

Introduction

**A “ZEST FOR LIVING”
AND A SOUND MIND AND BODY**

Part 1 The “Zest for Living” and the Mind-Body Connection

In today’s rapidly changing society, the practical skills that self-sufficient individuals need to socialize and cooperate with others, i.e., a “zest for living,” must be fostered from childhood in a balanced manner.

Among the more prominent facets of this “zest for living” are “a healthy body,” “a well-rounded character” and “solid academic prowess.” Manifesting themselves in such forms as athletic ability, a sense of justice, and mental agility, these elements do not function independently but instead complexly intertwine within the day-to-day activities of children. The “zest for living” is hence deeply connected with both mind and body.

Just as tangible volunteer activities are predicated on dedication to helping other people, the qualities and skills inherent in the “zest for living” are rooted in the workings of the mind. Curiosity about the “what” and “why” of things as well as the desire to know and learn to do are factors that underpin all activities, intellectual or otherwise. At the same time, engaging in suitably meaningful activities on a continuing basis requires good health, and improving physical fitness through proper exercise, a balanced diet and adequate rest/sleep is therefore essential. Physical fitness is a crucial ingredient in human development/growth and creative activity, and a key force supporting a “zest for living.”

Activities entailing physical fitness are closely tied to mental development. Playing with friends, for instance, provides children with a foundation on which to build their intellectual capacity and character by improving their physical abilities and enabling them to acquire naturally the skills for interrelating with others. Interacting with nature and with their playmates, adhering to good sportsmanship, and practicing and striving toward specific goals—all experiences that children can acquire through participation in sports—have an important role in teaching children to get along and cooperate, to play fairly by the rules, to have compassion for others, and to exercise self-control. At the same time, the fun, exhilaration and sense of achievement they gain from athletic activities motivate children to develop their physical abilities, the mind and body again working in synergy.

Experiences in natural and social contexts are vital for enhancing mental and physical capacity. Children gain a hearty “zest for living” through both mind and body as they undergo moments of excitement, surprise, frustration, and success during their interactions with nature and society.

The mind and body thus together sustain the “zest for living,” and a key mission for communities, schools, and families is that of creating an environment that contributes to the development of sound minds in sound bodies.

Part 2 Children’s Mental and Physical Health at Present

The rapid development apparent across society in recent years, even while generating benefits for the public, has diluted interpersonal relations, increased mental stress, led to a lack of exercise and caused various other problems. This has impacted the day-to-day lives of both children and adults in a number of ways.

A diminished sense of connectedness and a decline in the educational functions of communities are among the consequences of spreading urbanization. These have adversely affected the mental and physical health of children, changing the way children approach play and reducing the everyday opportunities children have to exercise their bodies and interface with nature and society, experiences considered essential to forming a well-rounded character (**Diagram 1**).

Although certain circumstances such as children who fall ill during morning assembly and children who slump over their desks do not show up in numerical figures, the situation of children at school has clearly changed. Other mental and physical problems such as refusal to attend school, bullying, drug abuse, and communicable diseases have also been noted.

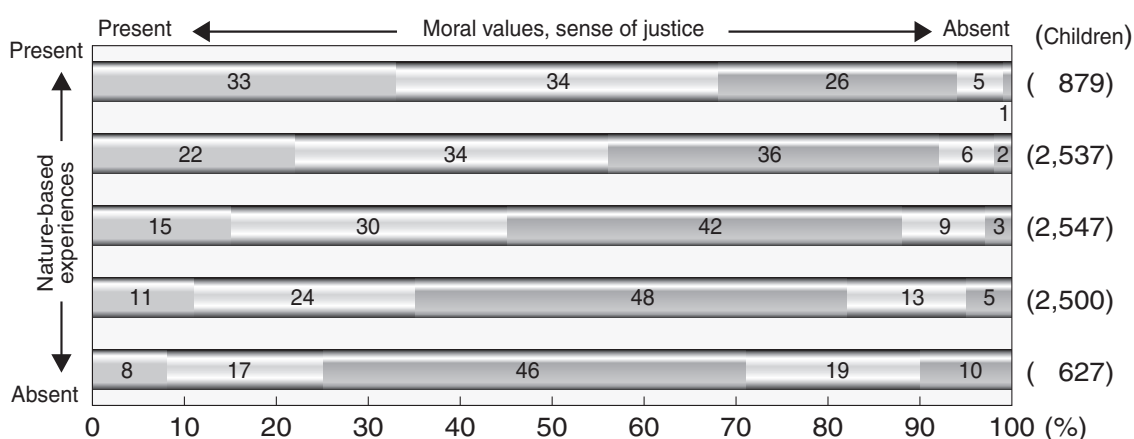
There has been a tangible decline in the educational functions of the family—the result of family nuclearization and a declining birthrate, the reduced presence of fathers in households, and low self-

awareness among parents about fostering good lifestyle habits in their children—and imbalanced nutritional intake and reduced sleep time are signs that a growing number of children have not learned basic lifestyle habits.

Diagram ♦ 1 Correlation of Experiential Activities and the Development of Moral Faculty

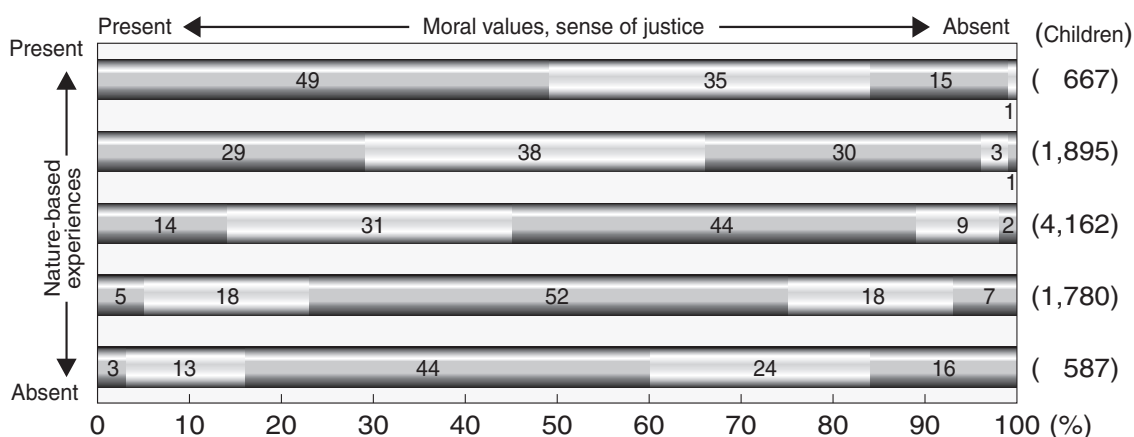
■ The more experiences of nature children enjoy, the more cultivated their moral values and sense of justice

When the extent of natural experiences (e.g., catching butterflies, dragonflies, grasshoppers and other insects) and the level of moral values and a sense of justice (e.g., a willingness to stop a friend doing something wrong) are converted into points and cross tabulated, it becomes apparent that children with more experiences in nature are more likely to have acquired a moral outlook and a sense of justice.



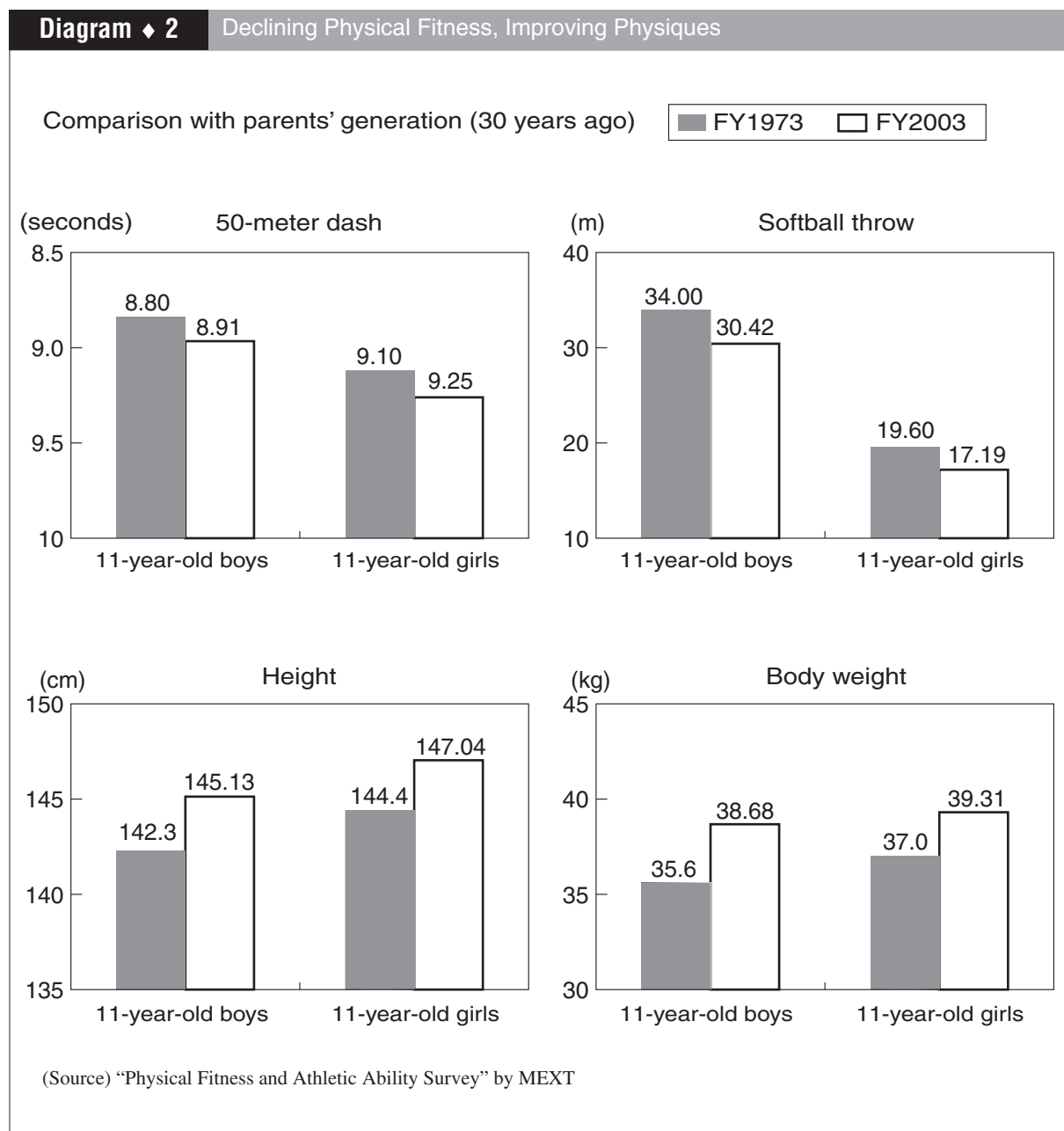
■ The more everyday-life experiences of children enjoy, the more cultivated their moral values and sense of justice

When the extent of everyday-life experiences (e.g., playing with small children and giving them piggyback rides) and the level of moral values and a sense of justice (e.g., a willingness to stop a friend doing something wrong) are converted into points and cross tabulated, it becomes apparent that children with more everyday-life experiences are more likely to have acquired a moral outlook and a sense of justice.



(Source) “Questionnaire Survey on Children’s Experiential Activities (excerpt)”, March 1999 survey requested by MEXT

According to the “Physical Fitness and Athletic Ability Survey” conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) each year since 1964, child fitness is on a downtrend despite the fact that their physiques are improving vis-à-vis their parents’ generation (**Diagram 2**).



These problems involving children are thought to be reflections of the significant impact that the rapid changes in today’s society have had on the minds and bodies of children. To overcome these problems, it is essential that each and every member of the public be aware of the existence of these mental and physical problems from childhood and cultivate the practical skills needed for their own sound mental and physical development over their lifetimes.

Sound mental and physical development requires not only that an individual’s physical and mental condition be good but also that their community and environment be healthy, i.e., that their society as a whole be positive and vigorous and offer people enjoyment and motivation for living. To that end, further efforts are needed toward community building that incorporates such quality-of-life improvements.

As the average lifespan approaches 80 years, enhancing quality of life is a matter of common interest for the entire nation. This will require developing new lifestyles and new ways of thinking that address the issue of cultivating minds and bodies from childhood.

Part 3 Nurturing Sound Minds and Bodies in Children

Physically and mentally sound children evolve through organized and planned learning in schools and, in families and communities, through parent-child interaction, playing with friends, contact with local residents and other activities, and balanced cooperation between communities, schools, and families and the learning that takes place in these contexts enrich the growth progress. Here are presented the issues being addressed by MEXT to nurture mentally and physically sound children.

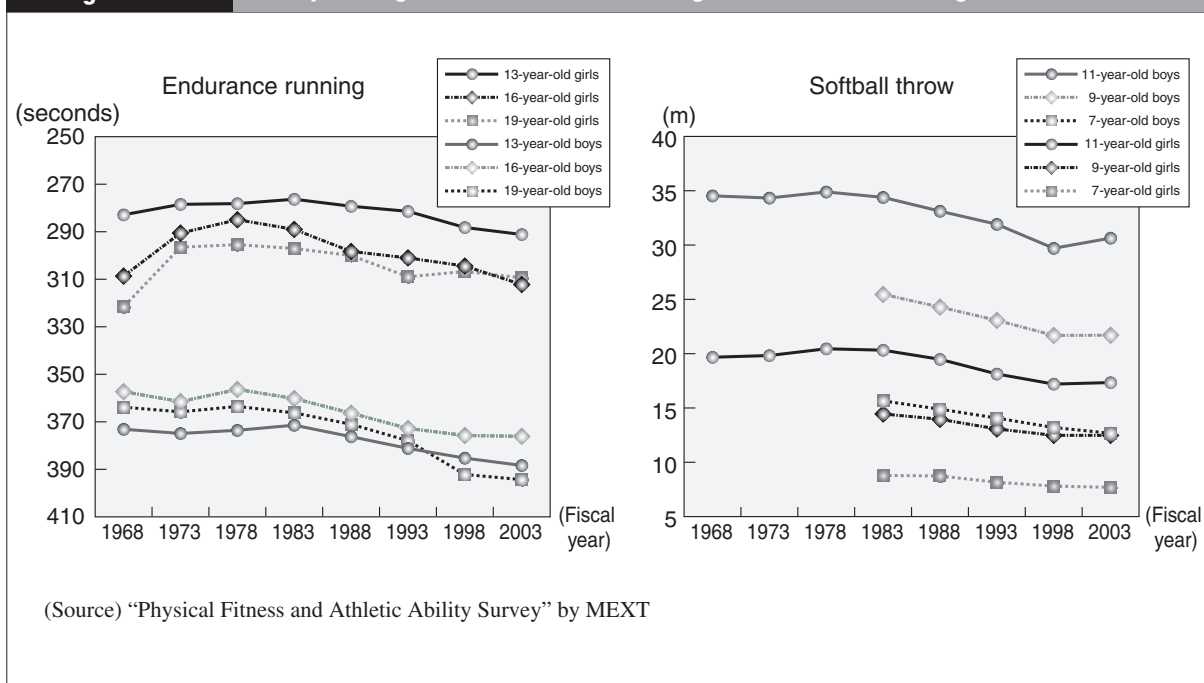
1 Improving Child Fitness (in connection with Chapter 1, Part 1)

Physical fitness comprises physical abilities that form the foundations for running, jumping, throwing and other exercises (active physical fitness) and physical abilities such as body temperature adjustment, immunity to disease and resistance to stress (defensive physical fitness). Both are absolutely essential to sound mental and physical development.

However, the long-term decline in the physical fitness of children (**Diagram 3**) should cause concern. Deterioration of child fitness will lead in future to deterioration of the physical fitness of the nation as a whole, spurring an increase in the number of people uneasy about their health as more begin to suffer from lifestyle diseases and lowered resistance to stress; this poses the risk of society as a whole losing its vigor.

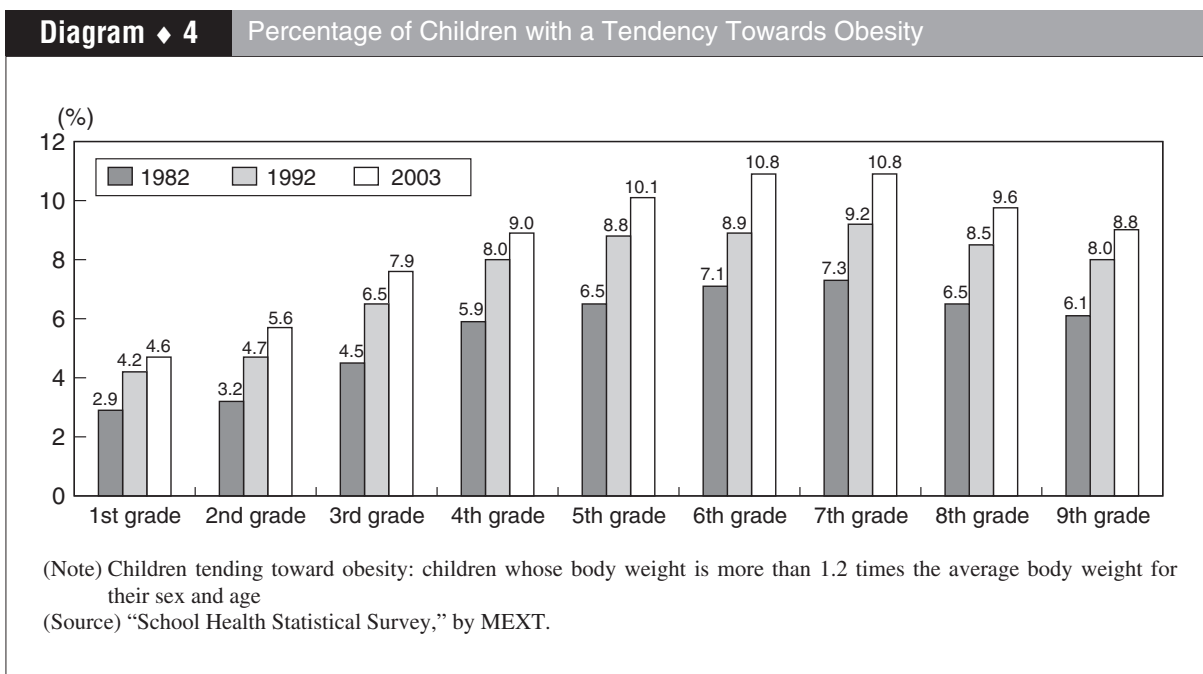
Together with encouraging in children the habit, desire and ability to actively participate in sports through the cooperation of communities, schools, and families, greater emphasis must be given to ensuring that children acquire the knowledge and habits necessary to do so.

Diagram 3 Yearly Changes in Endurance Running and Softball Throwing



2 Maintaining and Promoting the Health of Children (in connection with Chapter 1, Part 2)

The changes over recent years in the social environment connected with eating habits have disrupted the eating habits of children and produced diet-related health problems. These health problems could lead to diabetes and other lifestyle diseases in future (**Diagram 4**). Irregular eating habits are not only detrimental to maintaining health but could also adversely impact physical fitness, the very basis for human activity, and prove harmful to mental health through lowered energy and desire and a lack of concentration.



The "Three Principles of Health"—a balanced diet, appropriate exercise, and sufficient relaxation/sleep—must be fully incorporated into the overall lifestyle habits of children for sound growth.

Sound eating habits are a crucial and fundamental mechanism. Therefore active steps by schools and communities must complement approaches adopted by families.

Illnesses stemming from stress as well as problems affecting mental and physical health such as drug abuse and communicable diseases have been noted, and health management appropriately tailored to the health problems of individual children and efforts to foster sound bodies and well-rounded minds must be pursued through cooperation among communities, schools and families.

3 Creating a Nurturing and Protective Environment for Children (in connection with Chapter 1, Parts 3, 4, and 5)

Communities, schools and families must work in cooperation to establish an educational environment suitable for nurturing children. In recent years, misconduct and crimes by children have become a frequent occurrence, and incidents/accidents threatening the safety of children both in and out of school are on the rise, as is the number of children slow to achieve social independence or isolating themselves from society.

To combat these problems, communities, schools, and families must come together as one to create an environment to protect children. Given the decline in the educational functions of communities and families, efforts must be made to support the development of environments in communities and families to "nurture and protect" children.

MEXT is implementing measures to address the aforementioned problems from the perspective of promoting education and sports; Chapter 1 will offer a more detailed introduction to the status and success of these approaches.

Part 4 Building Minds and Bodies from Childhood Through Sports

Sports meet the instinctive need of people to exercise their bodies, generate exhilaration, a sense of achievement, and the mental fulfillment and pleasure of a sense of connectedness with others, and cultivate self-responsibility, self-control, and a spirit of fair play. Sports also contribute to sound mental and physical development, improving physical fitness, relieving mental stress, and preventing lifestyle diseases. With opportunities for exercise expected to fall even further as Japanese society rapidly ages and daily life grows ever more convenient, living a full “sporting life” featuring lifelong participation in sports is of considerable significance.

Sports are also a meaningful mechanism for pursuing the limits of human potential, and the single-mindedness of competitors who devote themselves to competitive sports also contributes to the formation of a vigorous and sound society, raising public interest in sports and inspiring the public with dreams. The following section will explain issues that should be addressed to promote the use of sports to build minds and bodies from childhood.

1 Basic Plan for the Promotion of Sports and Subsidies for Sports Organizations (in connection with Chapter 2, Part 1)

In 2000 MEXT approved the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Sports (FY2001-FY2010) as the basic guideline for promoting sports in Japan. Other approaches to support efforts by sports organizations have been pursued, including subsidies from the Sports Promotion Fund established under the National Agency for the Advancement of Sports and Health as well as the Sports Promotion Lottery (“toto”) that started in FY1998 to secure a new source of funding.

All of these programs have been in operation for several years, and sports promotion efforts must be further expanded in light of the progress and success they have achieved thus far.

2 Achieving a Lifelong Sports Society (connected to Chapter 2, Part 2)

To realize a society whose members can participate in sports at any time, at any place and up to any age in accordance with their physical fitness, age/skills, interests, and goals (i.e., a lifelong sports society), a broad and comprehensive range of measures must be developed, including supporting comprehensive community sports clubs, building sports facilities, and training/securing sports instructors. Sports promotion efforts must be further enhanced based on the progress and success of the approaches taken thus far.

3 Improving International Athletic Competitiveness (in connection with Chapter 2, Part 3)

The record of Japan’s top athletes (top-level competitors) in recent years has been remarkable, as typified by the impressive performance of Japan’s athletes in the August 2004 Athens Olympics. Naturally these accomplishments are the fruits of the efforts of the competitors, their coaches and other people involved, but the measures taken under the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Sports to improve international athletic competitiveness can also be said to have played a part. Sports promotion efforts must be further enhanced based on the progress and success of the approaches taken thus far to improve international athletic competitiveness.

MEXT is implementing measures to address the aforementioned issues from the perspective of promoting education and sports; Chapter 2 will offer a more detailed introduction to the status and success of these approaches.

