

Alternative Physical Education: A Movement for Life

by RV staff writer

You've probably seen it a million times: a group of somewhat demoralized kids on an athletic field, wearing shorts and shivering. They're all hoping to avoid going out on the field to kick a soccer ball, catch a baseball, throw a football, or perform any number of tasks that are part and parcel of the team sports we see on television. The reluctance and frustration of this scene repeats itself inside during winter sports season. The shorter kids wonder how they're ever going to get the basketball anywhere near the hoop. The slower kids feel humiliated by the realization that they are never going to avoid being hit in dodge ball. For many teens, traditional physical education programs modeled on team sports are nothing but a misery. However, there's a new game in town, and it's picking up speed—alternative physical education.

Originally engineered to meet the needs of kids who could not, for a variety of reasons, participate in traditional sports, alternative physical education has become the inclusive, go-to solution for combating inactivity. According to the American Heart Association, one in three teens is obese, and chronic health problems related to obesity in adults who are not physically active are now being seen in kids. A generation of kids who spend a great deal of their time in front of a screen of one kind or another has resulted in a reluctance or inability to meet the daily requirement of sixty minutes of vigorous activity in order to be healthy. But it is also true that up until recently, the standard activities provided in physical education classes just haven't been appealing to many teens. Traditional physical education certainly doesn't account for the fact that not everyone is a sports fan.

In order to assist teens in not only becoming healthy right now, but also in becoming physically active (and happy about it!) as adults, physical education programs are beginning to think outside of the box. It's not simple obesity that is the issue. Inactive teens, obese or not, tend to have more difficulty handling stress and social interactions. By taking the focus off of weight loss and putting it on feeling healthy and strong, physical education programs are becoming more relevant in the daily lives of teens. The diversity in alternative physical education programs allows everyone to participate in a way that is healthy and enjoyable.

When alternatives to physical education were first implemented, one of the first team-building activities to be used in high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools was the ropes course. Courses included climbing activities that required everyone to work together. Ropes courses are still quite popular, even with teens who would not ordinarily participate in physical activity. Weight training has also entered the curriculum in many schools. It allows teens to work on core strength, which improves their ability to participate in other physical activities.

Strength and teamwork are not the only factors that make up the whole picture of the healthy, physically active teen. Physical education programs are now adding fun to the mix. Playing on the

popularity of video games, some programs are adding software exercise activities like dance, tennis, archery, and jogging. New programs include healthy thinking as well as physical movement. Mindfulness-based activities, such as yoga, Pilates, and martial arts, help to round out the physical education experience. Some programs are even including activities like fishing, which have the added benefit of getting teens to spend time outdoors. Outdoor time, doing something besides getting hit in the head with a ball you can't catch, simultaneously acts as a stress-buster and expands the daily experiences of a generation that spends far too much time playing video games in the basement.

The concept behind alternative physical education is to get teens to experience the benefits of these activities not only while they're doing them, but in their daily lives as well. The improved ability to deal with daily stress is just one way in which these programs benefit teens. Improved strength, flexibility, and a higher activity level in general also have the by-product of combating some of the worst side effects of obesity in kids who are not already physically fit: depression and low self-esteem. These mental and emotional roadblocks are by no means experienced solely by obese teens, however. By expanding the activities offered in physical education programs to include a wide enough variety to entice even the most reluctant participants, alternative physical education has immeasurable benefits for everyone. And for many teens, a love of physical activity that carries through into adult life is a far better goal than just getting the ball into the net.

