

Always on the Move - Exercise-oriented Youth Work

Renate de Almeida

EHSAL Europese Hogeschool Brussels, Belgium

Part 1: Practical Guidance and Didactical Approach

Background and Keywords:

The way children and adolescents experience the world has changed completely in western industrial societies.

Although children in our society appear to have everything, hardly ever experience real poverty any more, and entire branches of industry are devoted to the perceived needs of children and adolescents, more and more of them are being increasingly deprived of the experiences they need for their development. An ever increasing number of restrictions are imposed on their freedom of action and personal freedom (restriction of unsupervised opportunities to play and exercise). Playing in the street, which was previously a part of their life over which they had control ("street childhood") is fast disappearing. Children are protected and assigned to self-contained spaces. This restricts extensive exercise activities, intensive physical experience, and unrestrained contact with materials in the home and in the natural environment. Moreover, adolescents are increasingly being observed and shown to have concentration problems.

This expropriation of their spaces leads to a significant impoverishment of experience for children, quite apart from the detrimental effects on their health caused by the lack of exercise. The various influences exerted by the media increasingly lead to children having "second-hand" experiences. Their sensory activity is confined to acoustic and visual perception. They no longer discover the world through their own movement, their own actions, by testing and experimenting. A child's world is an active world, however!

This neglect of exercise also has implications for children's various areas of learning activity. Space and time can be made for more exercise in all areas of school life, without neglecting the curriculum. The school building, playground and classrooms can be made more exercise friendly. **Exercise classes** not only improve the wellbeing and motivation to learn of individual children, they also have a positive effect on the learning atmosphere in the classroom. Short **exercise breaks** of 5 minutes for the whole class enable pupils to learn in a more relaxed manner and more effectively during the rest of the lesson. Boys are often extremely vocal during the lesson, demand a lot of attention and cause disruptions. They often draw attention to themselves through insolent behaviour and fidgeting, and are constantly restless in many cases.

A temporary separation of the genders in phases may be necessary and useful occasionally. Activities in gender-homogenous groups make boys stronger. When boys play together, this is likely to reduce and curb their doggedness, ambition and the enormous pressure to be better than the others. The activities offered here may help to counteract the increasing lack of opportunities for schoolchildren to exercise and may play a part in creating a school that is enthusiastic about exercise.

Similar topics:

Body and health, self-esteem and self-image, identity, reflection on gender roles in the environment.

Materials:

- Small cushion
- Exercise mats
- Skateboard

Duration:

- Approx. 5 to 10 minutes for exercise breaks;
- One 45-minute teaching unit for exercise lessons (may be used during lessons in the classroom, in the playground, for exercise classes, during afternoon supervision).

Number of participants:

- From 8 to approx. 20 boys;
- Also possible with the whole class.

Age:

Boys from 6 to 9 years old (1st to 3rd grades)

Aims:

- Maintain the children's enthusiasm for exercise
- Test and hone motor skills and coordination ability and skills (strength, speed, response, balance)
- Develop conditioning skills (perseverance)
- Improve their physical and mental wellbeing to create a balance to the school day
- Build up self-assurance and confidence in their own abilities
- Develop team spirit, cooperation, fairness and a sense of responsibility
- Boys should learn to listen to their own bodies more and develop a "different" sense and awareness of their bodies
- Boys should realize that their own interests and preferences are not controlled by their gender
- Boys and girls should practise prejudice-free contact with each other as this will enable them to cooperate in society

(Short) explanation: exercise break

Exercise breaks are not a waste of learning time, they are essential preconditions for further productive learning activities and measures that simultaneously satisfy the natural need that children have for exercise. They are absolutely essential in a morning of lessons with long periods of sitting down and also help to curb the pent-up urge to run around. These short exercise units reduce signs of tiredness and improve attentiveness. The children are consequently able to participate in the lessons with greater involvement again.

Procedure:

The exercise break should last 5 to 10 minutes to achieve the essential relaxation effect. The teacher's most important task is to determine the correct moment for this activity. The time before the end of a teaching unit is ideal.

The teacher must ensure that the classroom is well ventilated at the beginning of the exercise break. The exercise should take place next to a wide-open window, if possible. In addition, objects should be removed from the desks beforehand and the chairs should be pushed under the desks to create as much room for movement as possible. It is advisable to use music as music has a particularly motivating effect.

The children are initially

- activated /mobilised (joining in the programme, local muscular warming-up, and activation of the cardiovascular system)

Then switch to

- movement exercises (strengthening and stretching exercises which improve their coordination).

They finish with

- a final exercise/relaxation (rest, assemble, return to the next lesson).

The teacher should play an active part and occasionally assign this "teacher role" to one or more children, to help one or other of the children with the activity.

(Short) explanation: exercise lesson

The exercise lesson should last approx. 45 minutes (one teaching unit). It is subdivided into

- catching games (warming up)
- different movement games (e.g. games that require courage, strength and trust)
- relaxation unit or final activity

The movement and catching games outlined here are not about "winning at all costs" , they are about values such as self-confidence, trusting others, accepting help, offering others help, being able to accept the weaknesses and fears of others, teamwork. The sole combatant is not called for, the community is what counts.

The "warm up" is followed by movement games. In movement games such as "**pulling carrots**" or the "**fortress game**" the boys learn for example that it is sometimes possible to achieve more through the clever use of strength and reflection than through "brute" force. They experience an interplay of sensitivity and strength.

In movement games such as "**car wash**", "**ambulance service**" or "**sculptor**" the children get to know each other and come into contact with each other very quickly. It is noticeable that many boys enjoy this, that it is often not so easy for them to have physical contact outside these exercise situations. It is possible to use these games to experiment with proximity and distance.

Procedure:

Catching games can always be used at the beginning of an exercise class as they activate the circulation, warm up the muscles and help children to relax mentally. They can also form the subject matter of a lesson, however, and be acted out in the playground. "Game hits" can be repeated for hours on end. Catching games provide children with the opportunity for concerted action, for positive contact and strengthen the sense of community. They are designed to be less success and achievement oriented than sports.

Catching games are an essential opportunity for pupils to experience a situation that is free of any pressure to obtain high grades at school. They give children a space where their performance is not compared and where there is no competition and where they are able to experience being part of a community.

The majority of games revolve around themes such as

- Attack – defend
- Hunt – pursue
- Imprison – release
- Flee – escape
- Invade a territory and defend it
- Overpower someone – resist
- Be artful – provoke – tease



Their special feature is that the roles reverse within a matter of seconds, the hunter becomes the hunted, the prisoner a liberator. This satisfies the boys' need for danger and risk. As boys often overrate themselves, the subjective assessment of an exercise situation is essential. What may be boring for one boy is a personal risk for another. The different roles also enable the inclusion of timid children and children with a lower level of motor performance in the games, e.g. an "imprisoned child" is not excluded from any game. He usually assumes the role of catcher or is released by another child.

Catcher roles should usually be assumed by the pupils themselves. Their numbers will depend on the size of the group and the size of the play area. It is best to use a small cushion to beat off the opponent (it is possible to beat off the opponent firmly without hurting the children).

A so-called "life raft" should be created in the majority of games (mat or identified area), where the children may not beat each other off and catch each other. This is particularly important for shy, fearful children and children with poorer motor skills. At the beginning of the games it is agreed that if a child says "stop", the players concerned must react and stop the action in the game.

The exercise is based on the alternation of tension and relaxation. Time to **relax** should always be included at the end of an exercise lesson. As the boys are tense in many cases this is a particularly valuable experience for them.

The success of an **exercise lesson** depends on several factors, e.g. on the time of day, the classroom situation and the progress in the preceding lesson. The success of the game completely depends on the way the idea of the game is presented as well as the way the game is managed. The teacher should act as the role model and play an active part as this will communicate a very positive attitude directly to the pupils. By expressing his own enthusiasm about the game he is able to convey the sense of the game clearly and in an exemplary fashion. The way he handles conflicts and problems in the game, his ability to simultaneously manage the game in an empathic and reflective manner will provide the pupils with essential behavioural models and strategies for solutions.

Reflection:

After the relaxation exercises the children sit in a circle and are given the opportunity to answer the following questions:

- How did you feel during the different games?
- How did you feel in the role (e.g. of catcher, prisoner etc.)?
- Which is your favourite role?
- Which role don't you like playing and why?
- Was it a pleasant or an unpleasant feeling?
- Was your role in the game easy or difficult?
- Why did the game work well or not work well?
- What did I do well in the games and what not so well yet?
- What did I get annoyed about during the games?
- What game would I really like to play again next time / never ever play again?

- What do I want to get out of the next exercise lesson?

Smilies:

3 smilies are placed in the middle of the circle.

After the question “What did you like about the exercise lesson today?” the children choose the smily that best expresses their feeling about the game.

Rope stance:

A rope is laid down in a straight line. One end symbolises total agreement (I enjoyed it very much), the other end total rejection. The children position themselves next to the rope and demonstrate their agreement/rejection.

Finger flashlight:

The children are required to assess a selected fact, e.g. “You ... worked together very well during the game”. After a brief period of reflection (approx. 1 min.), the teacher asks the children to close their eyes and indicate a grade between 1 and 5 with their fingers. If the children know each other well and have known each other for a long time, one child could for example talk about the imagined thoughts and feelings (after the activity) of the child on his right. The child then gives his view of this.

Reflection does not always have to take place at the end of a lesson, it may also take place in between (as a break) or spontaneously. Verbalising and visualising the experience assist the children’s individual learning process.

Variations (Continuation):

Boys and girls should also repeatedly participate in the exercise lessons together so that they can observe each other in the different exercise lessons. This is the best way for them to discover how the members of the other gender behave, how they move, the qualities and abilities that they contribute. They can observe different needs and learn how to deal with them and take them into consideration in concerted action.

Shared experience – shared encounter = shared living!