

PE

A conversation with Adam Houlton

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If a pupil has had a strong, thoughtful provision, by the end of Year 6 we expect them to be confident to participate in a range of different physical activities. While they might not be passionate about all sports, we aim for them to be comfortable to have a go at any activity. This would mean that they have a grasp of basic physical skills as they progress to secondary school. If they haven't had a positive experience at primary school, they're going to really struggle when they go to secondary school.

When the children are in kindergarten and reception, they have two sessions a week and we encourage them to try out different equipment so that they learn how to balance, how to jump from pieces of equipment, how to land, hop, and skip, for example. We refer to this as 'physical scribbling'. When pupils are in Years 1 and 2, we isolate the skills, for example, pupils might throw a ball at a stationary target, then a moving target in Years 1 and 2, and then in Years 3 and 4, we include these skills

into different games. At this stage they work in groups and teams, and we introduce them to concepts such as invasion games and net games. Dodgeball is good for this as pupils pick up the ball, and without thinking about it, they adjust their bodies as they throw it to a moving target. We call this phase the 'ugly zone' because it does look messy, but in fact pupils are learning to hone these skills.

In Years 5 and 6, we ask pupils to think about what collaboration means and how to give constructive feedback. What does a good teammate do? What do you expect from a good teammate? What does a good teammate do when you make a mistake on your team? If you make a mistake, how can we make that person feel good and pick them up? Pupils talk about how it is important to be supportive, and to use constructive language. From these discussions, pupils developed a charter which is used in lessons. We introduce small-sided games when pupils are ready. We avoid playing the full game, apart from in sport or a lunchtime club. For pupils who are used to playing full games, we give them other roles to support other pupils.

We start teaching gymnastics in reception. They begin with obstacle courses, where they climb and crawl over equipment, discovering how to use their body. Then we feed in skills such as how to land on two feet and how to bend your knees when you land, for example. We vary the obstacles in Years 3 and 4, so in addition to jumping and landing, pupils might twist in the air. By the end of Year 6 we expect every child to be able to do a forward roll, a basic cartwheel, to maintain their balance, land on two feet, do a shape in the air. More able students might be able to do a handspring, for example, from a vault. For teachers who would like information about the health and safety aspects of using equipment, *Safe Practice: in Physical Education, School Sport & Physical Activity*¹ from the Association for Physical Education is essential reading.

We teach net and wall games, which involves developing basic body co-ordination, and we expect every pupil to be able to hit a ball from a stationary position. Then they progress to hitting a bouncing ball, then hitting a ball that's being fed to them by someone throwing underarm to them. This means we also need to teach pupils how to feed the ball

¹ <https://www.afpe.org.uk/physical-education/afpe-launch-new-2020-edition-of-safe-practice/>

appropriately. This takes practice, because to begin with they often throw the ball over their heads. It can be messy, but it's important to take the time to practise how to roll a ball or throw the ball underarm.

When it comes to invasion games, pupils need to be taught about spacing. They need to know that they do not need to be right next to the ball all the time. They need to understand how to create space for someone else.

By the end of Year 6 pupils need to be able to swim 25 metres; this is so that they can swim safely and know about water safety. Where possible, it's worth splitting pupils into groups to help them to develop water confidence. For outdoor adventurous activities, we include orienteering, so pupils need to know how to read a map, how to follow directions. And this aspect of provision is often through the Year 6 residential.

In terms of offering diversity in PE, we set up a pupil voice exercise where we gave pupils YouTube videos of different sports and we asked them to rank the ones that they wanted to try in future PE lessons and we included them in the curriculum, for example, ultimate frisbee in Year 6 and handball in Year 5. If they have plenty of opportunities to play these kinds of sports they are likely to join sports clubs outside of school.

We want every child to feel comfortable and confident in their PE lessons. It is important that teachers think about whether it is a positive experience for them and whether pupils are developing competence. If they feel competent, they are going to be confident in trying new skills. PE is a subject where you need to be mindful of the physical capabilities of children. It is important to scaffold ways to enable them to access the learning. One way we do this is to use an Olympic gold medal set-up. Everyone starts on bronze. This is the baseline activity, even if it's easy for the more able kids, you know in your mind that 'I'm going to move them on quickly.' You start on a basic activity, you then move children up as you see fit, but everyone has achieved something then. There's competence building for everybody. Then you can start teaching to the different levels, but the baseline must be that every pupil feels competent and safe in the lesson.

The baseline of the lesson is key: which pupils are likely to struggle with this skill? We set our baseline there, give them good feedback, give them a positive experience, and then differentiate for other pupils who might need a bit of a push. We also support pupils with the equipment

we use, for example, balls with a bell in them for children who are partially sighted. Or balls with bobbles that are easier to catch, or the slow flow balls. For more ideas on making PE inclusive for every pupil, the TOP PE cards² from the Youth Sport Trust are helpful.

Athletics is an important strand in the curriculum because it emphasises a personal best. If you talk about it in the right way, it means it is about you versus you. If we try something at the start of the lesson, are we going to be any better at the end? Are we going to be any better at the end of six weeks? For example, we use howler javelins with young pupils then progress to turbo javelins and we develop grasping a basic technique such as gripping the javelin the correct way, for example. It's about whether a child can measure their progress and whether they can offer feedback to others. An athlete is someone who can perform a field event, perform a track event, and officiate those things too.

I think we forget sometimes that when we're planning the PE curriculum, it does need to be aligned with the milestones that children go through, but they won't necessarily meet all at the same time. Unlike teaching reading, which is possible to accelerate, there are aspects of physical development which you cannot accelerate. It's like telling a child to grow their teeth more quickly, it's just not going to work, so it's important to be sensitive in curriculum design, to look at children and think about their physical developmental stage and whether it matches the curriculum. We need to be mindful of the fact that children grow and develop physically at different stages. For example, you might have an EYFS class or group who are all September babies, and they are likely to be different from an EYFS class that's predominantly summer babies. They've got another year on those kids, so their physical development is likely to be more developed.

It is important to consider how all children get an opportunity to be part of a competition of some sort. It's not being competitive but taking part in a competition. One possibility is to bring all the children together and organise a mini festival. If you have a house set up in your school, you might set up a festival every four weeks based on the curriculum. Everyone deserves the right to feel a sense of belonging and being part of a team. It is important to offer alternatives as well, for example,

2 <https://www.youthsporttrust.org/resources/character-and-leadership/top-pe>

basketball had not been taught in our school until recently. We found that a number of pupils who weren't necessarily into hockey or netball, would come along to the basketball sessions.

It is important to us that pupils continue being active into adulthood. While we want all our lessons to be active, it's not the priority. What we want to do is to make it a meaningful experience and positive experience, which will mean that good habits will form over time. It is possible to extend the PE curriculum with things like the Daily Mile³ and offer the Just Dance Club, which pupils enjoy for 20 minutes in the morning. We also do Rise and Shine fitness where we have fitness stations at three different levels, and pupils choose which level they work on for 20 minutes. They come in with their friends, just with some trainers on in the morning. We also have lunchtime clubs every day and after-school clubs every day and squads and pods. Squads are for pupils who want to train with a team, and pods for pupils who want to do different activities every week. These supplement what we do in PE.

For someone who has been given the role of PE co-ordinator in a primary school, and it's not their specialism, their first port of call would be the Association for PE, afPE.⁴ Will Swaithe at Birmingham University runs a PE curriculum design course⁵ where he talks through the design of a PE curriculum. In addition, the 'Beyond the Physical'⁶ website shows how to develop units of work, and different types of games that you can develop for your classes.

PE: background

In 1902, the War Office drew up a syllabus for physical education based on military drill. This remained the basis of PE in schools until 1933, when it then included some gymnastics. In the 1944 Education Act, which ensured free education for all, PE included more team games.

The Education Reform Act of 1988 reinforced the position of physical education on a school's curriculum by making it a compulsory subject. And in 1992, the first national curriculum physical education was introduced by the government.

3 <https://thedailymile.co.uk/>

4 <https://www.afpe.org.uk/physical-education/>

5 <https://www.pescholar.com/courses/awesome-pe-in-5-ways/>

6 <https://beyondthephysical.co.uk/>

It is worth quoting the purpose of PE from the national curriculum programme of study:

'A high-quality physical education curriculum inspires all pupils to succeed and excel in competitive sport and other physically demanding activities. It should provide opportunities for pupils to become physically confident in a way which supports their health and fitness. Opportunities to compete in sport and other activities build character and help to embed values such as fairness and respect.

'The national curriculum for physical education aims to ensure that all pupils develop competence to excel in a broad range of physical activities; are physically active for sustained periods of time; engage in competitive sports and activities; lead healthy, active lives.'⁷

Once the importance statements have been revisited, it is helpful for subject leaders and co-ordinators to discuss and agree with colleagues the reason why their subject, in this case PE, is important for the pupils in their school. One way of doing this is to draw on a quote, in this case from James MacAllister: 'Physically educated persons are those who have learned to arrange their lives in such a way that the habitual physical activities they freely engage in make a distinctive contribution to their wider flourishing.' Or it could be Juvenal's 'mens sana in corpore sano' ('a healthy mind in a healthy body'). This kind of prompt allows us to formulate our way of stating the importance of the subject. We might agree or disagree with such a statement and in doing so come to a form of words which expresses our view of the importance of this subject, in this school. This moves us away from the territory of 'we teach this subject because of the SATs or GCSEs'. While the external tests and exams are important, they are not the totality of the subject.

⁷ Department for Education. (2013) *National curriculum in England: PE programmes of study*. Available at: www.bit.ly/3yjpfIV (Accessed: 11 March 2022).

Professional communities

Subject associations are important because at the heart of their work is curriculum thinking, development and resources. The subject association for PE is the Association for Physical Education⁸ and any member of staff with responsibility for a subject should be a member of the relevant subject association, and this should be paid for by the school.

Twitter subject communities are important for the development of subject knowledge because there are lively debates about what to teach, how to teach and the kinds of resources that are helpful. For PE, it is worth following the Association for PE on Twitter and the hashtags #primaryPE, #physed and #pe.

Links

PE Umbrella – www.peumbrella.com/theumbrellamethod

School Games – www.yourschoolgames.com

Sport England – www.sportengland.org

Youth Sport Trust – www.youthsporttrust.org

The Daily Mile – www.thedailymile.co.uk/research

BBC School Radio Dance – www.bbc.in/3ikomnt

One Dance – www.bit.ly/3fpmZSP

Ten Pieces: Time to Move – www.bbc.in/37j2rqo

afPE Quality Mark for physical education & sport – www.bit.ly/2V9kaOR

8 <https://www.afpe.org.uk/physical-education/>