

Fitness Testing: An Educationist Perspective

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As experts in pedagogy, as opposed to sports science or physiology, our main focus is the learning that takes place within the curriculum subject of physical education and the effect this has on the learners. We are mindful that other professionals involved in the debate about fitness testing in primary schools bring different perspectives – and are equally committed to increasing children's levels of physical activity – but consider that decisions about what should be included in the school curriculum, and how this should be delivered and by whom, should be made by experts in this particular field of study. However, we acknowledge that fitness testing has always been a controversial topic in education, and probably always will be, and welcome challenging and alternative views on this topic.

We agree that a very narrow view of fitness testing that simply involves the production of scores is not appropriate for the curriculum because it reduces a complex concept to raw figures; this is limiting in itself. Our main concern, though, is that fitness testing is likely to be a limiting learning experience for children, with inadequate knowledge and understanding associated with it, and little or no provision of personalised feedback to help learners make sense of their scores and respond positively to the experience. If fitness testing in schools is approached in such a way that it addresses the limitations of narrow versions and, more crucially, offers a positive, educational experience for all learners and contributes to the promotion of healthy, active lifestyles, then we agree it could have a place within the physical education curriculum.

Such an approach clearly depends not only on what is done, but how it is done and by whom. It is important to recognise that we are not anti-fitness testing; we fully support alternative pedagogical approaches to health, activity and fitness assessment within the curriculum and have published some of these within teacher resources to assist in moving teachers away from limited, questionable practices. Furthermore, our approaches have

utilised criterion-based cut-offs and, from a learning perspective, we consider these more desirable than normative approaches to testing. As social scientists, we recognise that all field-based measurements within complex social settings such as schools are problematic in some way but the precise accuracy of the measures is not the main issue; the focus is on the learning that goes on before, during and after the measurement process. The process of children measuring each other's fitness and self-reporting their activity is conducive to the learning process. Children can develop knowledge and understanding, skills and attitudes which steer them towards the adoption of healthy, active lifestyles.

Therefore, we agree that if fitness testing were to be introduced for population surveillance (as suggested by the Chief Medical Officer in 2009 and *ukactive* in 2015), it would be best undertaken by independent, trained specialists in fitness measurement so that the tests are standardised, the process has rigour and the results are as robust as they can be. We acknowledge that there is merit in obtaining accurate fitness scores from children with respect to adding to the research literature on what is known about this.



However, we do not believe that this is good use of limited curriculum time (for physical education or any other subject). Curriculum time is precious and, in our view, in physical education is best used to increase children's movement competence and confidence in order to encourage them to be active outside of lessons, in their own time. We object to the use of curriculum time for population surveillance. Furthermore, the recommendation that testing be carried out by independent experts seems somewhat unrealistic given the existing demands on schools and the school day and brings concerns about the potential disruption to learning.

We recognise that fitness assessments are not a tool for promoting physical activity. Unfortunately, many individuals carrying out fitness testing do think that children will choose to be more active once they are aware of how fit or unfit they are. This is not helped by the fact that the rhetoric underlying fitness testing proposals often implies that it will contribute to the promotion of healthy, active lifestyles. Raising awareness by giving people a 'score' does not automatically result in changes to behaviour.

It is important to the debate around children's levels of physical activity that different perspectives are shared – even when there is disagreement. All professionals involved in this area need to recognise the different contributions that others bring as children and young people live and learn in multiple contexts. What we must recognise is that children's learning – their knowledge, understanding and skills – is critical to their motivation and ability to be active for life; high quality physical education for every child – rather than fitness testing per se – is the key to unlock this.

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