

Music helps and picking teams publicly hurts when helping kids try to enjoy exercise: study

February 6 2017, by Alec Sears



Experiences for kids in P.E. can have long-lasting effects. Being picked last for a team may be humiliating in the moment, but could also have lasting emotional effects. Credit: BYU

Maybe you remember the laps you were forced to run or when a dodgeball hit you in the face. Maybe you remember an empowering

athletic achievement or maybe an embarrassing one, or even the smell of your middle school gymnasium.

We all have different memories from childhood P.E. classes. For whatever reason, the sights, sounds and smells stick with you.

BYU teacher education professor David Barney has taken it upon himself to study P.E. and the positive or negative experiences children glean from their gym class experiences. In two recent studies, he's found there are things educators can do to significantly improve outcomes.

The importance of this research impacts children well beyond their childhood. Having a good experience in P.E. can be correlated with a person's long-term physical well-being. Research from BYU psychologists published in 2014 showed that [kids](#) who are teased in P.E. class exercise less a year later.

Barney's recent studies looked at two specific elements of gym class: playing [music](#) and publicly picking teams.

Playing music

"I've found music to be very magical," Barney said. "It's not the cure-all, it's not a pill that just fixes everything ... but boy it sure helps."

His research on music was recently published in the *International Journal of Physical Education* and shows that fourth grade students are 5.87 times more likely to enjoy P.E. when music is playing.

For the boy or girl who dreads going to gym class, 5.87 is a number that can make a world of difference. A dodgeball to the face might not seem so bad with Taylor Swift telling you to shake it off in the background.

Music appears to have a motivating effect on the kids as well. Students felt like they physically exerted themselves more when music was playing.

"When the music is on, I just feel like dancing all the time," said one female student whom researchers interviewed. Another student felt that the music got him "pumped up," and helped him to work harder.

The type of music you play makes a difference. Barney found that it's best to play contemporary songs with 120 to 160 beats per minute.

"My son is a fourth grader so I sat him down and played some music for him," Barney said, "and he would say 'No, not that one,' or 'Oh yeah we like that one.' We then tested it out, and the kids responded best to songs they recognized artists like One Direction, Taylor Swift and whoever else is popular."

Publicly picking teams

Barney also recently published a study in *The Physical Educator* addressing the practice of publicly picking teams with junior high boys. He observed that the awkward practice doesn't necessarily influence the outcome of the game itself, but it can have a deep emotional impact on students individually.

"A lot of the kids we interviewed basically said, 'I don't like it, but since the teacher's doing it, fine, whatever, let's get this over with,'" Barney said. "That doesn't build a lot of confidence. Nobody leaves class saying, 'That was awesome, I got picked last.'"

Publicly picking teams has been a practice for so many generations that people assume it's the status quo. The practice has remained and continues to have a negative associative effect on children.

"You could pick teams for basketball and in two days the kids won't remember who won," Barney said. "But they remember how they felt, they remember that they were picked last."

Barney proposes that privately picking teams should be the preferred alternative, one that circumvents publicly shaming students. When gym teachers pick the teams themselves, students are able to expand their circle of friends, they don't feel ashamed or excluded and teams can be more fair. Students can base their success off of their own improvement rather than basing it off when they were picked for a team.

"You save so much time when you privately pick teams," Barney said. "That's the kicker. We've seen again and again how much time is wasted going around and picking teams rather than just letting the kids go out and play."

Barney's hope is that music and privately picking teams can help create positive associations with physical fitness that will help kids develop a lifelong commitment to physical health—the ultimate goal of [physical education](#) classes.

Next in Barney's P.E. research, he's going to try to work backward, interviewing active seniors to try and identify early experiences that encouraged them to remain active throughout their lives.

More information: David Barney et al, Picking Teams: Motivational Effects of Team Selection Strategies in Physical Education, *The Physical Educator* (2016). [DOI: 10.18666/TPE-2016-V73-I2-6212](https://doi.org/10.18666/TPE-2016-V73-I2-6212)

Provided by Brigham Young University

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