The beginning of second semester is a perfect time to ask ourselves a few relevant, valuable questions. What types of experiences did my young students have during the first half of the year? Will they return to my gymnasium bubbling with excitement and motivation for physical activity? Did my instruction truly match their developmental needs and basic urges? Reflection on our past instructional choices and, more importantly, on the impact these choices had on our students’ disposition toward physical activity provides direction and motivation as we begin another action packed semester of physical education.

The purpose of this article is to continue the discussion of “should we or shouldn’t we?” Specifically, this article addresses whether or not young children need to spend time participating in static stretching activities during physical education class. Is it a worthwhile use of already limited time to ask young children to stretch? Do they need to touch their toes, stretch their triceps, or perform the hurdle stretch as they count in unison to ten? What evidence supports this age-old practice? Before discussing the concept of stretching, let’s first take a look at our students and our goals.

Regular Participation in Physical Activity

Standard 3 (NASPE, 2004) provides one of our most difficult challenges, as it focuses on student choices outside the physical education environment. Our task is to motivate, encourage, and educate students (while they are in our classrooms) to the point where they independently choose to make physical activity a regular habit (when they are outside of our classrooms). This task becomes a bit less daunting when we remember to keep our short-term goals at the forefront, and when we truly consider what young children bring to the learning environment.

First of all it is critical that we separate our long-term goals from our short-term goals. Clearly, we hope our 5-year-olds grow up to be healthy, active adults; but, this cannot be the driving force in our efforts toward Standard 3. Instead, we need ask ourselves these questions: What can I do today for my 5-year-olds that will help them become healthy, active 6-year-olds? What can I do today to help my 6-year-olds become healthy, active 7-year-olds? Healthy adulthood may be our optimal goal, but we are not training mini-adults and, therefore, what we ask children to do in our gymnasiums must be child-centered, relevant, and in line with their current developmental needs.

Young children engage in and persist in physical activity they see as important and useful; if they don’t see a reason to participate, they won’t. A recent study echoing these sentiments reported that subjective task value was the number one predictor of intention for future participation in physical activity for 2nd graders (Xiang, McBride, & Guan, 2004). Sadly, subjective task value given to physical education begins to decline between 2nd and 3rd grade (Xiang et al., 2004). Subjective task value refers to the importance individual movers place on a given task. Young children’s experiences in physical education must have immediate meaning and value if we want to help them move toward regular participation in physical activity.
In addition to keeping our goals straight, we also need to continually consider what our young students bring with them as they enter the learning environment. They bring a natural disposition to make learning playful (Sanders & Graham, 1995). Play is their primary mode for learning about their bodies and their movement capabilities (Gallahue, 1989). This playfulness serves as their tool for solving movement problems. Play is liberating, rewarding and motivating. Playing now becomes an avenue for healthy adulthood later.

Play has high subjective task value and thus perpetuates itself – kids want to keep doing it! Sanders & Graham (1995) refer to this as children’s “relentless persistence for play,” which they define as a “natural characteristic of children to change, alter, or adapt a task that does not meet their current skill or interest level into a task that better meets their current abilities or interests” (p. 376). This playful attitude is a positive characteristic that should not be interpreted as naughty, off-task behavior. Instead, capitalize on this inherent quality and use it to move your students closer to Standard 3 and closer to adopting a physically active lifestyle suited specifically for a young child!

**Do Young Children Really Need to Stretch?**

When is the last time you had a kindergartner pull a hamstring? Yet many physical educators require their youngest students to begin class with a structured set of static stretches. This is typically performed as a group, using regimented instructional methods. Sanders and Graham (1995) found this to be a developmentally inappropriate practice that conflicts head on with children’s relentless persistence for play. Stretching was a turn-off and, therefore, had low subjective task value for these young children. So the question becomes this: Should we require young students to stretch when there is evidence it may actually decrease the value they place on physical activity?

Stretching is generally purported to prevent injury, decrease soreness, and increase performance; however, such reasoning is based on findings from studies conducted on adult populations. Though flexibility decreases as young children grow, they are initially quite supple. Declines in flexibility are particularly noticeable during periods of rapid growth; bones grow much faster than the muscles lengthen, resulting in increased muscle-tendon tightness around the joint (Alter, 2004). Yet, though some suppleness decreases with age, that loss appears to be minimized in individuals who remain active throughout the growing period (Alter, 2004).

Most activities and movement skills performed in physical education require only functional flexibility, defined as the capability to perform motions required for a specific skill. For young children, those skills are things like running, jumping, chasing, and climbing. These are skills that are clearly dynamic in nature, not static. And, they are generally sufficient to maintain flexibility in specific joints. It is only during periods of enforced inactivity and lack of use, perhaps due to injury or illness, that joints are likely to become less flexible (Ingraham, 2003) and require stretching.

So, while static stretching conflicts with children’s relentless pursuit for play and appears to have limited value for young children who are already supple, it remains important for them to implement dynamic, functional stretching in the context of an exploratory, problem solving, play-like environment.

**Dynamic, Functional Stretching Can Resemble Play**

When organized correctly, stretching can be masked as play, and hence viewed by young children as valuable. Instead of directing children to perform a series of static stretches, try this: “Move your arms and legs like an octopus moving slowly through the water.” “Move your entire body like a snake slithering through the grass.” These tasks allow the pursuit of play to interact positively with an emerging value for functional stretching. But, the question remains how to increase the chances that students will view such learning tasks as play. Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg (1983) suggest designing the tasks to be (a) intrinsically motivating, (b) relatively free of externally imposed rules, (c) carried out as if the activity were real, (d) focused on the process rather than any product, (e) dominated by the players, and (f) requiring the active involvement of all players.

The playful nature of an activity declines, along with children’s interest, when adults structure or interfere inappropriately with the play (Rogers & Sawyers, 1988). This does not mean that play must be undirected or chaotic; rather, playful experiences often require much planning and organization. The six tenets listed hold great value for physical educators who are committed to creating child-centered learning opportunities. They could easily be used as a measure of play potential within a learning task. Taking the time to create learning tasks that meet the playful needs of young children is every educator’s responsibility, especially when the intent is to perpetuate physical activity outside school.

**So, Should Young Children Stretch or Shouldn’t They?**

The answer depends on what the implementation of stretching looks like. If it asks eager, playful young children to sit and reach as far as they can as they count in unison, the answer is "no." Instead of static, structured stretching try some of the following examples with your next class of 5- and 6-year-olds:
“Reach to the top of a branch like a giraffe.”
“Swing your arms back and forth like an elephant’s trunk.”
“Fly through the air like your favorite super hero.”
“Slowly sway as you melt like a popsicle.”
“Jiggle like a bowl of jello.”

To make stretching more “sport like,” create a short pattern of movements that captures the essence of a favorite sport.

Baseball – “Reach down low to field a hard-hit ground ball. Then burst up high with a huge make-believe throw to home plate.”

“Swing forcefully with a pretend bat to send a ball over the outfield fence. Then, run around make-believe bases and slide on the ground if you race back to home plate.”

Repeat a series of movements like this to music as a dynamic, fun, playful, and valuable warm up.

Create a “verbs on the move” sentence. Working together, have students brainstorm a list of actions. Depending on age and writing skills, the teacher may choose to write each action on a note card. A selection of 3 to 5 note cards represents a “verbs on the move” sentence. Place the note cards in a movement hat. Either the teacher or a student draws out cards for a sentence and reads them to the class, who in turn act out the sentence (e.g., sneak, pounce, fall, slither, sizzle). Enhance the learning potential and variety by altering movement forms and qualities, such as asking students to move quickly, move with a partner, or even move through different pathways as they make the sentence come alive.

When stretching is done as a means to enhance movements that are important to and valued by young children, it enhances the quality of the physical education program. Dynamic, functional, and playful stretching has great potential to increase the value young children place on physical activity. The increase in subjective task value in turn elevates the chances that students will regularly elect to be physical activity even when not in the gymnasium.

References

Use Bulletin Boards to Spread the Word!

Why not share news, ideas, and thoughts with school colleagues, students, and parents about all the great things that physical education and sport can promote by using a physical education bulletin board? It is a great space to let every one know the benefits of a quality daily physical education program and to reinforce healthy lifestyle choices.

Some ideas for your bulletin board:

- Health issues and facts
- Fitness tips and activities
- Family activity ideas to do in the local community in the evenings and on weekends
- Contact numbers and addresses of local clubs, centers, and organizations that promote and provide sport and physical activity programming
- Local events/teams that families can go to watch

For more ideas and photographs of different bulletin boards, visit the PE Central page (www.pecentral.org) that features bulletin boards web sites.

Source: pelinks4u.org