TIPS FROM THE TRENCHES

Motivating Students to Be Active

by Alice L. Mohor

The national standards for physical education stipulate that, “a physically educated person exhibits a physically active lifestyle and achieves and maintains a health-enhancing level of physical fitness” (NASPE, 1995, p. 1). One of the requirements of the Physical Education Standards Committee for National Board Certification is that “accomplished physical education teachers recognize the multiple benefits for a physically active lifestyle and promote purposeful daily activities for all students that will encourage them to become lifelong adherents of physical activity” (NBPTS, 1999, p. 6). When I began teaching, I believed that my elementary physical education students would achieve and maintain their physical fitness if I helped them develop effective movement skills. I now recognize that my students need a knowledge base of physical fitness concepts upon which they can build a physically active lifestyle. Furthermore, in our “couch potato” society, I also accept that I must motivate my students to participate in regular physical activity.

Professional textbooks and journals are packed with effective strategies for teaching physical fitness concepts to students. I have found that effective strategies for promoting student participation in regular leisure physical activity have been more elusive. My initial strategy was to keep students as active as possible in physical education class by designing lessons with maximum student participation and maximum movement time. I realized students were not generalizing their physical education activity to their leisure activity when they were observed sitting during recess. I tried to motivate students by testing their physical fitness. However, I forgot to make the testing fun and self-challenging, so most students hated it. After modifying my testing methods, I added more physical fitness concepts to my lessons. When professional journals began to tout regular physical activity in place of daily exercise, I started a “Fitness Counts” program (Mohor, 1997). Each morning, the homeroom teachers counted how many students had been physically active the prior day and a school total was announced every afternoon. I eventually recognized I was asking too much of the already harried homeroom teachers.

In place of the Fitness Counts program, I tried to reinforce the idea of being physically active by incorporating the motto “be active” into my teaching and polling physical education students about their leisure activity. At the beginning of each lesson, I asked students what they had done to be physically active the day before. However, after attending a conference session on lesson closure, I began talking about physical activity at the end of my classes.

My next strategy was to write a rhyming poem for each month of the school year. Each poem was based on the idea of being physically active with family, neighbors, or friends. I read an activity poem to my physical education classes at the close of every lesson. In addition, I sent home a written copy of an activity poem at the beginning of every month. Eventually, I began printing each month’s activity poem with a blank calendar and instructed my students’ parents to initial every day their child was physically active. I rewarded each student who returned a completed calendar with a shoelace charm. This year I have asked my students’ parents to help their children record each day’s activity on their calendars. I am hoping that enumerating the specific activity on the calendar will further involve parents and students.

Physical fitness concepts have journeyed beyond the inside of my gymnasium. For the past several years, my lesson closure has included students echoing the rhyme, “be active every day, be active healthy stay.” I help the music teacher with rehearsals and the art teacher with scenery for our school musicals. This past year, our fourth and fifth grade students presented Shapin’ Up Santa (Gallina & Gallina, 1985) for parents, teachers, and other students. The play depicted Mrs. Claus sending Santa to a weight loss clinic because he had gotten stuck in a chimney. The art and music teachers allowed me to replace a “no pain no gain” poster the art teacher had mounted on the weight loss clinic scenery with a “be active every day” poster and a “be active healthy stay” poster. After the play, I mounted the posters on the outside of my gym doors. Santa’s poor eating habits and reluctance to exercise generated many laughs. The trainer at the weight loss clinic was depicted as an over zealous and joyless exercise fanatic. I was concerned that the intended message of the play, “it’s not what you are outside, but what you are inside,” might be misinterpreted as negating the health benefits of proper nutrition and regular exercise. I hoped students would realize I had used their physical education class closure rhyme for the weight loss clinic posters. A month after the musical was finished, I asked one of my physical education classes what they thought was the message of the play. Every student responded in a variation of “you shouldn’t eat too much junk food and you need to exercise to be healthy.” The students also noted the posters and recited our closure rhyme, “be active every day, be active healthy stay.” I often hear students reading the posters mounted on the gym doors while they wait to begin their physical education class.

References


