical activity as punishment is inappropriate and constitutes an unsound education practice.

Exercise used as punishment is considered a form of corporal punishment in many states (e.g., California, Massachusetts, Hawaii). Corporal punishment in schools is defined as “physical pain inflicted on the body of a child as a penalty for disapproved behavior” (National Coalition to Abolish Corporal Punishment in School, 2006) and is illegal in 29 states (Dupper & Dingus, 2008). Furthermore, many national professional organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Association of State Boards of Education, have advocated for bans on corporal punishment. State boards of education in Hawaii and California prohibit withholding physical activity or using it as punishment.

The absence of support for using physical activity as punishment renders its use by a teacher or coach indefensible, from a legal liability standpoint.

From a physical education practitioner’s standpoint, time spent on physical activity used as punishment is time that could be spent on instructing students, developing their fitness levels or other positive learning experiences.

Unsound Behavior-Management Practice

While some people apparently believe that physical activity used as punishment and/or as a behavior-management tool is effective, behavioral experts perceive this practice as a “quick fix” that actually might discourage the behavior it is intended to elicit. Using negative consequences to alter behavior suppresses the undesirable behavior only while the threat of punishment is present; it does not teach self-discipline or address the actual behavior problem. Therefore, student behavior patterns are not changed (Weinberg & Gould, 2007).

At times, it’s appropriate to remove a student briefly from a physical education lesson, recreational play, athletic practice or game to stop an undesirable behavior. For example, it’s appropriate to remove a student who is behaving in a manner that is unsafe. Teachers should devote that time to allowing the child or youth a moment to cool down, reflect upon his or her actions, and communicate with leaders as to why he or she was removed. Once the student understands and conveys appropriate behaviors, he or she should return to the activity. However, any prolonged withdrawal of physical activity (e.g., holding a child back from recess or physical education as a consequence of classroom behavior) is both inappropriate and unsound for the same reasons mentioned above.

Alternatives to Physical Activity as Punishment

Successful teachers and coaches create positive learning environments without using physical activity as punishment. Managing and motivating children and youths involve developing an effective preventive-management system; no one, simple solution works for all. Prevention is the key. The following list offers actions that are suitable alternatives to using physical activity as punishment:

- Include students in establishing expectations and outcomes early in the year, and review those expectations and outcomes frequently.
- Include students in meaningful discussions about goals and how to reach them.
- Be consistent with enforcing behavioral expectations within the learning environment.
- Practice and reward compliance with rules and outcomes.
- Offer positive feedback and catch students doing things right.
- Don't reinforce negative behavior by drawing attention to it.
- Hold students accountable for misbehavior.
- Develop efficient routines that keep students involved in learning tasks.
- Wait for students to be attentive before providing directions.

Appropriate Use of Physical Activity

Meaningful engagement in physical activity is an essential aspect of physical education and sport. Building a sense of competence, advocating the joy of physical activity and moving, expanding movement and motor skills, and developing fitness levels are among the numerous practices that support appropriate behavior and the development of positive attitudes toward physical activity.

When it comes to promoting healthy lifestyles, it's just as important to use physical activity as a positive as it is to avoid using physical activity as a negative. Students need more experiences that use physical activity — rather than junk food — to celebrate significant events. Organizing a dance, developmentally appropriate games, cooperative activities, scavenger hunts, etc., provides students with the opportunity to move, socialize with peers and engage in physical activity for the fun of it.

Conclusion

School administrators, physical education teachers, classroom teachers, coaches, parents and others working with children and young adults play a critical role in providing meaningful physical activity experiences. Therefore, teachers should see providing meaningful physical activity as a way of ensuring that children and youths develop positive attitudes about physical activity and stop viewing physical activity as a means of punishment and/or behavior modification.

References

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