



## Letters to the Editor

# Should schools test our children's fitness?

Sir, While Sir Liam Donaldson, the Chief Medical Officer, is to be applauded for drawing attention to children's health and wellbeing, his suggestion of an annual fitness test to make children more active and healthy is misguided for a number of reasons ("Beep test could keep children on their toes", Mar 16).

First, although in adults higher fitness is linked to higher levels of activity and thereby better health status, in children this relationship is not as strong. In our experience of testing children for more than 20 years using some of the most objective measures of fitness and activity, the least active child can often be the most fit and vice versa. This is because while fitness is a trait comprising a variable genetic component, activity is a behaviour and is more easily influenced by a range of other factors, including peer group, family and the environment.

The other problem with annual fitness tests is that a child is growing and maturing and the interpretation of the change in the fitness scores from one year to the next is not as straightforward as it appears. This scenario is difficult enough for our youth sports coaches, who try to work out whether the changes in their young athletes are due to their training programme or whether it is predominantly due to an increase in growth and maturation. To expect the PE profession somehow to factor this level of analyses and interpretation into their annual fitness report is not appropriate.

Although I am not against children experiencing a fitness test as part of the curriculum, compulsory testing misses the point of fostering an environment where children should be encouraged to be active daily and maintain this throughout their lives. **This is the real test.**

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Director, Children's Health and  
Exercise Research Centre,  
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Sir, I welcome the suggestion made by Sir Liam Donaldson. In his report, he describes exercise as "nature's cure", because it reduces the risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease and cancer. As the sad decline in the fitness level of our children accelerates each year so

does the cost to the NHS of trying to provide treatment for a nation of unhealthy, overweight and unfit children and adults.

As a retired headteacher I have much sympathy for the overworked and undervalued teachers of today. Twenty years ago in the school where I worked, health and fitness were two of our top priorities and each child was given a "beep test" twice a year, with a special programme of visits once a year made by specialists such as a cardiologist, nurse and athletes involved in the promotion of health and fitness.

**Children need to be fit and healthy and properly prepared for life.**

COLIN HUNTLEY  
Shipley, W Yorks



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