



Top 10 Reasons Why Children Find *Physical Activity to Be* FUN

By Christine J. Hopple

If one were to survey 100 elementary physical education teachers and coaches for the top three reasons they think children stay active and interested in physical activity, chances are that “fun” would make the majority (if not all!) of their lists. Results from research conducted with youth (as well as from teachers’ practical knowledge) has revealed that fun or enjoyment (i.e., positive affective responses encompassing feelings such as pleasure and liking; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986) is a critical “must-have” if physical educators want children to voluntarily engage in physical activity (Woods, Graber, & Bolton, 2009). Conversely, it is also known (again, from both research and practical perspectives) that a *lack* of fun is one of the main reasons why children elect to *opt out* of physical activity (Crane & Temple, 2015; Visek et al., 2015).

Despite the important role that fun plays in children's activity participation, it remains a relatively unknown and elusive entity. That is, given how many times children say, "Wow, that was fun!" after playing an activity, educators do not know *exactly* what that means. Does it mean that each child thinks about that activity as being fun in the exact same way and for the exact same reasons? Or if children were to play that same activity in a different setting — for example, in an organized youth activity setting instead of on the playground for recreation — would they still consider the activity to be just as fun? Do factors such as skill level make a difference in whether children view the activity as fun? And what about when the activity is *not* enjoyable for children? Questions such as these and others are reminders that increasing understanding about fun in physical activity, from a child's perspective, is a worthy endeavor (McCarthy & Jones, 2007).

To determine answers to these questions, more than 90 boys and girls in grades 4, 5, and 6 from three nontraditional public schools in a midsized Mid-Atlantic community took part in surveys and interviews. First, all children completed a survey that included open-ended and Likert scale questions relative to their enjoyment of physical activity in the three activity settings of physical education, recreation and organized youth activity/sport. All children also drew a picture of "the first thing [they] think of when [they] think of physical activity." Then, select children were chosen to be interviewed in a focus group (4 to 5 students together; 28 children total) and/or a duo interview (2 students together; 26 children total). Because obtaining the perspectives of children of differing skill levels was desirable, children were assigned to one of three groups (low, medium, or high skill) according to their self-ratings of overall skill level. Based on these ratings and whenever possible, the same number of children in the lower- and higher-skilled groups were included in interviews, and children of the same skill level were assigned to the same interview group. Once collected, all data were analyzed according to standard research practices (please see Hopple, 2015, for a detailed description of the complete study's methodology).

The purpose of this article, then, is to first share the "top 10" reasons children in this study found physical activity to be fun and then discuss the implications of their thoughts for professionals who work with children in activity settings. The reader should keep in mind that children in this study utilized the terms "like," "fun" and "enjoy" interchangeably and to mean the same thing (even though adults may discern some differences among these terms). That is, if children felt an activity was fun or enjoyable, they liked it and vice-versa. Children's original statements are provided and are accompanied by a pseudonym (chosen by the child), gender (B/G), grade level (4/5/6), and skill level (low [L], medium [M], high [H]) provided in parentheses. (A "C" in quoted conversations denotes the author of this article.) Also, it may be helpful to know that the more strongly a reason was supported by all data in the study, the lower it is found in this "Top 10" list (i.e., the No. 1 reason was more strongly supported by children's thoughts than the No. 10 reason). Now, let the list begin!

10. Being Physically Active

Children in this study enjoyed being able to be physically active and move! For example, Susy (G/5/M) liked ballet because she was "exercising a lot and it's fun," while Elizabeth (G/6/M) liked the same activity because "it is good exercise, and it is fun [and] I liked playing softball because you can run." Mooley (B/6/M) liked basketball "because I like being active." Super (B/5/M) enjoyed football because he was "active, always running," and George (B/5/M) appreciated that he "got to run around when I wanted . . . I did not have to stay still."

Some children also saw a positive connection between being physically active and being healthy. As an example, when asked to describe why they classified certain activities such as running and yoga as being fun in nature, Megan (G/5/H) said it was because they are "keeping you fit," while Michael (B/5/H) said they were "[e]nergizing . . . energetic, healthy." Butler (B/6/H) felt that yoga class at school was fun because it made him feel "[h]appy, that I'm getting a workout. 'Cause I want to be active and I want to be healthy."

9. Being 'Mindful in the Moment'

Children in this study felt that being "mindful in the moment" — or being caught up in nothing except for the activity at hand — contributed to physical activity being fun. When children were "in the moment," the activity "[lets me] focus on other things rather than my own problems" (TheOtherGuy, B/6/M), and it "just sort of occupies me" (Larri, G/5/M). As an example of the latter, Jo (G/6/M) took horseback riding lessons and thought riding was fun, but she cautioned that "you don't have to be smiling to have fun, because my trainer always picks on me, 'cause she says, 'You're allowed to smile!' because I am really concentrated when I do it."

Some physical activities were perceived as fun because they allowed children to, at that moment in time, view their everyday world differently.

in the moment
learning **FUN** being free!
 relaxing **ENJOYMENT** healthy
 competition
 challenging
skillful physically active
 encouraging adults

Some physical activities were perceived as fun because they allowed children to, at that moment in time, view their everyday world differently. For Mike (B/5/H) and Butler, this experience happened to them when they jumped on the trampoline:

Mike: When you're jumping, you see things from a different perspective.

C: What do you mean?

Butler: It's like you're up high and you can see and you just . . .

Mike: . . . You're up high and you can see things differently. Sometimes you can just see it in a different way.

Here, two other boys (B/4/M) discussed being mindful of the moment in the wintertime:

Bob: I really just like playing in the snow and I've had good experiences, so it's really fun for me no matter what. Like one time in the morning I had just woken up and it was completely white, and I loved that so much.

JohnPeter: Yeah . . . I like kind of exploring the snow even in places I've been before. The snow just makes things so much different.

8. Positive Interactions with Teachers and Coaches

Children in this study felt that the positive interactions they had with adults such as coaches and teachers in physical activity settings contributed to the activity being fun. As Butler said, if the coach for your team "is really nice, you just have fun." Children in this study felt that "nice" meant that coaches and teachers were encouraging, understanding and involved

with them during activity. For example, Brandon (B/6/H) found playing football more enjoyable because of how his coach encouraged him: "Even sometimes when I lose, the coaches have always said that I work very hard and that I'm good. Which makes me feel good, because I feel disappointed when I lose." Jo thought gymnastics (done at a local club for physical education class) was enjoyable because "gymnastics is at your own pace, and they (the coaches) don't get upset if you don't know how to do something." Mike enjoyed it when his soccer coach played with him and his teammates, because "they're usually like really awesome at it, so you have a really challenging time, and you can get better pretty easily." Kris (B/5/H) liked when the "adults play with us," and Butler said that when his coach "tells us to [run down and back], he does it with us, so it makes a difference . . . he does it with us, so that makes it fun."

7. Being Challenged (But Not Too Much)

A number of activities were enjoyable to children because they found them to be challenging. For example, KTMartin (G/6/M) enjoyed figure skating because "it was something I never did and because it was challenging and I like challenging things." Mike "like[d] playing [baseball and soccer] because they are challenging." JoAnn (G/4/H) liked "kickball [because] it's a challenge," and JohnPeter said that soccer was fun for him because "it's hard and interesting." The balance between being challenged yet still improving and being successful was also important in terms of children finding an activity to be fun. For example, Butler thought that even though yoga is "hard" for him, "it's technically fun for me because I know I'm going to get better." Lilly (G/5/H) also explained this delicate balance when she described how running was hard for her, but it's "one

of those things where I like it but I also don't like it because it gets me frustrated, and I'm like, 'Ugh, I don't want to do this' but [then] like, 'Yay, I'm getting faster!'

6. Physical Activity Relieves Stress

Children in this study often used the words “relaxing” and “stress” in the same thought when describing why they found specific activities to be fun. Swimming was a popular choice for a fun activity that helped them to relax. Susy, for example, described how it helped her “[not] get so stressed, it's relaxing . . . I love to stroke, it's so fun; it's like washing away your stress.” CodyTaylor (G/5/M) said it helped to “just be by yourself . . . it relaxes you,” while Lilly said, “[I]f you're really mad, you don't have to take your anger [out] on a person; you can take it out on the water . . . and you can hit the water as much as you want to!” Other stress-relieving activities included yoga because it is “relaxing” (Anya, G/4/M), “biking . . . so I can relax” (Smile, F/6/M), and “dodgeball, because it helps if I have a bad day” (Lucky13, G/4/M). Jumping on the trampoline, running and lifting weights served as “stress relievers” for James (B/6/H). Sierra (F/6/M) felt that a “little jog can be fun and relaxing.” Susy thought that dancing “is fun because . . . it doesn't make you stressed, makes all of your stress go away, feels so nice!”

5. Competition and Winning

For a number of children in this study, the element of competition made playing some games enjoyable. According to Brandon, the purpose of competition is to “determine who is the better person in the game . . . by putting two people against each other, or two teams against each other, and then beating and not being mean about it, but just seeing who could do better.” It was apparent that some children thrived on this process of comparing their skills against others' skills. For example, AlexMercer (B/6/H) wrote, “I like playing [basketball, cross country running]” because “I am extremely competitive. I compete with everything. I feel like I have to be better than the guy standing next to me.” JKRichard (B/6) said that “it's great going against other people for fun.” Elizabeth liked the game of basketball knockout at recess because “I really enjoy the competition of trying to get the people out and people can't choose to not give you the ball because everyone gets a turn . . . and I also enjoy trying to stay in and not get eliminated.” Other children, through their survey answers, stated that they enjoyed activities such as dodgeball “because it's fun to play a really competitive game” (JohnDoe, B/6/M), football (“competition, love the sport,” Stefan, B/6/M), and ice skating (“I am going to Nationals to compete,” Mordici, G/4/H).

Larri liked “competitive swimming . . . I'm on the swim team, I really like it. It's like two of my favorite things combined, beating people competitively and not sweating to death.” Lilly used to play organized soccer but quit because there actually was not *enough* competition. She explained in her interview, “The way we were playing it, it wasn't really a competition or anything, I kinda like competitions. It was just kicking the ball around . . . and I was like, 'Ugh, I have to go to soccer,' and 'Ugh, annoying.' So I just said, maybe soccer is not right for me.”

For some children, winning — seen by them as a possible but not always necessary byproduct of competition — was also enjoyable. For example, Megan thought that scoring goals in soccer was fun “because you get to win and winning is fun. I don't know why, but it is.” Lilly, as described, quit soccer, and instead, she started to compete in swimming and liked it because “I can get better and win competitions.”



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4. Feelings Experienced During Movement

“Flying,” “floating” and “being free” are just some of the enjoyable feelings children experienced as a result of taking part in physical activity. Although a number of different activities elicited these feelings, all children who took part in the interviews agreed that jumping on a trampoline was especially fun. When asked to describe why, Mungoia (B/4/L) eloquently summarized their thoughts: “You get to feel the sensation of being up in the air without touching the ground, and to me, it’s just feeling the vibration of the wind when you flip and that’s fun.” Lizzie (G/4/M) said, “[I]t’s fun because you jump . . . you can go all over . . . You can free yourself!” The notion of being “free” as a result of activity was not limited to the trampoline; here, fifth-grade children described how their health teacher, “Mrs. D,” would sometimes have them move their desks out of the rows, make a circle in the middle of the room, and put on some music so that children who wanted to dance could go one at a time in the middle and “just do whatever they want.” The children — both boys and girls — loved this activity:

Brandon: You get to do whatever you want to music and everybody has fun and just likes to laugh and watch each other.

Keven (G/5/M): It’s like you’re free!

Lilly: You can open yourself!

Keven: And you don’t have to take lessons to be good at dancing!

Other girls talked about their experiences in taking organized dance lessons and why they are fun:

Susy: Dancing, it’s fun, because you get to show your true self.

CodyTaylor: Plus, you listen to music and dance . . . feels like you just love you for yourself.

Susy: I feel like I’m flying!

Swinging on a swing set, slam-dunking a basketball, and jumping off rocks into a natural swimming hole also resulted in the enjoyable feeling of “flying,” while other students enjoyed the feelings they experienced when floating during swimming.

3. Learning New Skills + Knowledge = Fun

Many children discussed how much they enjoyed learning new skills or acquiring knowledge during activity; to them, learning equaled fun. In the organized youth sport setting, Pack (B/4/M) enjoyed Tae Kwon Do because “it’s fun and you wear a belt . . . learning new moves and getting new belts and doing different moves is fun.” Denise (G/4/M) liked cheerleading “because I learn how to do flips and cartwheels,” while Duke (B/6//M) enjoyed springboard diving because “whenever we learned something new, it was very exciting.” Smile said, “[T]he main reasons [I like ice skating] is because I got to learn how to do it or more stuff about it and it was fun.” Fander (B/5/M) enjoyed learning “survival skills [because] it is a learn-

ing experience.” In physical education, Mack (B/6/H) thought learning fencing was fun because “it helps you to defend yourself,” while Jo liked it because “it was different from anything I did before.” Duke enjoyed the game of “knockout” because “I think the set-up of it is interesting, because there are no other games where you can eliminate other people in sort of that way.” Lizzie (G/4), TheDoctor (B/6/M) and WhatUpA-HomieJr (B/6) all agreed that playing “Capture the Flag” was fun because of the strategy involved in “ambushing” the other side and bringing back teammates who were previously caught. Similarly, Keven liked playing soccer because she could be strategic. In the recreational setting, Sierra liked her “fun pile of activities,” which included swimming, skateboarding, playing in the snow, and jumping on the trampoline because “they are all interesting. It’s not like some things you just do, but you’re not really enjoying them . . . [These] are interesting.” Lastly, Lucky13 said on her survey that she enjoyed playing “Frisbee . . . because it is unpredictable where it will go.”

2. Being Active with Family Members

Many children in this study described how much they enjoyed participating in physical activity with family members. Not surprisingly, siblings were most commonly mentioned as playmates with whom to have fun. For example, George said, “[S]ometimes I go to the park that we have near us and I go with my sister and we play basketball . . . [That is fun] because you are doing something that is not boring to you.” JoAnn (G/4/H) said, “I like mini-games with my brother, with my friends, like mini-baseball with my brother’s tiny bat.” Azalia (G/4/M) thought it was fun to “throw snowballs at my brother.” Kevin (B/5/M) described how he and a friend played “popcorn” on the trampoline and made “my little brother curl up in a ball . . . and he’d fly really high. That was fun!”

Children in this study also enjoyed helping their younger siblings learn skills through activity. For example, Michael’s activity drawing (see Figure 1) shows him playing basketball with his little brother; he explained further, “I like playing with my brother a lot. I like to show him how to do stuff because he’s very, VERY, VERY athletic . . . I’m trying to teach him to be very athletic and multi-sport talented.” Keven, whose mother “is a yoga teacher, she has a degree for it!” enjoyed running “sometimes. Like yesterday . . . we were just going to do a loop around the neighborhood and my little brother was on a bike and I was like being a tough trainer. I’m like, ‘There is no stopping, keep on pedaling; if there is a hill you got to keep on pedaling’ . . . I’m like, I shouldn’t be able to pass you, c’mon, I’m running!”

Parents also influenced their children to be physically active by participating with them. Larri explained how she and her father were into baseball: “Well, my dad really helps me with it, sometimes it’s just throwing the ball, and sometimes we’re at my neighbor’s house and we’re playing, and then he comes over and starts to pitch.” CodyTaylor enjoyed playing football: “[B]oth my cousins play and it’s a boy and a girl, and my father . . . we like throwing it around. I don’t like rough football; I just like throwing around a football. I don’t like the football where

Name: Michael

When you think about Physical Activity (either Organized sports or activities, PE at school, or activity at home), draw the first thing that comes to your mind:



Very briefly describe your picture below – for example, what is happening in your picture? In which setting (Organized sport, PE, or recreation) is your picture taking place?

I am playing basketball with my little brother. Recreation

Figure 1. Student depiction of PA.

The most important factor influencing whether children saw an activity as fun was that of being skilled.

you just clash together.” Osiris (B/4/H) participated in many activities that he thought were fun in his spare time at home: “I do football, I do wall-ball, I do push-ups, I do work-outs, I do ballet with my mom even though I don’t like it much. I play with my older brother, I give my older brother piggy-back rides, which is a workout, which is really hard!”

Sometimes, parents taught their child skills during their activity times. For example, Lilly talked about running with her parents:

I enjoy running with my mom because it’s fun . . . she’s a good trainer . . . she has me like running and sometimes we have little races to a certain point, and it’s just fun. She taught me how to run faster and learn my form better.

C: So she helps you out . . . didn’t you say . . . something [before] about your Dad?

Lilly: Yeah, he likes to [run] every morning when the weather is nice or on the weekends . . . he’ll go out for a mid-day run and say, ‘Lilly, come along with me’ and so we run along and we talk about stuff . . . he’ll say, ‘OK, we are going to run for a minute and walk for a minute’ . . . that kind of thing.

C: So, do you think it is important to your parents that you are involved in activity?

Lilly: Yes . . . well, they always tell me that if you’re not enjoying something you don’t have to do it but it’s kind of funny that they’re the ones who say, ‘You should go for a run even though you don’t want to!’

1. Being Skilled and Competent

The most important factor influencing whether children saw an activity as fun was that of being skilled. This factor was exemplified by Anya, who said that a prerequisite for having fun in any activity is “if you were actually good at it and you knew that you could do [the skills].” Not only did this idea come through in the interviews, but it was also listed on the survey ($n = 35$) more

often than any other reason for why children liked participating in a particular activity in any of the activity settings.

During the interviews, children made it clear that nothing beats being good at what you do. Lizzie thought softball was fun “because I’m one of the good players on my team. I can catch the ball, I’m not afraid of the ball, I can throw the ball, I can hit the ball, I can do everything with the ball.” Kevin liked volleyball because “I’m just kinda good at it.” Elizabeth liked ballet “because I’m like really flexible, like I was born really flexible, so that’s fun,” while Osiris similarly enjoyed yoga “because I’m flexible.” Soccer was a popular activity and sport to play in the local community; JohnPeter enjoyed it because he was “good at it,” while Kevin liked it because “I’m just like really fast, so I run up and shoot.” Mike thought that playing organized youth soccer was fun, but he also enjoyed playing in the recreational setting because “sometimes it’s really awesome because the people aren’t quite as skilled . . . so sometimes you score like [10] goals and it’s really cool.”

Children’s survey answers exemplified similar thoughts regarding the important role that competence plays in enjoying an activity. Children’s statements included, “I play baseball . . . I like it because I’m good at it” (Kevin); “I practiced a lot [at soccer and baseball] so I am really good” (Mike); “I like to play kickball and soccer. It is fun and I’m good at them” (Michael); “Climbing . . . I have the skills” (WhatUpAHomieJr); “I like[d] to play soccer because it was the only thing I was good at” (TheOtherGuy); and “I like to play pickle ball and badminton. I think they are fun and I am kind of good at them” (Karen, G/6/H). Miko (G/4/M) thought that swimming was fun because she “was the fastest in my swimming class,” while Joe (B/5/H) liked soccer “because you can show off your skills.”

Conclusions and Implications

Children who took part in this study had much to say (some thoughts were predictable, others not so much) about what fun in physical activity meant to them. They provided insights that may be helpful for physical educators to consider as they develop physical skill-related curricula and experiences for children in their own school and youth sport programs.

First and foremost, educators are reminded of the critical role that *competence* plays in allowing children to have fun in movement settings. When combined with the understanding that children in this study felt that *learning is actually fun*, it is a reminder that the primary goal of professionals is not just to engage children in activity for activity’s sake, but rather to guide them in developing the skills, knowledge and attitudes that will allow them to be physically successful and motivated to engage in a variety of physical activities (i.e., to become “physically literate”; The Aspen Institute, 2016). Because this responsibility is unique to the physical education profession, it may be especially beneficial to reexamine those pedagogical principles that have been proven to guide effective instruction and (most critically) result in actual skill improvement. The use of a single cue at a time, maximum opportunities for success and practice, and other principles of “developmentally appropriate” instruction

(SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2009), for example, can ensure that all children — not just those who are already skilled — may benefit from involvement in the activities educators present to them, whether in the gym or on the sports field.

Second, findings from children in this study suggest that the role of adults (i.e., teachers, coaches and parents) in both encouraging and actively engaging children in activity should not be underestimated, and this study is a reminder that the old adage “what we do is as important as what we say” still rings true. In addition, the strength of children’s thoughts regarding their involvement with siblings and parents in activity settings is a reminder that educators are in a unique position to bridge the gap between activity in school and in community programs and the home. Although some annual activity events such as “family fun nights” have been offered by physical education teachers for some time now, perhaps it is time to look toward the development of regularly offered events (not only at school, but also in the youth sport and recreation settings) that offer frequent opportunities for families to engage in activities they all can enjoy. For example, the use of before- and after-school programming such as intramurals, neighborhood walking programs, PE Central’s (<http://www.pecentral.org>) cooperative skill and fitness challenge programs, and other creative events may provide opportunities for all family members to engage together in physical activity.

Third, the idea that children enjoyed the feelings and sensations gained through movement as a critical aspect of their being may hold the key for making activity appealing to children (especially those who may not yet be skilled). Children experience the world first through their physical being — that is, through movement. When a movement *feels* fun to children — whether due to the actual use of their body to perform the skill or because of feelings such as joy, wonder or self-expression they gain as a result of that movement — they are more likely to continue to engage in that activity. Therefore, understanding that an activity cannot be perceived as fun by a child unless it actually *makes a child feel, and not just think, it is fun* is a challenge worthy of educators’ time and attention.

Lastly, and also importantly, it is imperative to realize that not every child will experience fun in physical activity in the exact same manner. Not every individual child’s “top 10” list will be exactly as listed here, nor should educators assume that every reason must be present for a particular child to have fun in an activity setting. For example, many — but not all — children in this study were greatly influenced by their parents or family members to be active, and some — but not all — children found competition and winning to be enjoyable.

The stated thoughts of children in this study suggest that what any one child finds to be fun in physical activity is influenced by a combination of factors unique to that specific child. Further evidence from this study suggests that these factors include (but are not limited to) each child’s particular personality, personal preferences, skill level, and even factors within the physical activity setting itself. In other words, there is no “one size fits all” when it comes to fun. Thus, it may behoove teachers

and/or activity coordinators to offer a variety of activities with differing characteristics to appeal to a variety of children. For example, evidence from children in this study suggests that an elementary physical education curriculum composed mainly of large-group (i.e., half the class vs. the other half of the class) competitive games and team sports will most likely not be perceived as fun by all children. A curriculum composed of a variety of activities in games, dance, gymnastics, fitness, aquatics and/or outdoor education, however, may be more effective in helping each individual child to find at least one type of physical activity that he or she will perceive as being fun and appealing.

In summary, the stated thoughts of children in this study are a reminder that children are not casual participants in activity situations. Whether they are participating in their everyday physical education classes, organized youth sports or recreational activities, children are actively learning, experiencing and shaping their attitudes toward, knowledge about and skills in physical activity. Over time, their experiences undoubtedly coalesce, resulting in an individual who enjoys physical activity and continues to engage in it — or one who does not. Thus, it is hoped that these children’s thoughts will provoke educators to reflect on their programs and instructional practices so that they can make the most of their responsibility to make and keep physical activity fun for all children.

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