

Workout for the Body and Soul: Introducing Gym into the Yeshivah Curriculum

By Rebecca Wolf

In the push to cram secular and Judaic subjects into an eight-hour day, many Orthodox day schools are leaving out one of the most important classes: gym. An informal survey of nearly fifty *yeshivot* (grades K-8) across the country revealed that most schools provide thirty-five to fifty minutes of physical education once or twice a week. Yet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the American Heart Association and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommend *daily* physical education for kindergarteners through twelfth graders for at least thirty minutes a day.

My husband and I were both lucky to have had active childhoods, so ever since our children started crawling, we've encouraged them to be active, too. They love to run and climb in the playground, bounce on the trampoline, ride their bikes, swim, dance and perform karate. We've tried to set a good example by participating in most of these

Rebecca Wolf lives in Teaneck, New Jersey, with her husband and two children. She ran her first marathon last November.

activities with them.

Countless studies demonstrate the myriad benefits of regular physical activity. Here are a few:

- Enhanced academic performance. Physical activity leads to improved memory, focus and problem-solving ability as well as enhanced creativity.
- Better physical state. Regular exercise helps maintain healthy body

Children who exercise are less likely to smoke, drink or use drugs.

weight; increases muscle strength; hones gross motor skills; builds stronger bones; enhances cardiovascular function and makes children feel more energetic.

- Improved self-concept. Physical activity results in reduced anxiety and depression, greater confidence (especially for those who are not always successful in the classroom) and children having a positive attitude toward a healthy lifestyle.

- Reduced risk of negative behavior. Children who exercise are less likely to smoke, drink or use drugs.

- Greater chance of healthy future. Children who cultivate good exercise habits (and eat healthfully) are more likely to maintain a healthy lifestyle as adults.

As stated earlier, a key benefit of exercise is maintaining a healthy body weight. According to the US Surgeon General, the current national obesity epidemic could make our children's generation the first in American history not to exceed the average life expectancy of their parents. Fortunately, studies have shown that regular exercise can help reduce the risk of obesity and obesity-related diseases (such as heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes) in children. In fact, in a recent study of 11,000 children (the largest study to date of obesity among young children) researchers found that just one extra hour of exercise a week could significantly cut obesity among young overweight girls.¹

Jordana and Kalman Schoor of Teaneck, New Jersey, encourage their children to be athletic. On most mornings before school, Jordana takes her three children bike riding. "It's good to get their bodies moving in the morning," she says. She notes that her children do not watch television regularly, so they are more likely to go outside

“because they can’t sit in the playroom all day.”

Regular physical activity clearly has great potential to improve our children’s lives. So why aren’t our children getting more gym time in day schools and *yeshivot*? The main reason seems to be a lack of time. With a dual curriculum, there are many subjects and just not enough hours in the day to cover everything.

Some principals advocate relegating physical activity to after-school clubs in order to maximize classroom learning during regular school hours. But a recent study by the CDC showed that almost two-thirds of nine- to thirteen-year-olds do not participate in organized physical activities outside of school. And more than one-fifth do not engage in *any* physical activity outside of school.

There are several problems with after-school exercise programs. First, our children spend most of their waking hours at school. In most *yeshivot*, the school day does not end until about four o’clock. By the time children get home and finish their homework, there is barely time to eat dinner and play before going to sleep. Second, the cost of tuition is already a financial burden; how many parents are able to comfortably afford paying for after-school clubs? Exercise

should not be the privilege of the wealthy—it is the right of every child. Third, and perhaps most important, exercise cannot be pushed back to the end of the day, because children need a break *during* the day.

Rabbi Isaac Entin, headmaster of Torah Day School of Virginia, in Portsmouth, acknowledges the challenge of squeezing physical education into the schedule. “It’s not easy, but it gives the kids a chance to ‘blow off steam.’” Torah Day School provides physical education four days a week by shortening lunch periods (“Kids

tend to inhale their food anyway,” says Rabbi Entin) and limiting gym to thirty-minute periods instead of the usual forty-five-minutes.

“[Physical education] is necessary as kids tend to go from bed to school to homework to dinner to bed,” Rabbi Entin says. “We need to be in the business of educating the whole child—that includes physical education classes as well as classes in health and nutrition.”

Whether or not our children are on the floor, at round tables or at traditional desks, they sit for most of the school day. Imagine being forced to sit still and focus on complicated subjects—some in a foreign language—and having just a few

Exercise cannot be pushed back to the end of the day, because children need a break *during* the day.

minutes to get up and stretch your legs.

Some would argue that recess is enough of a break, but it isn't. For girls especially, recess is certainly not a good substitute for gym class. Studies have shown that girls are significantly less active during recess time than boys. Throw the boys a ball and they'll start a pick-up game, but girls are more likely to sit and talk.²

Some parents contend that we shouldn't waste "Torah time" on physical education. But Judaism espouses the concept of "*Nefesh beriah beguf bari*, A healthy (sound) mind in a healthy (sound) body." As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote, "Only if the body is healthy is it an efficient instrument for the spirit's activity" (*Horeb* ch. 62, sec. 428). In the *Mishneh Torah*, Rambam explains the importance of keeping to a strict regimen. Similarly, Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook insisted that physical education be an important part of a yeshivah curriculum. He wrote, "When Jewish children will be strong, sound and healthy, the air of the world will become holy and pure."³


Nor should physical education be separate from our children's Judaic education. In fact, the gym is a perfect place to teach *middot* and morals. Maimonides Academy in Los Angeles offers a course called "Movement, Music, and *Middot* Awareness." Alan Rosen, the creator of the program and director of physical education at the school, says the course imbues physical education with spirituality. Classes begin with a short song about the moral theme of the week—honesty, responsibility, friendship, et cetera—and the activities reflect that theme. Rabbi Karmi Gross, the principal of Maimonides Academy, says that Rosen's program is a key reason the school offers gym every day.

Rabbi Gross believes teaching *middot* during gym is an effective way to concretize the lessons. "After all, the school yard is where most problems happen ... and at our school there are very few fights between children."

Children should have physical education at least four times a week (since Fridays are short school days). Moreover, teachers should never withhold gym time as punishment. Gym should be fun—never a graded class—and present opportunities to learn new things. Finally, activities don't always have to involve a ball. Why not bring in a yoga teacher or a karate master to broaden our children's experiences?

"We should give children a smorgasbord of activities—bowling, stilt-walking, volleyball, paddle tennis, tumbling, yoga and other activities," Rosen says. "Gym class is a wonderful time for growth and development."

We must push the schools to devote more time to physical education. At the same time, we must be aware that curriculum changes don't happen overnight. In the meantime, we can try to encourage the schools to integrate physical education with academic subjects. Let's persuade the science teachers to push the desks aside and have children flutter about like butterflies. Math teachers could help students calculate their target heart rates in between sets of jumping jacks. And social studies instructors could include a game of tag in a lesson on war.

Ensuring our children get more exercise in school requires determination and creativity. But our kids are worth it. 

Notes

1. Rick Callahan, "Fitness: Study Suggests Adding an Hour of PE Time May Fight Child Obesity," *SFGate.com*, 6 September 2004.

2. Alisa R. James, "Are Elementary School Girls Getting Enough Physical Activity During the School Day?" *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance* 70:8 (Oct. 1999): 13.

3. Z. Yaron, *Mishnato shel HaRav Kook* (Jerusalem, 1974).