



INFORMATION SHEET 9

How fit and active are students today?

Some research has been conducted on the fitness and activity levels of children and youth in Australia. However, there has been no major research to say whether students are more fit or less fit, more overweight or have poorer fundamental motor skills than in previous years.

It is often reported in the media that children and youth today are less fit, more overweight and undertake less activity than children in previous generations. These comments are based on perceptions rather than facts. No longitudinal studies have been completed on the fitness and physical activity levels of Australian school students.

The following research from a number of locations around Australia can help build a picture of the level of physical activity and fitness of children and youth today.

The *NSW Schools Fitness and Physical Activity Survey, 1997* surveyed 5 518 students and found that:

- ✧ most students performed well on all fitness tests (i.e. aerobic capacity, muscular strength, muscular endurance and flexibility)
- ✧ less than half the number of young people in NSW have mastered all the fundamental motor skills tested (run, vertical jump, catch, overhead throw, kick and forehand strike)

- ✧ the large majority of primary schools make available at least 90 minutes per week for physical education and sport
- ✧ a large proportion of students enjoyed physical education classes
- ✧ 30% of high school students spend more than 3 hours a day in sedentary activities, such as playing computer games and watching television or videos.

In terms of participation in physical activity, the majority of boys (80%) were active during the summer school terms. Similarly, the majority of girls (79%) were also active during summer school terms.

The survey found that there was a slight drop in active participation in winter for boys; however there was a significant drop in active participation for girls. It also noted that 67% of boys, but only 46% of girls, were vigorously active during winter.

Although the majority of boys and girls are adequately active, it is clear that a smaller proportion of girls than boys are vigorously active, particularly during winter.

A survey of ACT school children in 1992 found that the majority of school children participated in physical activity or sport. In the same survey, 40% of children ranked sport as their most

favoured leisure time activity (Clough, McCormack and Triall, 1993).

Research from the Australian Bureau of Statistics suggests that over 50% of children are involved in organised community sport (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994/95).

South Australian research has found that participation rates peak at age 13, with 69% of boys and 58% of girls participating regularly in organised sport (Brown and Brown, 1996).

The results of the 1985 *Australian Health and Fitness Survey* showed that girls obtained scores which were lower than those of boys on all performance measures except flexibility. Furthermore, the girls' results declined beyond the age of 14 years. It also found low levels of cardiovascular fitness for both girls and boys (ACHPER, 1985).

These results indicate that a large majority of Australian school children are regularly involved in some kind of physical activity. Considerable evidence

also points towards a high drop-out rate and lower fundamental motor skills for girls.

Putting it into practice in your school

The main recommendations from the *NSW Schools Fitness and Physical Activity Survey, 1997* were that schools should:

- ✧ devote more time and expertise to improving the fundamental motor skills of primary school students
- ✧ focus on skill development in Years 7 and 8 physical education and sport over the next few years as a "catch-up" period for the development of motor skills
- ✧ make greater efforts to meet the needs and interests of high school girls, with the aim of increasing the proportion of girls who are vigorously active.