

REPORT

COMMITTEE ON SCHOOL HEALTH

Competitive Athletics

A Statement of Policy

COMPETITIVE athletics for children is an important subject; it is also a controversial one. It is generally agreed that athletic programs for children of all ages are a necessary part of their education and recreation. There are differences of opinion as to the time in a child's life at which games requiring considerable co-ordination should be introduced and the extent to which such games should be organized on a competitive basis. Because of this, educators, community leaders in recreation, and particularly parents, often turn to physicians, especially pediatricians, for guidance and direction when they consider the development of athletic programs. To aid physicians in this advisory role, the Committee on School Health of the American Academy of Pediatrics has summarized its study of the subject.

A considerable fund of information as to extent of organized competitive athletic programs among children and as to the effects of these programs has been accumulated from the experience and investigation of recognized leaders in the fields of education and recreation, who have collaborated with interested and informed physicians. Those concerned with sports programs for children should give careful consideration to the opinions repeatedly expressed by these groups. Many of these opinions are contained in the appended reference list. The American Academy of Pediatrics definitely encourages and promotes continuing research to establish sound policies.

The Committee on School Health has considered the subject under the following headings:

Age

We are concerned in this statement with the question of competitive athletics for children 12 years of age and under. In discussing or planning programs for this age group, great care must be taken to avoid thinking interchangeably in terms of the older high school or college age activities. Many well-intentioned sports leaders and parents fall into this trap.

Sex

Published statements heretofore have made little mention of athletics for girls who constitute about a half of our elementary school population. A proper program of games and sports is equally essential for girls and boys. The problems of growth and development are even more evident among girls as some begin normally to mature before the age of 12 years. Fortunately, in most communities highly organized competitive sports are not available for girls. More often there is no sports program of any kind, implying that girls are being encouraged to be spectators only. Sports programs which include calisthenics, folk dancing, kickball, baseball, swimming, skating, tennis, golf, archery and similar activities should be encouraged for both sexes. The difference in interests of boys and girls at various ages should be considered in planning programs.

Competition

Competition has been defined as a contest between two or more individuals striving for the same objectives, but it may also be thought of as an attempt to surpass

previous accomplishment, singly or collectively. Competition is a natural, healthy process and is in no way being denied. The young child competes with his associates, with himself, or with his environment. Vying with one another is not only part of our society, but, as defined here, it is an inherent part of the growing, developing child. This inherent competitive drive should be understood and aided to develop normally, not suppressed nor overstimulated. It can be developed to better advantage when correlated with the child's physical and emotional growth and development. Competitive drives should be so directed that when children mature they will have developed a perspective in which competition and co-operation are properly balanced. Athletics become highly competitive and undesirable when the main emphasis is placed on winning; when emotional pressures are applied by teachers, parents and others; and when parental interest goes to the point of expressing concern over winning or losing.

Athletics

Under consideration here are the in-school and extracurricular programs for preteen-age children. Athletics are defined as physical activities in the form of competitive and noncompetitive sports and play activities. Developmental needs of elementary school children are best met if physical activities are informal and not highly competitive. Athletic competition should be gradually introduced with simple games involving few participants; five small groups are better than one large one. This plan will allow the child to develop early a sense of belonging as well as giving him the experience of pride in his accomplishment.

Children in this age group are particularly susceptible to bone and joint injury because the growing ends of the long bones have not yet calcified, and because they do not possess the protection of adult musculature. Such injury may result in interference with normal bone growth. For this reason body-contact sports, particularly wrestling, tackle

football, and boxing should be avoided in the sports program. Baseball, a good game in itself, often becomes highly competitive, a tendency that must be guarded against in this age group.

Programs

At present competitive athletic programs consist of the following: 1) those that are part of the regular school curriculum; 2) those outside the school curriculum, but under the community recreation programs; 3) those organized under independent, special interests related to various sports, and 4) unorganized, haphazard activities.

Provision of a program of suitable games for children of elementary school age requires professionally trained personnel who understand the needs and interests of children. Active community-wide interest and participation is needed. Particularly important is the close co-operation of parents, teachers, recreation leaders and qualified medical advisors. Schools and communities must recognize the dangers of exploitation of programs at any level. They must be alert to recognize the undue motivating pressures of advertising and commercialism in any form. The pressures which a highly organized competitive sports program place on children far outweigh any possible advantages which such programs may seem to offer.

Physical Aspects

Boys and girls are children and not "little men" or "little women" and in Nature's own way and time they gradually grow up. With understanding guidance they can reach healthy physical and emotional maturity. The physical maturation process does not have the same chronological curve in all children. Bone, joint, and muscle development shows individual variation during the preadolescent and adolescent years. Chronic fatigue has long been recognized as a factor which can interfere with healthy growth. Differentiation between healthy, transient fatigue and exhaustion which leads to chronic fatigue and other

ill effects may not be readily discernible. Exhaustion may lead to physical injury which may be acute and apparent, or non-apparent, but likely to manifest itself at a later time. Ill effects may result from its insidious interference with optimal body functions and so predispose to illness.

Good medical care assumes regular medical examinations, and any additional examinations which may be indicated in the course of the sports or physical education program. One objective of good medical care should be to detect any ill effects of sports upon the elementary school child. Another aim should be to detect evidences of need for encouraging participation in these activities. Careful and continuing health observation by coaches and teachers is an important part of a good health program.

Physical fitness is not attained solely by participation in competitive athletics, nor can it be said that physical fitness is necessarily related to degrees of strength and flexibility of certain posture muscles. The comparison of results of muscle testing in groups of children from different countries, likewise, is not a valid estimate of physical fitness or whether they are "healthy" school children. These comparisons fail to take into account the many factors which may be involved, such as heredity, rapidity of maturation, local customs pertaining to physical activities and the general interests of children of comparable age groups. In grade school children physical fitness can best be achieved not by greatly ballyhooed interscholastic or interleague competition, but by a program of intramural sports and play activities in which children of both sexes with varying abilities and capacities have an opportunity and are encouraged to participate freely. It is important that the various competitive sports are appropriate to the individual differences in children's capacities at successive developmental levels.

Emotional Aspects

All growing children need some regular

exercise. This should be a satisfying experience, not a routine chore imposed upon them by unimaginative adult leadership. Too often, however, a satisfying experience is denied children because they fail to "make the team." This may lead to the development of unwholesome attitudes toward both competition and athletics. Other children may be so highly motivated by the prestige of "wearing the uniform" or "winning the game" that their scale of values becomes warped in the process. All children need a sense of belonging, of being wanted, and their acceptance by playmates or adults should not be dependent solely upon success in competitive athletics.

Athletic competition among children produces strong emotional reactions in adults—parents, teachers, leaders, coaches, and even spectators. These reactions in the adults such as undue stress on "winning the game," undue adulation of the skilled athlete, coercion of the child beyond his ability or interests, all of these may be reflected in the children.

Physicians and educators should be interested in the growth and development, physically and emotionally, of all children. They should help children learn to play for the fun of playing. At the elementary school level programs of physical education should contain many noncompetitive, nonathletic activities such as games, stunts, hiking, nature study, etc., as well as team sports in which all children participate. The adult may then experience pride and satisfaction not only in the children's achievements, but in his own participation in and observation of their over-all physical, emotional, and social development.

The emotional and social needs of those children who for any reason are unable to participate in competitive athletics may often be met through opportunities for activities associated with sports programs.

Underlying emotional difficulties of various kinds may account for failure of a child to participate willingly in group activities or to gain satisfaction from any sport. After recognition of these emotional problems

further medical, social or other studies may be necessary.

Leadership

Proper leadership places the interest and welfare of children first. Guidance within the school program and in recreation programs outside of school activities is of basic importance. Supervision should be through individuals who understand the desires, needs and limitations of growing children. Such leadership will promote wholesome attitudes, encourage good health standards, and play an important role in the planning of proper programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. All children should have opportunities to develop skill in a variety of activities.

2. All such activities should take into account the age and developmental level of the child.

3. a. Athletic activities of elementary school children should be part of an overall school program. Competent medical supervision of each child should be ensured.

b. Health observation by teachers and others should be encouraged and help given by the physician.

4. Athletic activities outside of the school program should be on an entirely voluntary basis without undue emphasis on any special program or sport, and without undue emphasis upon winning. These programs should also include competent medical supervision.

5. Competitive programs organized on school, neighborhood and community levels will meet the needs of children 12 years of age and under. State, regional and national tournaments, bowl, charity and exhibition games are not recommended for this age group. Commercial exploitation in any form is unequivocally condemned.

6. Body-contact sports, particularly tackle football and boxing, are considered to have no place in programs for children of this age.

7. Competition is an inherent characteristic of growing, developing children. Prop-

erly guided it is beneficial and not harmful to their development.

8. Schools and communities as a whole must be made aware of the needs for personnel, facilities, equipment, and supplies which will assure an adequate program for children in this age group.

9. All competitive athletic programs should be organized with the co-operation of interested medical groups who will ensure adequate medical care before and during such programs. This should include thorough physical examinations at specified intervals, teaching of health observation to teachers and coaches, as well as attention to factors such as: a) injury; b) response to fatigue; c) individual emotional needs, and d) the risks of undue emotional strains.

10. Muscle testing is not, per se, a valid estimate of physical fitness, or of good health.

11. Participation in group activities is expected of every child. When there is a failure to do so, or lack of interest, underlying physical or emotional causes should be sought.

12. Leadership for young children should be such that highly organized, highly competitive programs would be avoided. The primary consideration should be a diversity of wholesome childhood experience which will aid in the proper physical and emotional development of the child into a secure and well integrated adult.

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