

Addressing Trauma in Children Through Physical Activity

by Tom Martinek, Eric Hardiman, and Dawn Anderson-Butcher

On the morning of December 26, 2004, a devastating tsunami struck southeast Asia. Eleven countries were affected and over 200,000 people perished. The epicenter of the tsunami was located off the coast of Sumatra's Banda Aceh where 120,000 were killed (Sipress & Lynch, 2005). The aftermath of the tsunami left thousands homeless, all searching for lost family members. Schools, mosques, hospitals, universities, and other vital institutions were totally destroyed. Especially affected were children whose parents were either swept out to sea or buried under mud and debris. It is estimated that over 35,000 children are without family.

Two months after the tsunami, the three of us were asked by the Indonesian Minister of Sport to assist in constructing a program in which physical activity would be used to help the traumatized children confront the impact of this cataclysmic event. He believed that physical activity programs along with other services were needed to rekindle the spirit of confidence in children and youth to move forward in life. We drew upon our professional experiences and the research of others to respond to this request.

We also were aware of how lives can be turned upside down by natural disasters in our own country. A recent reminder is Hurricane Katrina. We quickly learned that its fury left more than just the remnants of homes, schools, hospitals, businesses. It also left thousands of



children and youth (and families) bewildered and helpless, trying to figure out how to regain control of their lives. The bottom line is that the influx of traumatized children (regardless of the causes) entering America's classrooms is increasing at an alarming rate.

The purpose of this article is to describe guidelines for physical educators to use when trying to address the needs of traumatized youth. These guidelines can assist teachers in helping children survivors of trauma revitalize a sense of purpose and control. In particular, we describe four guidelines for program planning and implementation:

- Guideline one: Recognize signs of trauma.
- Guideline two: Get the right fit.
- Guideline three: Empower kids through physical activity.
- Guideline four: Seek other support/aid.

TABLE 1—Signs of Trauma

Emotional	Mental	Physical
Sudden crying	Inability to concentrate	Constantly fatigued
Angry outbursts	Spaced out	Fidgety
Disengagement from all activities	Difficulty in listening	Constant complaints of being sick or injured
Avoidance of challenging tasks	Difficulty in understanding directions	Excessive clinging

Guideline One: Recognize Signs of Trauma

An important starting point is to recognize the signs (consequences) of trauma. This can happen by watching children as they work and interact with others during class and on the playground. Indeed, both contexts are unique places where children have ample opportunity to express and act out their feelings. Research (Goodman, 2002; Hardiman, Martinek, & Anderson-Butcher, 2005) has shown that signs of trauma can be classified into three categories: *emotional*, *mental*, and *physical*. Table 1 provides a list of signs to look for within each of these categories.

Keep in mind that not all children respond in the same way. Obviously, the severity of the trauma will be a factor in children's responses. Response variations from child to child are also caused by the psychological disposition of the child. That is, some children are able to rebuff traumatic events better than others; they are much more resilient than others. In either case, recognizing any of these signs, especially if they occur "out of the ordinary," is an important first step in program planning. They will also serve as reference points for evaluating program impact. In either case, professional consultation with the school counselor will also be needed.

Guideline Two: Get the Right Fit

Before developing a program that can address needs of children of trauma, it is important to understand the cultural aspects of the children's lives. We refer to "cultural aspects" in a broad way. The culture of each child is bounded by the family situation, social position with classmates, affiliations with other community programs (e.g., church, clubs, etc.), and/or religious and ethnic mores or customs. For example, children who have lost one or both parents (i.e., death, divorce, court order) struggle with the pangs of abandonment and guilt. Likewise those who are deemed "outsiders" by their peer group or have little or no affiliation to community programs lack opportunities for social engagement and support. Such disconnect makes it imperative that programs serve as a positive, nurturing, and stable entities in the child's life.

The customs and values of a child's culture and/or religion must also be acknowledged. We have found that even with those most traumatized, children hang on dearly to their cultural and religious roots. That is why it is so critical to be aware of and understand their customs and beliefs. It places the teacher in a better position to effectively communicate with the child and understand his/her responses to a learning experience. For example, we found that collectivism and social networking are held steadfast in many Asian cultures whereas gaining the "competitive edge" permeates many aspects of life within the American culture. Consequently, we have found that both groups of children respond quite differently to cooperative and competitive learning activities. This has significant implications for teachers when providing varying degrees of decision making to children.

Of course, the above cultural considerations should pertain to *all* kids and in *all* programs. But they are especially important when working with children of trauma whose low confidence and vulnerability will weigh heavily in the success of any type of intervention.

Guideline Three: Empower Kids Through Physical Activity¹

Physical educators are well aware of the wonderful ways that physical activity can nurture children. The nature of the physical activity experience will determine the extent to which nurturing takes place. We feel that certain "nurturing qualities" must be present in physical activity to fully address the needs of traumatized children. These qualities are (a) opportunities, (b) expression of feelings, and (c) self-enhancement (Hardiman et al., 2005). *Opportunities* would be such things as reintroducing structure, providing a context for positive emotion and laughter, and creating experiences that help in gaining a sense of control. *Expression of feelings* includes encouraging



the sharing of feelings, normalizing feelings (like guilt), and enhancing communication with others. *Self enhancement* focuses on encouraging self-growth and fostering the development of personal helping strategies.

It is also important for the teacher to be diligent (and committed) in maintaining these nurturing qualities throughout the physical activity experiences. Creating a threatening atmosphere that is stressful, highly competitive, disempowering, and physically unsafe will undermine the recovery of children. Instead, *empowering youth* needs to be the "heart and soul" of the learning experiences. Empowerment does not mean that children are given "license" to do what they want. Rather, it means giving children meaningful "choices and voices" in the program (Hellison, 2003). We have found that three groups of strategies help to empower kids: *decision making*, *leading others*, and *reflection*. Table 2 provides some examples of experiences that focus on each of these dimensions.

Decision Making

One decision-making strategy is to give children choices as to the type of *learning climate* they wish to participate. For example, some kids like to work on their own because they want to become better at a particular skill (e.g., free-throw shooting). Others may want to engage in a more cooperative form of play (e.g., a group "keep it up" volleyball game). Still others, who are skilled, will choose to participate in a more competitive experience (e.g., 3 vs. 3 basketball game, etc.).

Choosing levels of difficulty within certain activities can also offer opportunities to make personal decisions. In calisthenics, for example, the choice of doing a sit up (arms crossed over the chest) either with legs straight or bent can serve as options for children. Or deciding to do push ups from the knees or from a "straight leg" position presents another type of choice. Having these choices helps to insure that children will try and, perhaps, push themselves to do as many as possible.

Station teaching is a popular method for giving choices to kids. Stations can either be interconnected by a set of skills of a particular sport (e.g., basketball skills stations) or can be independent activities representing many sports (e.g., basketball passing station, volleyball bump pass station, soccer pass/trap station). Even within each station, decision-making opportunities can be bolstered by giving choices among differing tasks (e.g., passing to the wall, passing to partner, passing with defender).

Giving children "a voice" in how *rules of the game can be modified* is another empowering strategy. Our past experiences with children have taught us that they are notorious for changing the rules so the game keeps going and remains enjoyable. Letting the ball bounce once in volleyball before sending it over the net, making sure everyone touches the ball before a shot goes up, or giving some "leeway" on traveling calls are just a few of the rule changes that children may employ to keep everyone in the game.

We have found that children (both younger and older ones) will usually make the "right choices." Why? It is because the choices matter to them and because they know who they are, what they are capable of, and how to have fun. More importantly, widening the boundaries of decision making allows the teacher to really learn what children are capable of doing. The great psychological benefit is that, over time, self-determination becomes part of their psyche.

Leading Others

One of the unfortunate by-products of trauma is that its victims are left feeling isolated from others. Therefore, reestablishing social connections is a must. Empowering kids by having them lead others is an important step in revitalizing social connections. Nudging them into leading roles also enables them to begin replacing feelings of victimization with those that compel them to serve others. They also acquire leadership qualities that can carry over into everyday life.

Empowering children to assume leadership (helping) roles is a step-by-step process. Our past experiences (see Martinek & Schilling, 2003; Martinek, Schilling, Hellison, 2006; Schilling, Martinek, & Tan, 2001) have shown that the process occurs along a continuum. At one end are simple challenges, and at the other end, the challenges become more complex. It is important to start slowly (especially with younger children) until they become comfortable with their leadership role.

A beginning strategy (borrowed from Mosston and Ashworth, 1994) is *peer or one-on-one teaching*. Students are paired with one being assigned as the "little teacher." After awhile the roles are switched. When both are finished teaching, they share how well each taught the other. Guidance is needed in this process. Simply telling children to teach each other without guidance can result in a disastrous and counterproductive experience. Certain cues (e.g., fingers form

TABLE 2—Strategies for Empowerment²

Decision making	Leading others	Reflection
Choosing learning climate	One-on-one peer teaching	Public reflection
Selecting levels of difficulty	Small group peer teaching	Private reflection
Choosing stations	Team coaching	
Changing/modifying rules	Cross-age teaching/leading	



window, knees bent, finger spread) must be given to guide the peer leaders.

Advancement to the next levels is made by having peer teaching take place in *small groups* (i.e., threes, fours). Similar to one-one-one teaching, students take turns teaching and giving feedback to one another. As in one-on-one teaching, they rotate with each other taking on the role of the teacher.

Once children are comfortable with the simpler forms of leading, they will be ready to take on a more advanced leadership role. This can be done by having individuals responsible for *coaching a team*. Running a mini-team practice, organizing and running a game, and even fostering good moral judgment among the team members (e.g., helping to settle disputes over fouls, making sure that an "all touch" rule is followed, settling conflict issues) becomes their responsibility.

Cross-age teaching is the most advanced level of leadership experience. It is usually for older students (upper elementary, middle school, or high school age) who work with younger children. At this level, youngsters become leaders within a sport club setting; they plan and teach values-based physical activities to others during the after-school hours. Guidance, feedback, and support for the leaders are important to maintain throughout the experience. The younger children can come from the leaders' previous elementary school or other community programs (i.e., Boys & Girls Clubs, child care centers, home school parent groups). Or upper grade students can be in charge of running a field day for the entire school or even teaching a PE class during a designated period of the day. Cross-age teaching is the next logical step for young people because it requires them to assume responsibility for themselves as well as provide a service to others within their own community.

Reflection

Adding *reflection* to the repertoire of strategies allows children to examine the connection between the learning experience and personal growth. Envisioning this connection is especially important for children of trauma who need to see the link between effort and outcome.

Reflection can be organized in two ways. One way is through *group reflections* (discussions) or what Don Helliison (2003) calls awareness talks. Group discussions can take place before and after a class by having students sit in a circle. Before class, students can be asked to evaluate how they think they will do during the rest of the class. By doing this, the student acknowledges his/her personal readiness for the class. At the same time, the teacher can get an impression on how the class as a whole will do. After class, students can again regroup in the circle and indicate how they actually did during class. Reasons for

discrepancies can then be discussed among the students and the teacher can make comparisons of each student's response to what was observed. Quite often, a simple show of hands (yes or no), or point thumbs up (yes), sideways (not sure), or down (no) is a quick and easy way to get students to respond. It's important that

the teacher listens to or looks at each response.

Private reflection represents another method to get students to reflect. This method is especially useful with students who are reticent about responding in a group. Teachers can have students keep a personal journal, fill out a rating form (with simple questions), or simply think to themselves. Even an index card can be used where the student is asked to write a grade or put a number that indicates how they thought things went. For example, on one side a rating is written on how the class went. On the other side, a rating is written on how the student thought he or she did. The student can also write the reasons for the rating or grade (just one sentence).



Guideline Four: Seek Other Support/Aid

It is important to remember that physical activity, by itself, will not be the "cure all" for the problems facing children or youth affected by trauma. Cross-cutting strategies that interconnect the physical activity program to other support services are required to maximize program impact. Physical activity becomes a complementary tool that should be used together with other services. Therefore, integration of outside services is a must. Indeed, the commonly used phrase "it takes a village . . ." is especially relevant when working with traumatized children.

School counseling and nursing services are immediate resources to the teacher. Maintaining the lines of communication with these services will amplify support efforts considerably. Information about a child that is not readily available to the physical educator can be requested when needed. In addition, classroom teachers in the child's school become an important conduit for feedback on how the child is doing outside of the program.

Resources outside the child's school are also helpful. Access to mentoring programs (e.g., Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Wise guys), mental health services, community volunteer groups, church organizations, and even family members significantly broaden the resource pool for physical education teachers. Working together will take time and commitment from all parties. The strength of the linkages with outside resources will be dependent on the teacher's energy to pursue additional help. Working as a team will significantly increase the probability

of children being able to rise above the devastating difficulties of trauma.

Conclusion

Someone once proclaimed that "children can stand a lot if they can stand themselves." The phrase is a reminder that confidence and personal control are the cornerstones of successful programs. Physical activity programs by themselves can't help children merely move beyond personal survival. Commitment, careful thought and planning, as well as outside support needs to be part of the agenda. One thing is for sure, whether children of trauma are from Banda Aceh or any country, immediate and compassionate help is critical. We trust that the ideas presented will be useful for all of those who try to enhance a child's capacity to carve out a broader and more enduring vision of his or her future.


References

- Goodman, R.F. (2002). *Caring for kids after trauma and death: A guide for parents and professionals*. New York: Institute for Trauma and Stress, New York University Child Study Center.
- Hardiman, E., Martinek, T., Anderson-Butcher, D. (2005). *Addressing stress and trauma post-earthquake through sport*. Workshop presented at the Indonesian Ministry of Sport. Jakarta, Indonesia.
- Hellison, D. (2003). *Teaching responsibility through physical activity*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Martinek, T., & Schilling, T. (2003). Developing compassionate leadership in underserved youth. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance*, 75(5), 33-39.
- Martinek, T., & Schilling, T., & Hellison, D. (2006). The development of compassionate and caring leadership among adolescents. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 11(2), 141-157.
- Mosston, M., & Ashworth, S. (1994). *Teaching physical education*. (4th ed.). New York: MacMillan.
- Schilling, T., Martinek, T., & Tan, C. (2001) Fostering youth development through empowerment. In B.J. Lombardo, T.J. Caravella-Nadeau, H.S. Castagna, & V.H. Mancini (Eds.), *Sport in the twenty-first century—Alternatives for the new millennium* (p. 169-180). Boston: Pearson.
- Sipress, A., & Lynch, C. (2005, January 20). Perhaps we will never know, president says. *Washington Post Foreign Service*, A20.

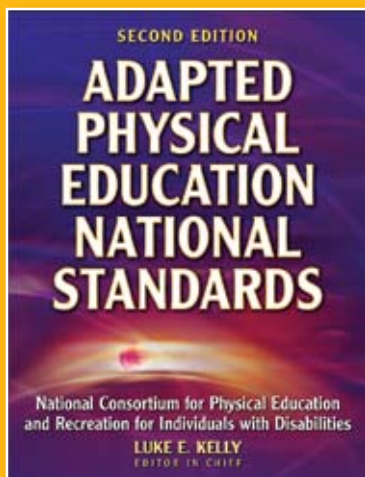
Endnotes

¹ The term "physical activity" was used so that it did not get confused with the traditional form of sport that stresses winning at all costs. However, we feel sport within a values-based framework can also be termed physical activity.

² These strategies have been adapted from Don Hellison's Personal and Social Responsibility Model. For a more complete description of activities see Hellison's *Teaching Responsibility through Physical Activity* (2003).

Tom Martinek is with the Department of Exercise and Sport Science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. E-mail: martinek@uncg.edu. Eric Hardiman is with the School of Social Work at the University at Albany-State University of New York. E-mail: hardiman@albany.edu. Dawn Anderson-Butcher is with the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University in Columbus. E-mail: anderson-butcher@osu.edu. 

Your complete guide to the adapted PE standards



NCPERID
2006 • Paperback • 208 pp
ISBN 978-0-7360-4603-9
\$29.00 (\$39.95 CDN; £20.00 UK;
\$51.70 AUS; \$55.00 NZ)

**New Edition
Now Available**

1219

Adapted Physical Education National Standards, Second Edition, is the physical educator's complete guide to understanding and providing top-quality adapted physical education. This revised and expanded edition includes new and enhanced features:

- An overview of the 15 national standards
- Specific performance indicators for each standard
- A format designed for ease of study
- Everyday applicability
- A frequently asked questions section
- A complete glossary of terms, abbreviations, and acronyms
- Everything an educator needs in order to pass the Adapted Physical Education National Standards (APENS) exam and become a certified adapted physical educator

To order call

1-800-747-4457

Canada: 1-800-465-7301 • UK: 44 (0) 113-255-5665

AUS: (08) 8277-1555 • NZ: (09) 448-1207

International: 217-351-5076

Web site: www.HumanKinetics.com



HUMAN KINETICS

The Information Leader in Physical Activity

7106