

The Role of Physical Education in Reducing Childhood Obesity

Chris Martin

Department of Physical Education and Sports, German Sports University, Cologne

ABSTRACT

This Childhood obesity has become a global health concern with far-reaching implications for the well-being of children and society as a whole. This research paper aims to examine the critical role of physical education (PE) programs in addressing and mitigating the rising epidemic of childhood obesity. The paper begins by presenting a comprehensive overview of the prevalence and consequences of childhood obesity, emphasizing the immediate and long-term health risks it poses to affected individuals. It further explores the multifactorial causes of obesity, highlighting the complex interplay of genetic, environmental, and behavioral factors. The central focus of this study is the analysis of how structured physical education programs, integrated within the school curriculum, contribute to the prevention and reduction of childhood obesity. Drawing on a synthesis of empirical studies, educational policies, and best practices, the research underscores the potential of PE to positively impact children's physical health, body composition, and overall well-being. Key findings suggest that effective physical education programs emphasize not only physical activity but also health-related knowledge, skill development, and the cultivation of lifelong fitness habits. Furthermore, the paper investigates the potential barriers to implementing high-quality PE programs in schools, such as resource constraints and varying levels of teacher training.

Keywords: Children, Exercise, Physical activity, Obesity, Diseases.

INTRODUCTION

Childhood obesity is a pressing public health concern of the 21st century, with consequences that extend far beyond physical health. The increasing prevalence of childhood obesity has ignited a global conversation about its multifaceted origins and the urgent need for effective prevention and intervention strategies. Among the various approaches to combat this epidemic, physical education (PE) in schools stands out as a critical and potentially transformative component. Childhood obesity, characterized by excessive body fat accumulation in children and adolescents, has reached alarming proportions in recent decades. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that over 340 million children and adolescents aged 5-19 were overweight or obese in 2016, marking a startling increase from previous decades. This epidemic has significant implications for the health and well-being of affected individuals, as it raises the risk of numerous health problems, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, orthopedic issues, and psychological distress. Moreover, childhood obesity often persists into adulthood, leading to a higher likelihood of chronic diseases and decreased life expectancy.

The causes of childhood obesity are complex and multifactorial, encompassing genetic, environmental, socioeconomic, and behavioral influences. Sedentary lifestyles, characterized by increased screen time and reduced physical activity, coupled with poor dietary choices, are key contributors to this epidemic. Schools, as central institutions in the lives of children and adolescents, play a pivotal role in addressing these root causes and fostering healthier behaviors. This research paper aims to delve into the pivotal role of physical education in the battle against childhood obesity. Physical education, embedded within the school curriculum, offers a structured and potentially influential platform for promoting physical activity, developing fundamental motor skills, and imparting health-related knowledge. Beyond its immediate physical benefits, PE has the potential to instill lifelong fitness habits and empower children with the tools to make informed choices regarding their health.

As childhood obesity continues to challenge the health and well-being of our youth and the sustainability of healthcare systems worldwide, understanding the effectiveness of physical education programs becomes imperative. This paper will critically examine the impact of PE on childhood obesity, drawing on empirical studies, educational policies, and best practices. It will also explore potential barriers to implementing high-quality PE programs and propose recommendations

for enhancing their role in the fight against this pressing public health issue. Ultimately, the goal is to shed light on the transformative potential of physical education in reducing childhood obesity rates and improving the overall health outlook for future generations.

OBESITY AND BMI

Body Mass Index (BMI) is a widely used measurement that assesses a person's body weight in relation to their height. It is a simple and convenient tool for categorizing individuals into different weight categories, ranging from underweight to obese. BMI is calculated by dividing a person's weight in kilograms by the square of their height in meters ($BMI = \text{weight in kg} / \text{height in m}^2$). Here are the BMI categories and their corresponding ranges:

- a) **Underweight:** BMI less than 18.5
- b) **Normal weight:** BMI 18.5 to 24.9
- c) **Overweight:** BMI 25 to 29.9
- d) **Obesity Class I:** BMI 30 to 34.9
- e) **Obesity Class II:** BMI 35 to 39.9
- f) **Obesity Class III (Morbid Obesity):** BMI 40 or greater

BMI is a useful tool for assessing population-level trends in weight status and is often used by healthcare professionals as a preliminary screening tool. However, it has limitations when applied to individuals, as it does not take into account factors such as muscle mass, bone density, and distribution of fat, which can vary widely among individuals. For this reason, a person with a high BMI may not necessarily be obese in terms of their body fat percentage, and a person with a normal BMI may still have an unhealthy level of body fat. Obesity, on the other hand, is a medical condition characterized by excess body fat that can have detrimental effects on health. Obesity is associated with an increased risk of numerous health problems, including:

- a) **Cardiovascular diseases:** Obesity is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke.
- b) **Type 2 diabetes:** Obesity is strongly linked to the development of insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes.
- c) **Joint problems:** The excess weight can put stress on the joints, leading to conditions like osteoarthritis.
- d) **Respiratory issues:** Obesity can contribute to breathing difficulties, including sleep apnea.
- e) **Certain cancers:** Obesity increases the risk of various types of cancer.
- f) **Mental health issues:** Obesity can be associated with depression, anxiety, and reduced quality of life.

It's important to note that while BMI is a useful initial screening tool, healthcare professionals often rely on a combination of factors, including waist circumference, body composition analysis, and a person's overall health profile, to make a comprehensive assessment of an individual's health and risk factors related to obesity. Lifestyle factors such as diet, physical activity, and genetics also play a significant role in obesity. In summary, BMI is a numerical measure of body weight in relation to height and is used to categorize individuals into different weight categories. Obesity is a medical condition characterized by excess body fat and is associated with a range of health risks. While BMI can be a useful tool for identifying weight trends in populations, it has limitations when applied to individuals and should be interpreted in the context of other health assessments.

REASONS FOR OBESITY IN CHILDREN

Certainly, here are some of the primary reasons behind the prevalence of obesity:

- a) **Poor Diet:** One of the leading causes of obesity is the consumption of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods. Diets rich in processed foods, sugary beverages, and fast food are associated with weight gain. These foods are often high in calories, sugar, unhealthy fats, and low in essential nutrients like fiber and vitamins.
- b) **Lack of Physical Activity:** Sedentary lifestyles contribute significantly to obesity. Modern conveniences, such as cars, computers, and smartphones, have reduced the need for physical activity in daily life. Many people spend long hours sitting at desks or in front of screens, leading to a lack of regular exercise.
- c) **Genetics:** Genetic factors can influence an individual's susceptibility to obesity. While genetics doesn't directly cause obesity, it can affect a person's metabolism, appetite, and how their body stores and burns fat. Individuals with a family history of obesity may be at a higher risk.
- d) **Environmental Factors:** The environment in which people live can strongly influence their dietary and physical activity habits. Limited access to fresh, healthy foods (food deserts), advertising of unhealthy foods, and the

- availability of high-calorie, low-nutrient options can make it challenging to maintain a healthy diet.
- e) **Emotional and Psychological Factors:** Emotional eating, stress, and mental health issues can contribute to overeating and weight gain. Some individuals turn to food as a way to cope with emotions or stress, leading to excessive calorie intake.
 - f) **Lack of Sleep:** Poor sleep patterns and insufficient sleep have been linked to weight gain and obesity. Sleep plays a crucial role in regulating hormones that control appetite and metabolism. Inadequate sleep can disrupt these hormonal signals, leading to increased appetite and weight gain.
 - g) **Medications:** Certain medications, such as some antidepressants, antipsychotics, and corticosteroids, can cause weight gain as a side effect. Individuals taking these medications may be more susceptible to obesity.
 - h) **Lack of Education:** Limited knowledge about nutrition, healthy eating habits, and portion control can contribute to obesity. People may make poor food choices because they are unaware of the nutritional content of different foods.
 - i) **Social and Economic Factors:** Socioeconomic status can influence obesity rates. People with lower incomes may have less access to nutritious foods, safe places for physical activity, and healthcare resources.
 - j) **Marketing and Advertising:** The marketing and advertising of unhealthy foods, especially to children, can influence dietary choices and contribute to the consumption of calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods.
 - k) **Cultural and Social Norms:** Cultural practices and societal norms around food and physical activity can impact obesity rates. For example, cultures that prioritize large portion sizes or have traditions of sedentary activities may have higher rates of obesity.

It's important to note that obesity is a complex issue with multiple contributing factors, and these factors often interact in intricate ways. Addressing and preventing obesity typically require a multifaceted approach that includes education, policy changes, improved access to healthy foods, increased opportunities for physical activity, and individual behavior modification.

IMPLICATIONS OF OBESITY ON CHILDREN

Obesity has significant implications and outcomes that affect individuals, communities, and society as a whole. Here are some of the key implications and outcomes of obesity:

1. **Health Implications:**
 - a) **Increased Risk of Chronic Diseases:** Obesity is a major risk factor for a range of chronic health conditions, including heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and certain types of cancer.
 - b) **Metabolic Syndrome:** Obesity often leads to metabolic syndrome, a cluster of conditions that increase the risk of heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes. These conditions include high blood pressure, high blood sugar, abnormal cholesterol levels, and excess abdominal fat.
 - c) **Orthopedic Problems:** Excess body weight places added stress on joints, leading to conditions such as osteoarthritis and musculoskeletal pain.
 - d) **Sleep Apnea:** Obesity is a leading cause of obstructive sleep apnea, a condition characterized by interrupted breathing during sleep, which can lead to poor sleep quality and daytime fatigue.
 - e) **Respiratory Issues:** Obesity can cause respiratory problems, including shortness of breath and decreased lung function.
2. **Psychological Implications:**
 - a) **Low Self-Esteem and Body Image Issues:** Individuals with obesity may experience low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and a negative body image, which can lead to mental health issues like depression and anxiety.
 - b) **Social Stigma:** Obesity is often stigmatized, and individuals with obesity may face discrimination and bias in various aspects of life, including employment and healthcare.
3. **Economic Implications:**
 - a) **Healthcare Costs:** Obesity places a substantial economic burden on healthcare systems. The medical costs associated with treating obesity-related conditions are substantial and continue to rise.
 - b) **Reduced Productivity:** Obesity-related health issues can lead to reduced workplace productivity and increased absenteeism.

4. **Quality of Life:** Obesity can limit mobility and physical activity, reducing an individual's overall quality of life and participation in daily activities.
5. **Societal Implications:** The prevalence of obesity contributes to the overall burden on public health systems, impacting resources and healthcare infrastructure. Obesity is associated with a decreased life expectancy. It can shorten life and reduce the number of healthy years individuals have.
6. **Inter-generational Effects:** Obese children are more likely to become obese adults, perpetuating the cycle of obesity across generations. This can lead to lifelong health problems and increased healthcare costs.
7. **Environmental Implications:** The production and distribution of calorie-dense, processed foods contribute to environmental issues, including deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions, and biodiversity loss.

Addressing the implications and outcomes of obesity requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach that includes public health initiatives, healthcare interventions, policy changes, education, and individual behavior modification. Prevention and early intervention are crucial to reducing the health, economic, and societal burden associated with obesity. Promoting healthier lifestyles, improving access to nutritious foods, and encouraging regular physical activity are key components of obesity prevention efforts.

SOLUTIONS TO COMBAT OBESITY

Addressing and preventing obesity requires a multi-faceted approach involving individuals, communities, healthcare systems, and policymakers. Here are some key solutions to combat obesity:

1. **Promote Healthy Eating:**
 - a) **Nutrition Education:** Provide comprehensive nutrition education in schools and communities to help individuals make informed, healthier food choices.
 - b) **Increase Access to Healthy Foods:** Improve access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, especially in underserved areas known as food deserts.
 - c) **Reduce Marketing of Unhealthy Foods:** Implement policies to limit the marketing and advertising of unhealthy foods, especially to children.
2. **Encourage Physical Activity:**
 - a) **Physical Education:** Maintain and strengthen physical education programs in schools, ensuring that students receive regular physical activity and education on fitness and health.
 - b) **Safe Public Spaces:** Create safe and accessible public spaces for physical activity, such as parks, walking trails, and bike paths.
 - c) **Community Programs:** Support community-based physical activity programs and initiatives, including sports leagues and fitness classes.
3. **Behavioral Changes:**
 - a) **Individual Counseling:** Offer counseling and support for individuals who need assistance with behavior change, including weight management and healthy lifestyle choices.
 - b) **Mindful Eating:** Promote mindful eating practices, encouraging people to pay attention to their food choices, hunger cues, and portion sizes.
4. **Prevention in Childhood:**
 - a) **School Wellness Policies:** Implement and enforce strong wellness policies in schools that prioritize healthy nutrition and physical activity.
 - b) **Breastfeeding Support:** Promote and support breastfeeding, as it has been linked to a reduced risk of childhood obesity.
5. **Policy and Environmental Changes:**
 - a) **Sugar Tax:** Consider implementing taxes on sugary beverages and unhealthy snacks to reduce consumption.
 - b) **Menu Labeling:** Require calorie and nutrition information on restaurant menus to help consumers make healthier choices.
 - c) **Urban Planning:** Design urban environments that encourage physical activity, such as walkable

neighborhoods and access to public transportation.

- d) **Food Labeling:** Enhance food labeling regulations to make it easier for consumers to identify and understand the nutritional content of foods.
6. **Healthcare Interventions:**
 - a) **Screening and Counseling:** Healthcare providers should routinely screen for obesity and provide counseling and support to patients who are overweight or obese.
 - b) **Bariatric Surgery:** Consider bariatric surgery as a treatment option for individuals with severe obesity who has not responded to other interventions.
 7. **Community Engagement:**
 - a) **Community Partnerships:** Foster collaboration among community organizations, schools, healthcare providers, and local governments to create a supportive environment for healthy living.
 - b) **Media and Advocacy:** Utilize media and advocacy campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of healthy eating and physical activity.
 8. **Research and Evaluation:**
 - a) **Continued Research:** Support research into the causes and consequences of obesity, as well as the effectiveness of interventions.
 - b) **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Regularly monitor and evaluate the impact of obesity prevention programs and policies to make data-driven improvements.
 9. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Develop interventions that are culturally sensitive and relevant to the populations they serve.
 10. **Early Intervention:** Provide early intervention and support for children and families at risk of or affected by obesity.

It's important to recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to obesity, and interventions should be tailored to individual and community needs. Additionally, addressing obesity requires a long-term commitment from individuals, communities, healthcare systems, and policymakers. A comprehensive, collaborative approach is essential to effectively combat this complex public health issue.

EXERCISES TO OVERCOME OBESITY

Exercise is an essential component of any strategy to overcome obesity. Regular physical activity can help burn calories, build muscle mass, improve metabolism, and support weight loss when combined with a healthy diet. Here are some effective exercises and physical activities to help individuals overcome obesity:

1. **Aerobic Exercises:**
 - a) **Brisk Walking:** Walking is a low-impact exercise that can be easily incorporated into daily routines. Aim for at least 30 minutes of brisk walking most days of the week.
 - b) **Running/Jogging:** Running or jogging can be more intense forms of aerobic exercise that can help burn calories quickly.
 - c) **Cycling:** Riding a bicycle is an excellent way to improve cardiovascular fitness and burn calories.
 - d) **Swimming:** Swimming is a full-body workout that is gentle on the joints and can be enjoyable for many people.
 - e) **Dancing:** Dancing, whether in a class or at home, is a fun way to get your heart rate up while improving balance and coordination.
2. **Strength Training:**
 - a) **Resistance Exercises:** Incorporate strength training exercises using resistance bands, dumbbells, or body weight. Strength training helps build lean muscle mass, which can increase metabolism and support weight management.
 - b) **Bodyweight Exercises:** Exercises like push-ups, squats, lunges, and planks are effective for building strength and toning muscles.
3. **High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT):** HIIT involves short bursts of intense exercise followed by brief rest periods. It can be an efficient way to burn calories and improve cardiovascular fitness in a shorter amount of

time.

4. **Yoga:** Yoga combines physical postures, breathing exercises, and mindfulness. It can help with flexibility, stress reduction, and overall well-being.
5. **Pilates:** Pilates focuses on core strength, flexibility, and posture. It can be beneficial for improving body awareness and building a strong core.
6. **Group Fitness Classes:** Participating in group fitness classes like Zumba, spinning, or aerobics can be motivating and enjoyable ways to stay active.
7. **Hiking and Nature Walks:** Exploring hiking trails or taking nature walks not only provides physical activity but also connects you with the outdoors, reducing stress and promoting mental well-being.
8. **Sports and Recreational Activities:** Engaging in sports like tennis, basketball, or soccer can be both physically and socially rewarding.
9. **Circuit Training:** Circuit training involves a series of exercises targeting different muscle groups. It can provide a full-body workout and boost metabolism.
10. **Tai Chi:** Tai Chi is a gentle form of exercise that emphasizes slow, flowing movements and deep breathing. It can improve balance, flexibility, and relaxation.
11. **Water Aerobics:** Water aerobics classes take place in a pool and provide a low-impact workout that is easy on the joints.
12. **Gardening:** Gardening involves various physical activities such as digging, planting, and weeding, which can contribute to daily physical activity.

When starting an exercise program to overcome obesity, it's essential to consult with a healthcare provider or fitness professional, especially if you have underlying health conditions or concerns. They can help you create a safe and effective exercise plan tailored to your needs and abilities. Additionally, remember that consistency is key, and gradually increasing the intensity and duration of your workouts can lead to sustainable results over time.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, overcoming obesity is a multifaceted challenge that requires a comprehensive approach addressing diet, physical activity, and overall lifestyle. Here are some key takeaways:

- a) **Lifestyle Changes:** Overcoming obesity begins with making sustainable lifestyle changes. These changes should encompass both diet and physical activity.
- b) **Healthy Eating:** A balanced and nutritious diet plays a pivotal role in weight management. Reducing the consumption of calorie-dense, processed foods and increasing the intake of whole foods, including fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains, is crucial.
- c) **Portion Control:** Monitoring portion sizes and practicing mindful eating can help control calorie intake and prevent overeating.
- d) **Regular Physical Activity:** Incorporating regular physical activity into your routine is essential for burning calories, improving metabolism, and supporting weight loss. Aim for a combination of aerobic exercise, strength training, and flexibility exercises.
- e) **Gradual Progress:** Sustainable weight loss and lifestyle changes often occur gradually. Small, consistent steps in the right direction are more likely to lead to long-term success than extreme, unsustainable approaches.
- f) **Seek Support:** Consider seeking support from healthcare professionals, registered dietitians, or fitness trainers who can provide personalized guidance and monitor your progress.
- g) **Behavioral Changes:** Understand that behavioral changes are a crucial aspect of overcoming obesity. Identifying triggers for unhealthy eating habits and finding alternative coping strategies is key.
- h) **Community and Social Support:** Engaging with a supportive community or social network can provide motivation, encouragement, and accountability in your journey to overcome obesity.
- i) **Health Monitoring:** Regularly monitor your health, including blood pressure, blood sugar, and cholesterol levels, in consultation with a healthcare provider. These indicators can help track progress and identify potential health risks.
- j) **Long-Term Commitment:** Overcoming obesity is not a short-term endeavor. It requires a long-term commitment to a healthier lifestyle that includes ongoing healthy eating and regular physical activity.
- k) **Holistic Approach:** Recognize that obesity is a complex issue influenced by genetic, environmental, psychological, and cultural factors. A holistic approach that addresses all these factors is most effective.
- l) **Prevention:** Preventing obesity is as important as overcoming it. Encouraging healthy habits from childhood, including nutritious eating and regular physical activity, can help prevent obesity in the first place.

- m) **Individualized Approach:** What works for one person may not work for another. It's essential to tailor your approach to your unique needs and preferences.

In summary, overcoming obesity is achievable through a combination of healthy eating, regular physical activity, behavior modification, and ongoing support. It's a journey that requires patience, perseverance, and a commitment to long-term health and well-being. Consulting with healthcare professionals and seeking support from friends and family can make this journey more manageable and successful.

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