Is It Physical Education or Physical Activity?

Understanding the Difference

With heightened attention on childhood obesity prevention efforts, there seems to be some confusion between the terms "physical education" and "physical activity." Often the words are used interchangeably but they differ in important ways. Understanding the difference between the two is critical to understanding why both contribute to the development of healthy, active children. SHAPE America believes every child in the United States deserves both a quality physical education and physical activity program.

School physical education programs offer the best opportunity to provide physical activity to all children and to teach them the skills and knowledge needed to establish and sustain an active lifestyle. Physical education teachers assess student knowledge, motor and social skills, and provide instruction in a safe, supportive environment. SHAPE America recommends that schools provide 150 minutes of instructional physical education for elementary school children, and 225 minutes for middle and high school students per week for the entire school year. Based on sequence of learning, physical education should not be compared to or confused with other physical activity experiences such as recess, intramurals, or recreational endeavors.

A quality physical education program provides learning opportunities, appropriate instruction, meaningful and challenging content for all children.

Physical activity is bodily movement of any type and may include recreational, fitness and sport activities such as jumping rope, playing soccer, lifting weights, as well as daily activities such as walking to the store, taking the stairs or raking the leaves. Similar health benefits to those received during a physical education class are possible during physical activity bouts when the participant is active at an intensity that increases heart rate and produces heavier than normal breathing.

It is important to understand not only the differences between physical education and physical activity, but also how they work together to develop students' knowledge, skills, and confidence to be physically active for a lifetime. Physical education is where students learn to be physically active and physical activity programs provide opportunities for students to practice what they learn in physical education.