

School PE Programs in Sorry Shape

- Jeanie Lerche Davis

Feb. 11, 2003 -- Kids are parked on the couch at home -- and they're not getting much activity at school, either. Most third graders get less than 25 minutes of exercise a week in school programs, a new study shows. Some are getting next to no activity at all.

"It's a snapshot of what's happening in schools, and it doesn't look great," says Sarah Friedman, PhD, a scientific coordinator for the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Friedman helped lead the study of 648 schools -- and 814 students -- funded by the National Institute of Child Care and Youth Development. The study appears in the February Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine.

It paints a bleak picture of physical education programs in today's schools. Yet, the American Academy of Pediatrics advises a minimum of 30 to 60 minutes a day of physical activity -- "playing outside, brisk walking, low impact sports, even just plain catch," says William F. King, Jr., MD, a professor of pediatrics at Temple Children's Hospital in Philadelphia.

"Exercise has to be a higher priority for society," he tells WebMD. "It's no coincidence that the communities that have very limited access to green space are also communities where the obesity epidemic is most intense."

In their study, observers tracked the activity of children as they participated in school PE classes.

"Some children don't have any PE classes at all, 30% had class once a week, and the large majority -- 45% -- have it only twice a week," Friedman tells WebMD. "The number of schools that comply with the idea of five times week of PE per week is very small -- 6% of schools. Only 3% of children had PE classes four times a week."

On average, children had two PE classes a week, totaling 69 minutes. In their classes, they spent 10 minutes playing games, five minutes in "fitness exercises" like calisthenics, five minutes hearing teacher's explanations, and seven minutes forming lines and waiting.

Students engaged in only about five minutes of vigorous physical activity and 12 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity.

PE programs vary greatly, and that allotted time for classes ranged from 30 minutes to 150 minutes per week, Friedman adds.

"It's another piece of evidence that young children don't get the exercise they need," Friedman tells WebMD. "It is a call for action. Children are developing a lifestyle that is not good for their health. If children don't learn about the importance of exercise and enjoy exercise when they are young, they will not pick it up later."

Not shocking data at all, especially in urban settings, says King. "With the epidemic of violence, the crises in school budgets, we have seen the opportunities for kids to be outside and exercise -- in neighborhoods and schools -- virtually vanish," he tells WebMD.

In North Philadelphia, the average school might house 500 kids, and have only about 1000 square yards of blacktop area for recess, he explains. An indoor room serves as gym, assembly room, and cafeteria from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. -- the majority of the school day. "Compare that to a rural or suburban school where they may have five to 10 acres of grass," King says.

Also, budget cuts have impacted school programs. "PE is one of the first cuts made, and one of last programs to come back," he adds.

"It's frustrating -- there are acres and acres of abandoned land, empty apartments, in the major cities. In a dense city like Philadelphia, they're within blocks of the schools. It just takes some grass seed, literally a grass-roots effort, to transform these areas into exercise space for kids."

SOURCES:

- Sarah Friedman, PhD, scientific coordinator for the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
- Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, February 2003
- William F. King, Jr., MD, professor of pediatrics at Temple Children's Hospital in Philadelphia.

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