

Adding Sensory Education to Physical Education

By Eli Thompson



Fitness

What are kids learning during physical education class? I can remember running around and having fun playing soccer, basketball, and ultimate Frisbee. I learned the basics of these sports. I learned that I was in the middle of the athletic spectrum, more involved than some, but not as good as others. But I didn't learn much else. Is phys ed just about sports or should there be more to it? Perhaps it should be about educating our children about how to use their physical bodies more effectively in everything they do.

Our educational system emphasizes the importance of preparing children mentally and intellectually for adulthood, but not physically. Handicapped by a lack of sensory education, they misuse their bodies in most of their actions. And like fish swimming in water, they have little sense of the effort and strain being created because they are so accustomed to it.

ures we use to assess our youths' physical performance are results-based. However, these markers are all external to us. Little to no focus is given to how it feels to perform the task. By using our proprioceptive, kinesthetic, and tactile senses, our brain tracks every movement and action we perform. This internally-felt sense, acting as a self-monitoring system, is our most powerful and accurate assessment tool. Leaving it undeveloped ultimately raises children who can't be truly self-reliant or self-correcting in their actions.

Such a somatic ignorance often leads our youth to grow into physically limited adults. The misuse of their bodies in their actions causes unnecessary strain in their tissues. This daily strain accumulates over the years, guiding their body's growth toward misalignment and dysfunction. This is especially detrimental in children and teens because their postural and structural patterns are still forming. By the time they reach adulthood, those now chronically-habituated patterns become embedded into their adult bodies.

Structural Integration – Helping One Person at a Time

I see these challenges every day in my Structural Integration practice. Clients come to me because their chronic patterns have turned into chronic pain. (See "Taking the Pain Out of Chronic Pain," *Our Town Brookline*, June 2007). We spend 12 sessions exploring their body's current condition and how they may have gotten there. We take time each session to free their tissues from the old pain-inducing patterns using deep, slow



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The Importance of a Physical Sense of Self

As a Massage Therapist specializing in Structural Integration, I witness this firsthand. Many of my clients have lost, or never truly gained, their physical sense of self. They have difficulty feeling their tension (until it becomes a problem) and are often unable to let it go. They cannot sense the right way to sit, stand, or walk. Many have habitually ignored their bodies to the point of numbness. We, as a culture, are losing the intimate relationship between performing an action and the internally-felt sense of that performance.

How did we get to this state of common numbness? I believe one factor may be the lack of sensory education in our schools. The meas-

manipulations. However, the key to ensuring long-lasting relief from their discomfort requires them to relearn how to connect to their own bodies. I help them learn how to listen to their body's feedback when performing any given task. Our bodies are our greatest resource – if we learn how to use them correctly.

A Wider Solution

Structural Integration is a very powerful way of extracting individuals from chronic misalignment, however it is impractical as a wider solution. The only effective solution is prevention. We, as a society, must learn to raise more kinesthetic-intelligent individuals before their chronic patterns set in. I believe adding sensory education to our schools' physical education curriculum may be the most effective remedy for future generations.

Physical education would not need to change much. Many of the same activities and games could be taught, but with an added emphasis on the internally-felt sense. Extra time will be needed to explore the basic movements and actions of the activity through this sensory-based teaching. However, investing in these fundamental skills will increase children's confidence and participation, including those less athletically inclined.

For example, many games require throwing a ball. If done correctly, it has an easy, fluid, whip-like feel to it which starts at well-grounded feet and works its way up through the pelvis, shoulder, and finally releases in the hand. A strong, effective throw has a certain feel and rhythm to it. A weak, misbalanced, or mistimed throw feels very different. Actually teaching children how to throw a ball effectively, with an emphasis on the right feel of it, will also teach them to trust their body's feedback. Our children would learn to self-evaluate and self-correct. They will eventually become more self-reliant and be able to learn how to perform many actions correctly on their own.

Empowering Children to Listen to Their Bodies

The physical education teachers will have the greatest challenges and most rewarding opportunities to advance their field, particularly in the earlier grades. They will need to get comfortable talking and guiding their students' exploration through this rather ill-defined internal world. It will be up to them to inspire their students to listen to their bodies. To show their students that it's OK to say, "This doesn't feel right" or "Doing it this way isn't working for my body." This will empower children to self-evaluate and eventually self-correct.

If children are exposed and encouraged to build an intimate relationship with their bodies in early grades, it will become natural to them in the later grades when the sports and activities are more challenging. They will be attuned to their bodies' needs and be much more capable of avoiding the chronic and structural pitfalls. With such a refined internally-felt sense, future adults may eventually gain greater awareness of themselves, of their emotions and feelings, and even their human spirit.

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