

Games are called 'games' for a good reason

Researchers at the University College London (UCL) Institute of Education Centre for Longitudinal Studies examined data from more than 10,000 teenagers who are taking part in the Millennium Cohort Study – a study tracking the lives of thousands of youngsters born at the turn of the century – and revealed this month that ["more than one in three British teenagers are overweight or obese"](#).

Cue educators and health foundation spokespeople and campaigners writing about what can be done to resolve this crisis, including Professor Mary Fewtrell, lead on nutrition at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. She said: "A range of measures must be considered including ... statutory school-based health education in all schools".

While this will no doubt provide children with the knowledge to make informed decisions later on about their health, we should all think back to the way we might have reacted ourselves to a lecture about eating five a day, or avoiding sugary drinks, or being forced to go on a long walk on a summer holiday. I remember as a youngster feeling immortal and I'm quite sure that most young people feel similarly today! In fact, I think part of human survival, ironically, is to be able to shake off some of life's bigger 'questions' until they hit us square on. Would anyone ever take up smoking, get sunburnt or drink alcohol regularly if we really accepted the stark warnings associated with all three? I'm not saying that we shouldn't give our young people health education – but let's not suggest that doing so would immediately resolve the issue of one in three teenagers being overweight.

Another concern that I have, which isn't highlighted in this particular piece of research and that I don't think is covered enough by the media, is what happens to young people at the opposite end of the fitness spectrum. Many of today's young people have obsessions with achieving levels of muscular definition that are, quite simply, worryingly unhealthy. Boys and girls alike feel a real pressure to have, for instance, a well-defined six pack, and view sport and exercise as merely a means to achieving extraordinary physiques or being 'beautiful', rather than for being healthy and happy.

The perception that TV and film producers, the media, and even social media create, is that 'perfection' (which itself is subjective!) is in fact 'standard'. Perhaps that's an extreme claim, but I don't think that most of us going about our regular lives actually expect our friends and family, or politicians and celebrities, or people we meet during the course of our working day or prospective partners, to look 'perfect'. Yet from the way that life is presented in TV programmes and films, on celebrities' or social media stars' social platforms, young people could be forgiven for having a skewed understanding of quite what is expected of them – or of what is actually 'normal'.

It doesn't take a great leap of the imagination to understand that if you regularly see people with six packs, tiny waists, taut and defined upper arms and slender legs, that you might assume this is easily achieved. I think it is important then, when schools and governments consider questions about sport, nutrition and mental well-being and how to instil in students positive habits for a long and healthy life, to recognise that not only are one in three teens overweight, but of the other two in three, there are

bound to be many who are endlessly striving for 'perfection' and have developed a different, but equally unhealthy, relationship with fitness or diet.

To nurture a positive relationship with sport it's important to actually show young people the many other benefits on offer, other than being 'beautiful' – from improved mental well-being to developing essential skills and, simply, having fun!

I tend to think this is the crux of the matter, that making sport fun is key, and that the way to do this is through effective organisation – from having the right people involved at all levels and scheduling suitable fixtures and events, to careful timetabling and facilities management and communicating with students and parents about expectations and pressures and positive attitudes.

Sensible coaching is paramount. Games are called 'games' for good reason. To get through to our young people, and to develop in them a healthy attitude towards games, coaches need to be able to carefully balance competition with enjoyment. No-one wants their Head of Games to behave like Alex Ferguson, and there's certainly no place in today's schools for overly competitive, overbearing sports teachers like Mr Sugden – Brian Glover's comical role in the film *Kes*.

There is such pleasure to be had from competitive team sports and I think we do reasonably well here on this front. While we completely understand that rugby might not be everyone's cup of tea, I am a firm believer that all students should still experience the thrill of it. The way teams work together in rugby offers fantastic rewards through the camaraderie that is developed, and the shared disappointments and successes experienced. The extreme competitive nature of the game is something all young people should experience at some point too as this encourages resilience, but also a sense of perspective when it comes to overcoming failures and pushing through to make progress. We used to have 'school sports', whereby fixtures would only be offered to those who made the team, but we now offer everyone the opportunity to play in a competitive game if they want to. For this we need a sufficient number of fixtures. It's never been too difficult to organise an impressive schedule of fixtures for our first XV, but making sure our third XV also has opportunities for regular competitive games is just as important.

I recently dined with a group of third XV boys who had initially been quite reticent rugby players, but who told me all about how they had just enjoyed an especially muddy afternoon of rugby together – and how it was that much more enjoyable because they felt they were on an equal footing to each other, which took off some of the perceived pressure.

As well as creating the right number of teams and organising fixtures at the right level, a good Head of Games will have the confidence to approach his opposite number ahead of a competitive fixture with another school and say, for instance, "we've got quite a weak team playing this week – could you weaken yours so that the boys all get a good, competitive game?". An 80-nil score would not be a positive outcome for either team, so ensuring all players have a good match is much more important than one team feeling like they thrashed the other! Much of this is common sense – it just takes those in charge to remember that this is what school sport is about.

So while I think that creating fair competition has a role to play in school sport, to lay all my cards on the table, I think the trend to remove medals from sports days is completely bonkers! I understand a desire not to alienate young children from participating in sports day, or sports generally, but the way to positively manage this situation isn't to remove all elements of competition. Part of the issue is, undoubtedly, that some parents do, sadly, behave appallingly and contribute to a negative environment completely unnecessarily. I recall at a previous school some parents arguing at the finish line of a Year 3 egg and spoon race, even bringing video evidence to bear, about which child finished in third place! Clearly this level of competition is not necessary and doesn't help children to experience the joy of taking part in anything competitive. Again, having the right coach, who will be prepared to be bullish and get into the parent crowd at the finish line, is key.

I also take issue with 'sport for all' messages (by which I mean students are permitted to spend PE lessons doing sports they have chosen) that you see from so many other schools. At a previous school I sat on a games committee and the question of choice for Sixth Form students came up, and I was glad that the less 'trendy' decision was taken then, that students shouldn't have a choice as to what sports they played in compulsory PE lessons. Students who feel more confident undertaking non-team and non-competitive activities such as fitness classes or working out in the gym would, under a student-choice programme, be able to choose to do only exercise classes for three terms if they wanted to, and would subsequently miss out on all of the positive aspects of being in a team, and the challenge of competition that goes alongside.

At Gresham's we have two year olds right through to 18 year olds, and so while it should go without saying that our approach for our two year olds' physical activities is more gentle, and has a greater emphasis on participation, the main thing to recognise is that there's no exact science to when children will start to respond better to competitive sports and working in teams. Because there is no exact science, all schools need to put in place the very best members of staff – from the Head of Games to coaches through to teaching staff running lunchtime activities – so that they can work out exactly what's right for each group. We would hope that by age nine or 10 we could start to rotate captaincies, and encourage full competition, whilst still ensuring the experience is positive for everyone: it takes the right people to make this happen.

We said farewell to one such 'right person' this term – Mr Richard Brearley, Deputy Headmaster at Gresham's Prep and well-loved 'Coach', who retires after 35 years at Gresham's. Many thanks for showing us exactly how it's done, and we wish you an incredibly fond farewell as you embark on your much deserved retirement.