



There is no shortage of information about the link between exercise and childhood obesity – and rightly so. Over the past three decades, overall obesity rates for children have doubled. For adolescents, the rate has tripled. Today, a third of kids aged 10 to 17 are overweight and half of them qualify as obese. Overweight and obese kids have an increased risk of developing high blood pressure, high cholesterol, respiratory and orthopaedic problems, as well as type 2 diabetes. That's while they're still kids. Over 80 per cent of obese children become obese adults, and those health problems become even more dangerous.

What is not mentioned so often, is the link between a lack of exercise and a child's academic performance, social development and general confidence – all of which can be equally damaging.

So why are kids being turned off sport?

When I was a child (to put that in context, let's be generous and say a little over 20 years ago...), school exercise consisted of team sports and mandated physical education (PE) classes. This system could be very confronting or uncomfortable for some kids as it was inevitably a competitive environment – even just from a social, peer aspect. It was based largely on how fast you could run or how well you could kick, hit and throw a ball and, if you weren't naturally gifted in those defined areas, you could be made to feel very out of place. Aside from those awkward moments when a child would 'drop a sitter' or finish the run while some other kids were already walking back to the change rooms, there was the systematic skipping of PE due to some injury or illness – further compounding the issue.

Sadly, it would appear that a number of people believe the answer is to simply make sport and PE classes an optional activity. While no one would suggest that forcing a child into a highly-competitive sporting environment is a good thing, there needs to be some middle ground. We can't bemoan childhood obesity rates, and then offer an escape clause to the obvious solution. After all, if you made everything a child didn't like optional, then mathematics wouldn't be around for long.

Surely, the key lies in making sport and exercise fun, so the child wants to take part, and with enough strength and vitality that there is a net health benefit.

Team sports have always been useful in this sense, and will undoubtedly continue to be important in the future. However, the degree of actual physical activity can be limited. Factors such as whether the child is playing in an active position on the ground or in a competitive team, or if they are named as an interchange player and spend most of the game sitting on a wooden bench, will greatly affect how much exercise is actually undertaken.

For the sake of health and wellbeing, there needs to be some sense of measurability of the activity being undertaken.

Craig Abbott has a level 3 qualification in strength and conditioning and is the founder of Heavy Haulers, a fitness and training company that operates throughout Victoria.

For more than three years, Heavy Haulers has been running a specialist exercise program for schools based on its highly successful courses in the adult recreational and corporate sectors.

The reason the program has transferred so well to children is that it is centred around fundamental body movements only, thereby reducing the risk of injury. It also promotes improvement from participants, but in a non-competitive environment, and this ensures