Physical education and recess are just as important as reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Are American schools neglecting the education of children’s bodies in favor of filling up their heads?

Physical activity is the greatest gift you can give your body. Health is the best legacy you can leave your kids. So why are recess and physical education increasingly left out of the equation when schools schedule the other three “Rs” of reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmatic?

The question is important. It deserves attention say Robert Pangrazi and Charles Corbin. Both are professors of exercise science and physical education at Arizona State University. Both are nationally known experts on physical activity.

Six-year-old Brooks could bat and throw like the pro he is named for before the age of two. He has excellent hand/eye coordination and joins in nearly every organized baseball, soccer, or football game he can find. His sister, nine-year-old Danielle, is just the opposite. She shuns organized sports and avoids skills-related games, opting instead to climb trees, play tag, and roller blade.

Which will grow up to be the healthier adult? Perhaps Danielle, say Pangrazi and Corbin. Children who adopt “lifestyle” activities—which can be done on a moment’s notice without extensive skills, equipment, or required teams—tend to remain more active throughout their lives than people who grow up involved primarily in “skills” activities.

Pangrazi and Corbin have co-authored many books and programs on physical activity. Pangrazi specializes in children’s issues and the education of physical education teachers. Corbin focuses on promoting healthy, active lifestyles for people of all ages.

“Research shows that activity patterns are established primarily in one’s youth,” Pangrazi says. “That is why physical education and recess are as important as reading, writing, and arithmetic in school curriculums.”

“The real problem,” Corbin adds, “is that schools see themselves as dealing mostly with heads. They tend to feel that if they fill up the head, the body will take care of itself. That’s just not the case.”

The issue is longer, more productive lives.

“Look at it this way,” Pangrazi says. “On your deathbed, would you trade your life for the ability to read?”

Pangrazi and Corbin believe schools must continue educating the “whole person,” despite the escalating competition for curriculum time among worthy mathematics, science, and computer programs.
“Our goal should be teaching basic skills that lead to lifelong proficiency, or in this case, activity, rather than starting young to build future champions.”

Pangrazi and Corbin are principal authors of recent national physical activity guidelines for children published by the National Association for Physical Education and Sport.

“These research-based guidelines show that elementary students should be physically active for at least 30 to 60 minutes every day,” Pangrazi says. “When I say active, I mean active in both a physical education class and through the running and free play they do in shorter, 10-to 15-minute bursts during recess. Both are critical.”

“When taught correctly, physical education provides the tools kids need to become active and fit for a lifetime,” Corbin explains. “Recess is a time to get away; it’s discretionary time when kids can move freely or just mingle and collect their thoughts. Recess and physical education have two very different goals.”

Not surprisingly, both Pangrazi and Corbin would like to see physical education classes offered five days a week in all schools—elementary, junior, and senior high. After all, they argue, breathing is just as important as reading.

It may be much more important, they assert, given that even brilliant minds cease functioning when bodies are felled by heart attacks and other illnesses associated with long-term inactivity.

“Arizona is probably one of the best states in the union when it comes to including physical education as part of the elementary school curriculum. Yet, it’s taught only two, maybe three times a week,” Pangrazi says. “So, we must do it right.”

For Pangrazi, “doing it right” means ensuring that physical education is not mistaken for athletics.

“Physical education is for the masses,” he explains. “It’s about prompting the habit of activity and teaching tools that provide the best opportunity for keeping active throughout one’s life. Athletics are for the elite.”

According to Pangrazi, a quality elementary school physical education program is one with a primary goal of teaching kids to be active and successful. It teaches them to feel like winners in ways that reach far beyond the scope of sports. A good program incorporates many types of age and developmentally appropriate activities, preferably in short two- to four-week sessions. Every child is exposed to at least some activity that he or she likes and is good at. A good program focuses heavily on processes, not outcomes. More importantly, it rewards efforts, not results.

“We’re talking about starting with two things that kids like—movement and fun—and building on them,” Corbin says. “You start with basic skills and forget all about the concept that says ‘I have to win.’ It’s about realizing that no one is good at everything and everyone is good at something. It’s the ‘doing’ that’s important.”

Pangrazi and Corbin advocate a “task,” rather than an “ego” approach to teaching physical activity. Task is process-driven. Everyone can do it.

For example, in a task-oriented approach to teaching batting, the teacher and student focus on the fundamentals of stance and swing. Are the feet planted correctly? The hands together? Is the child watching the ball all the way to the bat? Is he or she swinging to meet the ball, not kill it, and swinging level?

Doing the basic skill correctly is rewarded. Students come to realize that they can bat correctly. They learn to enjoy trying and they feel good about themselves. Ball contact is not important at this stage.

Conversely, an ego-oriented approach to batting would focus more on the outcome. Did you hit the ball? How often? How hard and how far?
A teacher compliments the hit, regardless of how well the fundamentals are performed. In this approach to learning, a batter who hit the ball farthest would have fun; one who did not make contact probably would not. What’s more, the “good” batter probably would not enjoy practice because there would be no one there to “beat.”

“We must get off the kick of believing that we have to get kids into highly competitive programs really early so that they can be the best,” Pangrazi says. “After all, genetics control up to 70 percent of one’s total physical performance potential.”

Factors such as physical size, speed, agility, reaction time, and strength are pretty much God-given, he explains. Which means that coaches can only train your son or daughter to become adults who end up watching sports instead of doing them,” Corbin says. “Sports participation potential.”

“It works both ways. “Studies have shown that among children who did well in athletics in fifth grade (age 11), only one in four, or 25 percent, did well later in high school,” Pangrazi says. Then there is the opposite. Thirty-five percent of basketball players in the NBA never played basketball before their junior year of high school, the most notable being Michael Jordan.”

Either way, sport skills alone are not the point. “All too often, people who grow up playing sports—especially team sports—become adults who end up watching sports rather than doing them,” Corbin says. “Sports can involve a high degree of skill and not all that much activity. So, the person who remains active, doing whatever, is better off long term.”

Corbin specializes in fitness and adults. He defines fitness as being the sum of what you are. Activity, he says, is the path that gets—and keeps—you there.

“I was on Good Morning America responding to the claim that America’s children are inactive and unfit,” Corbin says. “In reality, our children are much more fit and active than we are as adults. Of concern is that physical activity among young people declines with age. With each passing year in school, kids become less active.” Such inactivity can be tracked.

“We’ve already talked about opting out in Little League,” he continues. “We also know that the single biggest decline in activity occurs among girls during the teenage years. A large percentage of all kids drop out of physical activity by their sophomore year in high school.”

Pangrazi and Corbin believe that schools—including junior and senior highs—should become the first line of defense in the war on inactivity because kids attend daily through age 18. But the emphasis should be on interesting activity for all students, not just on high-level athletics for the elite few.

The second most likely time for activity occurs immediately after school ends. That is when many children, especially pre-teens, attend some type of after-school care programs. The ASU researchers say that such programs should encourage movement and non-competitive activities.
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### Time to P.L.A.Y.

**Facts are facts** and when they deal with inactivity in America circa 1999, the facts are rather grim. In the United States today, one of every two youngsters, ages 12 to 21, is not active on a regular basis. Six of 10 adults get little or no exercise. Obesity rates have increased 54 percent among children ages 6 to 11. The country is filling up with sluggos.

ASU researcher Bob Pangrazi works with the Arizona Department of Health Services to help address the issue. He has developed a program called P.L.A.Y., short for Promoting Lifetime Activity for Youth. The program does just that. It teaches kids the importance of being active for at least 30 minutes each and every day.

**When you are all alone with nothing to do:**
- Turn on the radio and dance
- Thrill mom or dad by vacuuming the house
- Shoot hoops
- Rake the leaves
- Hopscotch or in-line skate

**Activities for groups:**
- Play tag or hide and seek
- Play indoor volleyball with a balloon
- Jump rope
- Have a limbo contest
- Play some type of baligame

**Activities for cold weather:**
- Ice skate
- Shovel snow off your driveway
- Make snowmen or snow angels
- Practice throwing snowballs at a tree
- Go sled riding

**Indoor activities:**
- Shoot hoops using a paper “basketball”
- Run up and down the stairs
- Practice your karate moves
- Mop the floor
- Keep hitting a balloon up in the air

P.L.A.Y. stresses that activity can come in short 5 to 10 minute bursts. The program also teaches specific activities that can be done in any weather or location. Staying active is easier when it is lifestyle-oriented. Simply walking or running around one’s yard can work.

The program begins with lots of teacher prompts to get children up and moving. Students even keep activity journals for several weeks.

“Now in its third year, P.L.A.Y. has more than 45,000 Arizona kids up and moving,” Pangrazi says. “We teach kids to get active five times per day, regardless of whether they are alone or with friends, indoors or out.”

The program pushes other key messages as well. Exercise does not have to be boring. And kids do not have to run until they are sick to be healthy.

Several easy-to-read P.L.A.Y. brochures offer specific activities for different situations. Following are a few suggestions to get children active at home.

**Indoor activities:**
- Mop the floor
- Practice your karate moves
- Run up and down the stairs
- Make snowmen or snow angels
- Practice throwing snowballs at a tree
- Go sled riding

**Activities for cold weather:**
- Ice skate
- Shovel snow off your driveway
- Make snowmen or snow angels
- Practice throwing snowballs at a tree
- Go sled riding

**Activities for groups:**
- Play tag or hide and seek
- Play indoor volleyball with a balloon
- Jump rope
- Have a limbo contest
- Play some type of baligame

Once at home, parents should give their kids and themselves every opportunity for many forms of activity. Studies show that children with active parents tend to be more active themselves.

“If I only had one wish I’d wish for good health. We all know that phrase,” Pangrazi says. “But when push comes to shove, too many people put studying and job success ahead of a legacy of health for themselves and their children.”

For more information about specific research programs, contact Robert P. Pangrazi, Ph.D., 480.965.3593, E-mail to pangrazi@asu.edu, or Charles B. Corbin, Ph.D., 480.965.7652, E-mail to chuck.corbin@asu.edu. Department of Exercise Science and Physical Education, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Or visit the department’s Internet site at: http://www.asu.edu/clas/espe/

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LINDSEY MICHAELS

“Once the boy could learn to trust, the horse moved and responded to his commands. That little boy even went on to mentor other kids,” she says.

“Horses know that when the saddle and bridle go on, it’s time to work. When the saddle and bridle come off, it’s time to play,” Crews explains. “Our students see that too, and eventually start making similar associations. For example, when you go inside a classroom and sit down, it’s time to focus and be quiet. Going outside means it’s time to run and play.”

Crews admits that drugs are needed to help control some disorders. But she and her constituents have found that physical activity can often be used as a treatment alternative.

She recommends 30 to 60 minutes of vigorous activity at least five days per week for every child. She recommends structured, activity-based programs for those with special needs. Vigorous movement, she assures, can both cure—and prevent—a wide variety of ailments. —LINDSEY MICHAELS

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