

Section 7: Monitoring health, fitness and physical activity in schools

Any form of health, fitness or physical activity monitoring carried out with pupils in curriculum time (including, for example, the use of health behaviour questionnaires, activity diaries, pedometers, heart rate monitors and fitness tests) should be positive, meaningful, relevant and developmentally appropriate, and be part of a planned, progressive programme of study, the primary aim of which is to promote healthy, active lifestyles.

Fitness testing is a controversial issue in education and has had its proponents and critics over the years (see papers by Cale and Harris between 2006 and 2013). afPE's stance on this issue is to consider all perspectives but to focus predominantly on the quality of the learning that takes place within curriculum physical education and the effect that this has on learners. Clearly, a very narrow view of fitness testing simply involving the production of scores is not appropriate for the curriculum because it reduces a complex concept to raw figures and is therefore limiting in itself, but mainly because it is likely to be a limiting learning experience with inadequate knowledge and understanding associated with it, including little or no provision of personalised feedback to help learners make sense of their scores and to respond positively to the experience.

Fitness test results should be interpreted with caution as there are limitations in the validity, reliability and accuracy of field-based fitness tests. Many factors influence children's performance and scores on fitness tests such as their maturation, genetic potential, skill at taking the test, motivation and the environment. Furthermore, fitness test scores do not necessarily reflect children's activity levels as is sometimes assumed. Another common assumption is that fitness testing is an effective tool for promoting physical activity. Indeed, the rhetoric underlying fitness testing proposals and programmes often implies that it will contribute to the promotion of healthy, active lifestyles. However, for some children (often the least healthy and active), fitness testing is a negative experience and can be embarrassing and humiliating. afPE therefore cautions against the over use of fitness testing as a means of helping children adopt healthy, active lifestyles. Instead, it favours monitoring of physical activity levels to determine which pupils are and are not meeting the physical activity for health guideline; this can occur instead of, or alongside, the monitoring of health-related fitness components.

afPE considers that fitness testing can have a place within the physical education curriculum, providing that it is approached in such a way that it addresses the limitations of narrow versions of fitness testing and offers a positive, educational experience for all learners and contributes to the promotion of healthy, active lifestyles. This clearly depends not only on what is done, but how it is done and who does it. It is important to recognise that afPE is not anti-fitness testing per se; afPE fully supports alternative pedagogical approaches to health, activity and fitness monitoring within the curriculum and has supported the development of teacher resources which present pedagogical alternatives to limited testing practices. For example, approaches which incorporate criterion-referenced standards and provide individualised feedback on both activity and health-related fitness measures are considered more desirable from a learning perspective than narrow, normative approaches to testing.

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.

From time to time, it is proposed that fitness testing becomes a compulsory aspect of school physical education. This was recommended within the 2009 Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer in England and, more recently, ukactive's 2015 'Generation Inactive' report recommended formal fitness testing in primary schools as part of the National Child Measurement Programme. In response to this latter recommendation, afPE declared that it does NOT support formal fitness testing in primary schools. It considers this a retrograde step in terms of promoting healthy, active lifestyles and takes this position for the following reasons:

- Fitness testing is not good use of the limited curriculum physical education time in primary schools.
- Fitness testing is not a proven effective strategy for promoting active lifestyles.
- Fitness testing can be dull, dreary and dreaded, especially by the very children whom we want to be more active.
- Fitness test scores can be misleading and do not accurately reflect physical activity levels.

However, afPE fully supports effective promotion of active lifestyles in primary schools and considers that this requires:

- Increased curriculum physical education time in primary schools (many primary schools only have PE twice a week and this is not sacrosanct as it is sometimes shortened or cancelled).
- Increased time on training primary teachers to teach high quality physical education (this should include teaching a sequence of PE lessons during training and working alongside teachers with good knowledge of high quality PE). Well qualified staff teach PE that is more active for children as they plan better, are clearer about what is being taught and how learning is progressed over time, and can adapt tasks so that pupils of all abilities fully participate in and enjoy lessons.
- The identification of primary children who do not meet the current UK physical activity for health guideline of being active for a minimum of at least one hour a day, followed by offering these children free access to additional, enjoyable opportunities to be active within the school environment, and also liaising with their parents/carers to support them in being active at home and in their free time.
- Increasing the proportion of primary children who are active during break times, lunch times and before and after school (there are still many children who are not active at these times).
- Increased physical activity in curriculum time involving the teaching of subjects in 'active' ways which require pupils to get up and move to learn, where appropriate, both

within the school building and in the outside environment. This will help to reduce the amount of time children are sedentary during the school day.

If fitness testing were to be introduced for population surveillance purposes (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 in order that the tests are standardised and that the process has rigour and the results are as robust as they can be. afPE acknowledges 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, it does not believe that this is good use of limited curriculum time. Curriculum time is precious and physical education time 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.

In summary, if the limitations of fitness testing are understood and addressed, and if it is incorporated as just one component of a broad, balanced physical education curriculum which also includes monitoring of physical activity, then it can potentially play a positive role in promoting healthy active lifestyles.

References

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