

## VIEWPOINTS

*Debate concerning the importance of physical education in a school's curriculum may not be as warm as is that concerning interscholastic sports (with which we dealt in our last issue), but there are surely differences of opinion here as well. In our "Viewpoints" this time Mr. Tim Heemstra, a member of the Board of Covenant Christian High School and a former member of the Board of Hope School in Grand Rapids, contends that a P.E. program is essential in the elementary grades. He draws attention particularly to the apparent correlation between a student's physical fitness on the one hand, and his classroom performance on the other. Mr. Ken Vink, a former member of the Board of Adams Street School, while not disputing the relationship between the physical and the intellectual, between a healthy body and an alert mind, nevertheless wonders aloud whether physical conditioning (often necessitating costly facilities) is the business of the school. He's suspicious, he says, of another motive behind the current emphasis on phys ed. But... read for yourself.*

## **P.E.: Essential in the Elementary School**

by Tim Heemstra

All of us as parents recall our excitement as we observed the physical development of our young infants. We anxiously referred to growth charts and developmental guidelines supplied by the pediatrician. (This seemed more so with our firstborns, right?) The Baby Book contains our notations of Junior's achievements: 3 mos. — "He held up

his own head"; 7 mos. — "He began crawling"; 11.5 mos. — "He took his first step." We observed the joy that Junior had in developing his motor skills. Throwing the spoonfuls of cereal on the floor as he sat gleefully in the highchair created a mixed reaction from Mom. She could appreciate the refinement of gross to fine motor control. She noted the

improved eye-hand coordination. But the cleanup of the mess on the floor was less pleasant. On the other hand, Junior was truly excited about his newfound motor skill and realized there was indeed a cause and effect relationship going on.

As Junior continued to grow, we as parents were most excited by the first tottering steps that he took from the coffee table to Mom's outstretched hands. The glee on the toddler's face was indeed contagious. Junior developed further motor learning as he matured and became more adroit with manipulating toys and appliances. He became more adept at running on uneven surfaces and controlling his clumsy movements with greater ease and efficiency.

We trust that Junior will continue to receive a series of successful motor experiences during his preschool years, from playground equipment to improvised games with parents, brothers and sisters, and playmates.

We also hope that physical education is an integral component of his primary education. The learning experience provided by qualified teachers (not necessarily a specific physical education instructor, although such a luxury would be the best) will continue to build motor proficiency and establish a long-term basis for health fitness. The

ability to express himself through movement at least partially shapes the child's impression of self.

I personally have had the experience of observing individuals who had not been given ample opportunity to maximize their motor skills through bona fide physical education programs. My first vivid impression of such gross neglect was the case of Don, a 24-year-old student at the Reformed Bible Institute (now College) where I worked as a part-time P.E. instructor during my undergraduate years at Calvin College. Don had been reared in a small farming community and essentially sheltered from physical activities by his parents. There were no attempts in his local Christian school for providing P.E. Don could not perform satisfactorily on even basic motor tests. He could not perform even a minimal standing broad jump — could not jump off the floor with both feet at the same time! He could not catch a volleyball or throw a Frisbee (common social activities engaged in by his peers). He also complained that his heart beat fast when he ran! (I'm certainly glad it did! He would have had more serious trouble if it did not!) He did not lack the basic neuromuscular tools — there were no physical handicaps. But rather, he lacked coordination due to insufficient training. When given adequate

training sessions, he became more coordinated, he became more self-confident in his demeanor, and he began to interact with fellow students in social game playing. He was no longer the "wall flower" who hung back, but found greater self-confidence and a feeling of acceptance with others. Why were these skills not developed earlier? Don admitted to me that he suffered all his school years due to the lack of them.

I maintain that motor skills which enhance self-concept and wellness *must* be developed during the early formative years. The first 12 years are the most important. They are considered skill-building years. It is apparent that the child who enters school with poor motor skills and little previous opportunity to learn them is at a serious disadvantage if he receives no instruction to help him improve his situation at school. Fortunately, most children develop their motor skills to a greater or lesser extent by sheer default. We should not tolerate neglect. And we should be doubly concerned about those children who do not develop adequately.

Recently, as a physical therapist in private practice, I had the opportunity to work in remedial programs for the Physically and Otherwise Health Impaired (P.O. H.I.) students from a number of

intermediate school districts. These students are not mentally handicapped children, per se, although they might have some associated learning disabilities. Here it is obvious to note the close relationship between accomplishment of specific motor skills, such as grasping a crayola, walking with a rollator walker, or climbing in and out of a wheelchair independently and the resultant feeling of joy by the student at such a success. You can note the improvement in the student's self-concept.

David Prescott, an educational psychologist, has written, "The child continually uses his own body in interacting with objects, persons, and processes in his own environment. Gradually he gains a measure of control over his body and learns its potentialities and limitations. Experiences with others also lead children to compare themselves with each other and to rate themselves as stronger or weaker, more skilled or less skilled, fully equipped or handicapped, attractive or ugly in comparison with others. The degree to which the child has met the physiological needs for movement directly influences the development of his self-concept."

In addition to the component of self-concept, recent educational theory promotes the idea that perceptual motor development is essential to the development not

only of mature body functions and motor proficiency, but also of mental perception and intellectual learning. In layman's terms, a sound body and good health are an important framework for the best learning.

We have frequently heard of the child who never crawled — who went from sitting to standing and walking, but who in later years had learning difficulties. Problems with visual perception and transposing of letters of words in dyslexia have occurred. Frequently, going back to remedial motor exercises such as crawling and practicing right and left body movements was able to improve test results. Developmental psychologists such as Piaget, Delacato, and Kephart have maintained that sensimotor activity has an influence on perceptual development, which in turn influences higher thought processes. Posture and balance, locomotion, the sense of body image and laterality are basic to perceptual organization and intellectual capability.

Thus I would maintain that a good physical education program (as distinct from a sports program) in the elementary grades is essential because:

1. Improved motor proficiency and health fitness may enhance self-concept, which in turn may result in increased classroom performance.

2. Movement experiences of the *body* can contribute to perceptual development by improving body awareness and space awareness. Reading and writing competency can be built up.

3. Movement experiences, if properly applied, may help the hyperactive student, the right brain dominate student, or the student with minimal brain dysfunction. These students will be able to learn to place themselves under better control, and this will possibly result in increased attention to classroom tasks.

But these important movement experiences as part of the P.E. program do not just happen without meaningful and adequate preparation on the part of the teacher. I am thankful to hear of many of our teachers who take P.E. seriously. But let's not hear of the teacher who takes the class out to the playground or down to the gym, throws out the rubber ball, and says, "Have fun!" — while he sits back to read a book or mark papers.

Nor should the aim of the teacher in the P.E. program be to provide a training camp for the development of the athletic teams in which only the best players participate. (May this be an incidental although worthwhile, secondary gain!) But rather the goal should be to develop health fitness and motor proficiency in *all* our covenant children. The

teachers should prepare lesson plans for the motor activities and movement experiences, just as they do for the "academic" subjects in the "desk and chair" classroom. It is a *planned* program of activities that both develops the body and fosters intellectual growth in harmony with the goals of Christian education.

"Fitness" is a popular buzz word these days. All kinds of programs are being developed for the adult populations from huge promotions by the local community hospitals, by employers interested in corporate programs for healthier employees, and by insurance companies and health maintenance organizations (HMO'S) to cut down on the spiraling health care costs. But fitness is *most* appropriate an area of attention in our elementary schools. This is for two reasons.

First of all, a recent study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services indicated that despite claims about the popularity of exercise, one-third to one-half of the American adult population never exercises and only 10% meet the exercise requirements to prevent heart disease. In another study, the National Center for Health Statistics says that American adults are exercising less, gaining weight, sleeping less, and drinking more than in the past, despite a decline in smoking and more public

emphasis on health. Thus I maintain, we've got to impress the *young*. The first 12 to 14 years are the most important to effect changes in proper Christian care of one's body. The P.E. class will provide the necessary arena to instruct our children in this care. To develop health fitness goals for their present and also adult years is important: to keep their bodies from impairment of excessive adipose tissue (getting too fat!), to maintain organic soundness free from disease, and to encourage fitness vitality with enough strength, endurance, and flexibility to handle everyday and emergency situations.

The second reason to stress the importance of health fitness in our schools is to distinguish our motives for such fitness from those of our secular contemporary society. Our motives should not be to create the "body beautiful" for self aggrandizement nor for the longer, more enjoyable life. Nor should it be for the selfish pride of personal achievement in sports. Such motives conflict with the end for which God made us as human beings. Our children must be taught that each of their bodies "is a temple of the Holy Spirit" (I Cor. 6:19). Once students learn how important their bodies are, they can learn how to care for themselves in order to function most efficiently to serve God and others.

The care of the body is an important responsibility and part of reasonable service to God.

Frequently we fall prey to the Aristotelian concept of the dichotomy of the soul and body. The soul = good; the body = evil. There frequently has been the emphasis on proper care and feeding of the *soul* exclusively and a disregard for the *body* as something that "is of the flesh and evil." It should be ignored at the least and put up with at the best.

But it must be emphasized that each child of God is an organic whole — made up of mind, soul, and *body*. Each person is a divinely created creature "who is soul *and* body, inner man *and* outer man, a conscious personal being *and* a biological one" (N. Wolterstorff, in *Curriculum: By What Standard?*). All of God's people, as created in His image, function through the physical body as an instrument which is an indispensable, integral part of the total being. The body has weaknesses and illnesses as a result of sin against the Creator. But we should promote health fitness and motor proficiency as part of responsible service before the Lord. While Scripture points out that physical training is worth less than exercise in godliness (I Tim. 4:8), it nevertheless is

clear in instructing that the body is the instrument through which God calls His people to live their lives of service to Him.

In the past, some have questioned the need for a physical education program in the elementary Christian school because of the greater emphasis on the "3 R's" (mental) and the religious (spiritual) training while de-emphasizing the physical (body). There have been others who felt that students had plenty of opportunity to exercise in their work and play. And indeed, a generation or two ago this may well have been true. The life-style and culture of those bygone days required that children do physically exerting work and participate in physically demanding play. But times have changed. Physical efforts in work have been reduced. Technology and our modern conveniences have given more leisure time. Children generally have become much more sedentary, and engage less in physically demanding work and play. They have frequently become spectators rather than active participants in motor activities.

As a parent, I am pleased that my children have had some teachers who have done a most worthy job in providing a quality physical education experience. I hope their efforts are contagious.

