

PEDAGOGY

Appropriate or Inappropriate Practice: Exercise as Punishment in Physical Education Class

David Barney, Francis T. Pleban, Matt Fullmer, Rachel Griffiths, Kelsey Higginson, Dez Whaley

Abstract

There is an expectation that physical educators will provide games, activities, and interactions that will positively affect student attitudes toward being physically active throughout their lives. Unfortunately, certain pedagogical practices have been employed in physical education (PE) classes that negatively affect attitudes toward physical activity. Of those practices, incorporating student exercise as punishment (EAP) was the focus of this investigation. The purpose of this study was to explore individuals' (i.e., former students in PE) perspectives regarding their experiences of EAP. Findings suggest the use of EAP negatively affected the classroom environment as well as perceptions toward physical educators. Former PE students reported EAP did not teach valuable life lessons, with running and push-ups identified as the most common methods that physical educators used to punish students. Results of this study reveal that EAP may not be an appropriate practice and that physical educators should identify other methods of classroom management to create a more positive learning environment.

David Barney is associate professor, Department of Teacher Education, Brigham Young University. Francis T. Pleban is associate professor, Department of Public Health, Health Administration, & Health Sciences, Tennessee State University. Matt Fullmer, Rachel Griffiths, Kelsey Higginson, and Dez Whaley are graduate students, Teacher Education Department, Brigham Young University. Please send author correspondence to David_Barney@byu.edu

Physical education (PE) has been identified as a primary component to aid in combating the obesity epidemic in the United States. It is the hope that when students participate in PE that they will not only learn applicable skills to be physically active throughout their lives, but also form positive attitudes toward physical activity (Himberg, 2000). Yet physical educators employ certain practices that may negatively affect student attitudes toward physical activity. One of the more common practices in PE classes that may negatively affect attitudes is the use of exercise as punishment (EAP). Rosenthal, Pagnano-Richardson, and Burak (2010) provided an example of EAP in a middle school PE class:

Students line up in their squad to listen to Mr. Thomson's instructions about the warm-up activity. Caitlyn has already been asked once to "open her ears" yet she continues to talk with her friend while Mr. Thomson is addressing the class. When he can no longer ignore Caitlyn's disruptions, he stops what he is saying and orders Caitlyn and her friends to take a lap on the track and return to their squad when they are ready to listen, while the rest of the class waits for them. (p. 44)

Additionally, EAP has been highlighted as an inappropriate teaching practice in the Physical Education Hall of Shame (Williams, 1996). In other literature, researchers have gone as far as to label EAP as corporal punishment (Imbrogno, 2000). The National Coalition to Abolish Corporal Punishment in School (Gundersen National Child Protection Training Center, 2014) has defined corporal punishment as "physically punishing children and inflicting pain with the intent of controlling behavior" (p. 1) and "physical pain inflicted on the body of a child as a penalty for disapproved behavior" (p. 1). To define EAP, the question may be asked, why would physical educators use these classroom management tactics in their lessons? Richardson, Rosenthal, and Burak (2012) found that physical educators incorporate EAP "to teach students that there are consequences to their actions" (p. 363), and its use "establishes the physical educators' authority with the students" (p. 363). Reoccurring practice of EAP may therefore lend itself to the possibility of negatively affecting student attitudes toward being physically active later in life.

One tool at a physical educator's disposal to assist in positively affecting student attitudes toward PE and physical activity is the Appropriate Instructional Practices (AIP) in PE documents, created by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE). The AIP guidelines were specifically written for elementary (NASPE, 2009a), middle school (NASPE, 2009c), and high school (NASPE, 2009b) PE. The purpose of these documents is to give

specific guidelines for recognizing and implementing developmentally appropriate physical education activities and practices . . . practices that are in the best interests of children (appropriate) and those that are counterproductive or even harmful (inappropriate) need to be identified for the benefit of the students. (NASPE, 2009d, p. 7)

The AIP documents stress the importance of appropriate instructional practices in contributing to a healthy lifestyle and address the inappropriate use of activities/exercises to chastise misbehavior. Along these lines, NASPE developed a parallel position statement, voicing opposition of the use of EAP; citing specific examples, such as withholding PE class or recess for students to complete unfinished schoolwork or as a consequence for misbehavior; forcing students to run laps or perform push-ups because of behavioral infractions (e.g., showing up late, talking, and disruptive behavior); and making students run for losing a game or for not performing a skill properly (NASPE, 2009d).

In literature specific to EAP, researchers have investigated why physical educators and coaches use this tactic with their students and athletes. Richardson et al. (2012) examined physical educators' and coaches' intentions to use EAP. Richardson et al. reported that physical educators and coaches did not hold positive attitudes, intentions, or subjective norms about using EAP, yet a majority of study participants reported they had used EAP to manage their students and/or athletes. Additionally, they reported that participants with the dual role of physical educator and coach held more positive intentions, attitudes, and subjective norms and were more likely to use EAP compared to participants who identified only as physical educators (Richardson et al., 2012). Finally, study participants who

both coached and taught were more likely to implement EAP in both settings, for athletes and students alike (Richardson et al., 2012).

Another population identified with a propensity to practice EAP in PE was students. Barney and Christenson (2014) investigated elementary-aged (third, fourth, and fifth grade) students' knowledge of appropriate instructional practices in PE, in approximately 2,400 elementary-aged students. In this study, 57% of third graders, 51% of fourth graders, and 49% of fifth graders reported that misbehaving students should run for long periods or perform numerous push-ups or sit-ups as punishment.

EAP has also been glamorized in popular culture and motion picture. In the beginning of the movie *Mr. Woodcock* (Cooper, Dobkin, & Gillespie, 2007), Mr. Woodcock (PE teacher) lines up his middle school students to discuss the game of basketball. During his dialogue, he poses questions to students, and as a result of incorrectly answering or not knowing the answer, students have to run laps around the gymnasium as punishment. This particular inappropriate instructional practice has been glamorized and perpetuated, taking place on an all-too-daily occurrence, being passed from one PE teaching generation to another (Burak, Rosenthal, & Richardson, 2013).

As mentioned, subjecting students to EAP has the possibility of negatively affecting attitudes toward PE and physical activity throughout their lives. Another concern for physical educators using EAP is possible legal consequences. As reference, Sawyer (2003) discussed the court case of *Moore v. Willis Independent School District*. In this case, parents of Aaron Moore brought suit after their son sustained serious injuries as a result of EAP. On the day of the event, during roll call, Moore was observed speaking with another student, violating a class rule. Punishment for the infraction was 100 squat thrusts. After completing the 100 squat thrusts, Moore then participated in 20 to 25 min of lifting weights. In the days following the event, Moore was diagnosed with degenerative skeletal muscle disease and renal failure. The student was hospitalized, missing 3 weeks of school. When the case went to court, the student's parents submitted testimony that the PE teacher told them that the squat thrusts were a means of punishment necessary to control junior high school students, and "with junior high kids, you have to inflict pain or they

don't remember" (Sawyer, 2003, p. 12). Even though Moore's federal claim was dismissed, it is still important to note that EAP may have detrimental consequences for the student and the physical educator.

The majority of studies in which EAP is referenced take the perspective of current physical educators, preservice teachers (PETE majors), and coaches using EAP in their classes or with their athletes (Richardson et al., 2012). To further research in EAP and its effects on students, investigating past students' experiences with EAP may be beneficial for both PETE faculty and current physical educators. The purpose of this study was to understand better individuals' (i.e., former students in PE) perspectives regarding their thoughts and experiences of EAP during their time in school PE.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were 180 college-aged students and young adults (104 males, 76 females) from a private university and local community located in the western United States. Participant ages ranged from 19 to 36 years.

Instrumentation

Through a review of literature, we could not identify an instrument specific to EAP in physical education. Therefore, for this study, we developed a 16-question survey instrument (see Table 1). The survey consisted of five yes/no questions, three open-ended questions, six yes/no with open-ended follow-up questions, and two demographic questions. To establish content validity, we had college-aged students, academic colleagues, and other professionals with a PE pedagogy knowledge base review survey questions for clarity and understanding. For reliability, the instrument was further pilot-tested on college-aged students who did not participate in the subsequent study.

Table 1

Exercise As Punishment (EAP) Survey

Gender: Male Female

Age: 18–25 ____ 26–30 ____ 31–35 ____ 36 and older ____

The following survey questions will ask you about experiences with exercise as punishment in physical education class. Some questions will ask you to circle your answer and other questions will ask you to write a brief explanation. Thank you for participating in this survey.

1. Was daily (or frequent) running/exercise a requirement in your PE classes?
Yes No

2. Was running/exercise enjoyable in your PE class?
Yes No

3. If you misbehaved in class, did you have to run or exercise as a form of punishment?
Yes No

4. What kind of misbehavior would warrant a student to exercise as punishment? Give examples.

5. If you had to exercise because of bad behavior, did it impact your exercise (running, other exercising) today? Please explain your answer.
Yes No

6. Do you run for your exercise program now?
Yes No

7. Do you recall ever having to exercise as punishment in your PE class?
Yes No

Table 1 (cont.)

8. If you answered YES to the previous question, please write about your experience exercising as punishment.
9. Do you feel it is appropriate to have students exercise as a form of punishment? Please explain your answer.
Yes No
10. When you were in PE, did you witness your PE teacher have students exercise as punishment?
Yes No
11. What forms of exercise did you witness students do for their punishment?
12. When a student is told to exercise as punishment by the PE teacher, do you think it affects the overall classroom (gymnasium) environment for the whole class? Please explain your answer.
Yes No
13. Do you feel that having students exercise as punishment could affect their attitude toward exercise in the future? Please explain your answer.
Yes No
14. To those who experienced exercise as punishment, do you feel there were valuable lessons learned in the process? Please explain your answer.
Yes No
-

Procedures

We employed nonprobability sampling to collect study survey data. We placed ourselves in locations with heavy student traffic (e.g., student union building and dormitory cafeterias). We distributed

surveys in paper format, with instruction given prior to completion, to 180 subjects. Approximate completion time for each survey was 10 min. Prior to survey distribution and data collection, the university institutional review board (IRB) granted approval to conduct the study.

Data Analyses

Analyses were performed on student responses to the survey instrument. Quantitative data analysis consisted of chi-squares (χ^2) as well as measures of central tendency and dispersion. Chi-square was conducted to compare question responses between genders. Significance was established at $p < 0.05$. Means, standard deviations, chi-square, levels of significance, and Cohen’s d effect sizes were reported for all significant effects. Responses to questions, defined by gender, were presented as percentages, with means and standard deviations. Descriptive statistics were calculated, and thematic content analysis was performed on open-ended responses. Referencing qualitative analysis, we read and reread the data until common themes became evident for each survey question (Mueller & Skamp, 2003).

Results

Participants for this study were 180 college-aged students and young adults ($M = 1.42$, $SD = .495$) from a private university and local community located in the western United States. Participant ages ranged from 19 to 36 years, with 104 males and 76 females.

Table 2
Participant Responses in Percentages by Gender

Question #	Total population ($n = 180$)		Male ($n = 104$)				Female ($n = 76$)			
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	M	SD	Yes %	No %	M	SD
1	83	17	83	17	1.42	.496	83	17	1.42	.502
2	56	44	56	44	1.43	.497	57	43	1.42	.496
3	49	51	49	51	1.42	.496	49	51	1.42	.495
5	21	79	18	82	1.49	.507	24	76	1.41	.493
6	57	43	61	39	1.38	.488	51	49	1.47	.503
7	37	63	38	62	1.42	.497	37	63	1.42	.495

Table 2 (cont.)

Question #	Total population (<i>n</i> = 180)		Male (<i>n</i> = 104)				Female (<i>n</i> = 76)			
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Yes %	No %	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
9	46	54	54	46	1.33	.471	35	65	1.42	.495
10	64	36	64	36	1.43	.497	66	34	1.41	.495
12	77	23	73	27	1.45	.500	83	17	1.32	.471
13	83	17	79	21	1.45	.499	87	13	1.31	.471
14	38	62	47	53	1.29	.457	26	74	1.50	.502

Note. Total population mean and standard deviation for question responses ($1.42 \pm .495$).

Quantitative Analysis

Table 2 depicts participant responses in percentages by question response. Significant differences were reported for two (Questions 9 and 14) of the 11 scaling questions when comparing gender.

Responses to the question (yes or no), “Do you feel it is appropriate to have students exercise as a form of punishment?” (Question 9) indicated an association by gender, with males ($M = 1.46, SD = .501$) and females ($M = 1.64, SD = .482$), $\chi^2(1, N = 180) = 8.036, p > .01$. Cohen’s *d* effect size for Question 9 computed to $d = -0.37$, representing a small to moderate effect. Responses to the question (yes or no), “To those who experienced exercise as punishment, do you feel there were valuable lessons learned in the process?” (Question 14) indicated an association by gender, with males ($M = 1.53, SD = .502$) and females ($M = 1.74, SD = .443$), $\chi^2(1, N = 180) = 8.036, p > .01$. Cohen’s *d* effect size for Question 14 computed to $d = -0.44$, representing a small to moderate effect.

Follow-Up Questions Analyses

Additional data results comprised short-answer responses from respondents. The thematic analysis and findings reported below comprise nine questions.

In nine questions, participants were asked to explain and expound their responses from the quantitative portion of the survey. The following outlines the qualitative responses from the participants in this study. Participants were asked (Question 4) what kind of misbehavior warranted EAP. Parallel responses to Question 4 were a student talking, talking during teacher instruction, and talking back to the teacher in a disrespectful manner. One student stated, "Talking when you're not supposed to." Another student stated, "Talking while the teacher was teaching." In reference to "talking," participants' comments were specific to talking disrespectfully to the teacher: "when a student cusses or swears at the teacher" or "just talking back." Another common theme specific to Question 4 was being late for class. One student said, "The typical punishment for being late to class was push-ups." One final theme from this question was in reference to the losing team and EAP, during team play in PE class. Students stated, "Losing the game, the teacher made losers run" and "The losing team for games generally had to do push-ups."

The participants were asked (Question 9) if they felt EAP was an appropriate form of punishment. The following themes came forward, such as "cruel and unusual punishment," "sends a bad message," and "not a motivator." Yet some of the participants felt that such a technique "strengthened them," "promotes toughness," and "healthy way to be punished." Participants were asked (Question 12) if the overall classroom (gymnasium) environment was affected when the teacher used EAP on a student. The following statements were made: "The atmosphere usually becomes tense," "It's awkward to watch," "It scares the group or makes them feel uneasy," and "It made us fear the teacher." The participants were also asked (Question 13) if EAP could affect attitudes toward exercising in the future. Students stated, "When you are forced to do stuff, sometimes you end up hating it more," "Why choose to do something that you've learned is a punishment," "They might have a negative attitude toward it," and "I hate running now." Finally, the participants were asked (Question 14) if they had experienced EAP, and if they had, did they feel they learned valuable lessons from their experience. Statements such as the following were given: "It didn't accomplish anything," "Taught me not to misbehave again," "Valuable lessons? Probably not. Just burn off some energy so they'll be less disruptive," and "Could've

learned the same thing without physical punishment.” In Question 11, participants were asked what forms of exercise they witnessed their classmates participate in when used as punishment. As punishment, they identified running and push-ups.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand better individuals’ perspectives regarding their thoughts and experiences of EAP when they were in PE. Results indicate that participants generally did not enjoy EAP while in PE. However, gender differences were identified in reference to Question 9, with males more in support of the use of EAP compared to females. Burak et al. (2013) studied PETE majors’ attitudes, beliefs, and intentions regarding the use of EAP in PE and sports. They found that 62% of male PETE majors used EAP during their teaching. For female PETE majors, 52% also used EAP during their teaching. Results from our study concur with results from Burak et al. (2013) that the male participants were more likely to use EAP. Other survey responses were homogenous when compared between genders. With a fairly equal amount of participant responses to survey Question 9, one may ascertain that a mind-set has been established early on that EAP may be considered standard practice in PE (Burak et al., 2013; Rico, 2002).

Another point of discussion is specific to the effects of EAP on the overall classroom (gymnasium) environment (Question 12). Data revealed that both males (73%) and females (83%) felt that EAP affected the classroom environment. The question may be asked, “In which direction was it affected, positively or negatively?” To help clarify the data, the participants responses ranged from “it’s awkward to watch” or “it is humiliating” to “it changes the mood.” One participant stated how “embarrassed” she was when she had to run in front of the whole class, which included friends. These types of responses may lead to negative feelings toward physical activity, which in turn may affect student attitudes toward being physically active throughout their lives. Along this line, in Question 13, participants were asked if EAP could affect attitudes toward exercise in the future. To note, a majority of males (82%) and females (76%) reported that they were not negatively affected when they encountered EAP. Yet other participant responses shed additional insight in reference to Question 13: “Why choose to do something that you’ve learned

is a punishment” and “It can traumatize a student.” Literature has implied that EAP could negatively affect student attitudes toward exercise throughout a person’s life (Burak et al., 2013; Himberg, 2000; Rosenthal et al., 2010). Student responses from this study help bring some clarity to the negative effects that EAP can have on future physical activity in a person’s life.

A final point of discussion deals with valuable lessons learned (Question 14) by participating in EAP. In Rico’s (2002) study of law reviews of EAP, she concluded that when students participate in EAP, they are not going to change behavior, not going to be taught discipline, and are likely to become physically aggressive. Participants in our study found EAP “did not accomplish anything” and “pain is not a good form of punishment.” Prusak and Vincent (2005) implored physical educators to do what is best for their students. For physical educators who are using EAP in their daily lessons, it is hoped that they will discontinue this inappropriate practice. Findings from our study concur with the NASPE (2009a, 2009b, 2009c) documents in that PE should promote exercise for its contribution to a healthy lifestyle and not as a form of punishment.

Implications

After analysis of the data and a review of participants’ responses, it does not come as a revelation that EAP is not appropriate for physical educators to use in their daily lessons. First, it is important that physical educators make their students’ PE experiences positive. If physical educators use EAP with their students, they run the risk of creating a learning environment that makes students afraid or uncomfortable. Students will be required to come to class, yet participation may not be a fun or enjoyable experience. Furthermore, a learning environment that is tense or filled with uncertainty may affect a student’s ability to learn and appreciate PE (Pangrazi, 2004). Graham (1995) stated that physical educators have the potential to positively affect multitudes of students. These students will grow up to be adults, parents, teachers, school board members, and voters. As such, their PE experiences may have an effect on PE in future children’s schools and school districts (Aicinena, 1991).

Another study implication is to start a discussion to get physical educators to think of other classroom management methods to implement instead of EAP. The NASPE position statement on

Physical Activity as Punishment and/or Behavior Management has suggestions for physical educators. The following were documented as suitable alternatives to using EAP: (1) include students in establishing expectations and outcomes early in the school year, and review those expectations and outcomes frequently; (2) be consistent with enforcing behavioral expectations within the learning environment; (4) practice and reward compliance with rules and outcomes; (5) offer positive feedback and catch students doing things right; (6) include students in meaningful discussions about goals and how to reach them; (7) do not reinforce negative behavior by drawing attention to it; (8) hold students accountable for misbehavior; and (9) develop efficient routines that keep students involved in learning tasks. Richardson et al. (2012) suggested more work still needs to be done to encourage and educate physical educators, coaches, and preservice teachers about the potentially negative consequences of EAP. It is hoped that implications from this study will provide physical educators, coaches, and preservice teachers with plenty of alternatives to EAP and strategies with a focus on students' best interests as well as their future health and well-being.

References

- Aicinena, S. (1991). The teacher and student attitudes toward physical education. *The Physical Educator, 48*, 28–32.
- Barney, D., & Christenson, R. (2014). Elementary-aged students perceptions regarding appropriate instructional practices in physical education. *The Physical Educator, 71*, 41–58.
- Burak, L. J., Rosenthal, M., & Richardson, K. (2013). Examining attitudes, beliefs, and intentions regarding the use of exercise as punishment in physical education and sport: An application of the theory of reasoned action. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 43*, 1436–1445. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12100>
- Cooper, R. W. (Producer), Dobkin, D. (Producer), & Gillespie, C. (Director). (2007). *Mr. Woodcock* [Motion picture]. United States of America: New Line Cinema.
- Graham, G. (1995). Physical education through students' eyes and in students' voices: Implications for teachers and researchers. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, 14*, 478–482.

- Gundersen National Child Protection Training Center. (2014). National Coalition to Abolish Corporal Punishment in Schools (NCACPS): Facts about corporal punishment worldwide. Retrieved June 28, 2014, from <http://stophitting.com/dis-at-school/worldwide.php>
- Himberg, C. (2000). CASPER demands: No more exercise as punishment! *Teaching Elementary Physical Education, 11*, 17–18.
- Imbrogno, A. (2000). Corporal punishment in America's public school and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child: A case for nonratification. *Journal of Law Education, 29*, 125–147.
- Mueller, A., & Skamp, K. (2003). Teacher candidates talk: Listen to the unsteady beat of learning to teach. *Journal of Teacher Education, 54*, 428–440. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0022487103256902>
- National Association for Sport and Physical Education. (2009a). *Appropriate instructional practice guidelines for elementary school physical education*. Reston, VA: Author.
- National Association for Sport and Physical Education. (2009b). *Appropriate instructional practice guidelines for high school physical education*. Reston, VA: Author.
- National Association for Sport and Physical Education. (2009c). *Appropriate instructional practice guidelines for middle school physical education*. Reston, VA: Author.
- National Association for Sport and Physical Education. (2009d). *Physical activity used as punishment and/or behavior management* [Position statement]. Reston, VA: Author.
- Pangrazi, R. P. (2004). *Dynamic physical education for elementary school children* (14th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Benjamin Cummings.
- Prusak, K., & Vincent, S. (2005). Is your class about something? Guiding principles for physical education teachers. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance, 76*(6), 25–28, 35. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2005.10608263>
- Richardson, K., Rosenthal, M., & Burak, L. (2012). Exercise as punishment: An application of the theory of planned behavior. *American Journal of Health Education, 43*, 356–365. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19325037.2012.10598866>

- Rico, K. (2002). Excessive exercise as corporal punishment in Moore v. Willis Independent School District - Has the fifth circuit “totally isolated” itself in its position? *Villanova Sports & Entertainment Law Journal*, 9, 351–386.
- Rosenthal, M., Pagnano-Richardson, K., & Burak, L. (2010). Alternatives to using exercise as punishment. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance*, 81, 44–48. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2010.10598479>
- Sawyer, T.H. (2003). School punishment and physical education. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 74(2), 12–13.
- Williams, N. F. (1996). The Physical Education Hall of Shame. Part III: Inappropriate teaching practices. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance*, 67, 45–48. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07303084.1996.10604838>