

Guest Editorial

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A Response to "The Horse Is Dead; Let's Dismount"

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The thoughtful editorial "The Horse Is Dead; Let's Dismount" in the May 1995 issue of *Pediatric Exercise Science* (3) provided much to contemplate concerning activity and health. Editor Rowland urges the application of the lifestyle physical activity model (LPAM) for children. He suggests that this model is appropriate if the goal is to promote health through physical activity, specifically to meet the unique needs of children. As authors of the paper "Toward an Understanding of Appropriate Physical Activity Levels for Youth," which Rowland cited in his editorial, we want to support and elaborate on many of the points made. We use the HELP acronym to emphasize the philosophy behind the "new strategy" of promoting good health through regular lifestyle physical activity, as opposed to the "old strategy" of promoting fitness through "training" often not appropriate for children.

H stands for *health*. Though children are seldom subject to chronic lifestyle diseases that are common to many adults, physical inactivity is a risk factor of concern. Evidence now exists indicating that childhood inactivity leads to adult inactivity (2). *E* indicates that activity is for *everyone*. Physical activity must be perceived as available and positive for all people. *L* reminds us that activity must occur for a *lifetime*. Activity for now is a worthy goal, but building habits and skills that can be used later in life are critical. *P* is for *personal*. Each person must select his or her own type of physical activity—all people are unique and must have the opportunity to select personalized physical activities to incorporate into daily routines.

Rowland's editorial comments are consistent with the HELP philosophy. In our view he rightly promotes the following:

- A lifestyle activity model that focuses on health benefits (health)
- Activities that can be done by all people, including those who need exercise the most, as well as those who are already active (everyone)
- Lifestyle activities including activity in transportation (walking to school), work, school, family, and community (lifetime)
- The adaptation of physical activity to children that meets their specific and unique needs (personal)

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Because the HELP philosophy is central to the "new strategy" for children and physical activity, we agree that when physical fitness testing is "demeaning, uncomfortable, and embarrassing" (3, p. 119), it should not be done. We also believe that any physical activity that offers the same end result should be avoided! Physical fitness testing that is done improperly and that "reinforces . . . that exercise is competitive and unpleasant" (3, p. 119) is not consistent with the HELP philosophy and is counterproductive. Similarly, participation in sports and activities that are perceived as too competitive or demanding often becomes an unpleasant or negative experience for unskilled or uninterested students. We agree that many times testing "turns such youngsters 'off,' rather than 'on'" (3, p. 119) to activity. However, physical activity programs that incorporate developmentally inappropriate high-intensity activities based on adult models can also become turn-offs to many children and youth (see Corbin et al. [1]).

It is our view that professionals need to be more aware of activities and approaches that turn kids off to physical activity. The "new strategy" that we encourage, and the HELP philosophy that provides its underpinnings, demand that we also recognize what turns kids on and keeps them involved in activity. Rowland's dying horse is physical fitness testing. When fitness testing does things counter to the "new strategy" and the HELP philosophy, it should be discontinued—and we should dismount. But before we send physical fitness testing to pasture, one more caring look may be in order.

Physical Fitness Testing

Physical fitness testing might survive if it can be shown that it promotes the HELP philosophy and compliments the "new strategy." Is it possible that fitness testing can turn kids on to activity and provide them with useful personal information that makes them feel good, rather than poorly, about themselves? Is it the testing itself that is "bad" or the way in which it is done? There are three ways to use fitness testing. It is possible that each method can make an important contribution to physical education and physical activity promotion, if done properly.

Self-Testing

We support self-testing as the preferred method for use with youngsters. This approach places emphasis on the personal nature of fitness testing. It is individually done by each child or with a trusted partner. The concept of confidentiality of information (consistent with the personal in HELP) is discussed, and results are confidential. Primary goals are learning about different components of fitness, learning to set realistic goals, learning which factors (including physical activity, heredity, and maturation) contribute to fitness performance scores, and learning how to use personal fitness data to help plan a personal program of physical activity. Tests scores are not used for grading or for awards of any type.

Institutional Testing

Institutional testing is a traditional form of testing. Under the best of circumstances, this type of testing is done by a team of trained experts so that results

are reliable and valid. Institutional testing is done to assess whether the institution is reaching desired goals and objectives. When used properly, this type of testing also places emphasis on the privacy of the process. The testing is done in a sensitive manner that reduces comparison between and among children. The primary focus is on meeting health standards (what proportion of students are below the health-related standard) rather than individual, normative comparisons. This type of testing is done at 3- to 5-year intervals to provide institutions and teachers with information that can be used for curriculum planning and an overall view of group health status. Test results are not used to grade children or for making awards.

In institutional testing programs, no children are forced to do a test that causes embarrassment or an invasion of privacy. The consent of each student is vital to a humane and caring experience. Institutional concepts such as learning about health, fitness, and activity become a central part of the learning experience. Care is taken to prevent the implementation of "boot-camp-like physical training" programs in response to perceived low test score results. Getting kids fit is the "old strategy." The "new strategy" uses test results to contribute to an active lifestyle that is enjoyable and meaningful. Only when institutional testing is carried out in this spirit can such testing be justified.

Elite Performance Testing

Elite performance testing is how fitness tests have been used in the past. The purpose is to reward a few gifted youngsters who are capable of achieving high performance levels on a number of fitness test items. Research suggests that for children, especially young children, high performance scores may have more to do with heredity and maturity than personal accomplishment. Therefore, this type of testing is unlikely to be useful in promoting physical activity for all children.

As children grow older, testing to help elite youth prepare for participation in sports may be appropriate. It is our position that such tests should be done after school or in team practice sessions. It is not for all youth, but for those who choose to be evaluated. All students should not be subjected to this experience simply to reward a small handful of students who are capable of earning an award. A much more acceptable procedure is to arrange for testing after school, during lunch hour, or on the weekend. Any student may choose to be tested. If they choose to participate and fail, less is lost because such students felt reasonably confident about their physical prowess prior to being tested.

The same testing guidelines are followed for this type of testing as for the other two. The testing should not embarrass or intimidate the children or discourage activity. The test results should be used to help students develop personal improvement plans. This type of testing has no place in physical education classes, though it may be appropriate to help nonathletic students determine their fitness levels if they desire to seek assistance outside of class.

Fitness Testing Guidelines

We, like Rowland, will dismount the testing horse if it is done improperly or if we find that it does not contribute to the HELP philosophy and the new strategy.

Indeed, we do not find physical fitness testing to be central to the "new strategy." Still, as we have pointed out, we think there may be some life left in the horse if the following are considered before implementing fitness testing:

- When using fitness testing, place emphasis on learning about personal fitness and teaching students how to use the information received from the evaluation results.
- Consider fitness testing a choice activity for children. Testing should never be administered at the expense of a student's self-concept or confidence. A fitness test should be used only when it contributes to the welfare and betterment of youngsters.
- Understand fitness testing for what it is: a rough estimate of physical performance without consideration for genetics, nutrition, or other limiting factors.
- Accept that the majority of youngsters are fit and that "high level" fitness is not necessary for all children. Most American children meet reasonable fitness standards, so the key is to help children acquire fitness levels that are appropriate for their personal needs.

A Plea to Dismount Other Horses

The central issue of Rowland's editorial was also the central issue of our paper (1) in the *Physical Activity and Fitness Research Digest*. The issue is this: If you get children into regular, enjoyable activity, fitness will follow. A second, equally important issue is that children who participate in enjoyable activity will continue this pattern in later life. To assure that activity is enjoyable for children, we urge an examination of other "dead horses" that need to be dismounted:

- *Using physical activity as punishment.* Using laps or calisthenics as a means of discipline in classes, sports, and other school and community activities should be discontinued. This practice is inconsistent with the HELP philosophy and turns activity into a negative experience. Professionals should discontinue this practice and openly discourage others from using it.
- *Forcing high-intensity and continuous activity on young children.* The exercise prescription model (see Corbin et al., [1]) was developed to prescribe exercise goals for adults. Still, many professionals continue to apply it to young children, suggesting that children are not active if they do not maintain a high heart rate for a relatively long period of time. Few activities keep heart rates high for long periods of time, and those activities are not particularly enjoyable for most children. Adult models should be abandoned in favor of models appropriate for children.
- *Making high-level performance the primary focus of youth sports.* Most children enjoy physical activity programs, but often drop out when they cannot perform at an elite level. If enjoyment of activity and lifetime participation are goals, we must refocus on making the experience meaningful for all children, on developing opportunities for children who are not highly skilled, or both.
- *Using activity to evaluate mental toughness.* In many sport programs, youngsters are put through rigorous and demanding activity to see if they

are "tough enough" to make the team. For example, youngsters are often asked to run a mile or wind sprints to see if they are willing to accept the challenge. This initial experience is often discouraging and leads to incorrect stereotyping of participants. Not only is this initial screening unsafe, it leads many youngsters to believe that "being on the team" is not worth the effort and that physical activity is not fun.

- *Grading on physical fitness or skill performance.* Physical education grades are often assigned on the basis of physical fitness or skill tests. Such practices can be, and often are, discouraging to less gifted children. The HELP philosophy suggests that alternative methods of grading should be used if physically active lifestyles are a primary goal.

Summary

Like Rowland, we endorse a new strategy to promote lifetime activity for children. We concur that the fitness testing horse has been ridden hard and needs a rest. It should only be ridden when needed for special purposes and then done in a kind and caring manner. We also believe there are other horses in the barn that have been overused and need a permanent rest. For children's sake, we encourage the adoption of the "new strategy" based on a HELP philosophy.

References

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