Experiences with Sportwall

We build strong kids,
strong families, strong communities.

South Shore YMCA
Quincy, Massachusetts

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Over the past two years, we have been privileged to provide many children with enjoyable exercise experiences using an older version of the Sportwall apparatus, appropriately named the Electronic Playground. While this proved extremely effective for fitness purposes and great fun for the boys and girls, the relatively small playing space limited the number of participants to about six at any given time.

The new Smartball concept rectified this situation, allowing many people to play concurrently in a much expanded activity area. A variety of new, exciting and fast-moving games made the Smartball perfect for implementation into elementary school settings (gyms, cafeterias, etc). To test the efficacy of the Smartball in a progressive school district, we arranged to implement the latest equipment at the Schofield Elementary School in Wellesley, Massachusetts under the direction of Joyce Tolken and Karen Perry Kaplan, two of the state's leading physical education professionals.

Two classes of fourth grade boys and girls were evaluated on a variety of fitness parameters before and after a 10-week period (Spring 2003) during which Smartball activities were incorporated into their physical education classes. The following section presents Karen Perry Kaplan's test results and impressions as related to the Smartball training

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This fall (2003), we visited the Schofield Elementary School and observed firsthand the now fifth grade class perform a variety of Smartball games during their physical education period. We were most impressed with the attentive focus on the activities, the obvious enthusiasm for the games, the supportive and cooperative attitudes towards classmates, the high level of activity and energy expenditure, and the progressive motor skill development. Additionally, we noticed how the Smartball games offer a wide range of total body coordination that is important for any sport or physical activity. The program design facilitates rotation from student to student which encourages teamwork while, at the same time, allows each individual to focus on and improve his or her own motor skills. We also observed the positive accountability and performance feedback that the participants shared with each other such as standing behind the line when aiming and throwing or catching runaway balls. This activity also provided an opportunity for the teacher, Karen Perry Kaplan to reinforce proper positioning and technique that should prove useful for students in developing lifelong physical skills.

This experience with Smartball supports our original anticipation that the upgraded design would be an effective, enjoyable and positive application in a physical education class environment. We would like to extend our sincere compliments to Karen Perry Kaplan, Joyce Tolken, and all of the Schofield Elementary students for their most valuable participation in this study.

STUDY DESIGN

This research project commenced mid March with two fourth grade classes that meet one half hour twice a week. There were a total of 20 girls and 19 boys. The Smartball was used either as a warm-up or an entire class activity during some part of each class from April 1 to June 15, 2003, 16 class meetings.

The study began with a fitness pretest consisting of an agility test and the Fitnessgram Pacer, Sit and Reach and Flexed Arm Hang. For the agility test there was a milk crate placed on the starting line and 5 bean bags placed 6' apart from the starting line and a 45 foot finishing line. The test required the children to pick up the 5 bean bags one at a time, (closest one first) place it in the crate, getting the next closest one and placing it in the crate and running 45 feet to the finish line once all the bean bags were picked up and in the milk crate.

The focus of test one was agility, speed and endurance. Test two was for agility, strength, coordination and endurance. And, Test three was for reaction time, accuracy, and agility. Some accuracy was required for all three tests because the wall had to be hit.

TEACHER OBSERVATIONS

With only 10 weeks to work with the Smartball, it was important to incorporate it in some way into every class meeting. It was used either for warm-up or skills development during each of the 4th grade class meetings. Although I used a variety of games with different equipment and formations, I would have chosen less exposure over a longer period of time. But, despite the frequent use, the students stayed interested, worked hard, and continued to enjoy themselves and have fun.

Being creative and developing Smartball activities to meet different goals was easy and fun. The children often had ideas of their own and were excited about trying their creations. Using single targets from a shorter distance resulted in total loss of form. But, increased distance from the board and increasing the size of the target encouraged and required good form to achieve higher scores. It also developed strength as is required more power.

Playing games as a team was exciting for the children but, even as they worked individually in their lines to achieve personal best score, there was a sense of "team". They always wanted their wall to display the highest score and each child had their own cheering section as they worked. Most noticeable to me was that the less skilled participants got the most encouragement from their team members and showed the most improvement in both skills and attitude. It definitely improved their self-esteem and motivated them to work hard and do their best.

During the entire time, there never appeared to be a child who was not challenged to do their personal best. The difficulty of the tests did not seem to matter, as the students were always challenged and working towards improving their own scores or beating their classmates' scores. Sometimes classmates would set goals for whoever was at the wall. There was definitely both class and team building and never a sportsmanship problem.

SURVEY RESULTS

Based on the survey given to both fourth grade classes, there was an overwhelming positive feeling about the Smartball. 35/39 children enjoyed their experience with the wall. Those who rated it "just okay" were justified in feeling like we had to use it "so much".

Even though the children were only fourth graders, a majority felt that their skills related fitness components (catching, throwing, agility, reaction time, and coordination) were more improved by their work with the Smartball than their Health Related Fitness Components (flexibility, muscle strength and aerobic capacity). I would agree with their assessment with the exception that I feel team relays and suicides with bean bags done with increased time would benefit their endurance.

The following list summarizes what the children liked:

1. Getting better
2. Being motivated
3. Everything
4. The challenge
5. Lights Out
6. Helped my throwing
7. Getting high scores
8. When the wall made music
9. Made me work harder
10. Variety of games
11. Competing with classmates
12. When it wasn't competitive
13. Throwing from far away

So true of all children, the wall was fun and well-liked, but working hard and not doing as well as they wished to was not fun.

In conclusion, the Smartball is a great addition and asset to my Fitness and Health program. It adds a whole new dimension with unlimited possibilities for skills and fitness development. It is very easy to operate and its benefits are limited only by the user's creativity. It is well received by elementary students of all ages and levels of skill. Some special education used the wall for positive reinforcement with some difficult students.

I highly recommend this product for use in any health and fitness, special education, or recreation program. It is perfect for the 21st Century student.