



Position Paper

Athletic Competition and the School-Aged Child

The Health and Physical Education Council takes the position that readiness should form the basis for an individual participating in a competitive experience. However, there seems to be no common consensus by Albertans as to what constitutes readiness for a given activity. As all children follow the same general developmental sequence, our Council proposes the following guidelines limiting the level of school-sponsored athletic competition for the various age categories, and we invite non-school athletic groups to appraise their own athletic programs within the context of the developmental principles proposed.

Children under nine years of age (Grade III and under):

- Informal competition¹

Children ages nine through 11 (Grades IV, V, and VI):

- Informal competition, intramurals², and exhibitions³

Children ages 12 through 14 (Grades VII, VIII, and IX):

- Informal competition, intramurals, exhibitions and interscholastics⁴ to be limited to local and/or city level

It is our belief that adherence to these principles would help children to develop a positive self-concept, provide maximum participation for increasing numbers of our population, provide opportunities to develop skilled athletes, and encourage desirable behavior and attitudes for competitive athletics.

Rationale

The Health and Physical Education Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association for a number of years has been concerned with problems related to competitive sport within the schools and communities of Alberta. Differences in philosophy and leadership within and without our ranks in relation to athletics and the school-aged child has become of increasing concern over the past few years.

¹Informal Competition – no imposed structure, that is, free play.

²Intramurals – competition occurring or involving students within the limits of school.

³Exhibitions – a school plays host to a neighboring school in the form of a contest or game but without importance in respect to winning or losing.

⁴Interscholastics – formal competition between teams from two or more schools, for example, leagues, schedules, and so on.

There seems to be a growing interest and concern for sport and physical activity programs in Alberta which may be attributed partially to an increased awareness of the possible relationship between exercise and health, the desire to produce more top athletes, and the extra leisure time for increasing numbers of our people. As a consequence a greater emphasis than ever before is being placed on the development of sport and physical activity programs. This has had the effect of promoting early participation in sports and often strenuous competition among the younger age groups. The growing involvement of all levels of governments in promoting such programs has greatly increased the numbers participating

The development of competitive sports programs is often based on the premise that it is good for people to participate in sport and physical activity. Unfortunately, this promotion may be carried out without concern for the many factors which interact to affect the child as a participant – sociological and psychological areas of growth development and motor learning.

In this section we have attempted to briefly summarize factors from these areas related to competition and the school-aged child. These factors have been taken into consideration in arriving at our position.

From a study of literature, from professional course, and from practical experience, the following factors appear important in relation to competition and the school-aged child.

1. Competitive athletics, if suited to the maturity (physical, mental, social and emotional level of the participant, can provide a positive education experience.
2. The young child (under 12 years) needs a wide range of sensorimotor experiences in order to have a repertoire of movement patterns on which to draw. At early ages it is essential that experiences be broad rather than specialized.
3. Skill learning should be introduced after maturational readiness has been achieved. At this time children have both physiological maturity to learn complex movement patterns so that they can experience success in coordinating difficult skills and in coping with complex team activities. By waiting for necessary maturity, skill learning is more rapid and as a result one may avoid the danger of loss of interest.

4. Competitive athletics, if introduced prior to readiness, may have detrimental physiological and psychological effects. Three quotes from recent literature will clarify and emphasize this point.
 - a. Rarick indicated that there was some evidence that repeated stresses can bring about injury to joint structures during the growing years.⁵
 - b. Orlick reports that "children who dropped out of sports at an early age appeared to be merely reacting to negative stimuli, which were largely a function of the structure of the game and the emphasis of the coaches." . . . "In general the children expressed a desire to have the entire game scaled down so that they could have more fun and experience more success." . . . "Minor league coaches must be made cognizant of the tremendous impact they can have on young children, as well as how they can function in the child's best interest."⁶
 - c. In a study among students in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, Shuck observed no difference in growth trends of those involved in interscholastic sports and of those who did not participate. However, there was an apparent retardation in the growth of the seventh and eighth grade boys who participated in a 17 game schedule as compared to those who participated in a more limited season of 12 games.⁷
5. Young children have an inherent activity drive, are egocentric and need to participate in order to improve their skill and maintain their interests. In order for maximum benefits to be derived from play situations, high quality supervision and broad range of sports activities which are suited to the needs of children must be in evidence.
6. The objective of a program for children should be on self-improvement rather than on winning. It should be concerned with participation by everyone rather than by a few.
7. Children's introduction to an activity should be in situations which are appropriate to their level of skill and maturity. Length of practice times, length of games, length of schedules and the time of day of practices and games should take into consideration the age and maturity level of the child. Games should be modified to suit the skill level, strength and

⁵Rarick, G. Lawrence. "Issues in Athletic Competition for School Boys," Paper presented at 10th National Conference on the Medical Aspects of Sports, Miami Beach, Florida, December, 1968.

⁶Orlick, T.D. "Children's Sports – A Revolution is Coming," *CAHPER Journal*, p 12-14, Jan. – Feb.1973.

⁷Shuck, Gilbert T. "Effects of Athletic Competition on the Growth and Development of Junior High School Boys," *CAHPER Research Quarterly*, Vol. 33, 288-298, 1962.

endurance of the participants by using smaller equipment, smaller playing areas, modified rules, shorter games, and so forth.

8. Facilities should be made available for appropriate children's activities at suitable hours. Children should be given their fair share of facility time.
9. The emphasis in children's programs should be on giving children a rewarding, fun-filled experience.
10. Children need to grow into competition in much the same way as they gradually develop in other areas. They should experience competition at a level in which there is little at stake and no outside pressure before they are put into highly competitive situations with spectators, publicity, awards and so on. Such pressure situations are contributing factors to children dropping out of activities.
11. All-star competitions and most valuable player awards should have no place in children's programs. Practices such as these give the child an exaggerated notion of the importance of his/her athletic prowess. The philosophy for children's activities should be for a variety of experience and participation by everyone.
12. Participation in National and International Championships should occur after a person is mature and has the experience to cope successfully with the physical, social, emotional and mental pressures associated with such competitions.
13. Children's major thrust, until they are approximately 18 years of age, should be to obtain an education. Intense involvement in competitive sports, unless carefully controlled, may have a detrimental effect on academic schooling.