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The Role of Physical Education in Addressing Childhood Obesity

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Background

We are bombarded almost daily with government, scientific or media reports and messages concerning the growing 'problem' of childhood obesity and the possible consequences of this for children's current and future health. Perhaps not surprisingly, this has led to various policies, strategies and responses from government in recent years which have highlighted schools to be instrumental in addressing the issue. For example, in 2004, the government's white paper 'Choosing Health' highlighted 'reducing obesity and improving diet and nutrition' as one of its priorities, noting how action would be linked to activities in schools, as well as communities and workplaces. More recently, 'Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives', which is a cross-government strategy published in 2008, sets out the government's ambition 'to be the first major nation to reverse the rising tide of obesity and overweight in the population...' The initial focus of this strategy is on children, and schools, including physical education and physical education teachers, are seen as critical to achieving the above. For example, the strategy identifies the need to develop tailored programmes in schools to increase the participation of obese and overweight pupils in physical education and sporting activities.

Furthermore, and perhaps in the desire to make a difference and/or in recognition of the expectations being placed upon them, it seems that individual schools and teachers are responding to the issue in varied and different ways. However, it is felt that some of the reports and messages concerning the obesity 'problem', as well as the measures being taken or advocated to tackle obesity, are misleading, misguided and could do more harm than good.

Research Questions

In light of the above, this paper will focus on physical education and childhood obesity and consider the role that the subject and profession can potentially and sensibly play in addressing the issue. Firstly, and to inform the discussion, some of the key facts, issues and considerations concerning childhood obesity will be explored. Some of the formal guidance and recommendations that are available on the issue will then be summarised, before concluding with some practical and specific recommendations for physical education practice.

Methods

The paper will draw on the relevant obesity literature. Firstly, obesity will be defined and the scale of the 'problem' explored. Alongside this, it will equally be acknowledged how the obesity issue and statistics have been questioned or refuted by some researchers. The main physical and psychological health problems and complications associated with obesity and the factors (genetic, behavioural and environmental) believed to contribute to obesity will then be considered. Given these, the importance of physical education, physical activity and physical activity promotion to obese children will be highlighted.

The paper will then explore how to effectively promote and involve obese youngsters in physical education and physical activity and in so doing, will argue that the same general messages and advice with regards to promoting and involving all children in physical activity apply to obese children. Additionally though, there are some specific philosophical as well as practical considerations and sensitivities which need to be taken into account. For instance, from a philosophical point of view, there is concern that some of the measures currently being taken or advocated to tackle childhood obesity are misguided and, if implemented inappropriately, could do more harm than good. Examples include weighing and measuring children's Body Mass Index, inspecting children's lunch boxes, introducing health report cards, and running fitness testing and 'fat' clubs aimed specifically at

overweight or obese youngsters. From a practical point of view, examples of considerations and sensitivities likely to affect obese children's ability to perform, enjoy and develop positive attitudes towards physical education and physical activity, and which therefore have implications for practice, include orthopaedic problems, poor exercise tolerance, movement efficiency and body management, low self-esteem/confidence, self-consciousness/embarrassment, and isolation.

The paper will move on to focus its attention towards some of the formal guidance and recommendations made on overweight and/or obesity by key organizations such as the British Heart Foundation, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence and the Department of Health. Following on, some specific, 'common sense' recommendations for physical education practice will be presented. As applicable, these recommendations take into account the related literature, the considerations, sensitivities, and formal guidance outlined earlier, plus they draw on recommendations which emanated from a specialist seminar on 'Physical Education and Childhood Obesity' organized by the Association for Physical Education (afPE) in 2007.

Frame

The paper will explore childhood obesity and the role of physical education in addressing the issue from a multi-disciplinary perspective. It will draw on the related literature from, and the disciplines of physiology, psychology, sociology and pedagogy to fully inform the content, discussion and the resulting recommendations for physical education practice.

Research findings

Whilst schools and physical education in particular are clearly expected to play a role in addressing obesity, to date, little clear information and guidance is available to support schools and physical education teachers in their efforts in this respect. This paper will attempt to address this gap by summarising the key facts, issues and considerations relating to childhood obesity and by offering some 'common sense' recommendations for practice. It is hoped that the latter will help physical education teachers to respond to obesity and the associated issues appropriately, convey sound and sensible messages and advice, and effectively promote and involve obese youngsters in physical activity both within and beyond the school and curriculum.