
AFTER-SCHOOL SPORTS & FITNESS

A Resource Brief

PREPARED BY POLICY STUDIES ASSOCIATES, INC.

Anyone who works with children after school knows the benefits of sports and fitness activities. After hours of sitting at desks, students have lots of energy to release. Many are overweight and need exercise. Others have no safe place in their neighborhoods for physical activity. Students who aren't good at academic pursuits often blossom as athletes or team captains, and their success with sports can make them happier in school. And sports help all children learn personal and social skills that help them in school and life, including the ability to focus, teamwork, leadership, self-discipline, and sportsmanship.

Many after-school projects supported by TASC feature sports and fitness, but their approaches vary. A few emphasize cooperative play. Some offer highly disciplined training and organized competition—in step dance or fencing, for example—or a blend of sports and arts, such as the martial arts. Some use Olympic-style events to provide fun, physical breaks in the routine. Other sites participate in fitness partnerships. Madison Square Garden's MSG Club, for example, links sites with professional sports teams that provide sports training, equipment, tournaments, and access to events. The TASC Team Fitness Challenge (at middle-school sites) and Sport For All (at elementary schools), both sponsored by the Picower Foundation, train after-school staff to teach basic fitness concepts and sports-related skills to children; an intramural soccer league gives students a chance to try their new skills in an organized setting.

This Resource Brief highlights examples and ideas from a sampling of those projects. At the end are cross-cutting lessons and resources for more information. The Brief focuses on three basic approaches to after-school sports and fitness: games that foster teamwork and cooperation, sports designed to develop individual skills, and activities for children who have special needs.

Teamwork and Cooperative Games

Site directors unanimously praise team sports for giving young people a chance to interact with peers, lead and contribute to activities, and learn how to work as a group—skills that are as vital to academic learning as to physical games. As one site director notes, "Fitness benefits an individual, but the sports part benefits the group. If you benefit a small group, the larger group will also benefit."

This belief compelled Rob Abbot, former site director of Good Shepherd Services' project at P.S. 27

(Brooklyn) to hold **Olympic games** several times a year. Abbot divides all of his students into two teams of mixed ages and sizes, and each team lines up along the gym's sidelines from smallest student to largest. Staff are assigned to each team with instructions to keep the students not just orderly but engaged in cheering their teammates on. "You want to create special memories," says Abbot, who now directs another after-school program in Brooklyn. "It's a time when staff get to model really being enthusiastic, abandoning themselves to a fun activity."

Starting with the youngest children, Abbot counts off 10 students from each team and brings them to the front of the gym in single lines. The competitions, which are tailored to each mini-group's age and size, are based on the relay model. One at a time, each team member races from one end of the gym to the other, completes a task, and runs back. The first team to have every member complete the task wins points.

What the tasks all share is physical challenge and a sense of exuberance that engages students. For example, the challenge might be to dress up in thrift-store castoffs—flowered shirts, crazy hats, funny-looking coats—as quickly as possible, race across the gym and back, undress, and help the next teammate dress up. Or two children might have to run side by side with a balloon balanced between them, unable to touch it with their hands but forbidden to drop it. When they get to the other side, one child holds the balloon on a chair while the other tries to burst it by sitting on it. For younger students, the tasks are simpler, such as dribbling a ball the length of the gym or running basic foot races.

Although Abbot's project emphasizes the activities themselves rather than competition (there is no prize for the winning team), some projects foster cooperation even more explicitly. At the project operated by Educators for Social Responsibility at P.S. 24 (Brooklyn), instructors design **cooperative sports**.

With kickball, for instance—a game like baseball but played with a soccer-type ball—"you normally have a whole team of children waiting on the sideline for their turn," notes site director Marisol Ramos. "They get bored and start talking." Instead, incorporating an idea from a workshop given by the Sports and Arts in Schools Foundation, Ramos directs the entire team to run behind the kicker when he or she scores a run. Each person who passes home base earns a point. And when the ball goes into the outfield, the catcher has to toss it to every member of the outfield team so they all get a chance to play.

Similarly, when Ramos sets up an obstacle course with cones and long foam tubes, she sends students

through it several times. The first time, each child goes alone to learn the course. The second time, he or she runs with a partner. The third time, three children work together to coach each other through the intricate hurdles.

The chance to contribute to a team is especially important for students who are not gifted athletes, observes Tito Luna, senior program director for the Sports and Arts in Schools Foundation. Luna, who organized an interborough basketball league for his organization's after-school sites, notes that "a lot of these kids will never get a chance to be on a team when they go on to high school and college. Our [teams] are based on who wants to play and who will give it 100 percent."

The opportunity to help a team do well is also important for students who struggle with reading, writing, and other academic skills during the school day. For them, team sports are a chance to gain respect from peers and experience the thrill of success, both of which build self-esteem and interest in school.

The Personal Side of Sports and Fitness

At the other end of the spectrum are after-school activities that develop an individual's basic physical skills and personal qualities, such as strength, discipline, and self-esteem.

The **TASC Team Fitness Challenge**, for example, is a 10-station circuit of skill-building activities that includes rope jumping, ball passing, kicking, hopping, jumping jacks, sit-ups, push-ups, and a relay run. The curriculum, developed for middle-school sites, helps students understand the concept of "fitness" and improves their endurance, muscle strength, flexibility, speed, agility, and hand-eye coordination. A similar program for elementary-school students, **Sport For All**, gives children practice throwing, catching, kicking, and moving objects. The activities are simple enough that many can be done in classrooms, and they don't require expensive equipment. Both programs were designed to be taught by staff with no formal experience in sports or physical education.

Site coordinators like these programs' emphasis on building individual skills. Carol Ross, coordinator of the after-school program operated by Project Reach Youth at P.S. 230 (Brooklyn), has many students who are recent immigrants and do not understand the rules of American sports. "They succeed very well in the classroom, but [not] in the gym, so they won't try to do sports," Ross says. "But once they have the basic skills, you can introduce the sport."

Ross also serves many special education students, and she notes that some of the skill stations used in Sport For All are similar to physical therapy

exercises. "It means that children are getting extra [physical help] in a social setting," Ross says.

One popular sport that teaches personal skills is **martial arts**. According to Rachel "Rocky" Rivera, who teaches Goju-do karate in the after-school project operated by Teachers College at Heritage School 71 (Manhattan), the sport is "like a dance—very graceful and very hard. It's got everything a body can possibly do in it."

The 30 to 40 students who take Rivera's class learn a strict protocol for self-discipline. They are quiet and focused. They bow on entering and leaving the room, and they shake hands before and after fighting an opponent.

The curriculum is equally demanding. Each class starts with stretching, sit-ups, push-ups, jogging, and calisthenics. Then comes instruction in the basics of kicking, punching, leg and hand techniques, and fighting positions. Next is *kata*, the "fighting dance," a vocabulary of 80 core moves choreographed into sequences of 20 moves that students memorize. After some mat work—rolling, falling, and landing—and instruction in how to follow up if attacked, students practice *kumite*, or free fighting. They learn to block other students' punches and control their own.

Rivera's more experienced students compete in tournaments against other schools and perform in the school, at local hospitals, and for community fund-raising events. With Rivera's guidance and support, some also compete for belts that designate their skill level.

The physical demands of martial arts and the rigid discipline impart an essential structure that transfers easily to academic learning and other challenges, says Rivera, a member of the worldwide Martial Arts Hall of Fame. "Everything in life has a discipline, rules, structure. You can take that with you for the rest of your life. If you can learn one structure, you can adapt that to everything else," she says.

Step dance is another after-school sport popular with middle-school students. And, like karate, it is a challenging, creative activity that fosters both personal and physical development. "It's athletic at its best, and it's fast-paced. It's hard work. But it also requires creativity, because kids make up their own moves and words," says Tracey Haqq, site director of Safe Horizon's project at I.S. 292 (Brooklyn).

Haqq describes step dance as an intricate process of stepping and chanting that requires sophisticated coordination and timing. "You can't just see it one time and do it," she says. "You have to practice over and over. Once students master it, they feel really good about themselves because they know they've accomplished something not everyone else can do."

Step dance's extensive rehearsal process, its reliance on group coordination, and the complexity of its performances also develop students' teamwork and communication skills, Haqq says.

Haqq's project recently had a step team of 25 to 30 girls and boys in grades 6-8. They practiced for an

hour and a half every weekday, and they held first place among competing teams throughout the borough. Students voted on what to wear and where to perform, and they had to work out their differences peacefully, which helped develop their conflict resolution skills, Haqq adds.

Sports activities like step dance and karate are especially valuable for young people searching for personal identity, project directors say, because they stem from cultural roots—step dance from traditions in African-American college fraternities and karate from ancient Japanese and Chinese cultures.

Leveling the Playing Field

One of the challenges of providing after-school sports and fitness is finding a way to include all students, regardless of age and ability. The after-school project operated by Maspeth Town Hall at P.S. 229 (Queens) has something for every one of its 350 students when it comes to sports and fitness. At least once every week, first-graders take dance or aerobics classes. Second-graders play one of several ball games that require running and gross motor skills—kick-, dodge-, or volleyball. Third- and fourth-graders play team-related games, such as basketball. And, through an MSG Club partnership that linked Maspeth Town Hall with the New York Rangers, fifth-graders learn to play hockey.

The real challenge is to include the program's 35 to 40 students who have learning, physical, or emotional disabilities. Some participate in full-inclusion classes during the day, while others have severe developmental delays that prevent them from interacting with other students, processing directions given by a teacher, or making complicated physical maneuvers.

Site director Steve Powers accommodates these students by hiring staff who can help them participate in the regular activities. Two special-education teachers alternate days to give special-needs students personalized help, and a paraprofessional attends every day. These staff accompany special-needs students when they are included in regular sports activities and help the instructors translate activities into movements the students can handle. This effort enables all students who have medical clearance to participate fully without taxing the abilities or attention of the main instructor.

Powers also modifies games to provide alternative ways of learning the same skills. For instance, while other fifth-graders are playing real hockey, students with physical limitations might play a table version of the game, using the same rules. And when Powers got some fourth-graders with physical conditions that precluded contact sports, he switched the class from dodge ball to kickball, a less risky and non-contact sport.

Finally, Powers groups children by grade rather than by skill, which avoids a stigmatizing focus on physical prowess. "I'm a strong believer that weaker kids will move along if stronger kids are there [as models]," Powers says. "If you take strong kids out to make an elite group, [the others] won't learn the skills overall."

Cross-Cutting Lessons

1. Hire skilled instructors.

Good staff are the key to making sports and fitness activities safe, fun, and productive for all children. Staff should be able to:

- Structure activities so that no one gets hurt and so vulnerable children—those with asthma or other health risks, for instance—avoid injury
- Motivate some students to push harder while recognizing when others are in danger of pushing beyond their physical limits
- Help children recognize the learning skills embedded in sports and think of ways to apply them to school and life

2. Make sure staff have positive roles and attitudes.

As with other after-school activities, staff are the key to success. They keep events running smoothly, and their enthusiasm (or lack of it) is contagious. Abbot suggests involving staff in planning the activity to ensure they're personally invested. "Give them the basic format, such as the relay race, and have them think about the equipment that's available," he suggests. "Do you have scooters? What could be done with them that's fun and [athletic]?"

Abbot also designates clear roles for staff: dealing with equipment, counting off team members, cheerleading. For relay races, he makes sure some staff are stationed at the other end of the gym to help students complete their tasks and head back to the starting point.

Team sports are a good way to learn if a staff works well together, Abbot notes. "If the activity is successful, it's because everyone is playing their role and people have taken responsibility for making the activity fun, energetic, and [streamlined]," he says.

3. Keep activities fast-paced.

Children lose interest if they have to wait too long for their turn. Abbot cuts down on the time needed to organize each sports activity by insisting that the winning team is the one that not only completes its athletic task but also sits down quietly in line. That ensures that the next team is always ready to go as soon as the previous team completes its race.

4. Plan ahead.

Have materials for each activity compiled, labeled, and lined up so you're not scrambling for them while also trying to conduct the activity. Have at least one piece of equipment available for every two children.

5. Make sure activities are age-appropriate.

As Maspeth Town Hall's Powers says, "Don't expect all fifth-graders to be playing on competitive basketball teams. At the same time, don't take fifth-graders and put them in simplistic activities where they're just... throwing a ball around."

6. Make it hard for students *not* to participate.

Sometimes children, especially girls, are reluctant to play group sports. Site director Ramos learned to make those students join the circle or line of peers even if they didn't intend to participate. "When they see the other kids having fun, they can't resist joining in when it gets to be their turn," she says. "Don't separate them from the group."

7. Identify and respond to students' individual needs.

Ramos recalls a seven-year-old girl who would cry until she was ill whenever it was time for sports. She was a little clumsy and was terrified that other children

would laugh if she stumbled and fell. So the instructor asked the girl to choose something she wanted to do by herself. The girl chose a scooter, and for several days she played with it on the sidelines while other children did their activities. When she was comfortable with the equipment, the instructor directed a few other children to play with the girl. Gradually, she integrated the child into the rest of the group by letting her select group activities that she knew she could perform.

8. Connect the sports activities to academic and life lessons.

Rivera helps students put sports in a healthy context by pointing out that many of the skills they're learning apply during the school day and to life in general. She tells them to "use their body and mind" to concentrate in the classroom, listen to their teachers, carry themselves with pride and restraint, and control their emotions outside the gym just as they do during karate class.

Resources for After-School Sports and Fitness

The **TASC Team Fitness Challenge**, developed with support from the Picower Foundation, is an easy-to-implement model for introducing physical fitness to middle-school students. It features a 10-station circuit of activities that help students learn and practice basic physical skills. A manual includes detailed activities, curriculum modules, planning tips, discussion topics, and scorecards. TASC provides training for site coordinators and after-school staff through workshops, conferences, and institutes. **Sport For All** is a similar model for elementary-school students; each participating school receives a starter equipment package. Contact Ila Jain at TASC, (212) 547-6953 or ijain@tascorp.org.

In partnership with **MetroSoccer**, New York City's leading organizer of soccer leagues, TASC is developing a pilot intramural soccer league. The program will provide coaches, referees, equipment, and curriculum. Contact Ila Jain at TASC, (212) 547-6953 or ijain@tascorp.org.

PowerPlay NYC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to educating and empowering girls through sports and mentoring. Its resources include: *NYC Girls Sports Directory*, a free registry of places where girls can learn or play sports; *Sports Training and Role Models for Success (STAR)*, a two-year mentoring program that helps girls explore sports careers; *STARS Skillz*, life-skills training for girls' sports teams; and *PowerPlay Days*, special events with sports skill-building clinics and educational workshops. For information, contact Ellen Markowitz, (212) 633-2469 or elmarko329@aol.com

MSG Clubs, sponsored by Madison Square Garden, include hands-on sports and arts components. After-school projects are paired in the Bronx with the New York Knicks basketball team, in Manhattan with the Liberty basketball team, and in Queens with the Rangers hockey team. Each club meets once a week for 90 minutes. The program has a 16-week curriculum supported by workbooks and staff training. Children practice their new skills by participating in tournaments, and players from the teams visit the clubs. TASC distributes applications for MSG Clubs to after-school projects every summer.

The **Sports Training Institute** offered by the Sports and Arts in Schools Foundation provides courses, workshops, and seminars on teaching sports and fitness skills. For more information, visit <http://www.sasfny.org> or contact Ian Walker at (718) 786-7110, ext. 114 or by e-mail: institute@sasfny.org.

In 1998, The After-School Corporation (TASC) launched an initiative to improve the quantity and quality of after-school programs for students in the public schools of New York City and State. Through grants to nonprofit organizations that sponsor school-based projects, TASC now serves students in kindergarten through twelfth grade at almost 200 sites. This Resource Brief shares some of the promising practices used by TASC projects. We hope that it helps your planning, program improvement, and further exploration into the world of after-school services. For more information on the Resource Briefs or the companion Tool Kits, which contain checklists and other practical materials, contact TASC's Research and Education Policy staff at (212) 547-6950 or www.tascorp.org. This brief was prepared for TASC with support from The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York.