



# **Game Plan for Elementary School Physical Education**

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Tips for K-5 Physical Education Specialists and Classroom Teachers to Make Classes and Recess Time Inclusive and Respectful for All Students

Physical education and recess play time in K-5 schools are integral parts of the elementary school curriculum. Through these opportunities, students not only learn fundamental movement and fitness skills and a wide range of motor and fitness activities, but they are also given the opportunity to practice pro-social behaviors. Because of the foundational role that physical education and recess activities play in K-5 schools it is important that students have access to climates that are safe, respectful and inclusive for all students regardless of their gender identity/expression, sexual orientation or family configuration.

In many schools classroom teachers are responsible for providing physical education instruction or for supplementing the instruction provided by physical education specialists. Classroom teachers also monitor recess or supervise after-school intramural activities. Both K-5 physical education specialists and K-5 classroom teachers must be prepared to take an active role in assuring that physical activity periods are safe, respectful and inclusive for all students.

### **Out of Bounds: What to Avoid**

#### **Tolerance of Name-Calling, Bullying or Taunting**

When teachers ignore disrespectful talk in classes or engage in disrespectful talk themselves, students assume that name-calling, taunting and bullying are an acceptable part of physical education and recess times. This creates a climate of disrespect and lays the foundation for bullying to occur. Physical education and recess times should promote participation of all students in a positive climate.

#### **Free-for-All Dodge Ball Games or Other Activities in which Aggressive Play Toward Others is Allowed**

Physical education classes and recess times should include games and activities that are inclusive and physically and emotionally safe for everyone. Free-for-all dodge ball or any game or activity in which the strongest, biggest and most aggressive students dominate at the expense of the participation of other students is not an acceptable instructional or recess activity.

For example, recess games such as “Smear the Queer,” in which students chase and attempt to tackle one student (the queer) with the ball before they can pass the ball to another student, are a problem because of the message the name of the game conveys to students: That the “queer” is targeted by other students and that “smearing the queer” is acceptable.

#### **Overemphasis on Competitive Activities and Winning**

Competitive activities have an important place in physical education, but they should not dominate class activities or recess periods. When competitive activities are part of the curriculum, winning should be kept in perspective and students should be taught how to be good sports, win or lose. The primary purpose of physical education classes should be skills instruction with the goal of active participation for all students. When competition and winning become the focus in physical education, some students will quickly find ways to avoid or limit their class participation as protection from embarrassment by or ridicule from peers. Some students who do not feel safe find reasons

to avoid participation in physical education activities and miss these important instructional opportunities. Though recess times enable students to choose activities in which to participate, teachers who supervise recess times should provide a range of activity options and actively monitor student interactions during play to assure that recess time is inclusive and respectful for all students.

## Picking Teams Publicly

Though picking teams has been a long-time practice among children on the playground, this often results in the public humiliation of children who are chosen last. As educators, elementary physical education specialists and classroom teachers need to set higher, more educationally sound standards for dividing students for game play in classes and in recess times. Such options as dividing into teams by birthday month or date, sneaker colors, favorite ice cream flavors or other creative ideas can be fun and serve the purpose of dividing students into groups or teams.

## Dividing Students by Gender for Instruction or Class Games

Dividing physical education classes or recess activities by gender for instruction, game play or open activities is illegal according to Title IX. Moreover this practice is based on gender stereotypes that assume that interest in and aptitude for sport and activity participation and performance are linked to gender. By dividing students by gender, these stereotypes are reinforced rather than challenged. In addition, for transgender students or students who are gender non-conforming, dividing students in this manner places them in a position that calls potentially unwanted attention to their gender expression or gender identity.

Sometimes students divide themselves into gender-separate groups. Teachers should monitor these peer divisions to make sure that no students are excluded from participation in an activity because of their gender or gender expression.

## Gender Stereotyping Sports and Other Physical Activities

Elementary teachers need to make sure that physical activities and sports included in the physical education curriculum or recess times are presented as appropriate for students of all genders. This is especially important for activities that are strongly gender stereotyped such as flag football or jump rope. If teachers present activities as

“boys” or “girls” activities or teachers communicate the expectation that girls or boys will be more interested in a particular activity, it is more difficult for students to make activity choices based on their own interests rather than gendered expectations. Sometimes students use anti-LGBT name-calling as a way to tell other students that they are stepping out of the bounds of gender expectations. As with all name-calling, it is important for teachers to let students know that this is not appropriate or acceptable.

## Unsupervised Locker Rooms

Many elementary schools do not have locker rooms, but for those schools that do, it is important for these areas to be monitored by teachers. When teachers fail to monitor and respond to inappropriate student behavior in locker rooms, they invite incidents of bullying, name-calling or taunting.

## No Access to Safe Changing Areas or Bathrooms for Transgender Students

Transgender students should not be forced to use changing areas or bathrooms that conflict with their gender identity. Neither should they be exempted from participation in physical education classes as an alternative to providing them with a safe changing area and bathroom that is consistent with their gender identity. If physical education instruction is part of the curriculum, provisions should be made to make sure that all students can access activities and facilities associated with physical education.

## **Winning Strategies: What to Do**

### Invite Students to Identify Ways They Can Be Respectful, Cooperative and Helpful with Each Other

Talk with students about what having a Safe Sports Space means and review Safe Sports Space rules with students. Talk with students about what kinds of actions and behaviors are expected in a Safe Sports Space. Invite students to identify what guidelines they would like to add to the Safe Sports Space Rules. Post these additional guidelines in instructional spaces and on the playground. Review them with students on regular intervals. Thank students who are respectful, cooperative and helpful. Remind students who are not that they need to act in accordance with Safe Sports Space Rules.

## Intervene to Stop Student Name-Calling, Bullying and Taunting

Call students' attention to Safe Sports Space Rules whenever someone fails to abide by them. An important goal in physical education is teaching good sport behavior in games or other class instructional activities. It is up to the teacher to create and model a climate of respect for all participants in the class so that everyone can learn and enjoy sport and physical activity skills. When teachers fail to intervene in student name-calling, bullying or taunting, students assume this behavior is acceptable in physical education. It is equally important for classroom teachers to intervene on the playground when name-calling or bullying occurs so that all students can enjoy recess time in a safe and respectful climate.

## Provide Skills Instruction for Students' Different Ability Levels

Respectful physical education classes are ones in which all students have instructional time that helps them to gain physical skills, learn game strategies and improve their physical fitness in a positive learning climate. Plan classes so that all students can learn and practice new skills that challenge their levels of ability.

## Diversify Curriculum Offerings

Team sports are fun and exciting for many students, but they are only one kind of activity. A physical education curriculum that includes a variety of team and individual sports and competitive and non-competitive activities and fundamental skills instruction offers a broad spectrum of activities in which every student has an opportunity to succeed. A varied curriculum invites all students to try new activities and provides all students with opportunities to be successful.

## Provide Private Changing Areas in the Girls' AND Boys' Locker Rooms

Open changing areas and gang showers that provide no privacy for students in the locker room can make the experience of participating in physical education classes an embarrassing and unsafe experience for many students. Some students find ways to opt out of or cut physical education classes altogether because they experience the locker room as an unsafe space. For transgender or gender non-conforming students, the locker room can be a

particularly painful place where discomfort with changing clothes in front of peers may intensify feelings of being different. For any student, gender non-conforming or not, feelings of embarrassment or discomfort should not cause them to avoid physical education. Instead, physical education teachers should make sure that girls' and boys' locker rooms and bathrooms provide some private changing and toilet areas for any student who prefers such a space. This can be as simple as providing a curtained off area in the locker room for changing and providing individual stalls for toilets.

Students who identify as transgender should be able to use changing areas and bathrooms in accordance with their gender identity. In some cases, in consultation with a student's parents or guardians, it is appropriate to provide transgender students with access to a separate gender-neutral changing area and bathroom.

## Make Physical Education Clothing Gender-Neutral

Expectations for what students wear in physical education classes should be gender-neutral. For example, shorts or warm-up pants and tee shirts with sports shoes are appropriate for everyone, regardless of gender. By identifying different expectations for girls' and boys' clothing in physical education, gender is unnecessarily highlighted as a significant factor in the class. There is no reason for gendered clothing requirements in physical education and having them can reinforce gender stereotypes that do not serve either male or female students' best interests. For transgender or gender non-conforming students, in particular, this differentiation can create discomfort that can be avoided with gender-neutral requirements.