



INFORMATION SHEET

Physical fitness or physical activity? Definitions and differences

There is often confusion about the differences between physical fitness and physical activity. The terms are often interchanged and used to mean the same thing in many contexts. But there is a difference and we need to clearly differentiate between the two meanings.

Physical fitness has generally been described as a set of attributes that people have or achieve, and which relate to the ability to perform physical activity. It includes measures of health-related elements, such as body composition (height, weight and skinfolds), aerobic endurance, strength and flexibility. It also includes skill-related elements, such as catching, throwing, kicking and striking.

Physical activity is any movement produced by our body that results in some expenditure of energy.

Exercise is just one type of physical activity planned to improve or maintain one or more of the components of physical fitness. Other types of physical activity include walking or cycling for transport, occupational physical activity (such as PE lessons or household tasks) and leisure time physical activity (such as skateboarding or surfing).

Current research findings about physical activity

In the past the FITT principles (frequency, intensity, time and type) were seen as essential components for the achievement of health and fitness. During the 1980s it was considered that at least three sessions of high intensity exercise (75%–85% of maximum heart rate) for 20 minutes each time was necessary for health benefits. This was found to be an unrealistic goal for many people and the latest research suggests you can attain health benefits without the need to be vigorously active.

It is now recommended that physical activity of **moderate intensity** will provide health benefits, provided the duration is around 30 minutes per day. These 30 minutes can be accumulated throughout the day in at least 10-minute bouts, and should preferably occur every day, but on at least five days per week.

Research also suggests there is probably some additional gain for children and young people by engaging in more vigorous activity. It is recommended that children and youth should also participate in three or more sessions of vigorous activity per week for at least 20 minutes each session.



<i>Physical fitness model</i>	<i>Physical activity model</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">✧ <i>exercise for fitness benefits</i>✧ <i>specific exercise to improve performance</i>✧ <i>intensity is measured by heart rate</i>✧ <i>exercise is done in one continuous bout, 20 minutes or more</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✧ <i>physical activity for health benefits</i>✧ <i>a wide range of activities is acceptable</i>✧ <i>moderate intensity activities equal to a brisk walk</i>✧ <i>accumulation of activity throughout the day (e.g. 3 x 10-minute sessions)</i>

The type of activity you undertake does not appear to be a critical factor, as long as it is of moderate intensity and undertaken on most days of the week. Walking is the preferred activity for most people because it is convenient, has low cost and appeals to many different people.

So in recent years, there has been a significant shift away from promoting a “physical fitness” model towards a “physical activity” model which is more attainable for the broader population. Of course, those people still interested in training for improved sports performance will still work to the “physical fitness” model.

The two models are summarised in the table above.

Putting it into practice in your school

The focus for teachers is to promote physical activity as a way of developing lifelong healthy habits. While children do need a healthy level of aerobic endurance, muscular strength, muscular

endurance and flexibility in order to be able to participate fully in activities that will enhance their overall development, it is not necessary to include specific fitness exercises as part of the PDHPE program.

“During lessons, teachers should be satisfied that children are being ‘sufficiently active’ when they are:

- ✧ huffing and puffing or developing a light sweat, without teacher coercion
- ✧ moving different body parts in a range of different movement patterns (walking, fast walking, running, jumping, climbing and dancing) in different body positions
- ✧ exerting themselves to push, pull or manoeuvre their bodies or equipment”.

(ACHPER, 1996, p. 15)

Schools can also look at ways to provide more opportunities that encourage students to be active throughout the school day and on the way to and from school. Cooperating with community-based and government organisations may provide a greater range of options.