



Youth Physical Fitness Testing

Background

Physical fitness is a critical determinant of health in children and youth. Accordingly, assessment of physical fitness has been a key element of physical education programs in the U.S. for many decades. When appropriately designed and implemented, youth fitness test batteries can be a valuable curricular element of school physical education programs.

Physical fitness has been defined as a set of attributes that people have or achieve that relate to the ability to perform physical activity. This definition of physical fitness is typically operationalized as a multi-component construct comprised of specific abilities, each of which is related to function and health.

In 1958 the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (now known as SHAPE America) introduced the first national youth fitness testing program in response to reports that American youth were less fit than their European counterparts. The Youth Fitness Test (YFT) was primarily comprised of items that were measures of speed, strength, power and skill. The YFT was revised in 1965 and 1975. The President's Challenge, introduced in 1986, had a similar focus.

In the 1980's, as the health benefits of physical activity and physical fitness became extensively documented, the focus of youth fitness testing programs shifted to "health-related physical fitness (HRPF)." HRPF test batteries (e.g., FitnessGram, AlphaFit, and Eurofit) are comprised of items selected to measure components of physical fitness known to be associated with health outcomes. These include cardiorespiratory endurance, muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility and body composition as outlined in a 2012 report produced by the Institute of Medicine (now known as the National Academy of Medicine).

With the transition to health-related fitness testing, the norm-based standards used prior to the 1980s were replaced by standards referenced to health outcomes. HRPF testing using health-based standards and are now the dominant approach to youth fitness testing in U.S. schools. Fitness awards programs based on normative standards (comparisons to others) fell out of favor. As noted in the 2012 IOM report; "fitness is not a competitive sport." Current comprehensive HRPF test programs include essential components such as test administration manuals, parental reports, record keeping support, and guidelines for fitness education.

ACSM Position

It is the position of the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) that appropriately designed and implemented health-related youth fitness test batteries that use criterion-referenced health standards, can be valuable curricular elements of school physical education programs. Health-related fitness test batteries should be accompanied by fitness education programs for students, instructional and management resources for teachers, and guidelines for parents. Future decisions about youth fitness testing and awards programs should be made in consultation with ACSM, other scientific societies, and organizations that serve professionals who administer youth fitness tests.