

# Fitness tests get tweaked

September 16 2011, By Heidi Stevens

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We're not saying they're not out there, somewhere, blithely crushing pre-pubescent souls with their whistles and clipboards and flexed-arm-hang timers.

But the masochistic physical education teachers - and their dreaded, humiliating [fitness](#) tests - are largely a thing of the past.

"My mom still talks about how her PE teacher ruined her life," says Cheryl Richardson, senior manager for programs at the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. "We're working to make physical education class a physically and emotionally safe place. We want to motivate kids to want to be fit."

Which means those twice-yearly fitness exams you may have faced as a kid in gym class - run a mile, do some chin-ups, shuttle run, hop on the very public scale - have been mostly phased out in favor of a kinder, gentler approach.

Beginning at age 10, students in most states are still tested twice a year (or more) to assess their [fitness levels](#) and help them set goals to get and stay healthy, Richardson says. And some portions of the tests have stuck around through the decades. ("Remember the old sit-and-reach?" she asks. "We still do that.")

Roughly half of the nation's elementary and high schools use the presidential fitness test, overseen by the President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition, and the other half use FitnessGram, a test

developed in 1982 by the Texas-based Cooper Institute, says Richardson. Both are designed to assess aerobic capacity, body composition and flexibility.

But because Richardson's group (which offers best-practices counseling to schools nationwide) and others like it aim to instill lifelong [healthy habits](#), tweaks have been made to the test execution and scoring.

"For example, you might have a pacer test where you have kids go along until they can't keep up with the cadence anymore," she says. "It's not everyone waiting for Johnny to finish the mile so we can all go inside. Or you'll have kids travel as far as they can in 12 minutes. They are much friendlier tests so no one feels awkward or uncomfortable."

With the emotional burden lifted, kids can focus their energy on performing to the best of their physical abilities. And parents play a large role in that performance.

"If you can get across to your child that fitness is not a test, but really something to focus on throughout the year, that's really important," says Mary Lou Gavin, medical editor for KidsHealth.org and a pediatrician at Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Del. "A healthy, fit lifestyle correlates with better health, lower body mass index, improved academic performance, according to a lot of research. That's why it's really important to motivate your kid to be active."

Gavin says parents often overestimate how fit their children are, especially if they're involved in organized sports.

"They are fooling themselves that because they go to soccer twice a week they're getting enough activity," she says. "The current guidelines for physical activity recommend 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day and vigorous physical activity at least three days

a week. Most kids are not active every day."

Even gym class, Gavin says, is rarely a source for ample activity.

"Not all schools have it or it's once or twice a week, maybe 30 to 45 minutes per class," she says. "Half that time is getting ready, lining up, here are the rules. The actual time in moderate to vigorous activity is a lot less than most parents realize."

Against this backdrop, fitness exams may serve as a wake-up call to parents and students alike - a necessary one.

"What you need to be successful in a fitness test is what you need to be a successful student," Richardson says. "Plenty of sleep, a variety of healthy foods in appropriate amounts and a variety of physical activities. That just leads to a happier, healthier child."

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## PREP YOUR CHILD FOR A FITNESS TEST

"Just like test anxiety in math or language arts, children can have fitness test anxiety," says Cheryl Richardson, senior manager for programs at the National Association for Sport and [Physical Education](#). "Make sure you talk about why fitness testing is done and that this isn't a contest among kids in the class, but a way to see how well you're doing so your teacher can help you set goals. You don't win or lose."

Dress the part. "Make sure they have good shoes," Richardson says. "It's really hard to run the mile if you're trying to hold your shoes on your feet."

Test their muscles. "Younger kids are often swinging on monkey bars

and climbing in the yard, but older kids may need some extra motivation to get some strength training," says Mary Lou Gavin, medical editor for KidsHealth.org and a pediatrician at Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital in Wilmington, Del. "Simple, modified pushups, wall pushups, planks. Kids should be using their own body weight as resistance more than picking up free weights or getting on a machine."

Teach them technique. "Ask the teacher what they'll be testing and make sure your child knows how to do those skills," Richardson suggests. "People aren't born knowing how to do a pushup."

## THE TEST

A typical fitness test assesses aerobic capacity, body composition and flexibility. Some or all of the following tests (from [cooperinstitute.org](http://cooperinstitute.org)) will likely be used to examine a student's physical fitness.

### [Aerobic capacity:](#)

The pacer: 20-meter progressive, multistage shuttle run

One-mile walk/run

### [Body composition:](#)

Percent body fat: Calculated from triceps and calf skin-fold measurements

Body mass index: Calculated from height and weight

Abdominal strength:

Curl-up test

Trunk extensor strength and flexibility:

Trunk lift

Upper-body strength:

90 degree pushup

Flexed-arm hang

Modified pull-up

Flexibility:

Sit-and-reach

Shoulder stretch

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