

Addressing the Needs of Overweight Students in Elementary Physical Education:



Creating an Environment of **CARE and SUCCESS**

By
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Helping overweight and obese children to reduce sedentary behavior and increase energy expenditure is not as simple as telling them to “just get moving.” The experiences they have at school and the way they are perceived by important people in their lives (e.g., teachers and peers) are key factors in their motivation to choose to be active. Of considerable concern is the vulnerability of so many children to the negative emotional and social consequences of obesity. In fact, these consequences could prove to have both immediate and long-lasting effects on their well-being and serve as barriers to rectifying the risks (Puhl & Latner, 2007). Obesity bias and anti-fat attitudes are prevalent in today’s society and often result in discrimination toward people who are overweight or obese (Puhl & Brownell, 2003).

Physical Education and Anti-fat Bias

Physical education teachers are at the frontlines of the battle against childhood obesity and try to increase students' physical activity levels through the development of skills and positive attitudes so youth will be lifelong movers. However, the physical education setting may be one in which overweight students are especially likely to experience anti-fat attitudes (Faith, Leone, Ayers, & Pietrobelli, 2002). Fox and Edmunds (2000) reported on the common concern among extremely overweight children that the physical education setting creates numerous opportunities for negative feelings and social comparisons such as changing clothes in front of others, being required to wear uniforms that may not fit, and having a difficult time completing physical activities. Teachers can help to ameliorate these negative factors associated with physical activity among overweight or obese students.

Stelzer (2005) stated that teacher behaviors are an important determinant of student attitudes toward a subject matter. Physical educators need to not only be compassionate and understanding, but they also need to demonstrate appropriate attitudes and behaviors toward body size and weight issues (Irwin, Symons, & Kerr, 2003). Anti-fat attitudes are prejudicial responses directed toward individuals because of their obesity (Morrison & O'Conner, 1999). Greenleaf and Weiller (2005) reported that some physical educators do possess anti-fat attitudes toward overweight individuals, and they express lower expectations of performance and ability for overweight youth. When students who are overweight or obese are learning to develop a physically active lifestyle and to value being active for a lifetime, the interactions they have with their physical education teacher may be the most important factor contributing to the formation of those values. Although many caring, committed physical educators strive to develop a foundation of movement skills as well as instill joy of movement in students so they will remain active throughout life, these teachers may be sending "mixed messages." For example, some teachers may lack empathy or an understanding of the challenges and potential limitations of being overweight in a physical education environment. Some teachers may feel that tough love is the best motivation for these students. Many physical educators love to be active and may have never struggled with their weight, making it difficult to understand what their overweight or obese students may be feeling and experiencing in their physical education classroom (Table 1).

Developing a Supportive Learning Environment for Overweight or Obese Students

Consider the elementary physical education classroom. What types of challenges do you see for students who are overweight or obese? Do you feel their weight is something they can control? Is it frustrating and confusing to figure out how to best meet their needs? Is there an assumption that these students are lazy, undisciplined, and unmotivated? Is it difficult to

understand how they may be feeling? What do you see when you look at a student who is overweight or obese?

If a physical educator has a negative perception of overweight or obese individuals, that perception may cloud their "teaching goggles" or the lens through which they view a student. When an educator's teaching goggles get fogged with negative perceptions or attitudes, the result may be a lack of positive interaction, less feedback (both instructional and motivational), and lowered expectations for performance and success. Unfortunately, the message that may get sent to an overweight student is that their physical education teacher does not care about them, which may result in a lack of motivation by the students who have the greatest need for successful movement experiences.

Noddings's (1984, 1992) research illustrated the critical need for teachers to express care for their students and the students' need to receive expressions of care from their teachers. For example, the elementary physical education teacher can communicate that they care for an overweight or obese student by showing an interest in their health habits, interests outside of school, or their home life. This indicates to the student a desire by the teacher to understand him or her, both physically and emotionally. In addition, a physical educator who expresses care by encouraging, complimenting, or acknowledging an overweight or obese student's effort may motivate the student to work harder.

Research in physical education supports the idea that when teachers are willing to work with students, exhibit an authentic interest in their well-being, and foster a safe and supportive learning environment focused on cooperation and personal growth, students participate more (Cothran & Ennis, 1999, 2000; Cothran, Hodges-Kulinna, & Garrahy, 2003; Ennis et al., 1997; Larson, 2006). Li, Rukavina, and Foster (2013) found that overweight students felt cared for in their physical education class when the teacher made instructional adaptations, built interpersonal rapport, and created a positive motivational climate, as well as when other students provided peer support.

Table 1. Challenges of Being Overweight in a Physical Activity Setting

- Negative comments from the teacher and students
- Being compared to other students
- Wearing clothes that do not fit
- Being teased or harassed by other students
- Difficulty completing physical tasks
- Being physically uncomfortable or in pain when moving
- Breathing difficulties
- Joint pain from excess weight
- Learned helplessness due to constant failure
- Viewing physical activity as a reminder of inability



Instructional adaptations

Using instructional strategies that maximize participation through individualized instruction is an effective way to ensure that students who are overweight are successful and empowered to participate (Table 2). Differentiating activities in physical education for an overweight or obese student is something any teacher can do. Designing and implementing modifications or adaptations for students who are overweight or obese begins with carefully examining the activities being used in the curriculum and the classroom environment.

Can you transform that traditional warm-up lap to a more satisfying and enjoyable activity that motivates all students and does not spotlight those students coming in last? Can you adjust a task so there are a range of practice opportunities for a student to feel success (Table 2)? Overweight students reported feeling cared for when teachers simplified the task if they were tired or could not finish what everybody else was assigned (Li et al., 2013). For example, during a tag activity, physical educators should switch taggers frequently. They should also allow frequent rest or water breaks as individually needed. In the same study, overweight students reported feeling cared for when teachers designed activities in which students could work at their ability level and were not spotlighted or compared to other students. During fitness testing, physical educators should encourage students to improve their previous personal best score rather than require them to meet a predetermined level of success.

Special consideration should also be given to the equipment used in the elementary physical education classroom. Be mind-

ful that some equipment may not fit or hold the weight of a larger student (e.g., scooters, Hula-Hoops, stilts, pinnies, tunnels, etc.). Providing equipment that fits a larger body helps the overweight students to stop focusing on their size and to focus on learning and feeling successful as they move.

Considering that the typical elementary physical education teacher faces the challenges of seeing their students only once a week, as well as having to teach large classes, physical educators may need to find ways to provide developmentally appropriate movement opportunities to overweight or obese students both at school and at home.

Build interpersonal rapport

Being a positive and supportive role model so all students hear and see that the teacher wants overweight students to be successful

is important. Overweight students reported that they really appreciated the motivation (i.e., encouragement and compliments; Li et al., 2013). In addition, they felt cared for when the physical educator paid attention and made personal connections with them. Physical educators should provide specific feedback about students' performance or weight status, offer to help them, and share information on how to improve. Communicate both verbally and nonverbally that overweight and obese students do matter. Do not tolerate teasing or harassing comments and quickly address the remarks and actions of unsupportive peers. Provide advice to overweight or obese students on how to cope with teasing.

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Table 2. Examples of Instructional Modifications for Typical Elementary Physical Education Activities for a Student Who Is Overweight or Obese

Activity or Game	Considerations	Instructional Strategy
Instant activity/warm-up movements	Encourage individual fitness and physical activity plans versus making comparisons to others or criterion-referenced norms.	Run or move for a predetermined length of time, not a distance. Alternate jogging the length of the court and walking the end line.
Chasing, fleeing, and dodging	Fatigue is a concern. Encourage the use of water bottles or frequent hydration breaks. Provide Body Glide or talcum powder to prevent chafing.	Change taggers frequently before fatigue sets in (every one to two minutes). Include “free zones” for students to rest and regroup.
Relay races	Overweight students may feel embarrassed if they slow the team down.	Change the objective of the relay so the outcome is based on a predetermined objective and not on the first team to finish (e.g., the team that has the highest total number of trips when the whistle blows is the winner).
Stretching activities	Extra girth limits flexibility (i.e., sit-and-reach, toe touches, triceps back-scratcher stretch).	Encourage students to reach as far as they can rather than expecting them to touch their toes.
Traveling and locomotor movements	Encourage working at a personal level of comfort and success. Fatigue is a concern.	Teacher says: “Everyone can be successful at their own speed. Focus on performing the movement as efficiently and controlled as possible. Be quick but never hurry.” Alternate between low-impact and high-impact movements during an activity (e.g., running then walking, skipping then sliding, galloping then walking, etc.). Encourage students to demonstrate the movement at different speeds. Teacher says: “Can you show me your best controlled gallop? Now, show me how efficiently you can walk without breaking into a run. For those who are ready, show me your most controlled run.”
Dance activities	Quick, repetitive movements can tire an overweight student. Extra girth can inhibit balance, range of motion, and flexibility associated with quick, repetitive dance movements.	Teach progressions and gradually increase speed of the movements. Teacher says: “Remember, if you need a break, it is OK to slow down and rest. Get back to practice when you are ready.”
Body awareness and balance	Lifting extra weight and holding a body position can be difficult and tiring. Extra girth can shift and cause imbalance (e.g., balancing on an object or one-legged).	Demonstrate to students how to use a yoga block to increase their range of motion (e.g., body bridge). Suggest that students widen their base/stance.
Jump-rope activities	Lifting extra weight can be tiring and uncomfortable (e.g., weight jiggles and shifts as they jump, joint pain, etc.).	Teacher says: “Remember, if you need a break, it is OK to slow down and rest. Get back to practice when you are ready.” Students may need a longer rope.
Fitness activities	Push-ups: Lifting extra weight can tire muscles. Curl-ups: Extra girth can limit range of motion.	Push-ups: Teach all students alternative forms of the exercise. Teacher says: “Everyone, if you can show me perfect form with bent-knee push-ups by keeping your back straight and your rear end low, then you can try them with straight legs.” Curl-ups: Teach alternative forms of curl-ups. Teacher says: “Everyone, show me how well you can do your standing abdominal exercises. Remember to tuck your belly button to your spine and bring your shoulders toward your knees.”

A physical educator who expresses care by encouraging, complimenting, or acknowledging an overweight or obese student's effort may motivate the student to work harder.

When addressing the topic of classroom respect for others, include individuals who are overweight or obese and the importance of celebrating differences. Speak with students who are overweight and find activities for which they might be willing to offer demonstrations or lead during group activities. Having an overweight or obese individual work in a demonstrative role will illustrate that they are capable of completing physical activities, which may reduce criticism or harassment from other students.

Create a positive motivational climate

Physical educators can exhibit a caring attitude by providing students with choices — for example, by designing activities where students feel they work at their own level of ability (Table 2). Encourage overweight students to do better. Compliment and recognize their effort and expect overweight students to improve. Overweight students reported feeling appreciative of the way in which their teacher motivated and encouraged them to succeed at their own level (Li et al., 2013).

Peer support

Overweight students have stated that they felt cared for when they received peer support and encouragement during physical education from peers or friends and when their friends helped them learn motor skills (Li et al., 2013). Expect all students to be supportive of one another. Pinpoint those students who are supportive and encouraging. Pair an overweight student with a peer who exhibits caring behaviors to help the student learn and improve their skills.

Conclusion

Obesity is a global concern. Physical education teachers are in a position to battle this epidemic by developing skillful and confident physically educated persons. A physical educator's interactions and the classroom environment they create with overweight students may be the most important factors in helping students to develop a physically active lifestyle and value being active for a lifetime. A good first step is to be aware

of anti-fat perceptions of individuals who are overweight or obese and how these perceptions can affect teaching practice. Gaining a better understanding of the challenges associated with being overweight in a physical activity environment and then developing instructional strategies that transform the classroom into a positive place where students of all sizes can be successful will set students up for ultimate success!

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