

Why are sport and physical activity so important for our children?

The following two articles provide some background information as to why The Gap State School enthusiastically encourages students actively engaging in physical activity.

Article 1: Give your child a sporting chance

Escalating childhood obesity rates and an increase in the number of children developing health problems previously only seen in adults have sent alarm bells ringing about children's health and wellbeing.

Television, computer games, the demands placed on working parents and the fast-food industry have all been blamed for the decline in children's health and fitness.

To reverse this trend, Queensland schools are using the key learning area of Health and Physical Education (HPE), as well as school sport, to help students understand the importance of a healthy lifestyle and physical activity.

Education Queensland Senior Education Officer Anita Woodward said the HPE syllabus for Years 1 to 10 focused on students learning skills, knowledge and attitudes that promoted health, fitness and personal wellbeing.

'Physical activity and learning about health issues are very important to a child's overall development,' she said.

'In the area of physical activity, the syllabus concentrates on children learning a variety of physical skills and putting those skills into practice.

'It also covers a wide range of health issues, including diet and nutrition, sun safety and drug education — in fact, anything that has an impact on a person's health.'

Mary Summerson, coordinator of Education Queensland's School Sport Unit, said participating in a school sport program allowed students to apply skills learnt in HPE to a formal game.

'You'll find that most schools and areas of the state have a school sport program,' she said. 'Programs vary depending on the school and what suits the students best.'

Association of Independent Schools of Queensland Executive Director Dr John Roulston said that each Independent school was responsible for determining its school sport and physical education program in consultation with parents and the school community.

'Some schools may offer bursaries and scholarships to students based on their sporting talents,' he said.

'It is not unusual for Independent schools, which cannot offer a formal time in the timetable for school sport, to field teams in a range of age divisions for many sports played locally.'

Shalom Catholic College (Bundaberg) sports coordinator Jenni Gagen said that as well as having obvious health benefits, sport and physical activity taught students important values.

'Children learn respect, commitment, cooperation, loyalty, discipline, selflessness, pursuit of excellence and competition through sport,' Ms Gagen said.

'The skills they learn, the friendships they make and the wins and losses they experience make participating in sport a valuable learning experience all round.'

The benefits of sport and physical activity may also flow on to the classroom. Ms Summerson said participating in sport and physical activity could help to improve children's concentration levels.

'I believe there is definitely a link between physical activity, whether it is through sport or HPE, and mental sharpness in children,' she said.

As with many behaviours and habits, the amount of physical activity a child undertakes is directly influenced by the amount of activity undertaken by his or her parents.

'Mum and dad need to be good role models for physical activity,' Ms Woodward said.

'Simple and enjoyable activities like going for a walk with your children in the afternoon, throwing a ball around or walking the dog together will increase the level of physical activity of you and your children.'

'We need to send a message to children that daily physical activity is just as important to your health and wellbeing as eating, sleeping and cleaning your teeth.'

She said helping a child to become more physically active may mean just finding a sport or activity that the child enjoys.

'Not all children like team sports and not all children like competitive sports,' she said. 'Have a look around at what is offered in your community, and maybe what your child's friends are doing.'

'Once you find an activity your child enjoys and that offers positive experiences, he or she is more likely to continue with it long term, possibly even into adulthood.'

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Article 2: Fact Sheet – Childhood Obesity: Australian Report Card

- There are an estimated 1.5m people aged under 18 who are considered overweight or obese. This translates to 20-25% of children and adolescents. (1)
- About 20-25% of Australian children are overweight or obese, and the proportion is increasing at an accelerating rate, particularly since the mid-1980s – a trend which reflects international patterns. At the same time the aerobic fitness of children has taken a sharp downward turn since 1970-1980, trending downwards at 0.4% per annum.(2)
- Between 1985 and 1997 population prevalence of overweight increased by 60-70%, obesity increased 2-4 fold and combined obesity levels doubled suggesting obesity and overweight are not only increasing, but accelerating.(3)
- “By 2020, with the current trend in weight gains, 80% of all Australia adults and one third of all children will be overweight or obese”.(4)
- In Australia there is evidence of a decline in walking and cycling for transport among children. A large scale Queensland study revealed that as many as 30% of Australian children have low fitness levels and 60% have moderate to poor motor skills.(5)
- Some studies show a decline in the fitness of Australian children, with the least fit deteriorating fastest over time. Data from the South Australian Talent Search program indicates a decline of about 0.6% per year in 20 m multistage shuttle run performance of 12-15 year olds. A Tasmanian survey found that performance of 7-10 year old Tasmanian children on a 1.6 k run/walk had declined between 1985 and 1995, by 0.2% per year.(6)
- “... physical education is being dramatically reduced throughout schools in Australia ... Ironically there is no dispute about the importance of physical education, yet there is a serious problem with its delivery”.(7)
- The 2001 census showed that 43% of all families with children aged less than 15 years were couple families where both parents were employed. This is the most common of all families with children aged less than 15 years. 10% of families with children aged 15 or less were one parent working families. There has been an increase in the proportion of families where both parents are working, or the sole parent is working since 1986. (8)
- In 1999 just over half (53%) of all families with at least one parent employed and with children aged less than 12 years reported using some form of flexible working arrangement to care for children.(9)

Physical Activity among Australian Children(10)

- Outside of school hours, in the 12 months prior to April 2003, of approximately 2,647,500 children aged 5-14 years in Australia it is estimated that 1,630,400 or 62% participated in organised sport.
- Of all physical activities swimming had the greatest participation rate (17% or 439,000) followed by outdoor soccer (13% or 356,000).
- Boys - outdoor soccer had the highest participation rate (22% or 301,000) followed by swimming (16% or 213,600). Girls - netball had the highest participation rate (18% or 233,000) followed by swimming (17% or 225,500).
- 1,630,400 or 62% of children rode a bike, a decrease from 64% in 2000.
- 605,000 or 23% of children took did skateboarding or rollerblading, a decrease from 31% in 2000.

International Comparisons

- About 1.7 billion people around the world are overweight or obese. Among children one in 10 is too fat. The prevalence is doubling every 10 years.(11)
- In the U.S the prevalence of overweight more than doubled from 1980 to 1994.(12)

- In Canada the prevalence of overweight more than doubled from 1981-1996. (11 to 33% in boys and 13 to 27% in girls).(13)
- Increasing overweight is also being reported in western and southern Europe where the prevalence of overweight in 7-11 y olds is currently greater than 20% in the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Croatia, and greater than 30% in Spain, Italy and Greece.(14)

Physical Activity and Sport: Amount of Activity

- The amount of activity recommended by the International Society for the Study of Obesity for weight maintenance (i.e. to prevent the transition from overweight to obesity) is moderate intensity activity of at least 45-60 minutes per day which is around twice the current recommendation for cardiovascular disease and diabetes prevention.(15)
- The recommendation for preventing weight regain by the formerly obese is 60-90 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity per day.(16)
- Physical activity is (or the thermic effect of exercise) is the only component of energy expenditure that can be altered by will. There is evidence that the level of physical activity energy expenditure is associated with fatness. Reduced physical activity energy expenditure can play a role in weight gain over time. Physical activity energy expenditure is a modifiable risk factor. (17)

General Information

- Obesity is defined as a condition in which excess fat has accumulated, to the extent that health may be impaired.(18)
- The primary cause of obesity is an energy imbalance – high energy intake (from food) coupled with poor energy expenditure (low levels of physical activity and high levels of sedentary behaviour).(19)
- Studies indicate that relative body weight is sustained from childhood to adulthood, and, once children or adolescents are overweight or obese, their weight is unlikely to track backwards.(20)
- Up to 50 per cent of obese adolescents remained obese in adulthood.(21)
- “Perhaps the single most important time to increase physical activity and decrease sedentary activities such as television watching and computer time is after school between 3 and 6 pm” (22)
- A study estimating the cost of diseases such as coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, colon cancer, breast cancer, depression and stroke resulting from inactivity suggested that every 1 percent increase in the proportion of physically active people could be expected to save 122 lives lost through coronary heart disease, colon cancer and type 2 diabetes.(23)
- The financial burden associated with obesity in Australia was estimated in 1995-96 to be between \$680-1239 million.(24)
- Addressing the determinants of health and well being for children and adolescents will improve the population health and well being overall.(25)
- Higher physical activity levels are associated with more favourable Cardio Vascular Disease risk factor profiles.(26)
- Physical activity has been demonstrated to be a significant predictor for blood lipid profile levels.(27)
- Habitual physical activity in youth has also been associated with enhanced skeletal health.(28)

Effects of Obesity and Overweight

- Obesity in childhood is associated with increased adult cardiovascular morbidity and mortality, regardless of the adult weight.(29)

- Childhood overweight is associated with increased risk factors for heart disease such as raised blood pressure, blood cholesterol and blood sugar.(30)
- The prevalence of type 2 diabetes is also reported to be on the rise in children and adolescents.(31)
- Childhood obesity is also related to medical conditions such as respiratory disorders, orthopaedic problems, arthritis, hepatic complications, and decreased release of growth hormone, gastroesophageal reflux and gastric emptying disturbances.(32)
- Obesity is a risk factor for sleep-associated breathing disorders and may be associated with asthma.(33)
- Evidence suggests that increasing age and female gender are associated with lower self-esteem in obese children and adolescents.(34)
- Physical activity in children and youth is associated with beneficial effects and health outcomes in adiposity, skeletal health, and several aspects of psychological health.(35)

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Source: *Australian Sports Commission - Active After-school Communities Program*