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This note takes a look at the hard reality of school sports across the country and recommends the interventions needed to ensure schools develop a generation of healthier, fitter and physically active children. This comes at a time when data from a study on sports skills and fitness assessments covering 19,797 children in 73 schools across 39 cities throws light on the shockingly low level of sports skills and fitness levels among children.

The starting premise: Shockingly low levels of skills and fitness among children

- 61% of Indian school-going children are growing up without the right fundamental skills needed to engage in sports. This covers locomotor skills (to run and hop), manipulative skills (to throw and catch), non-manipulative skills (balancing) and spatial awareness (awareness of self-space and boundaries)
- 43% of the children have less than ideal levels of physical fitness (identified with unhealthy BMI)
- The poor skill and fitness levels are seen consistently across the country with no significant difference between metros and non-metros.



Snapshot of an Assessment Session in Progress

These findings are drawn from a comprehensive assessment tool implemented by EduSports as part of its structured sports/PE curriculum in schools. The tool helped measure progress towards the goals of the curriculum, led to diagnosis, identified remedial action and further led to enhancement of learning.

Almost half the group (48%) was not fully proficient in running, 64% were not proficient at hopping, and a whopping 71% of children were unable to throw or catch properly. These are only a few of a large group of skills, classified as locomotor, manipulative, non-manipulative (or balancing) and spatial awareness skills that are fundamental to any physical activity or sport. The inability of the children to perform these basic skills well, coupled with the low levels of fitness, puts these children at a risk of not enjoying physical activity/sports and over the long run becoming inactive as adolescents/adults.

It was also found that 56% of the children are not fully aware about their self-space and general space or boundaries that exist around them. This translates into them being unable to interact seamlessly with the people or objects in their environment. At an aggregate level, 28% of children showed a shockingly low level of proficiency across different skills and needed significant interventions to reach acceptable levels of proficiency in these skills. This can be delivered through an age-appropriate and inclusive physical education programme in schools. No significant difference was noted between boys and girls when it came to locomotor and body management skills. However, boys came up a notch higher when compared to girls on manipulative skills such as dribbling balls and striking different objects.

The fitness parameters counted for the study included aerobic capacity (or endurance-recorded by making children run/walk for 600 metres) and anaerobic capacities (measured by making children cover 30 metres in a sprint), body/muscular strength (measured by sit and reach activity, sit-ups, standing, long jump), flexibility and body mass index (identifies children as underweight/healthy/over-weight and obese).

43% of the children assessed had unhealthy body composition (with scores above or below the healthy BMI scores). Among the entire group of children, 24% recorded higher than normal BMI scores indicating signs of over-weight/obesity. Coupled with poor flexibility scores (again, 57% recorded average to poor scores) this group of children are probably at a risk of suffering from problems related to their back as they grow up.

Thus combined together, poor levels of skill development and low levels of physical fitness are a potent combination to deter children away from physical activity and play as they grow up. All this coupled with unhealthy eating habits (junk and processed foods) and the lure of sedentary options available for children to entertain themselves (television, internet and video games) puts an entire generation of children at risk of growing up to be inactive and unhealthy adults.

It is indeed disheartening to see that skills like running or throwing, which we took for granted a couple of decades ago, are now deficient among today's children. It is only natural for anyone to move away from an activity that they do not possess the skill for. Logically, more children opt to play less and spend more time indoors because they are unable to play. While building skills for sport is important, one cannot ignore the low physical fitness levels of children. If kids are unable to run or jump for long, they will be happy to settle on the sofa. Together, parents and school authorities must work to change this.

Focus on Fun and Engagement- The Paradigm Shift needed in School Sports

The realisation that children play to have fun and not for anything else comes at a time when parents are getting increasingly concerned over their children's health and fitness and society is seeing an increasing level of child obesity and associated physical and psychological ailments. While physical activity is a great remedy to overcome these ailments, it is important to figure out the right way to ensure all the children in school are fully engaged in regular

physical activity.

The design of a remedy should start with understanding what a child's body and mind are 'designed' for. A lot of health and fitness programmes start with the adult context - and thereby miss out on the key elements that will work with children. Kids, for example, should not be going to gyms. Their bodies are not designed for such highly structured, repetitive activities as well as weights. They should not diet. While there is a certain balance necessary for any person, diet as a means of weight control for children is inappropriate, given that the child's body is developing. Children are designed to play. And this is how nature ensures that children stay healthy and fit! Having figured out that play is the natural thing to do, the next challenge is to figure out how to ensure no child is left out. School



sports programmes generally are unstructured and are focused on supporting talented children/the school team. In this process, a large number of children who do not make the cut get excluded or do not have fun while playing. So, how can we ensure that they are having fun?

Some of the key elements are:

1. **Age-appropriate play equipment:** For each age, there is a certain level to which a child can manage particular equipment. In basketball for example, taking an adult level basketball for small kids will ruin their technique for life. Children will start throwing the basketball like a shot-put!

2. **Inclusion:** The activity should ensure that all the children are included - and is not designed for those children who already have a sporting ability. This ensures that all children stay interested in the playing experience - and don't switch off from sports. Having the right number of equipment and running a structured plan in every session that has specific objectives/outcomes covering each child ensures all the children are involved while playing and no child is excluded.
3. **Introduction to fundamental skills:** It is important that some time is spent on ensuring that children learn the fundamentals before engaging in game-play. In the absence of the foundation, the sporty kids will outperform the rest - and the remaining kids will not enjoy the experience.
4. **Rewarding small wins:** In addition to helping children with the skills via inclusive and age-appropriate tools, it is important to record the progress seen and reward even the smallest of improvements seen (need not be competitive at all!). This encourages children to set the bar higher and constantly improve.

Conclusions

As adults (parents/school leaders), the next time we see a child not getting excited about physical activity and sports, we need to take a moment and analyse the nature of the sports experience provided to the child. There might be some simple, yet startling answers there!

Saumil is the Co-Founder and CEO of EduSports, India's first and largest school sports education enterprise. He believes that schools are the ideal partners for developing a generation of healthier and fitter children equipped with key life-skills – through the magic of sport. Saumil is also the Founder-Director of SportzVillage and was the Founder-CEO of QSupport (one of India's first remote tech support companies) after his stint at Wipro.

He holds a B-Tech degree from IIT-Bombay and an MBA degree from IIM-Bangalore. In addition to conducting workshops in many leading schools in India, he has also been a guest lecturer at IIM Bangalore, ISB Hyderabad, Laxmibai National College of Physical Education, Trivandrum and TiE (The Indus Entrepreneurs). Saumil holds a Basic Mountaineering Degree from Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (Uttarkashi). Saumil was in the Maharashtra badminton team and in the IIT Bombay football team.

