



## Co-Curricular Physical Activity and Sport Programs for Middle School Students

A Position Paper from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education

Participation in sport and physical activity programs outside of the regular curricular physical education program provides many positive benefits for middle school students\* when sound educational policies and qualified leadership are in place. It is the position of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education that all middle school students should have the opportunity to participate in a wide variety of organized sports and physical activities through intramurals, clubs, and school-sponsored co-curricular programs. Middle schools interscholastic sport programs should be based upon and implemented in developmentally appropriate ways that focus on student needs and interests. Middle schools should provide qualified leadership and appropriate and safe equipment and facilities for co-curricular physical activity and sport programs. Leaders of these programs should receive training in safety and emergency procedures. Standards provided by the National School-Age Care Alliance in their document NSACA Standards for Quality School-Age Care, (NSACA, 1998), are recommended as guidelines for providing a safe co-curricular and physical activity program.

### Benefits and Detrimental Effects of Sport Participation

Numerous authors and organizations have cited the potential benefits of participation in sport and physical activity programs (e.g., American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001; Darst & Pangrazi, 2002; Seefeldt & Vogel, 1986; Siedentop, 2001). A representative list of such benefits, developed by the World Health Organization (1998) includes the following:

- Improvement of motor skills and physical fitness;
- Enhancement of normal physical and social growth and maturation;
- Improvement of socialization, self-esteem, self-perception and psychological well-being;
- Establishment of a basis for a healthy lifestyle and lifelong commitment to physical activity (pp. 445-446).

In addition, the Centers for Disease Control (2002) lists the following benefits of physical activity, specifically for middle school students:

- Helps build and maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints;
- Helps control weight, build lean muscle, and reduce fat;
- Prevents or delays the development of high blood pressure and helps reduce blood pressure in some adolescents with hypertension;

- Appears to reduce depression and anxiety, improve mood, and enhance the ability to perform daily tasks throughout a lifetime;
- May contribute to a physically active lifestyle that may continue into adulthood.

Despite such an impressive array of potential benefits, many authorities warn of the detrimental effects associated with participation in organized sports. Among the more common concerns are: distortion of students' educational priorities (Steinberg, 1996), overspecialization in one sport that leads to overuse injuries and burnout, loss of identity (Wuest & Lombardo, 1994), increased injury rates and psychological stress (National Middle School Association, 1997), and distorted concepts of fairness (Covrig, 1996).

What appears to create such diverse views about the values of sport participation is that the individuals responsible for conducting such programs often lose sight of the programs' educational purposes and the fact that such programs may not be designed and implemented with the best interests of the participants in mind (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001; National Middle School Association, 1997; Siedentop, Mand, & Taggart, 1985; Wuest & Lombardo, 1994).

### **Addressing the Needs and Characteristics of Middle School Students**

Middle school students (ages 10-14) should be viewed as a distinct age group that represents a unique stage of development with definite physical, social, emotional, and intellectual characteristics. Although there are many comprehensive lists of these characteristics (cf. Mohnsen, 1997; Rice, 1996; Wiles and Bondi, 1986), the most relevant ones for the purpose of this paper may be summarized as follows:

- A period of rapid physical development marked by increases in height, weight, and muscular strength. Bone growth exceeds that of muscular development which may result in lack of coordination and awkwardness.
- A wide range of individual differences in physical maturation with girls advancing approximately two years sooner than boys; the greatest variability in physical development and size occurs about age 13.
- Fluctuations in basal metabolism that may cause students to be extremely restless at certain times and listless at others.
- Affiliation base broadens from family to peers; peers become increasingly important sources for models of behavior. Middle school students may become increasingly loyal to their peer groups and may be insensitive to persons outside it.
- Despite allegiance to peers, middle school students are still strongly dependent on parental and other adult values as they attempt to define their own adult identities.
- Are easily offended and sensitive to criticism about personal shortcomings and are often alienated, self-conscious, and lack self-esteem.

- Are often idealistic and frequently show concern for what is “right” and for social justice while demonstrating a concern for the less fortunate.
- Display a wide range of intellectual skills and abilities unique to their stage of development, including an increasing capacity for abstract thought.
- Frequently consider academic pursuits to be a lower priority than personal-social concerns.
- Prefer active to passive learning and desire to interact with peers during learning activities.

Finally, due to the many changes occurring both within and around themselves, coupled with increased decision-making opportunities, middle school students are extremely vulnerable to behaviors that place them “at risk” physically, socially, emotionally, and academically (Mohnsen, 1977). Therefore, they frequently need guidance from parents and teachers in order to make appropriate choices.

Middle schools were founded for the purpose of addressing the needs and characteristics of this age group. Effective middle schools offer a balanced, comprehensive, and success-oriented curriculum that is sensitive, caring, and supportive of student learning. They assist students to make the transition from late childhood to adolescence by bridging the gap between the self-contained structure of elementary school and the departmentalized curriculum of the high school. Among the most important characteristics of middle schools are their emphasis on innovative and flexible curricula, opportunities for exploratory study and enrichment activities, small learning communities, instructional staffs comprised of teachers who are well versed in teaching young adolescents, fostering the health and fitness of young adolescents in order to improve academic performance and linking school activities to families and local communities (Carnegie Task Force, 1989; Kohut, 1988).

Virtually all middle schools offer co-curricular (during and after school) activities that complement academic programs in order to further address the needs of their students. Ideally, these programs should be “less sophisticated” than those offered at high schools (McGlasson, 1973). In fact, middle schools are strongly advised to de-emphasize the sophisticated activities that were commonly found in junior high schools such as marching bands, dances and competitive athletics. Instead, middle school co-curricular activities should be less structured, focus strictly on student development and allow all students to participate (Kohut 1988; National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2001; National Middle School Association, 1997).

### **Intramurals and Interscholastic Sports at the Middle Schools**

Despite the recommendations just cited about desirable and appropriate co-curricular middle school activities, there is evidence that middle schools are offering these less structured, intramural-type activities less frequently than in the past while interscholastic sports competition continues to exist and expand at many middle schools. “Data from a 1993

national survey of 1,798 middle schools reported 63% of schools offered intramural sports programs for sixth graders, a decrease of 5% in 5 years. At the seventh grade level, 58% of grades 6-8 middle schools had intramural sports programs as compared with 67% in 1988, a decrease of 9% in five years. Similar decreases were found at the eighth grade level.” (National Middle School Association, 1997). On the other hand, in a study of 1,798 middle schools by McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins (1996), approximately 25% of schools provided interscholastic sports for sixth graders, 77% for seventh graders and 79% for eighth graders and those percentages were increasing for seventh graders and holding steady for eighth graders. This is an alarming trend since intramural activities and other related activities such as sport clubs have the potential to offer middle school students the variety of activities that are consistent with the philosophy and purposes of middle schools when they are carefully designed and implemented (Darst & Pangrazi, 2002; Siedentop, 2001). The National Association for Sport and Physical Education therefore recommends that all middle schools should provide high-quality intramural programs for middle school students and make them as accessible and available to all students.

Intramural programs should be a part of the co-curricular program in middle school and should include both competitive and recreational activities that build on the activities offered in the regular physical education program. They should also offer an array of novel activities that capture the interests of middle school students. Further, provisions should be made to use community facilities as well as those at schools as a way to add variety to programs and to meet student demand. Whenever competitive activities are offered, every effort should be taken to establish equitable competition. This may be accomplished in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to, equalizing teams according to players’ sizes, ability levels or prior experience with each activity (Seefeldt, 1987). Finally, the activities offered should be modified whenever necessary to accommodate the developmental levels and diverse skills of students (Rink, 1998) and should be conducted by qualified professionals (NASPE, 2000).

If it is possible to additionally provide for interscholastic competition in middle schools, it should be planned and implemented in developmentally appropriate ways with the needs and interests of middle school students as the primary focus. Middle school interscholastic programs should not attempt to emulate the highly structured interscholastic sport competition offered by high schools. Instead, several essential policies should be followed. First, a “no cut” policy should be in place so that students are not eliminated from participation. Such a policy benefits students, is consistent with the overall philosophy of middle schools and can be effectively implemented if there is a desire to do so (e.g., Burns, 1993; Doering 1997; Riemcke, 1988). Second, it is imperative that intramural programs continue to be offered even when interscholastic programs exist at middle schools. Greer and Thompson (1992) provide an excellent example of how intramurals can complement an interscholastic program either by serving as a transitional experience for sixth graders who may later choose to play on interscholastic teams or by accommodating those students who want to participate in sports, but at a level that is less demanding than required by interscholastic competition. In fact, these authors report a 90% student participation rate between the two types of programs. Third, playing rules, field dimensions and equipment should be modified to accommodate the diverse abilities of middle school students and facilitate equitable competition (cf. New York State Public High School Athletic Association, 2000). In

addition, implementing these modifications would most likely decrease the incidence of injuries associated with intense competition at middle schools (e.g., Dougherty, 2002).

Finally, leadership is the most critical factor in the success of any intramural or interscholastic sport program. Therefore, middle schools are urged to provide opportunities for prospective leaders and coaches to acquire the competencies necessary to work effectively with middle school students in any capacity (NASPE, 1995). These opportunities may include coaching certification programs, training programs, or orientation sessions about local policies. All intramural leaders need to be trained in the safety and rules of the activities they supervise and all intramural leaders must be well versed in the proper emergency procedures for the facility and the locality in case of injury or environmental emergency.

*\* The term "middle school students" is used throughout this paper to simplify the discussion.*

*The term encompasses the ages of 10-14 years that includes virtually all students who attend grades 6-8, the most common middle school structure. Terms such as preadolescents and young adolescents are also used in the middle school literature to describe this age group.*

## **Recommendations**

1. The most appropriate practice for middle school sport and physical activity programs is to provide a comprehensive array of after-school programs to meet the diverse experiences, interests and ability levels of students. These programs must always be based on the needs of middle school students and should include intramurals, activity clubs (e.g., sport, dance, exercise), special events, and open gym days/nights. Such programs should take precedence over interscholastic sports competition.

The activities offered through after-school programs should include those introduced in middle school physical education classes as well as novel programming concepts that may capture the interests of diverse groups of middle school students.

All students should be encouraged to participate in such after-school programs regardless of their ability and prior experience with organized sports. The primary purposes of these programs are to provide opportunities for students to:

- (1) improve self-esteem and feelings of competence through positive interactions with their peers and adults
  - (2) acquire new skills and refine those previously learned
  - (3) learn to function effectively as members of a team or group
  - (4) improve personal health and fitness levels
  - (5) have fun and enjoy physical activity
2. If middle schools decide to offer interscholastic sport programs, they should be progressively phased in. For example, the types of after-school programs listed above should be the only ones available to sixth graders. This policy has several benefits for middle school students including:
    - (1) providing a "transitional experience" so they become accustomed to staying after

- school to participate with classmates;
- (2) introducing them to sports that they might have been previously unfamiliar with;
  - (3) bolstering confidence and self-esteem by letting students experience equitable competition and developmentally appropriate activities;
  - (4) allowing them to participate in an environment that is less structured and less demanding than typically found in interscholastic sports.
3. The types of interscholastic sports offered to middle school students should be carefully considered. Sports that encourage students to concentrate on personal improvement (e.g., track and field, swimming, etc.), accommodate large numbers of participants, and are inherently safe should take precedence over contact sports or sports that require extensive amounts of equipment or space.
  4. If interscholastic sports are offered at the middle school level, they must address the unique characteristics of middle school students. Therefore, playing rules, equipment, field dimensions, etc. must be modified to accommodate the ability levels and capacities of the participants. Middle school athletic programs must not attempt to imitate those conducted at the high school level. Safety and developmental appropriateness must be the primary concerns. In addition, middle school athletic programs should have skill refinements, basic tactics and effective team membership as their primary goals instead of winning or entertaining spectators.
  5. All students who want to participate and are willing to make the commitment necessary for team membership should be allowed to participate in interscholastic sports at the middle school. An exclusive interscholastic program (cutting) has no place at the middle school since it contradicts the very tenets on which the middle school was founded. A variety of policies can be implemented to overcome any and all obstacles related to achieving this goal.
  6. Even if interscholastic sports are offered at the middle school, the after-school programs listed in the first recommendation should continue to be offered since they are more consistent with the overall philosophy of the middle school.

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