SAFETY IN SPORTS AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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Of late, safety education has been a subject of much discussion. The increasing number of road deaths and industrial accidents in an overcrowded island republic has brought to light the urgent need for more definitive school policies toward safety education in all aspects of school life. Conservation of human resources and materials, so important to Singapore, is the ultimate aim of developing safety consciousness among our young. The school administration, therefore, has a moral and legal responsibility to ensure the safety of those under its charge.

My experience with teachers and teacher trainees convinces me that there is an urgent need to inculcate proper safety habits, skills, attitude and knowledge among both teachers and pupils in school. The school PE and ECA programme provides a higher risk factor in terms of accidents than the ordinary classroom situation. It is not surprising, therefore, that accidents and injuries on playgrounds, running tracks, swimming pools and gymnasiums account for a major portion of the total number of accidents and injuries in our schools. Such risks should be minimised through the exercise of proper controls and precautionary measures.

A Professional Attitude

Safety apathy among teachers is unforgivable and should not be tolerated. We need to take a long hard look at ourselves. As teachers, we know that certain precautions need to be taken whenever children participate in physical activity. Which teacher does not? Then, why is it that the necessary health examinations are not administered before we expose children to strenuous physical activity? Why is it that very often unsafe environmental conditions are permitted to exist in our teaching areas?

Too often we feel that it is the other person who is responsible for lapses in safety. We see ourselves as blameless. However, to measure our own level of apathy we should, as professionals, ask ourselves these questions when conducting PE or ECA.
Have we taken the necessary precautions to prevent unnecessary risks and accidents?

Do we know what these risks are?

Do we know how to take preventive measures against such risks?

Do we know that accidents occur most frequently when such conditions exist: inadequate and poorly trained leadership, faulty equipment and poorly maintained facilities, lack of supervision, and insufficient skill and the poor physical condition of pupils?

Do we have good knowledge of our pupils' health, and are records of pupils' health maintained?

Is there adequate first aid equipment available?

Do we know how to render first aid in an emergency?

Are the various safety rules made known to all pupils, and is strict compliance with these rules compulsory?

Is there an emergency and accident reporting procedure in school, and are we familiar with it?

Planning for Safety in Sports and PE

Like other aspects of accident prevention, safety in sports and PE requires planning and careful execution of the plan. When we draw up the programme, the following principles should be noted:

- Recognise the hazards present;
- Remove the hazards wherever and whenever possible;
- Exercise control over those hazards that cannot be removed;
- Do not create additional hazards;
- Establish an emergency and accident reporting procedure;
- Do not take safety procedures for granted.

Recognising hazards requires a thorough analysis of the environment where the activity takes place, the equipment, and the facility itself. Teachers should make a daily inspection of the areas where children engage in physical activities. Recognition of the hazards enables the teachers to determine whether or not that hazard can be removed, controlled, or effectively dealt with. If it
cannot be removed, other action must be taken to limit the risks. It should be noted that "common sense" is common only to those who are familiar with the facts. For example, a pupil who is untrained, or worse still, convalescing from a serious illness, should not be required or allowed to participate in vigorous physical activity. It should not be that because he is present and appears to be well he should be required or permitted to join in. Whenever there is some doubt about the state of health of a pupil, medical advice should be sought.

Some Suggestions for Safety Planning

These suggestions cover 5 broad areas.

A  An Emergency and Accident Reporting Procedure

In an emergency or accident, the following procedure should apply:

a. Application of first aid and, if necessary, sending for the school’s First Aid Unit. (It is highly desirable that all PE teachers and those in charge of sports and games have undergone training in first aid and safety education.)

b. Calling for the nearest doctor and/or ambulance, if necessary.

c. Notifying the Principal, Vice-Principal or Senior Assistant (not necessarily in that order).

d. Informing the parents.

e. Filing a report.

B  On the Use of Outdoor Facilities

The following safety measures should be taken when using outdoor facilities such as the playground, fields, running tracks, games courts, parade ground, etc:

a. The play area must always be checked for safe use before the lesson or training begins. Most injuries are caused by broken glass, rocks, splinters, slippery surfaces, unevenness and other hazards.
b. Lessons should not be conducted close to drains, fences, walls, flag-posts and other dangerous obstacles.

c. Road runs or cross-country runs should be organised with extreme care. Avoid roads carrying heavy vehicular traffic. Pavements and footpaths should always be used. Runners should face oncoming traffic and should on no account be made to cross roads.

d. Activities involving the throwing of the javelin, discus and shot put should be carried out in properly designated areas under supervision. Throwing should be done in one direction and pupils should not be permitted to throw to each other.

e. When teaching the high jump or pole vault event, suitable rubber or foam-plastic landing mattresses must be provided.

f. Lessons on hurdling should preferably be conducted on grass.

g. All equipment and apparatus (eg. goalposts, basketball and volleyball uprights, hurdles, etc.) must be checked for safety before use.

C On the Use of Indoor Facilities

The following precautions should be taken when indoor facilities such as the hall, gymnasium, canteen and classroom are used:

a. Be judicious over the use of space. Care must be taken to prevent overcrowding.

b. As most of our school halls are not constructed for ball games, it is advisable that such activities be conducted outdoors. However, minor games, activities involving bean bags, hoops, small balls, skipping ropes, bands, benches and other small apparatus, may be conducted indoors, especially during inclement weather.

c. All gymnastic apparatus and indoor equipment must be thoroughly checked before use. They must be safely stacked away immediately after use.
d. The space to be used must be cleared of desks, tables, chairs, benches and other obstacles.

e. Sufficient safety mattresses and mats must be used when teaching gymnastics. These should not be placed near walls, windows or doorways.

f. Hazards in the use of large gymnastic apparatus must be brought to the attention of all pupils.

g. Gymnastic skills must be specially graded according to the degree of difficulty. One stunt or skill should be practised at a time. The principles of progression should always be observed.

h. Ensure that spotters or assistants are used when activities are in progress. Pupils must be taught the techniques of spotting.

D On the Use of the Swimming Pool

When using the swimming pool the following safety measures must be taken:

a. At least one qualified lifeguard must be present throughout the lesson.

b. A roll-call must be taken before and after each lesson. The importance of punctuality must be stressed.

c. Order and discipline must be maintained at all times.

d. Life-saving equipment must be readily available.

e. All pupils must be informed of the pool layout, and all safety rules governing the use of the pool must be observed.

f. Pupils who are ill or who have contagious diseases such as sore eyes, cough and cold, skin diseases, open wounds and the like, should not be allowed to swim until they have completely recovered.

E General Safety Precautions

a. The teacher must always be in full control of the class. "Horseplay" and other forms of
irresponsible behaviour must not be tolerated at any time.

b. Whenever possible, adequate space must be provided for pupils in each activity.

c. Ensure that pupils have sufficient warm-up activities before the main activity begins. Also allow sufficient time for warming down.

d. All activities should be organised with safety in mind. Clear instructions should be given regarding safety precautions and rules relating to the activities, particularly those which govern foul and dangerous play.

e. In team sports and body contact games, it is necessary to check the pupils' attire for personal safety as well as the safety of others. Dangerous objects such as belts, watches, jewellery, pens and unsuitable footwear should not be allowed. Finger nails and hair must be kept short.

f. When conducting cross-country runs, road runs and other activities requiring cardiovascular endurance, care must be taken to ensure that the pupils have sufficient practice before the actual run. They should be advised to run at their own pace and to walk if necessary. Those who have just recovered from influenza and other serious illnesses should not be allowed to run.

g. All activities must be supervised by a teacher.

h. Whenever there is some doubt about the state of health of a pupil, medical advice should be sought.