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Should We Be Teaching Sport Skills to 5-7 Year Olds in Physical Education?

NOT SO FAST!

Michael Gosset

A reader of the article title might respond, "Of course, my six year-old is playing soccer on the travel team." Or, "My brother's seven year-old is playing tee-ball. Of course they should be learning this in school." These comments are plentiful. From my 25 years of teaching physical education in Kindergarten through to 5th Grade in the United States (the equivalent of Reception to Year 5 in the UK) it's the norm, with exceptions, to teach sport skills beginning in Kindergarten (Foundation Stage). Go into the majority of gymnasiums around the country and you'll likely see children attempting to bounce, throw or kick balls. You may also see immature form and lack of control. *Should* these actual sport skills be taught at this age? In the author's view, we should begin teaching actual sport skills and concepts around 3rd Grade (eight year olds).

WHY AROUND 3RD GRADE?

Parents often ask school personnel whether they believe their child is ready to start school, taking into consideration, among other factors, physical maturity (Daniels, 2015). According to Scholastic's *Parent & Child* magazine (www.scholastic.com/parents), the following motor and cognitive skills should not be expected by most children until the age of at least 7:

- increased coordination for catching and throwing
- be able to participate in active games with rules
- sequenced motor activities, as with gymnastics or shooting baskets
- improved reaction time in responding to thrown balls.

By nine years old, most children have achieved mature patterns of fundamental

motor skills, and their posture and balance are better. They have begun to learn sequenced skills, which are fundamental abilities performed in combinations or with variations. Their attention spans are still short, so physical education lessons should emphasise fundamental skills and encourage development of transitional skills (Paediatrics and Child Health, 2005). Sports should be modified for smaller-sided lead-up games and minimal, developmentally appropriate competition can be encouraged.

In other words, younger than about eight years old, the child's mind may be capable of learning concepts, or knowing what to do, but the body's coordination may not be sufficiently developed to successfully execute many motor skills. Imagine that: the child knows what to do, but cannot do it to his/her (or the teacher's) satisfaction! This can be frustrating for a

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child. Harris (2000) views readiness as a process where children's development in different areas is assessed to see if it meets a sport's demands. This might also be a consideration when children are being asked to acquire sport skills at 5-7 years old.

Student attitudes play an influential role in physical education (Solmon, 2003). Research suggests that lesser-skilled children have lower attitudes toward physical education (Carlson, 1995; Portman, 1995), and may therefore not be as physically active outside of school (Carlson, 1995; Portman, 1995; Wallhead and Buckworth, 2005). This may lead to obesity. Research also suggests that people who are obese as children tend to remain obese as adults (Craigie *et al.*, 2011; Power, Lake and Cole, 1997; Serdula *et al.*, 1993; Simmonds *et al.*, 2015). Taking this into consideration, the author believes the learning, practising and application of these motor skills (i.e. throw, catch, kick) are better suited to begin in 3rd Grade and continue into 5th Grade (ten year olds).

WHAT SHOULD WE TEACH IN THE FOUNDATION STAGE?

If we shouldn't teach sport skills until 3rd Grade, what *should* we be teaching children from the Foundation Stage until then? My answer would be movement education, also known as movement exploration. Movement education focuses on learning concepts (e.g. body awareness, space awareness, effort awareness and movement quality). Therefore, if we were teaching body awareness to Kindergarteners, students might be asked to solve a problem asking them to move the ball on the ground in general space with their feet, and keep it near them. (Mosston's production styles of teaching are best suited for problem-solving.) The focus of this lesson would be body awareness. Students 'moving' the ball with their heel or toe are solving the problem equally as successfully as the child using the instep, which is what might be considered normal or more effective in soccer. The focus of the preceding example could also have been object manipulation, and the teacher would have rephrased the problem to be solved as, "Move the ball on the floor in general space with a side of your foot, keeping it near you." Providing another example, the teacher might ask the students to move a ball with their hand so that the ball changes levels from low to medium repeatedly, and the ball can only touch the student's hand some of the time. The child is essentially 'dribbling' but is learning about levels in space via problem-solving. Key to these examples is that the sport-specific terms (e.g. dribbling) are not being used. Rather, the movement concept is emphasised.

THE FOUNDATION HAS NOW BEEN FORMED

Movement education lessons form the foundation for the learning of sport skills in the years to come by creating a movement vocabulary within the children. Children are able to comprehend this cognitive information. Further, they may be better able to understand it when concepts are not taught in isolation. With regard to sport skills, Schmidt's schema theory (Schmidt, 1975) suggests that repeating, or revisiting, a skill in different contexts allows for skill transfer due to the similarity in motor patterns. Graham, Holt/Hale and Parker (2013) indicate that revisiting a skill, whether in the previous context or an entirely different one, provides children with variations to skill themes (mentioned in the next paragraph). In other words, lessons on the skill of throwing with a round ball would be done several times yearly in different contexts, such as simply throwing to a target or partner or throwing for distance. In keeping with schema theory, these lessons would not be consecutive, but might be weeks or months apart. If schema theory is applied to conceptual learning, then scaffolding knowledge over an extended period of time may produce even more educated students.

The mention of sport skills above is another topic. After being taught concepts via movement education, the child is now ready to build upon the complete movement base and transition into learning sport skills. The author is an advocate of using the skill-themes approach to teaching gymnastics, dance and games and sport skills. A discussion of the use of skill-themes, however, is beyond the scope of this article (with the exception of the example above).

SUMMARY

The next time you are planning your Kindergarten to 3rd Grade teaching, think about what you've read here regarding why many children may not acquire the skills as easily as might be thought. Malcolm Gladwell, in *Outliers* (2008), points out children who are born toward the beginning of the calendar year seem to have an advantage athletically over those born toward the end of the year due to physical growth/maturity. In physical education classes, students may absorb concepts and understand what they're learning at a young age, and execute beginning locomotor, non-locomotor and manipulative skills. Physical educators should take advantage of that to build the aforementioned foundation. Waiting until they're a bit older for expectations of actual sport skill acquisition may be to students' advantage in the long term. ■

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