Frequently Asked Questions for Parents

Answers to commonly asked questions about FITNESSGRAM

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GENERAL QUESTIONS ABOUT FITNESS AND FITNESSGRAM

Q. Why are fitness tests important? I'm a parent, and my child is not going to be a professional athlete. Who cares if he/she can do push-ups or run a mile?

The FITNESSGRAM physical fitness assessment is based not on athletic ability, but on good health. No matter what your children grow up to become, they will live happier, more productive lives if they are healthy--and physical fitness is vital to overall health. FITNESSGRAM provides accurate and reliable information about your child's level of physical fitness. The FITNESSGRAM test (and report) includes a number of different assessments because fitness has multiple components. Some kids may have good muscular fitness but need improvement on aerobic fitness. By having a complete report, you (and your child) will know more about their overall level of physical condition and how it can be improved

Q. Why are physical activity and fitness important?

Physical activity and physical fitness are not the same thing. Participation in regular physical activity leads to improvements in physical fitness and provides many important health benefits. This is well documented, and has been neatly summarized in widely publicized documents such as the Surgeon General's Report called Physical Activity and Health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). To quote one point from the "General Conclusions" section of that report:

"Physical activity reduces the risk of premature mortality in general, and of coronary artery disease, hypertension, colon cancer, and diabetes mellitus in particular. Physical activity also improves mental health and is important for the health of muscles, bones, and joints."

Physical fitness (an outcome associated with participation in physical activity) also has been shown to be important for health and quality of life. Assessments of physical fitness provide an effective way to evaluate overall physical condition and potential risk for negative health outcomes. Physical fitness is also more easily assessed than physical activity since it doesn't vary on a day-to-day basis. It is important to note that physical fitness is also influenced by factors that are out of a person's control (for example, genetics). While not everyone can be an elite athlete, most people can achieve healthy levels of fitness by performing the recommended amounts of physical activity.

For a more detailed description of the health benefits of physical activity and fitness in children, see pages 10-27 of the FITNESSGRAM Reference Guide, accessible from the home page of www.fitnessgram.net or through the Cooper Institute Web site at http://www.cooperinstitute.org/youth/fitnessgram/references.cfm.

Q. How does a fitness report lead to better health and fitness?

The FITNESSGRAM report generated by the FG software provides information about fitness in an easy to read format. More importantly, the report provides personalized tips and suggestions that

can help in planning an individualized fitness plan. An accurate assessment of physical fitness is one component of a comprehensive physical education curriculum that incorporates health-related fitness education. The report provides a way for teachers (and parents) to teach children about the importance of being active and fit throughout their life.

Q. Will schools use FITNESSGRAM to grade my child?

The FITNESSGRAM assessment and report are intended to provide teachers (and parents) with accurate information about children's physical fitness. A Position Statement developed by the FITNESSGRAM Advisory Board says that schools should not use FITNESSGRAM either to grade your child or to evaluate teachers. The inherent goal of the FITNESSGRAM program is to promote regular, enjoyable, physical activity for students so that they can reach and maintain a level of physical fitness that will contribute to good health and well-being. FITNESSGRAM helps teachers to determine student needs and guide students in planning personalized physical activity programs.

FITNESSGRAM also helps parents/guardians understand their child's needs so they can help the child develop and stick to a plan of regular physical activity--one that's focused on enjoyable activities the child can do throughout his or her life.

To read the Position Statement on appropriate and inappropriate uses of the FITNESSGRAM tests, click here to view the PDF document.

Q. Will my child's FITNESSGRAM scores be posted or made public?

FITNESSGRAM results are meant to be individualized and personal. Schools should not post FITNESSGRAM results. They are for use by the teacher, the child, and the child's parents/guardians. Where FITNESSGRAM data is collected by the state, the data will have student names removed so that individual scores may not be identified with a particular student. That data will be used to study trends and not to judge individual students.

Contact your local school district or visit your district's Web site for details regarding your district's privacy policy concerning students' personal information.

Q. Will my child be compared to other children?

No. FITNESSGRAM uses health-related criteria called Healthy Fitness Zones to determine students' overall physical fitness and suggest areas for improvement when appropriate. Healthy Fitness Zones (HFZ) are not based on class averages or any other peer comparisons. They are "criterion-referenced" standards that are based on how much fitness is needed for good health. The standards are set specifically for boys and girls of different ages using the best available research. The FITNESSGRAM report defines the recommended range of fitness for each test measure and calls this range the Healthy Fitness Zone. If your child's score falls within the Healthy Fitness Zone it means they have achieved the recommended level of fitness for their age.

So, your child will not be compared with other children. Your child will get personalized information on his or her own fitness as it relates to good health.

For more detailed information about the development of the Healthy Fitness Zones, a definition of the criterion-referenced standards they're based upon, and why these standards are important, go to the FITNESSGRAM Reference Guide at http://www.cooperinstitute.org/youth/fitnessgram/references.cfm.

Q. Will my child be made to feel that he or she is too fat or too skinny?

No. FITNESSGRAM recognizes that physically fit and less-fit people come in all shapes and sizes. The beginning level of the FITNESSGRAM Healthy Fitness Zone for body composition is based on research that links these levels to an increased risk for cardiovascular disease. The FITNESSGRAM parent and student reports use carefully worded terminology to help parents and youth understand possible risks associated with higher levels of body fatness. Language that could be used to describe physical appearance is not used in the FITNESSGRAM reports.

Additional information about body composition, body mass index, and related issues is provided in other parts of this FAQ document. For more details about the scientific basis for Healthy Fitness Zone standards for body composition, see pages 90-92 of the FITNESSGRAM Reference Guide, accessible from the home page of the www.Fitnessgram.net Web site or from the Cooper Institute Web site at http://www.cooperinstitute.org/youth/fitnessgram/references.cfm.

Q. Will body composition testing increase the risk of students developing eating disorders?

Some teachers and parents express concern that assessments of body composition (or weight status) will make a child overly concerned about their body and lead to eating disorders. There is no research evidence suggesting that this likely to occur. On the other hand, lack of knowledge about body composition and the lack of appropriate perceptions of body image may be greater contributors to the development of eating disorders.

Body composition testing (particularly skinfold testing) offers an opportunity for teachers to deal with the cultural obsessions with thinness and body image that prevail in our society. The teacher can set a tone of acceptance for different body types and acknowledge the important genetic contribution to obesity. With greater tolerance for variation in fitness levels, children can better determine the relation of their body composition to health without fear of ridicule. Avoiding the use of body composition assessment does nothing to counter the perceived cultural pressure to be thin or the tendency of many children to become obese as adults.

Using FITNESSGRAM can help young children set realistic standards for their body fatness and avoid the overemphasis on leanness that is often displayed by our culture.

Additional information about body composition, body mass index, and related issues is provided in other parts of this FAQ document.

Q. What happens if my child "fails" the FITNESSGRAM test?

There is no pass or fail to the FITNESSGRAM report. The category below the Healthy Fitness Zone on the FITNESSGRAM test is referred to as "Needs Improvement," to indicate dimensions of fitness that may require special attention. While the effect of low fitness may not influence health until later in adulthood, it is important to identify potential risks early on so that adjustments can be made to improve those levels. Therefore, the Needs Improvement message should be used prescriptively to help children set goals or targets to improve their fitness. The wording used for this category does not imply "bad fitness" or "poor fitness" but rather areas in which the child should seek improvement.

It should be noted that it is also possible for some students to score above the HFZ. FITNESSGRAM acknowledges performances above the HFZ but does not recommend this level of performance as an appropriate goal level for all students. However, students who desire to achieve a high level of athletic performance may need to consider setting goals beyond the HFZ.

The Healthy Fitness Zone (HFZ) standards in the FITNESSGRAM test reflect reasonable levels of fitness that can be attained by most children who participate regularly in various types of physical activity. Because of this, we recommend that all students should strive to achieve a score that places them inside the HFZ. However, it is common for children to achieve the HFZ for some dimensions of fitness but not for others. Most children usually have areas that they excel in more than others.

Q. Doesn't fitness testing take away time from academic areas and thus hurt academic test scores?

Parents--as well as teachers and administrators--sometimes express this concern. The general assumption is that the best way to improve students' test scores in core subjects is to increase the amount of class time spent on core subjects, even to the exclusion of other curriculum areas like physical education and fine arts. However, there is no research evidence to suggest that daily physical education detracts from academic success, even when it results in less academic class time during the school day. While a direct cause-and-effect relationship has not been established, some research suggests that fitness (and physical activity) may improve cognition and academic performance. The evidence is compelling enough that the American Academy of Pediatrics has issued a policy statement in favor of "expansion of school physical education, dissuading children from pursuing sedentary activities, providing suitable role models for physical activity and making activity-promoting changes in the environment."

It is also important to point out that FITNESSGRAM testing need not take time away from academic subjects. Most physical education teachers use fitness assessments as part of their normal instruction, so additional class time is not needed to complete the testing. Depending on class size, the FITNESSGRAM test battery can be completed in 3 or 4 class periods, and the assessments help reinforce students' learning of fitness concepts that are part of the overall physical education curriculum.

A selection of reference sources for information about research related to physical education and academic achievement (or physical activity and cognitive function) can be found at:

http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/template.cfm?template=pr_121002.html
http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/pf/documents/2004pftr esults.doc
http://www.cahperd.org/im ages/pdf_docs/CA PE fitness academic CSBA 06.pdf
http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/49250.php
http://www.tahperd.org/HOME_PDFs/Acti vity_Achievemnt_Scores_article.pdf
http://www.actionbasedlearning.com/article09.shtml

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS ABOUT FITNESSGRAM

Q. What is the FITNESSGRAM/ACTIVITYGRAM Philosophy?

The acronym HELP is used to describe the philosophy of FITNESSGRAM and ACTIVITYGRAM:

Health and health related-fitness. The primary goal of both programs is to promote regular physical activity among all youth. Of particular importance is promoting activity patterns that lead to reduced health risk and improved health-related physical fitness.

Everyone. FITNESSGRAM and ACTIVITYGRAM are designed for all people regardless of physical ability. They are intended to help ALL youth find some form of activity that they can do for a lifetime. Too often activity programs are perceived to be only for those who are "good" rather than for all people.

Lifetime. FITNESSGRAM and ACTIVITYGRAM have as a goal helping young people to be active now, but a long term goal is to help them learn to do activities that they will continue to perform through out their lives.

Personal. No two people are exactly the same. No two people enjoy the exact same activities. FITNESSGRAM and ACTIVITYGRAM are designed to personalize physical activity to meet personal or individual needs.

Q. What does the FITNESSGRAM report look like?

There is a student report and a parent report generated by the FITNESSGRAM software, each of which is available in English or Spanish. Click here for examples of each with information on what the various sections are reporting.

Q. How was FITNESSGRAM developed?

FITNESSGRAM was created in 1982 by The Cooper Institute to provide an easy way for physical education teachers to report to parents on children's fitness levels. Then and now, students are assessed in these areas of health-related fitness: cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength, muscular endurance, flexibility, and body composition. Scores are evaluated against objective criterion-based standards, called Healthy Fitness Zones, that indicate the level of fitness necessary for health. FITNESSGRAM/ACTIVITYGRAM software generates the student and parent reports, which contain objective, personalized feedback and positive reinforcement. These reports serve as a communications link between teachers and parents.

The Healthy Fitness Zone standards were established by the FITNESSGRAM Advisory Board, which includes some of the foremost scientists and practitioners in fitness and physical activity. Technical information on the fitness assessments and standards is available in the Reference Guide, which can be accessed from the www.Fitnessgram.net home page, or from the Cooper Institute Web site at http://www.cooperinstitute.org/youth/fitnessgram/references.cfm.

Q. For what ages is FITNESSGRAM an appropriate assessment tool?

FITNESSGRAM's recommended age range is from kindergarten through college. Most of the Healthy Fitness Zones address younger children, but aerobic capacity standards are not presented for students in grade K-3. This is partly because of the challenges associated with determining standards but also a philosophical decision by the FITNESSGRRAM Advisory Board. Performance levels are not the most important objective for young children in this age range. Instead, the emphasis for young children should be on enjoying activity and on learning to perform the test items successfully.

Q. What are the "Healthy Fitness Zones" and how are they determined?

FITNESSGRAM's Healthy Fitness Zones (HFZs) are research-based standards for aerobic capacity; body composition; and muscular strength, endurance, and flexibility. These standards indicate levels of fitness necessary for good health. They have been developed and refined over more than 25 years by the FITNESSGRAM Advisory Board.

A score in the HFZ represents the level of fitness thought to provide some protection from the potential health risks that result from a lack of fitness in this measure. The beginning of the HFZ represents a minimum level of fitness necessary to have acceptable health. These standards reflect

reasonable levels of fitness that can be attained by most children that participate regularly in various types of physical activity. Because of this, we recommend that all students should strive to achieve a score that places them inside the HFZ. It is not uncommon for children to achieve the HFZ for some dimensions of fitness but not for others. Most children usually have areas that they excel in more than others.

Healthy Fitness Zones differ for boys and for girls, and they differ based on age.

Q. Why use the "Healthy Fitness Zones"? Why not just compare kids to the national--or class--average?

The use of health-related criteria helps to minimize comparisons between children and to emphasize personal fitness for health rather than goals based solely on performance. Since only modest amounts of exercise are needed for obtaining health benefits, most students who participate in physical activity almost every day will be able to achieve a score that will place them in the Healthy Fitness Zone.

Q. Who currently uses FITNESSGRAM?

Tens of thousands of schools nationwide use the FITNESSGRAM assessment. These include individual school settings as well as large district implementations in cities like New York City (NY), Baltimore County (MD) Public School District, and Miami-Dade County (FL) Public Schools--and even statewide implementation, as in Delaware and California.

Q. What is ACTIVITYGRAM?

ACTIVITYGRAM is a physical activity assessment that is incorporated into the FITNESSGRAM software. It enables students to monitor and record their activity patterns over a three-day period, and receive a report that evaluates the results. ACTIVITYGRAM helps students learn more about their own physical activity habits, so they can more effectively plan personal activity programs to keep them healthy and active for a lifetime.

QUESTIONS ABOUT BODY COMPOSTION TESTING

Q. Why is body composition testing important?

Research has shown that excessive fatness is associated with increased blood pressure, elevated blood lipids and type II diabetes. Long-term studies show a relationship between adult obesity and childhood obesity especially as children become adolescents. Together these studies indicate that excessive fatness in children and youth increase the likelihood of obesity-related adult diseases including coronary heart disease, hypertension, high cholesterol and type II diabetes.

For more details about the scientific basis of assessing body composition, see pages 87-92 of the FITNESSGRAM Reference Guide, accessible from the home page of the www.Fitnessgram.net Web site or from the Cooper Institute Web site at http://www.cooperinstitute.org/youth/fitnessgram/references.cfm.

Q. What is BMI? Is BMI a better measure of body composition than height and weight charts for children? That's how I remember being measured when I was in school.

BMI stands for body mass index. BMI is a ratio of weight over height. Recent charts have been published by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for quickly determining body mass index (BMI) in boys and girls, ages 2 to 20 years. These charts are percentiles showing the distribution of BMI at a given age and can be used to identify children who are overweight (however they may not be overfat). BMI provides a better estimate of fatness than height and weight tables.

The FITNESSGRAM Healthy Fitness Zone for the BMI assessment is different from the widely used CDC percentile-based charts. As described elsewhere in this document, FITNESSGRAM standards are established as "criterion-referenced standards." The standards are based on the level of fitness needed for good health, rather than comparisons of test populations. See more in the next question.

Q. Why does FITNESSGRAM offer BMI as an option for body composition testing?

The preferred method of determining body composition for the FITNESSGRAM test is with estimates of body fatness. Skinfold measures are the recommended technique but other tools may be used to provide these estimates. Body Mass Index is offered as an alternative because occasionally teachers are not familiar with the skinfold test, or there are regulations in the school district limiting the use of skinfold measurements. There are limitations associated with the use of BMI for assessing weight status or body composition. The main limitation is that the BMI will yield inaccurate values for people that have a large muscle mass. Despite these limitations, the use of BMI does yield some useful information for evaluating patterns and trends in groups of people.

FITNESSGRAM includes body composition as only one of several components of fitness assessment, rather than relying on BMI testing or skinfold measurements alone. FITNESSGRAM also assesses aerobic capacity, muscular strength and endurance, and flexibility to provide more well-rounded picture of a student's physical fitness.

Q. How are body composition test results described in the FITNESSGRAM student and parent reports?

Body composition scores are reported as in the Healthy Fitness Zone (HFZ) or Needs Improvement. If a teacher does skinfold measurements and height and weight measurements, the FITNESSGRAM report will include the percent body fat score from the skinfold measurements. If only height and weight measurements are taken, the report will include the Body Mass Index score.

Q. How should FITNESSGRAM body composition test results be interpreted?

The FITNESSGRAM report provides information to help you (and your child) interpret body composition scores. Scores that fall either above the Healthy Fitness Zone (Needs Improvement) or in the Very Low area should receive attention, because this indicates that the child may have greater potential than others to develop health problems related to their level of fatness or leanness. (For an article from USA Today about body composition and health, click here.)

A BMI in the Needs Improvement range indicates that the child's weight is too heavy for his or her height. However, children who are extremely muscular may have a BMI in the Needs Improvement area but may not have excess fat.

In general, children who score in the Needs Improvement area should be encouraged to work toward the HFZ by slowly changing their body weight through increased physical activity and decreased consumption of high-fat, high-calorie, low-nutrition foods. Changing dietary habits and exercise habits can be very difficult. Students with severe obesity or eating disorders may need professional assistance in their attempts to modify their behaviors. Evidence in adults clearly

indicates that participation in regular physical activity can reduce the health risks associated with obesity (even without weight loss). Because this relationship likely holds for children as well, emphasis for overweight children should be on being physically active and not on absolute weight or fat loss. The FITNESSGRAM software includes reports that provide information to help children and parents know how to interpret the body composition data and how to improve their body composition levels when the need is indicated.

It is important to point out that there is also an area in the body composition graph of the FITNESSGRAM report identified as Very Low. Parents of children who are categorized as very lean should consider factors that may be responsible for the low level of body fat. Many children may naturally be very lean while others may have inappropriate nutritional patterns. Creating awareness of a child's current status is the primary purpose in identifying lean students. Changes in status should be monitored.

Q. How should body composition testing be performed within a P.E. setting?

Body composition testing (like any fitness assessment) is a personal matter. Because body composition is a particularly sensitive issue, additional care should be taken to ensure that it is conducted in a setting in which the child feels safe and the results can be kept confidential.