

Exercise: A Therapy for Physical and Mental Fitness of School Children

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Abstract

The enhancement and maintenance of physical and mental fitness of the pupils in school is one of the cordial objectives of every good education system. Physical fitness does not only imply the absence of diseases or deformities, but the ability of the pupils to undertake their studies efficiently and effectively each day without undue fatigue imposed by any of the systems of the body and to have reserve energy for other activities at home. Physical and mental fitness cannot be developed and maintained mainly by reading them in books. They are attained through participation in regular graded physical exercises outside the classroom in the open air. This was the primary preoccupation of the classroom teachers in the forties and fifties. Today the story is different. Teachers do no longer pay attention to the development and maintenance of physical and mental fitness of the children. Consequently, the physical and mental fitness of the pupils has dropped tremendously and school administrators are virtually powerless to do anything about it.

INTRODUCTION

The development and the maintenance of a functional or dynamic physical and mental fitness of the pupils and students for all intensive physical and intellectual work through graded regular physical education programme was keen one of the candidate objective of any good educational system from time immemorial. Physical fitness in broadest sense is called total fitness which involves physical, intellectual, emotional, social, moral and spiritual wellbeing. So, a fit person must enjoy an alert and inquiring mind, emotional stability, a robust healthy and a proficiency in basic skills of movement (Perrol, 2006).

Ntui (2005), elaborated on the areas which total fitness covers, ranging from physical fitness which involves the general fitness of the human body which can be enhanced through sports social fitness refers to the ability of the pupils or students to have good pupils relations with others; mental fitness means an increase in the flow of blood to the brain, enhancing mood, increasing mental alertness, and improving self-esteem among other things.

THE CONCEPT OF FITNESS

Self-concept or self perception of physical and academic achievement were related in fourteen (14) fields and laboratory indicators of physical fitness and to academic achievement for a large national representative sample of Australian boys and girls ages 9-15 (N=6283). Corrections between self concept and the corresponding external criteria increased steadily with age both in physical and academic domain (March, 2008).

According to Arnold (2003), although the term "physical fitness" is in common use and each of us has a personal interpretation, the concept is difficult to define. Physical fitness implies not only freedom from disability, deformity or disease but also the activities which demand a high degree of coordination (Greaff & Fax, 2006).

RELEVANCE OF FITNESS (WHY WE EXERCISE TO KEEP FIT)

Some people may claim that they do not take regular exercise but yet fit. But if there are forced by circumstances to run a short distance to catch a train or rescue a child in danger, they begin to gasp for breath. They possess what is referred to as static or medical fitness (Copper, 2008).

1. Exercise is important in maintaining as well as developing physical and mental fitness. Habitual exercise prolongs life and gives some protection against the diseases with a too much dormant or sedentary existence. There include obesity, diabetes, back ache, due to poor muscle tone, constipation, varicose vein and coronary heart diseases which are common and tend to be more severe in inactive individuals (Sloan, 2004).
2. Physical fitness is a dynamic process. It is not stored up like food or money. It has to be developed, renewed and maintained by regular exercises throughout life (Sloan, 2004).
3. Muscles are not like machines which wear out by use instead, they become more efficient with use. Regular exercise especially aerobics are the activities which keep all the types of principal muscles efficiency.
4. Physical fitness is more important to the community as well as to the individual. Many everyday tasks in agriculture and industry demand a high standard of fitness and even light work is performed more

- efficiently, other things being equal, by someone who is physically fit.
5. In war, even more than in peace, the survival of a nation may depend on the physical fitness of its citizens. Modern war in spite of mechanization imposes severe physical and intellectual strain on members of the armed forces. If both opposing forces are equipped with modern weapons, the deciding factor may be the endurance of the fighting men. In the time in which we are living now, a nation may be called upon at short notice to defend itself against aggression and its men and women should be physically fit for this service.
 6. The physical fitness of the children is the basics of physical fitness of the community. Appropriate physical activities in childhood develops the muscles, promotes good posture, improves neuro-muscular coordination and increases the capacity of the circulatory and respiratory systems to deal with the demands of muscular and intellectual exercises (Sloan, 2004).
 7. Physical fitness has become a basic requirement for certain employments in many countries. Recruitment into the Armed Forces and the Police, para-military, youths and sports centres, FIFA referees etc. requires a certain degree of fitness. Development of fitness standards for employment must comply with the bonafide occupational requirement guidelines (Thomson, 2004).
 8. Cardiovascular fitness (the heart and the blood vessels) is considered by most exercise physiologists as the major physiological indicators for overall fitness and power (Martin & Dodds, 2003).

From the above literature on physical and mental fitness, it is crystal clear that the development and maintenance of physical and mental fitness of pupils and students is a responsibility of the school. The school administrators must spare no iota of their strength in seeing that the pupils and students in their schools have a well developed and maintain physical and mental fitness through regular graded physical education programmes throughout the course of their educational career.

Teaching in the primary schools is in “unit”, in that every teacher teaches all the subjects on the time table including physical education to the pupils in his or her class. There is no serious specialization at that level, the classroom teacher does not need to be an athletic champion or a professional in basketball, football, handball, volleyball, and so on in order to teach physical education at this level. There have been excellent physical education teachers in the primary schools who could not perform themselves but because they know the importance of physical exercise to the development and maintenance of the fitness of the pupils, they made possible for the pupils to have graded regular exercises.

After-all, the teaching of physical education in the primary schools is more of organization than the actual teaching of skills. Besides, skills at this level are taught indirectly in the form of lead-up-games. Once the teachers have mastered the principles of organizing these games, they can administer them with every little instruction and without most personal demonstrations.

In many countries in Africa today, teachers in training colleges are taught how to teach some simple physical exercises to the pupils and how to organize some lead-up games. As far back as the forties and the fifties, classroom teachers were able to drill, teach physical education to the pupils from 8:05 to 8:45 am three to four mornings in a week. They also organized some games for pupils in the afternoon after school. All these, the morning drills for every pupil and the games in the afternoons contributed tremendously to the development and the maintenance of the physical and intellectual fitness of the pupils (Ntui, 2006).

What has happened to the classroom teachers of today? There is a lot of laissez-fair in most of our primary schools today. Some school administrators do not care to see that all the subjects on the school time table are given equal attention. Many school administrators and teachers do not know that all school pupils need physical as well as mental fitness in order to study well at school. The physical and mental fitness of our pupils is down to first rung of the physical fitness ladder.

The capacity to perform our daily physical and intellectual tasks without limitations imposed by poor function of any of the systems of the body, may be defined as a state of health in which active physical and intellectual exercise can be undertaken efficiently without undue fatigue and with a sense of well being. Akintunde (2004) said physical fitness is something individuals need, being an athlete or non-athlete notwithstanding. To him, fitness include those qualities or functions that provide the individual with what is necessary for his or her participation in sporting activities or daily work with great skills, great power and those aspects which enable one to have endurance, strength, stamina, muscular endurance, cardio-respiratory endurance, flexibility, coordination, speed, motor skills, and other desirable physical qualities such as freedom from obesity which are best developed through vigorous activities.

CATEGORIES OF FITNESS

According to Ntui (2006), physical fitness may be considered in three categories: medical, static or passive; functional, dynamic or endurance and motor skills fitness.

- a. **Medical, static or passive fitness:** Freedom from deformity or disease is ascertained by routine medical examination which should be performed by a qualified medical practitioner. There are degrees

of fitness in this category as in others. Weak muscles, a feeble acting heart, or a rather low concentration of hemoglobin in the blood make the individual less fit though not necessarily diseased. There is nothing wrong with him-not yet, rather there is nothing really right with him either. If he is likely he can coast like that for years, but without any activity, his body is essentially deteriorating (Copper, 2008).

- b. **Functional, dynamic or endurance fitness:** A person is functionally physically fit if he possesses the ability to carry out his daily physical and intellectual tasks without undue fatigue and still has an ample reserved energy to enjoy leisure time activities and meet unforeseen emergencies (Sloan, 2004). Here it is a relative term. An athlete may be fit for high jump but not fit for distance run. Particular situations in life require particular fitness. There is a fitness of an old man at the age of seventy (70) who is a farmer; there is the fitness of a market woman who carried her wares on her head and travels 5km to the market; there is the fitness of a student, a teacher, a tutor; there is the fitness of an Olympic athlete; there is the fitness of the pilot who flies the supersonic air craft, etc. In this type of fitness, the question can be asked “fitness for what”? The answer may be started thus: As long as you possess the fitness for performing your daily physical and intellectual tasks without undue fatigue at the end of the day, you are physically and intellectually fit (Muten, 2004).
- c. **Motor skills fitness:** Fitness for particular skills depends on neuro-muscular co-ordination and on the strength of particular muscles group. The co-ordination of groups of muscles to perform purposive movements is achieved by the nervous system and improves the practice. Motor skill fitness is important in all.

Ntui (2005) opined that some pupils by virtue of their intrinsic love for play organize some internal games within the school premises during break time on their own without the assistance of any teacher. It is this type of informal fitness of some pupils even to the first rung of the physical fitness ladder. He concluded that we cannot say anything much about the motor skills of our pupils today, very little or nothing is taught to pupils in most schools today in the form of basic or special skills in athletics, football, handball or other games practically.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To sum up, let us note that physical and mental fitness are primordial qualities in the child which must receive the attention of teachers and school administrators at a very early age if we are aspiring to the optimum development of the pupils we teach. No iota of our energy should be spared in trying to develop and maintain high level of physical and mental development of our pupils. We cannot do this simply by teaching them in the classroom theoretically how to develop and maintain physical and mental fitness. Physical and mental fitness can be developed and maintained only through regular and graded physical education programmes. We must therefore make an effort to give our pupils regular graded physical exercises even if we ourselves cannot perform, but we must learn how to teach physical exercise practically and to organize some lead-up games. If we cannot do this, then we are failing in our task of giving the pupils all round education.

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