



## What Happened to Physical Education?

By **Melissa Halas-Liang, MA, RD, CDE**

Remember your childhood years of playing tag, racing friends on big wheels, and meeting the neighborhood kids at the local playground or creek? Remember daily PE class, experiencing new activities with your friends? How we wish to go back to those days! But a lot has changed in the last few decades. As of 2007, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation reported only 36% of children were meeting the recommended 1 hour of physical activity per day. Only about 30% of school children participate in a sport on a regular basis, even though studies show that participation in sports is correlated with a greater likelihood of attending college, increased self-esteem, and stronger leadership skills. Many schools have decreased the time devoted to PE in an attempt to meet the increasingly high academic standards mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act. As parents, it is our job to question whether this is really necessary. Does physical activity take time away from academics, or does it complement learning?

Research has repeatedly shown that physical activity supports children's mental and emotional well-being, which improves their ability to learn. Physical activity also promotes healthy body weight, which reduces the number of school days a child misses due to illness, further supporting their learning. In other words, taking time out of the school day for physical activity doesn't detract from academic performance – it helps support it. And as the epidemic of overweight and obesity continues to claim a third of our children and adolescents, the nation cannot help but reconsider the critical importance of physical education classes in our school systems.

### **So what can parents do?**

These facts are here to empower you—the parent, guardian, family member—to take action today, for a healthier generation tomorrow. Talk to the school administration, go to the district school board or Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, or pass around petitions to the other parents. Get creative! If school staff are not available to run physical activity programs, parent volunteers can implement lunch time activities, classroom yoga, or even supervise a PE class! There are so many ways to make a difference. Persistence is key!

In the meantime, get your kids in the habit of being physically active at home. Try these suggestions for helping your kids live a healthier happier lifestyle and stay active in a sedentary world.

### **Limit screen time.**

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends limiting screen time to less than two hours a day for children over 2, and none at all for those under 2. Per the AAP media kid on children's media use, 8-18 year olds spend an average of 7 ½ hours per day on various media! Screen time is not just TV anymore. Screen time includes TV, video games, computers, tablets, and even smart phones! And you can buy accessories for all of these devices designed for babies as young as 6 months! Try your best to cut back, but when screen time does happen, sneak activity in with it. Keep jump ropes, an exercise ball, a mini trampoline, or even an exercise bike in front of the TV, kids can't resist! Trade off using the equipment during commercial breaks.

**Get moving!** Start a new family routine. Take a walk around the neighborhood after dinner, find a new place to hike every Sunday, or ride bikes to the pizza parlor on Friday nights. Bring back the oldies-but-goodies, including games like tag, hopscotch, whiffle ball, and kick the can. Try swimming, basketball, tennis, soccer, and volleyball. If your child is exposed to these activities, they may find a sport they love and you can sign them up! Get more ideas on how to help your kids have fun while moving their bodies!

**Reduce stress.** Children's lives are busier than ever, and with their packed schedules comes stress. Being active and spending time outdoors helps kids re-set and take a mental break from their scheduled activities. Stretching is another great way to reduce stress and promote well-being. Try incorporating bodyweight exercises like yoga or floor Pilates in the morning, before bed, or on a rainy day. Plus yoga has many body, mind and spirit benefits for kids! Research has shown that exercises that require balance, timing, and dexterity can improve a child's learning abilities.

**Incorporate a healthy diet.** Which came first, the healthy diet or the physical activity? These two activities, when incorporated into one's life, have powerful benefits. A study of more than 3,500 school children found that those that ate the healthiest also tended to incorporate more regular physical activity. These physically active, healthy eating children also had fewer instances of learning and behavioral problems.