Why Physical Education?

My parents were typical Asian parents. You must get straight A’s in all academic subjects. Being a sickly child, I managed to get my only failing grade ever in elementary school one year: in P.E. I trembled when I handed them my report card. But my father just glanced at that red score and shrugged, “Oh, it’s just P.E.”

So when I decided to homeschool my children, I was at a loss as to what to do for P.E. What is the goal of physical “education” anyway? That question led me on a long search for an answer, that stretched over a couple of decades.

The first obvious answer is that children should learn to be fit. By the time they complete their 12-year grade school education, they should not only be “told” to be fit, they should internalize the knowledge and discipline necessary to keep themselves fit for the rest of their lives. It is obvious that public schools have failed in that aspect in this country, or we wouldn’t be having one third of Americans qualifiying as “obese”. Another unspecified fraction of the children are too thin and cannot catch up with any athletic program.

Since the main goal of PE is NOT to turn all school children into professional athletes, why then are school PE programs geared towards team sports, or what I call the “ball, ball, ball programs”? You know, basket***ball***, base***ball***, foot***ball***, etc? Such curricula have very successfully geared some children that way, but the great majority are failures at keeping themselves fit and healthy.

I finally figured out that physical “education” for 12 years should give my children the following: a) physical fitness: the knowhow of how to keep fit, and an ingrained habit of keeping oneself fit; b) mastery of at least one sport: it is amazing how after 12 years of schooling, so many children are not good at any sport at all; c) experience with a variety of different sports. This was simple enough as a goal. Then, I tried to implement it.

It’s amazing how simple things can be and how versatile curricula can be once you have a final goal in mind. My first challenge was identifying a sport for my sons to specialize in. We lived in Jeddah then, and not in a compound, meaning that we did not have access to a swimming pool. I still tried to visit people who did have a pool now and then, but that did not make a good training program. My husband tried to include my sons when he would train his adult students in TaeKwonDo, but again this was not a program specifically geared for children. Finally, I hit on bowling. I dutifully took the children to a bowling alley every Wednesday, bought books that taught bowling and eventually even bought my son his own ball and shoes.

Then we moved to Arizona. Sports programs everywhere. The first 6 children soon acquired their black belts in TaeKwonDo and all became swim team champions. Two of them even broke records at state wide competitions. My sons eventually all became lifeguards (nice income over the summer), swim coaches and swim team coaches. My daughters have now taken up Wushu. The point is that, it is feasible to excel at one or two particular sports, whether you are in school or homeschooled. I personally know several families whose children have achieved the same if not more.

As to fitness, few schools around Arizona implement an all-round fitness program, in the sense of keeping fit and keeping a healthy lifestyle. This involves of course, teaching the children the knowledge of balanced nutrition and activity-centered lives. I’m afraid, Parents, that this will have to be your job. Making these a family affair works very efficiently. Dragging my kids on hikes at first was, well, a drag. But seeds tend to grow into trees. Now, my older children have an annual rite. They hike across South Mountain every winter break, taking the better part of an entire day to do so. My daughters invent all sorts of vegetarian dishes to improve the nutritional balance of our family diet.

Fitness is a life-long struggle. The job is never over. But it can be joyful. I wish you all a lot of joy in your family’s fitness plans.