



## Promoting Physical Activity: Addressing Barriers and Moving Forward

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# The Physical Activity Movement

## COMES OF AGE

### PROMOTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: ADDRESSING BARRIERS AND MOVING FORWARD

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In spite of the ever-growing body of evidence showing that the health benefits of regular, moderate physical activity are extensive for all individuals, there has been a significant decline in physical activity levels among Americans and others across the world. Federal guidelines and a systematic and comprehensive national plan have been developed to address the challenges that exist in modern society related to engaging in regular and adequate physical activity. Most people believe that physical activity is important for health, and many may think strenuous exercise is needed to achieve or maintain fitness or health. However, knowledge of the benefits alone is not sufficient to incentivize increases in physical activity or fitness. This article reviews the social-cultural, economic, and technological shifts that have led to the complex barriers that are hindering physical activity promotion and participation, and it identifies strategies and tactics that may increase physical activity participation across the population, with an emphasis on those targeting youth.

The previous articles in this feature presented the evolution of physical activity guidance in the United States. The body of literature supporting the benefits of physical activity for health was summarized, and the subsequent development of the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans was described. The third article in this feature discussed the development and implementation of the National Physical Activity Plan (NPAP), which was generated to support a coordinated effort to help Americans meet the national physical activity guidelines. While various initiatives were already taking place before the development of the NPAP, efforts have been increasing since the release of the plan.

#### Barriers to Physical Activity

To maximize success and provide targeted efforts to promote physical activity, it is important to understand why people are not

active. A clear understanding of these reasons allows for the creation of focused, informed strategies to reduce or eliminate barriers and facilitate the adoption of a more physically active lifestyle. Although some of the common barriers for physical activity have been known for some time, collectively, the factors that limit regular physical activity participation are more complex (Sallis & Hovell, 1990; Sallis, Hovell, & Hofstetter, 1992). Some barriers are difficult to overcome (e.g., milieu, socioeconomic status), especially by youth who have limited control over these factors. Other known demographic variables such as sex and age cannot be changed, but an understanding of the influence of these factors, both individually and collectively, is essential for the development of strategies to effectively promote physical activity.

*Personal, Environmental, and Social Barriers.* Barriers to physical activity participation can be categorized as personal, environmental, or social (Dishman & Sallis, 1994). Personal barriers to physical activity are often the focus of interventions because they are usually under the individual's control. These barriers include time limitations, motivation, energy, knowledge, environment, and confidence. They become particularly complex when lifestyle habits need to be changed. Environmental barriers are more difficult to change and include occupation, milieu, weather, and availability of facilities. Social barriers include socioeconomic status, cultural expectations, and support from family or friends. It is important to note that much of the literature identifying these barriers utilizes self-report data that involves the perceptions of individuals and may or may not meet a generally accepted definition. This is

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of particular importance because strategies for overcoming an individual's perception are different from strategies for a condition that can be discreetly documented.

*Policy Barriers.* In addition to personal barriers, in recent years the need for policies associated with increasing physical activity in youth has been recognized. Specifically, stakeholders at all levels are beginning to understand that policies are an integral component and support for youth physical activity promotion. This push began with the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 and has evolved into the development of policies for a variety of settings (e.g., municipalities, states, school districts). In a review of international policies to increase youth physical activity, physical education in schools, school environmental policy, and mass media/advertising were found to be supported by strong evidence (Pate, Trilk, Byun, & Wang, 2011). Despite this strong evidence, the authors pointed out that research examining the impact of policy implementation on youth physical activity is limited. While policies are being developed with the potential to alter the environments in which youth participate in physical activity (e.g., schools, parks), more research examining the types of policies and the effects they have on actual physical activity levels is needed. Policy adoption can occur at the national, state, local, district, school, and classroom levels. The Institute of Medicine's (2013) call for physical education to be a required core subject illustrates a national policy recommendation. If put in place and implemented, it has the potential to increase physical activity levels.

*Milieu and Age Barriers.* While the barriers to individual participation in physical activity are well established, the development

of strategies to overcome these barriers is difficult. And the barriers to meeting national guidelines and implementing local, state, and national strategies are even more challenging. To examine the complexity involved, consider only two known barriers — milieu and age. For simplicity, milieu is categorized as urban, rural, or suburban, and age is coarsely categorized as youth, young adult, adult, and older adult. Using only two of the 10 commonly cited barriers creates 12 different combinations for which specific strategies could be needed (e.g., youth living in urban areas, young adults living in rural areas, and so on). Engaging urban youth is vastly different from engaging a rural elderly population. Addressing these two categories does not provide consideration for other factors such as climate, region, gender, or socioeconomic status. All of these factors interact and have impact potential on physical activity. The many complexities associated with the multiple potential barriers are an indication of the many issues that challenge physical activity-promotion efforts.

*School-Specific Barriers.* As presented in the previous articles, the physical activity level of the youth population remains alarmingly low and is a major public health concern now and in the future as youth enter adulthood. For this reason, a great deal of effort is being focused on increasing the level of youth physical activity. A major emphasis of this work is targeted at schools. Schools are seen as an ideal setting for physical activity promotion for a variety of reasons. The first reason is that most children in the United States attend a school. Second, schools have had a long history of playing a role in public health as reflected by the federal school meal program and vaccination requirements before



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entering school. Last, evidence continues to increase that physical activity and fitness support and facilitate student cognition (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2010). In an era of high-stakes testing and increased school accountability this benefit of physical activity is particularly salient. Schools are focused on not only enhancing their ability to teach students but on furthering their rich history of supporting healthy lifestyles for the public. Thus, many national efforts to promote physical activity center on school-based efforts. While the school is used as the vehicle to reach youth, consideration should be given to other entities associated with physical activity behaviors (e.g., family, community, local/state agencies).

In addition to the barriers noted previously, schools have school-specific barriers. These include school policies, building schedules, teacher skills and knowledge, curriculum, resources, finances, and facilities. In addition, statewide policies, initiatives, and legislation can have an impact on school-based physical activity promotion. A potential overriding barrier for physical activity is “perceived importance.” This holds true for school-based efforts as well — that is, how important is engagement in and encouragement of physical activity behaviors relative to other priorities in schools. There may not be sufficient importance given to physical activity to help students establish an active lifestyle. Therefore, the local perceptions of physical activity’s importance must be considered carefully when developing or selecting strategies for promotion.

Another school-specific barrier has to do with a common confusion among professionals and the public about the link between physical education and physical activity. When physical activity and education are considered, typically physical education is thought of as an ideal program to increase and promote physical activity during the school day. However, the media, policy makers, parents, and some educators often use the terms physical education and physical activity interchangeably. For example, a parent might say, “My child received physical education every day of the week” when, in reality, the child received recess every day and physical education one day per week. As the field of physical activity begins to emerge and gain an identity in public health and education, it is essential that these terms be clearly understood. While both contribute to the health and development of youth, they have distinct meanings.

Physical activity is bodily movement involving the muscular and skeletal systems and caloric expenditure; numerous health benefits are gained from engaging in regular physical activity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2008). Movement can be a part of recreational activities (e.g., recess) such as walking, fitness activities such as lifting weights, or sports such as tennis. Physical activity can and should take place during physical education. In fact, it is recommended that students engage in physical activity during at least 50% of every physical education lesson (USDHHS, 2000). Certainly students should also learn about physical activity in physical education classes, but physical activity can also take place in the classroom, at recess, and outside of the school day.

Physical education, on the other hand, is a part of the school curriculum designed to teach students the skills, knowledge, and dispositions required to engage in physical activity throughout the lifespan (Pangrazi & Beighle, 2013). Of high priority during physical education is physical activity promotion (Sallis et al., 2012), as it is specifically delineated in all editions of the National Standards (National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2013; SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators,

**Table 1.**  
**What Is Physical Literacy?**

Physical literacy is a learned disposition that includes:

Motivation, confidence, physical competence, and knowledge necessary to pursue physical activity as an integral component of a healthy lifestyle.

This comprehensive term serves to provide an overarching purpose in physical education (i.e., to provide students with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to be active for a lifetime). In addition, physical literacy parallels terminology currently used in other subject areas, such as health literacy and math literacy. Physical literacy, as the primary goal of physical education, is consistent with the intent of the Common Core Learning Standards.

2014). Unlike recess or other informal physical activity settings, physical education is characterized by having a developmentally appropriate curriculum, being taught by a certified physical education teacher, and including meaningful learning experiences for all students (NASPE, 2010). Physical education is not only physical activity; it is also skill techniques, fitness, and the value of physical activity, all taught in a safe, supportive environment during school hours. The content of physical education is defined by national and state standards (SHAPE America, 2014). A clear understanding of these terms indicates that physical activity and physical education are related but distinct in their meaning.

Associated with the confusion between physical activity and physical education are the philosophical differences among professionals regarding the purpose of physical education. Blankenship (2012) and Lund (2013) provide perspectives on the debate regarding the role of physical activity in physical education. Are we about teaching psychomotor skills? Should we focus on physical activity levels in physical education? What about personal and social responsibility? Or are we educators who should focus on concepts or knowledge? Regardless of the viewpoint on the focus of physical activity and physical education, as the field embraces the term “physical literacy” (see Table 1), it appears we are reaching a common ground. The underlying goal of physical education is to promote physical activity. Lifelong physical activity is definitely an indicator of physical literacy. While this is progress, physical education’s lethargic uptake of physical activity promotion is definitely a barrier (Sallis et al., 2012).

## Strategies to Increase Physical Activity Participation

In recent years a tremendous surge in national, state, and local physical activity–promotion initiatives for youth has occurred. In an effort to broaden the impact and to increase the number of individuals reached, numerous organizations and entities have led initiatives or programs to promote and facilitate physical activity for people throughout the country, as well as develop strategies for overcoming the barriers to physical activity.

*National Physical Activity Plan.* The NPAP (2013), discussed earlier, targets all individuals and addresses the diverse issues that influence physical activity participation. The NPAP Education Sector addresses early childhood through college-age students and

provides comprehensive approaches to school, childcare, and post-secondary physical activity promotion, policy development, and physical education. In response to these strategies, many organizations have worked to develop programs and advocacy efforts to implement one or more of these strategies and the related tactics.

**Healthy Schools Program.** Founded by the American Heart Association and the Clinton Foundation, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (AHG; [www.healthiergeneration.org](http://www.healthiergeneration.org)) collaborates with schools, other organizations, industry, healthcare, and families to help improve the health of youth. Specific to physical activity, their Healthy Schools Program includes components designed to help schools increase and improve school-based physical activity opportunities. Strategies for improving physical education and recess, as well as for providing physical activity breaks, are included within their recognition framework.

**Presidential Youth Fitness Program.** Another prominent program involved in youth physical activity promotion is the Presidential Youth Fitness Program (PYFP; [www.pyfp.org](http://www.pyfp.org)), a recent collaborative effort between the President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition (PCFSN), SHAPE America, the Cooper Institute, the Amateur Athletic Union, and the CDC. This free program has replaced the President's Challenge Youth Fitness Tests and now supports FITNESSGRAM® for the assessment of the health-related fitness of students. The PYFP program targets three areas: professional development for educators, health-related fitness education and assessment, and motivating youth to adopt and maintain an active lifestyle. Professional development provides physical educators with training, resources, videos for Fitnessgram implementation, and effective instructional strategies. In addition, all the necessary tools to utilize Fitnessgram, communicate with parents and students about appropriate fitness testing, and educate parents about the importance of an active lifestyle are provided. Schools are encouraged to integrate fitness education into their physical education programs by using effective instruction and communication with students, parents, and teachers. This means that physical educators are not just measuring fitness but also teaching students about fitness, which includes exposing them to a variety of fitness activities, teaching fitness knowledge, and making fitness fun.

**Let's Move! Active Schools.** While the efforts of these and numerous other organizations and programs are important, they may not achieve their full potential if not connected through collaboration. To this end, *Let's Move! Active Schools* (LMAS; <http://letsmoveschools.org>) is a collaborative initiative combining the efforts of numerous organizations including PCFSN, SHAPE America, AHG, Nike, Action for Healthy Kids, the USDHHS, and several other organizations. The focus of the LMAS initiative is to target, train, and empower school champions, or Physical Activity Leaders (PAL), to promote physical activity within schools and in the school community. The LMAS and PAL initiatives are grounded in a Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program approach that will be further described in the final article of this feature.

## Summary

Barriers to physical activity have been well documented. However, efforts to overcome these barriers have been slowed because of

their complexity and the difficulty of generating strategies that will increase physical activity at both the individual and population level. Efforts by numerous national groups have been implemented, with a special focus on addressing youth physical activity levels. A few of these major national efforts for promoting and facilitating youth physical activity were briefly described here. The next and final article of this feature will provide specific suggestions for those working in schools and colleges to increase physical activity participation that will support healthy lifestyles now and for the future.

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