

Decline in the physical skills of Australian kids

January 29 2015, by James Rudd



Australian kids are falling behind their international peers in fundamental movement skills. Credit: Jason Devaun, CC BY-SA

Australians like to think themselves as sporting and fit – a concept reinforced by the success of the country's elite athletes. But evidence is emerging that Australian kids are falling behind their international peers and are performing worse in skills such as kicking, throwing, catching and jumping than they were 30 years ago.

For some time, researchers have been tracking Australian [children's](#) capacity to run, throw, kick, catch and jump. Collectively, these [skills](#) are known as Fundamental Movement Skills.

They are called fundamental because they are required to engage proactively in a high proportion of physical activities and sporting pursuits. Children with these skills are also more also likely to become fit adolescents who continue to [play and enjoy sport](#).

Skills in decline

In Western Australia over the past 30 years 27,000 primary school-aged children have been assessed, both in terms of their skillfulness and fitness. The [findings](#) have demonstrated a marked decline in six to 12-year-old children's general physical fitness and skillfulness.

The biggest decline was observed in six-year-olds, who now perform markedly worse than those assessed in the 1980s in simple tasks such underarm throws, catching and bouncing balls. Using a scaled scoring system whereby 100 points was considered average, the 2014 study found six-year-olds now performed 20 to 30 points less than children three decades ago.

Over the past 13 years in New South Wales around 14,000 children aged nine to 15 [have been assessed](#) to identify their proficiency in five basic Fundamental Movement Skills.

By the time they left primary school competency was low, with less than 50% being competent at running, jumping, catch kick and overarm throw. Two thirds of the girls and a quarter of the boys had poor scores in the over-arm throw where less than 32% of boys and 8% of girls showed competence.

Similarly poor levels were found in the kick with fewer than 31% of boys and 6% of girls demonstrating mastery.

Poor comparison with overseas

Part of my research now is looking at Melbourne children's mastery of Fundamental Movement Skills compared to our international peers.

More than 400 pupils aged six to ten from four schools were assessed between October 2012 and June 2013 using the same assessment tool as that from studies done to children in the United States.

The latest US study was in 2000 but the findings – when compared to the later Australian data – are still disturbing.

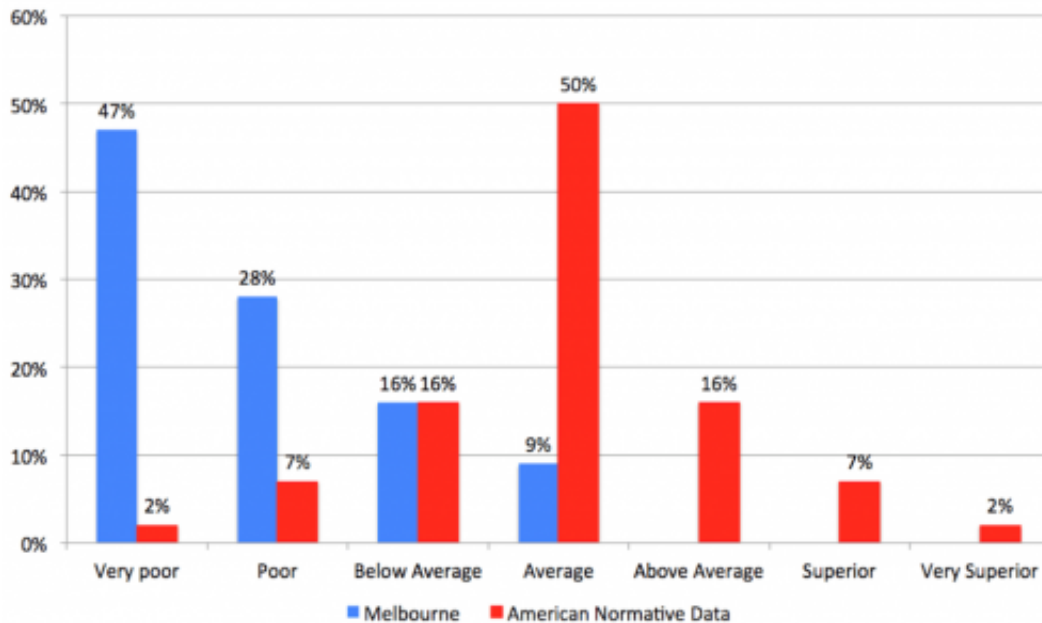


Figure 1: How Australian children perform at Fundamental Movement Skills compared to their American peers. Author provided

Not only are Australian children falling behind their older siblings and parents when at a similar age, as shown by the WA data, but 90% of them are also scoring below average when compared to American children of the same age (see table above).

It's possible that the Fundamental Movement Skills of US children may also have declined since 2000 although we won't know until we get any new studies.

But if we look at the Australian data in more depth, we can see Australian children are performing below average in both areas of locomotive and objective control skills compared to the American normative data.

Figure 2 (above) shows the distribution of Melbourne children's performance in locomotive skills which includes running, jumping, hopping, leaping, galloping and sliding.

Figure 3 (above) shows the distribution of Melbourne children's performance in object control skills which includes throwing, kicking, striking, underhand rolling, catching and dribbling.

Overall Australian children have very low levels of Fundamental Movement Skills compared to their American peers. Even our most competent children are only performing just above average and none are considered superior compared to American norms.

Why does this matter?

It has been found that children who possess good Fundamental Movement Skills have higher levels of physical activity as well as better health-related fitness, but many children are not being given the opportunities to [master these skills](#).

At present only one in three children, and one in ten young people, meet the current physical activity [guidelines](#) for children of 60 minutes of physical activity every day. Furthermore, fewer than one in three children and young people are meeting the guideline for "no more than two hours of screen-based entertainment" every day.

Given this worrying decline in children's fundamental movement skills, accompanied by rising levels of [sedentary behaviour](#), it is clear that more needs to be done if Australia is to maintain its reputation as a top sporting nation.

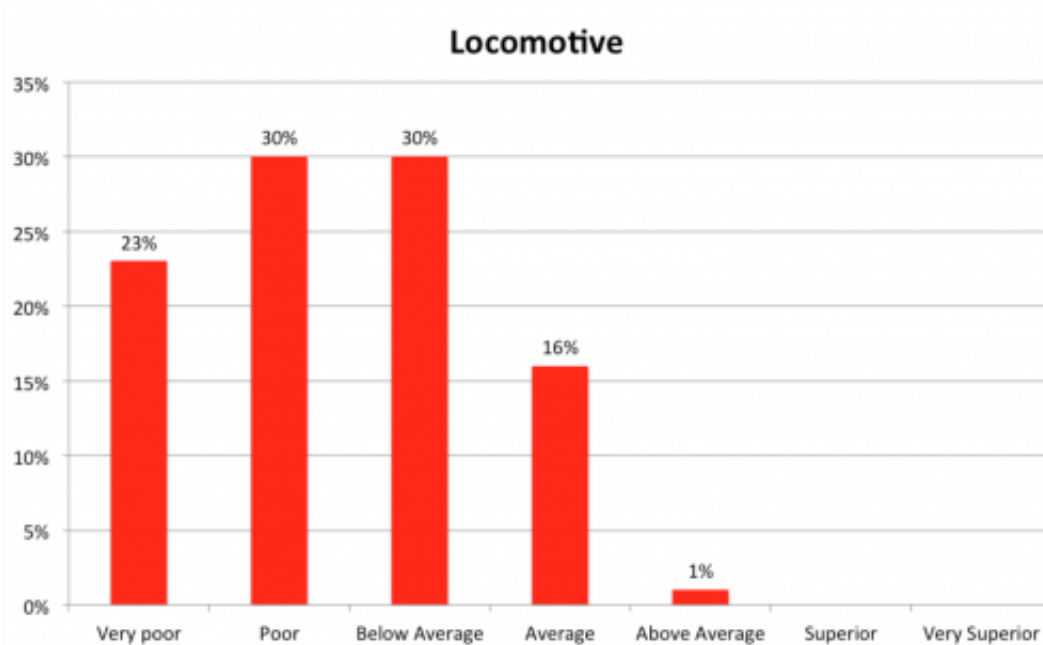


Figure 2: Breakdown of the distribution of Melbourne children's locomotive skills. Author provided

Primary schools can only do so much in the current educational climate.

Physical education has been pushed to the periphery of the school

curriculum with the majority of children currently getting well under the recommended two hours of physical education a week.

It is common for classroom teachers to teach physical education but many lack specialists training.

Recent data I have collected from Melbourne primary schools indicate that while 86% of classroom teachers feel confident to take a physical education class, 82% don't feel confident to make the PE class developmentally appropriate to help children acquire Fundamental Movement Skills.

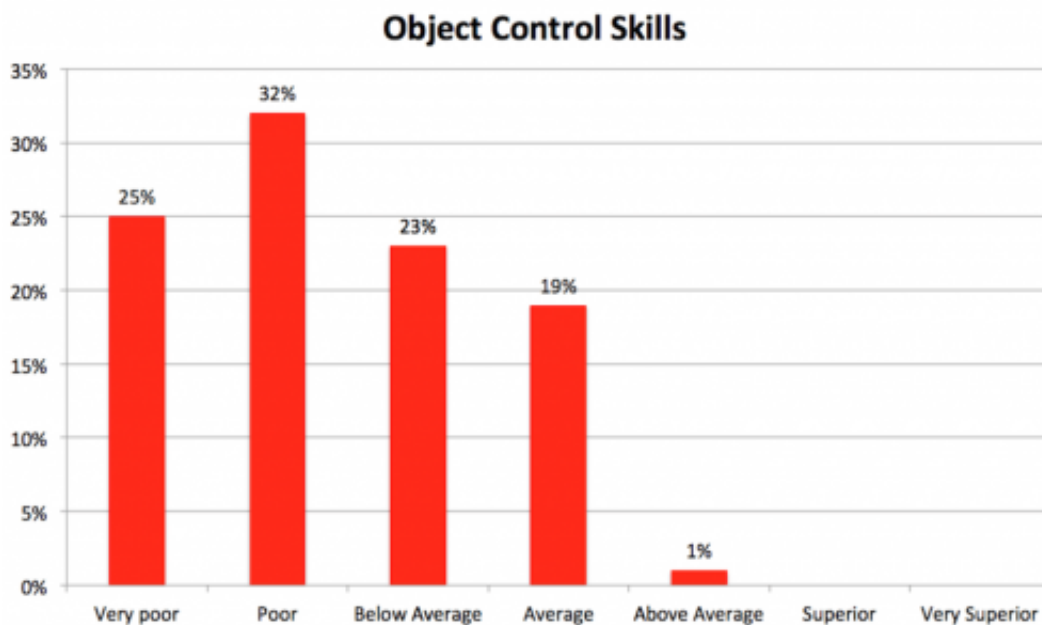


Figure 3: Breakdown of distribution of Melbourne children's object control skills. Author provided

Mums and dads to the rescue

So, at present, the best chance of improving Australian children's Fundamental Movement Skills lies with parents and care-givers.

They should try to ensure their children are provided ample opportunities to experience different sports so they can practice and develop a broad range of Fundamental Movement Skills.

These opportunities should take the form of both structured sports coaching as well as unstructured play.

Across the globe, Australia is looked up to as a beacon of sporting excellence. Australians are rightly proud of their sporting heritage but the truth is that Australia is in danger of becoming a country of spectators who watch sport rather than participate in it.

To help turn this tide we must equip all children with Fundamental Movement Skills. This will help to ensure that future Australian children are more active and fitter.

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