LET US Play: Maximizing Physical Activity in Physical Education

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Physical inactivity is linked to many negative health outcomes for school-age youth (Guthold, Ono, Strong, Chatterji, & Morabia, 2008; Kelishadi, 2007; Waxman, 2004). To decrease these risks and increase health, the World Health Organization (2010) recommends that youth accumulate health-enhancing levels of physical activity (i.e., 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity [MVPA] daily). Despite the clear health benefits of regular engagement in physical activity and the health consequences of inactivity, 58% of children ages 6 to 11 are not accumulating the national guideline of 60 minutes of MVPA daily (Troiano et al., 2008).

Schools have been identified as a promising setting for increasing youth physical activity levels because of their broad reach and the amount of time youth spend in attendance. Specifically, physical education is one key time during the school day where youth can accumulate health-enhancing levels of physical activity. Indicators of quality physical education call for all students to spend 50% of their time in physical education class in MVPA (Carlson et al., 2013). The actual time children spend in MVPA in physical education, however, is somewhere between 30% and 40% of class time (Fairclough & Stratton, 2006). Further, in today’s school climate with the emphasis on standards-based assessment, there is less time allocated for physical education throughout the school day (Lee, Burgeson, Fulton, & Spain, 2007). The National Standards for Physical Education published by the American Alliance of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (in press) call for physical education programs to develop children who “demonstrate competency in a variety of motor skills and movement patterns” (http://www.aahperd.org), and it is known that maximizing practice opportunities is key to developing a motor skill (Rink, 2010). These two goals can go hand in hand. The more time students are engaged in an activity, the more practice opportunities and MVPA they are accumulating. For these reasons, physical education teachers need strategies to increase the practice opportunities and the amount of time students are engaged in MVPA during their class. The purpose of this article is to describe one approach, LET US Play, to maximizing physical activity opportunities and the amount of practice time students accumulate during physical education.
Defining the LET US Play Principles

The LET US Play principles (see Figure 1) are competency-based tools that were developed in the after-school program setting but can be used in a variety of settings including physical education. The principles are designed to be a reflective tool to identify barriers to elementary-age children's physical activity in free play or organized activity opportunities. However, they can also be used to identify barriers to practice opportunities in activities designed for skill development for all students in physical education.

LET US Play stands for Lines, Elimination, Team size, Uninvolved staff/kids (teachers/students in the physical education setting), and Space, equipment, and rules. The strength of the LET US Play principles lies in the fact that teachers and students do not have to learn new games. Physical education teachers introduce students to a wide variety of games and physical activities in diverse settings (e.g., gyms, outdoor environments, varying amounts of equipment, etc.). Unfortunately, many of the games used are not designed to maximize children's physical activity. Further, children need the basic skills to play these games competently — skills that can only be developed through repeated practice. The LET US Play principles can be used to modify activities already in use to increase practice opportunities and children's physical activity while still maintaining what makes each activity unique and fun.

**Lines**

When students are standing in line waiting for their turn, they are less active and not practicing a skill. Common games that include lines are kickball, softball, baseball, relay races, and some tag games (e.g., “Cross the Ocean” or “Sharks and Minnows”). The rules of these or similar games should be modified to eliminate lines so that students spend more time involved in the activity and less time waiting for their turn. For example, by providing more equipment, lines can be shortened or eliminated altogether. If no more equipment is available, children waiting for their turn can be provided a task to complete related to the activity.

**Elimination**

Elimination from physical activity opportunities is a common component of many tag games. If a student is eliminated from the activity by having to move to the side, sit down, or freeze until the next round, he/she will be less active and will have limited opportunities to practice the requisite skills for the activity. Designating children who have been tagged as new or additional taggers is one simple way to remove elimination.

**Team size**

Games in which team sizes are large, such as 10 versus 10, can often lead to lower activity levels and fewer practice opportunities because students are not able to engage in the game. This limitation is also exacerbated when the game is played in a large area with a limited amount of equipment (e.g., 11 vs. 11 soccer on a full soccer field with one ball). Often, athletic students dominate these large games, thereby limiting activity and skill practice for the rest of the students. A solution is to organize students into small-sided games (e.g., 3 vs. 3) and hold two or more games concurrently (depending on the number of students) by dividing large fields into two or more smaller fields.

**Uninvolved teachers and students**

When students or teachers are uninvolved in the activity, it leads to lower activity levels and off-task behavior resulting in fewer practice opportunities. When students are not engaged in the activity, they are often engaging in more sedentary activities (e.g., sitting and talking with friends, playing with electronic devices, etc.). Large team sizes, lines, and elimination games are related to uninvolved children. When students are waiting for their turn or for the next round to begin, time during which they could have been engaged in activity and practicing skills is wasted. Also, when one student dominates a large game, the other students lose interest quickly. By addressing the three prior LET US Play principles (team size, lines, and elimination), involving students becomes much easier. However, physical education teachers should also be actively involved in the game by moving throughout the activity space and vocally encouraging those children who are not participating. Incorporating these strategies can increase all students’ activity levels.

**Space, equipment, and rules**

Finally, space, equipment, and rules are the tools in the teacher’s toolbox to modify the games. By manipulating the space (e.g., using cones to divide one large field into two smaller fields), large games can become several small games. Adding more equipment can encourage uninvolved students to be more involved by allowing more practice opportunities. Using appropriate equipment for the student’s size and skill levels can also get more students involved (e.g., using a child-sized football or using a ball instead of a Frisbee in Ultimate Frisbee). Finally, changing the rules can remove elimination and lines while keeping the game interesting for students.

**Benefits of LET US Play**

The strategies included in the LET US Play principles have been linked to increases in children's physical activity (Weaver, Beets, Webster, & Huberty, in press). Two studies have incorporated the LET US Play principles into training for afterschool and summer day-camp staff, and they revealed that the strategies were easily incorporated into routine practice (Weaver, Beets, Beighle, Saunders, & Pate, in press; Weaver, Beets, Saunders, Beighle, & Webster, in press). One of these studies also revealed related increases in children’s activity when the principles were implemented (Weaver, Beets, Beighle, et al., in press). This evidence shows that not only do the principles produce the desired increases in children’s physical activity, but they can also be implemented in physical activity environments. Further, maximizing practice time is the single most critical element to learning a motor skill and developing fitness (Rink, 2010). Incorporating the LET US Play principles should provide children with more opportunities to practice skills and develop fitness. For strategies to incorporate the LET US Play principles, see Table 1.
Implementing LET US Play

This section is focused on integrating the LET US Play principles into practice. Two traditional games will be presented with modified rules to meet the principles of LET US Play. These games are by no means the only ones that can be modified and the modifications presented are not the only ways to modify the games. Instead, these are examples that teachers can use as the foundation for modifying the games and activities they are already familiar with.

**Kickball (lines, elimination, uninvolved students)**

Traditional kickball rules violate the LET US Play principles in three key ways. The first problem is that the players on the kicking team must stand and wait in line for their turn to kick the ball. This leads to long periods of sedentary time for the students who are waiting their turn. The second problem is that base runners are eliminated from activity if they are out. They must then go back and wait in line for their turn again. Finally, kickball leads to a few involved players while everyone else watches. For example, one student will catch the ball in left field while all others stand and watch.

An easy way to modify kickball is to play “all-in” kickball. Similar to traditional kickball, there are two even teams, a fielding and kicking team, with any amount of players. Once the kicker kicks the ball, the rules change from traditional kickball. Instead of one player on the kicking team running the bases, all players run the bases. A point is rewarded for each base that the kicking team reaches. The fielding team must retrieve the ball and complete a designated task in order to stop the kicking team from running. One of many tasks that the fielding team could perform would be to line up behind the person who fielded the ball and pass the ball from the front to the back of the line. These tasks could also be skill-related, like throwing and catching the ball a given number of times.

**Soccer (uninvolved students, team size)**

The traditional rules of soccer (in physical education) violate LET US Play principles in two key ways. Because of the large team size, some students dominate play by maintaining possession of the ball. This leads to a few students playing while the other students watch. Lower-skilled children have trouble maintaining possession of the ball with their feet, leading to disinterest, lower levels of activity, and fewer practice opportunities.
A simple way of modifying soccer to increase practice opportunities and activity is to divide one large game into several smaller games. By breaking into teams of four or five students and playing several smaller games, it becomes easier for all children to get involved in the game, thereby increasing activity.

**Conclusion**

Children are not accumulating the desired levels of physical activity while in physical education (Fairclough & Stratton, 2006). Further, scheduled physical education time is being diminished in schools. This leads to lower activity levels throughout the school day and fewer opportunities for children to build the skills necessary to be physically active (Tudor-Locke, Lee, Morgan, Beighle, & Pangrazi, 2006). The LET US Play principles can be used by teachers as a tool to maximize the physical activity and practice opportunities children accumulate in the games already played in physical education.

**Table 1. Strategies for Incorporating the LET US Play Principles into Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LET US Play Principle</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lines</strong></td>
<td>Divide the space</td>
<td>Divide games that involve waiting for a turn into multiple games to reduce the length of the wait.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increase equipment</td>
<td>Add more equipment so that more students can be participating at once rather than waiting for their turn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Modify the rules</td>
<td>Provide everyone or every group with a unique physically active task so that students are not waiting in line for their turn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elimination</strong></td>
<td>Divide the space</td>
<td>When a student is eliminated from one game, the teacher can send him/her to join the other game. This preserves competition but allows students to continue to be active and accumulate practice opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Modify the rules</td>
<td>If a student is eliminated from physical activity, one can designate a task that he/she must complete to return to the game. In tag games, if a child is tagged, instead of freezing or being eliminated, he/she becomes a tagger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Team Size</strong></td>
<td>Divide the space</td>
<td>Divide large games into several smaller games. Frame these smaller games as a tournament and have teams rotate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increase equipment</td>
<td>If it is impossible to divide into smaller games, then add more equipment to the activity with several smaller teams engaging with different equipment on the same field.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uninvolved Teachers and Students</strong></td>
<td>Actively supervise</td>
<td>Move throughout the activity space constantly so that it is possible to identify those students who are uninvolved. Be a presence by encouraging often!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Target less active children</td>
<td>Focus verbal encouragement on the students who are uninvolved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space, Equipment, and Rules</strong></td>
<td>Modify the space, equipment, and rules</td>
<td>Modify the space, equipment, and rules to ensure that games adhere to the LET US Play principles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Additional Resources**

- *Working with Schools to Increase Physical Activity in Physical Education*: http://www.prevent.org/ Click “Publications & Resources” tab and search “School Based Physical Education”
- *Let’s Move Active Schools*: http://www.letsmove.gov/active-schools
References


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