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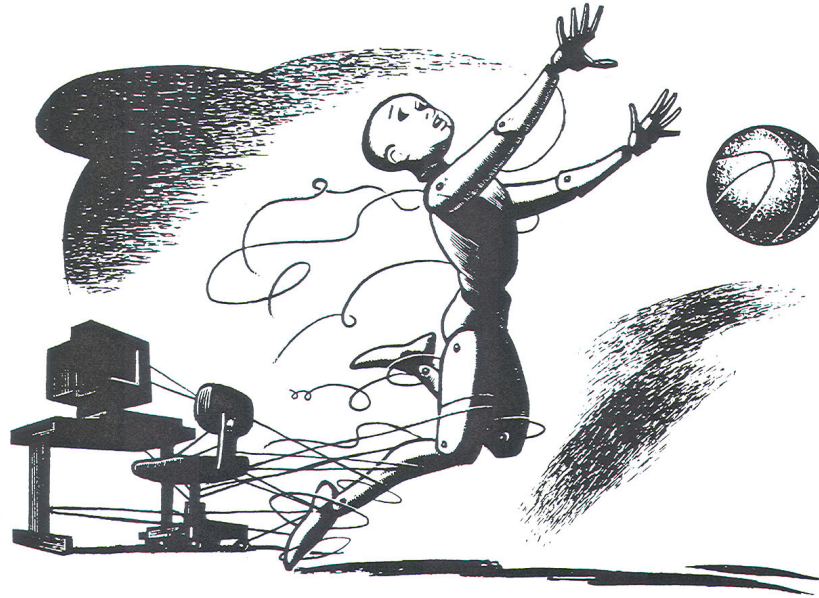
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## Children Are Hurting for Some Exercise

If they Don't Use Those Muscles and Bones, They'll Be Adults With Chronic Pain



"Youth," Somerset Maugham wrote, "is wasted on the young." A good line, but I'm afraid it may no longer be true. And I do mean afraid. Our young seem to have lost their right to youth and along with it the right to health.

Kids are growing up faster than ever. It is happening both socially and psychologically. Preschoolers are run through testing mills akin to college admission grinds, 8-year-olds have schedules as busy and carefully orchestrated as corporate c.e.o.'s and adolescents are a prime source of cheap menial labor and flash floods of discretionary spending ("You've seen 'Titanic' how many times?").

There are numerous examples of this accelerating social maturity. Law-and-order advocates want to try children as adults for breaking the law and even seeking the death penalty for kids. Educational reformers are suggesting we abolish high school because kids are too mature to tolerate the traditional regimen, and, in Atlanta, they've done away with recess for more productive uses of time.

Almost every day I see the victims of this hectic pace and drive for productivity in my sports injury and exercise therapy clinic. Kids come in bandaged and braced, halt and hurting, like 50-year-olds. Many of these young athletes regard their bad

knees, wrenched ankles and sore shoulders as confirmation that they are playing like the pros. Almost all of them believe the fragile human body can't take the punishment meted out on a basketball court or ball field. They're proud to be banged up and think pain is just part of life. The nonathletes are equally resigned to bad backs, sore wrists, headaches and other chronic pain symptoms.

Those kids aren't dumb. Their bodies can't take the punishment, and pain is part of life, but it is a part that until recently was rarely visited by a person under 40. Our kids are getting hurt, not by the games they play or by random mishaps but by living a

sedentary and wildly premature adult life style.

Youth has a purpose. From a musculoskeletal standpoint, the years between birth and the early 20's are important for building a solid foundation that insures muscles and joints will operate properly for the rest of life. This happens only one way: unstructured, spontaneous movement. As children, we are programmed by nature to be little whirling dervishes. Crawling, rolling over, walking, running, skipping, throwing and the like are all intended to form vital physical functions. Moreover, healthy development of the brain stem is directly linked to movement, starting in a mother's womb and continuing for at least the first 10 years of life.

But good genes cannot override the bad effects of an environment that offers fewer and fewer opportunities for unstructured, spontaneous motion. Children whose movements are limited because they're spending their time in front of computers or televisions, or being chauffeured to the next appointment are at risk of never achieving their full potential.

Learning occurs but it comes harder. While children can walk and run, the supporting musculoskeletal functions are weakened, inviting serious injuries that a generation or two ago probably would have been minor sprains or bruises.

Ominously, this is just the beginning. Without the musculoskeletal basics, youngsters mature into adults plagued by chronic pain. Children who do not move because the culture has decided that they have better things to do, grow up to be adults who cannot move. What is awaiting such kids? Obesity, heart disease, falls from dizziness and lack of balance, migraines, joint-replacement surgery, and a long list of other horrors.

Just as there are basic requirements for food, water and sleep to keep the human body going, motion cannot be intensely curtailed without damage. Today's kids have followed their elders right into this danger zone.

My experience persuades me that much of what medical science regards as chronic disease has a significant motion-deprivation component. The body's internal systems and subsystems are energized by constant muscular interaction. As this interaction subsides, good health also ebbs.

There are neurological effects as well. Serious research should be done on whether children with attention deficit disorders, other learning disabilities and behavior prob-

lems are actually presenting symptoms of overall motion starvation. We must know if these kids need doses of drugs or doses or recess.

More motion might be a better option for school districts considering later class starting times for teen-agers who are said to have a biological predisposition for staying up late and sleeping longer in the morning. I may be missing something, but it seems to me the only relevant biological predisposition at issue is the one violated by the invention of the light bulb. We are programmed to work by day and sleep when the sun goes down; kids and many adults stay up late because they're not physically tired. Teens go to malls and movies, watch TV and ram around in cars for enough stimulation to get tired.

I find that attitude, behavior and educa-

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### Children are being hurt by a sedentary and wildly premature adult life style.

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tion problems in youngsters increase or decrease in direct relation to how much physical activity they are allowed. It is not a matter, however, of merely burning off excess energy. Modern technology has eliminated most of the naturally occurring stimuli that kept our ancestors limber, strong and healthy.

This has to be replaced in some way. For adults, it takes a regular motion-intense program that moves muscles that are not being regularly engaged. However, teen-agers and younger children need periods of intense, unstructured play without any purpose other than having a good time.

Instead of Ritalin, Prozac or knee braces, I'd like to see parents prescribing playgrounds, open fields and tall trees for climbing. If moms and dads assess the kind of motion their children are getting, they'll quickly realize that it tends to fall into patterns that hold for days and weeks at a time: after school it's soccer practice, piano lessons, hanging out at the mall, computer games and the like. Start by breaking those patterns.

If left to choose, children instinctively seek the joy of movement, the well-spring of human life. With enough time and latitude, they will find ways to properly engage most of their musculoskeletal functions. In fact, kids drive adults crazy with all their frenetic activity, and it's why we have a tendency to

try to impose structure and "productivity" on them.

Operating the modern tools of productivity keeps most adults trapped in an invisible box that is about four feet by four feet in dimension. It hangs in front of us, waist high. We type and answer the phone in it, ring up groceries and turn a steering wheel in it, push the lawnmower and load the washing machine in it; for recreation, we stay in the box to tune the TV, prune the roses, read a good book and ride our bike through the park. The office, workplace and home environments have been arranged to accommodate the box.

Until relatively recently, we took our bodies to work by bending, stretching and pulling; now work comes to us. The joints and muscles, meanwhile, that are designed to work outside the boundaries of this new work space get very little use.

Today's young people are showing acute symptoms of living in this box because they are members of the first generation unable to spend significant time outside of its confines. A 50's, 60's and early-70's childhood still permitted many hours a week of activity that used the full range of motion and physical functions that support it. Not anymore. Children and their parents are active and hard working, but in most cases 100 percent of this work is done with about 20 to 30 percent of their musculoskeletal functions.

As humans, we lose physical functions that we don't use. They never vanish entirely but the functions, when summoned, have atrophied. At that point a vicious circle sets in: it hurts or is difficult to move, movement is curtailed, it hurts even more, movement is further limited, and so on. The box grows smaller and smaller.

When I visit high schools around San Diego, my hometown, I see a lot of sullen teen-agers. What else is new? But I have a different take on adolescent attitudes. I think they look and act sick. Not demented or weird. Ill. Those kids and their counterparts all over America don't feel good. The motion they need to sustain mental and physical health is not occurring.

It's been a long while since I last heard a mother or father tell a child to "stand up straight." Being straight and tall was the same as being strong and healthy. If we don't break these patterns and the young lose the right to youth, the right to spontaneous, unstructured motion, all we really can expect is for them to stand still and stand the pain. Like adults.