

‘Sports is important for holistic development’, ‘Sports improves children’s well-being’, ‘Children learn life skills while playing sports’ were some of the points mentioned by teachers during our discussion on *Sports in Education* on The International Day of Sport for Development and Peace. The day, celebrated on April 6, was inaugurated by the United Nation in 2013 to celebrate the power of sports to drive social change, promote community development and foster peace and harmony.

More than 30 teachers from the Raigarh district (Chhattisgarh) participated in the webinar. The points mentioned above clearly indicate that teachers are aware of the importance of sports in children’s lives. Teachers are also aware that the ground reality is very different because some schools do not have playgrounds and sports equipment. Even if many rural schools have large campuses, the grounds are too rough and uneven for children to play safely. In most schools, the games period is used for assembly or lunch or it is scheduled at the end of the school day when most children just leave for home early. Even if the games period is organised, the focus is on drills and PT that many children do not enjoy.

To tackle this challenge, for the last three years I have been designing sports sessions that are pragmatic and can help teachers and coaches to conduct sports in schools successfully.

Changing mindsets

In my experience and from what I have seen in private and government schools, the focus of teachers is to conduct march pasts and drills which clearly indicate the old school of thought which focused on one-way communication in which children are just the recipients of instructions. Sports, clearly, offer important skills for children, such as strategising, problem-solving, cooperation and social skills. If you have played with or observed children engaging in free play (unstructured and without adult intervention), such as gully cricket or

gilli-danda, you would have noticed that children use higher order thinking and strategising in these games.

One such example is Bit-by-bit cricket. The game was developed by children who innovated and accommodated to their surroundings in which they could not find enough space to play. A game of Bit-by-bit cricket, which is played in many parts of the country, can engage six to eight children in a 100-200 square foot area. To play the game, children have invented new rules which are different from those of regular cricket. While in regular cricket runs are scored by hitting boundaries or singles and doubles, in this street version of the game, players can score runs by just successfully defending the ball. The rules are so difficult (for it very easy to get out) that the batsman must use a high level of strategic thinking to save his or her wicket. The game teaches patience, strategy, handling pressure and many other skills that are very important in life. Yet, we fail to recognise this and sometimes, even discourage children to engage in such play which we think is a waste of time. Let me give an analogy from a different field to explain the importance of such learning.

In Nicaragua in Central America, until the late 1970s, there was no sign language because people who were hearing-challenged remained isolated. So, the government set up a school for hearing-challenged children that focused on teaching language to them through drilling lip-reading and speech. However, the results were dismal; children did not show any improvement. Then the same children started inventing ways of communicating with their peers on the playground and in the school buses where there was no adult intervention. Before long, the interaction among the children became a system structured into what is called *Lenguaje de Signos Nicaraguense* (LSN), which later developed into a standardised sign language for children with hearing challenges.

Similarly, instead of making children do drill and march pasts which they clearly do not seem to enjoy, we should learn from children and bring their free play to our sports session. While the free play that children engage in hones many valuable skills, sometimes, it can be risky and may lead to bullying and exclusion of some children. In such circumstances, adult intervention is required. The adult can help create certain guidelines which promote inclusivity, safety and fun for all.

Based on my experiences, here are some best practices that I would suggest for teachers to make games and sports more enjoyable for children.

Safety

For physical safety, we must clearly mark out play areas and convey to the children the spaces that are out-of-bounds or unsafe, for example, slippery areas and uneven and concrete surfaces. Communicating some ground rules before play sessions, such as no pushing and fighting, contactless play, redefining winning and fair play and cooperation can help in creating a better and more positive environment in the playground.

Gender parity

When I started conducting sports sessions in schools, whenever I asked the children to form a team, all the boys would stand on one side and the girls on the other side. It took great effort and time for me to create mixed groups. Struggling with it for a session, I decided to use an activity named 'Bolo-bolo kitne' to divide the team equally without giving explicit instructions. This can work both as a warm-up and a transition (from one game to another) activity. The coach or teacher calls out, 'Bolo-bolo kitne?' (Say how many?) and the children who are running in a circle reply, 'Aap bole jitney' (as many as you say). The coach repeats the same question a few times more till the children have run a few rounds. After that, the coach calls out a number and the children must form groups of that number. For example, if the coach says, four, the children must form groups of four. Initially, they will still form separate boys' and girls' groups. Children who are not part of the groups come to the centre and help the coach. The game goes on for a few rounds and in the final round, the coach says that children must form a group of an equal number of boys and girls. The mixed-gender groups formed are declared as

teams for the games to be played.

This is just one example; teachers and coaches can take other games and ice-breaking activities to create mixed-gender teams without explicitly giving instructions to children to form mixed groups (which can take a lot of time).

Another important way that the game sessions can be made safer and more inclusive is by modifying rules. For example, for a game of *kho-kho*, the coach can give clear instructions and show how to gently tap instead of hitting a person, in *kabaddi* allowing only a girl to be able to defend a girl raider, in football, instructing a strict 'no' to shoulder-push or making it contactless and in cricket, preventing fast-speed bowling.

Focus on fun

There are only one or two games sessions in a week for children and coaches must see to it that the children can enjoy as much time playing as they can. It is a good practice to set up a play area and equipment in advance and not spend too much time explaining the rules or giving instruction (remember the 80:20 rule - 80% playtime, 20% time for giving instructions, transition between games and setting up equipment). Having multiple activities to engage in is also a great way to make the session fun for the children.

Reflection

One of the good practices for coaches is to ask all children to gather together five minutes before the end of the games session to discuss their activity. During games, in the heat of the moment, children sometimes abuse, push and or engage in unfair play. It is a good time for the coach to point out the importance of values, like fair play and cooperation, without pointing out specific children.

Conclusion

While it is easier to write about what we should and could do, it may be difficult to implement these on the ground. Some of the challenges will come from other stakeholders, like parents and the community and maybe a few other teachers as well, who would want children to just focus on the competitive nature of sports like winning tournaments and who may disapprove of the idea of boys and girls playing together. Other challenges can come from children who may not want adult

intervention during games period which they see as purely their leisure time for enjoyment. In the latter case, I will request teachers and coaches not to force children to your idea of fun and let them enjoy their own games. During such times, you may focus on children who may not otherwise engage in games and try to make the session fun for them.

While there are several challenges we may have to face – planning, setting up objectives and reflecting on the sessions, doing these will take us a long way towards creating sports sessions from which children derive more joy and benefits.



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Play needs to be child-centred, and children must enjoy playing. It should make them explore their environment through thought and inquiry to find ways to satisfy their curiosity.

Yogesh G R, A Day in an Anganwadi Centre, p 91.