



PT IS FOR PLAYTIME

In this race, everyone's a winner



HEALTHCHILDREN

In the absence of PT on the National School Curriculum, teachers and parents are finding new ways to get children moving. Here's what one South African school is doing to make an active difference **BY KIM CHALONER**

The wind has slipped below the mountains, the sun has parted the clouds, the ocean is lazily lapping at the shore. Who wants to be indoors on a day like this? Not Miss Manser's early-morning Walk-It class.

They're out on the track at Sun Valley Primary School in Fish Hoek, walking the talk from one activity station to the next. A group of girls huddle together, chatting as they begin the 1km circuit, which winds its way around rugby poles and under netball hoops, on the school's sports field.

Each loop of the track includes quick sets of star-jumps, sit-ups, scissor-jumps and burpees. Swing across the monkey bars, climb a few stairs, jump to the hopscotch, walk across the balance beam, and you're just about ready to go around again.

A little boy, barefoot and gangly, squeals with joy as he overtakes his classmates. Another, smiling slyly, cuts a corner when the teacher isn't looking.



STAR JUMPER A Sun Valley scholar reaches for the sky

Tracy Manser, Head of Girls' Sport, is too busy showing her young charges how to do push-ups, pull-ups, stretches and jumps. "They can't get enough of these activities," she smiles. "It's a lot of fun and they absolutely love it."

Woven throughout the day's schooling, as a stirring warm-up or a break between classes, this programme has its origins in a wake-up call from school principal Gavin Keller.

"Our children are becoming less and less active," he warned parents and teachers after attending a Physical Education conference by the Sports Science Institute of South Africa. "Children love watching TV, playing computer games, and surfing the Internet. Many families have multiple TV channels, which ensure that there's always something to watch. They sit still, grow fat and get old."

Taking his cue from the Charter for Physical Activity and Sport for Children and Youth in South Africa, which recognises children's right to take part in physical activity, sport and play, Keller seized the opportunity to create "fitter, healthier students" at his place in the sun.

In the absence of traditional PT, which was dropped from the National Curriculum in 1999 in favour of the more holistic and classroom-based "Life Orientation", schools are now left with the onus of designing their own Physical

Education programmes. Keller's solution was simple and practical. He wanted each child to participate in at least two hours of vigorous activity a week, excluding sport and extramurals. He wanted the in-school programme to be fun, flexible, non-competitive, and so easy that even the most sedentary child would be able to "walk it". The results have been heartening, in more ways than one.

Walk an accumulated 10km on the circuit at your own pace before, during, or after school, and you're entitled to a little heart-shaped badge, bearing this proud message: "My heart is healthy". Walk a grand total of 300km during the year, and you get a badge that says you're a Walk-It Champion. Every week in assembly, certificates are awarded to the classes that walked the most. But the programme isn't really a competition or a race. It's a way of life.

A number of times during the school day, particularly if a class is a bit rowdy or has been sitting for too long, the children go outside and navigate the circuit, under the watchful eye of a teacher or gap-year student.

On returning to class, the children are more focused and ready to work, having expended their surplus energy. The Walk-It circuit is safe and accessible, with the bars set low, allowing even the most overweight and unfit children ▶

Losing her balance, she slips off, shakes her head, and smiles. Then she clambers straight back on.



PHOTOGRAPHS PIPPA WETHERINGTON



A new school of movement

“*We don't want our children to hate Physical Education. We want them to enjoy it, because then they'll do it.*”

THE BUDDY SYSTEM Scholars work together to reach their fitness goals



to enjoy the activities. But the real goal is to give children the incentive, the encouragement, and the means to get healthy in the process.

The alternative? A nation of unfit adults, warns Dr Claire Nicholson, Head of Human Movement Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. Nicholson's area of expertise is Gerontology, the science of ageing, so she is acutely sensitive to the weaknesses of our youth.

“I'm seeing in children what I usually see in older clients,” she says. “Type 2 Diabetes, and low bone-mass density, which results in osteoporosis. The roots are in sedentary behaviour.”

At eight and nine, explains Nicholson, children are naturally inclined to physical activity. If they aren't active at this age, they'll become inhibited later in life. If they are not taught to catch and throw, for example, this will later inhibit their confidence and development.

In the past, Physical Education sought to place these skills firmly on the curriculum. But rigid, outdated teaching methods more suited to a military academy than a school environment, often had the opposite effect.

“We don't want our children to hate Physical Education,” says Manser. “We want them to enjoy it, because then they'll do it.” Physical Education classes take up only an hour a week at the school, and include Pilates balls, games of rounders, and a variety of cardio-based activities. But exercise alone isn't enough to build a healthy child.

The school conducts occasional lunch box checks, sending home polite suggestions for healthier snacks and treats if necessary. When

children indulge in junk food, their blood sugar levels are erratic, and their energy levels rise and fall like a rollercoaster. The school tuck shop has set the precedent, refusing to stock sugared fizzy drinks, chocolates or sweets. Instead, it sells fruit juice, sugar-free drinks, biltong, nuts and popcorn. Sun Valley gives children 15 minutes to eat their lunch before they venture outside for break. That way, they're encouraged to spend their playtime on active play, rather than just idle munching.

Children learn from what they see, says Manser, adopting their parents' attitudes towards exercise and nutrition. As their parent, you can't tell your children to “go outside and run”, if you sit around watching TV. These patterns are hard to break.

If you eat properly at a young age, you'll carry this habit through life. And if you're encouraged to play, have fun and be active at school, chances are you'll grow up to be a healthier, happier and



CLASS ACT A token of healthy achievement

more productive member of society. Certainly, Manser has seen no bad side-effects of the Walk-It programme. “Well,” she adds, “other than the fact that the children want to do it all the time!”

Dr Claire Nicholson agrees that only good can come from Physical Education and activity at school. “There are huge benefits in letting kids get tired while doing something energetic and purposeful,” she says. “Physical Education will ultimately enable our children to make the right decisions, and to build a great South Africa.”

But here at Sun Valley Primary School, on a beautiful Cape morning, it's a journey that's being taken one step at a time. A little girl in slip-slops, the sleeves of her sweatshirt too big for her tiny frame, tries to cross the balancing beam.

With fists clenched and fierce determination on her brow, she places one foot in front of the other. Losing her balance, she slips off, shakes her head, and smiles. Then she clammers straight back on, makes it to the other side, and hurries off to complete the rest of the circuit. ①