



# ACHIEVING FITNESS OF THE BODY AND THE MIND A NEW MODEL

by Jane Panicucci

*“There is cutting edge research explaining the profound impact that physical activity has on the brain’s ability to learn, and on an individual’s ability to manage behavior. Yet, scientists struggle with how to make exercise fun. That is a terrible miss, and the use of adventure and play is the simple solution.”*

—Jane Panicucci

Project Adventure has created a Physical Education and Fitness model that compels students to make significant and lasting change in their lives. This successful model, Achieving Fitness, is based on the following premises: 1. In order for students to get fit, they have to believe they can get fit (self efficacy) 2. In order to push themselves beyond what is comfortable, which is necessary to improve fitness, students have to feel safe in their environment. 3. Participation and engagement increase with personal choice. The employment of PA’s core concepts, coupled with the unique, fun, and challenging activities in Achieving Fitness, are what distinguish our fitness


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content from all others. In addition, we are uniquely positioned to leverage the new brain research that proves that physiological changes in the brain lead to better cognition and greater ability to manage one's behavior. Let's consider each of these concepts separately.

Self efficacy is based on the notion that confidence in one's ability to perform a given behavior is strongly related to the actual ability to perform that behavior. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave. If someone believes that they can become fit, they have a much better chance of doing so. They will be more apt to maintain a program and be better positioned to achieve their health-related goals. The four components of self-efficacy – accomplishing challenging tasks, having positive role models, being in a social setting that is supportive, and learning to deal with stress in positive ways – are all experiences that come alive in adventure programming. There is no better venue for developing support among peers and pushing oneself beyond perceived limitations than engaging in challenging group experiences.

Everyone can relate to feeling “unsafe,” not in the physical sense, but in the emotional sense. Thoughts of “What if everyone laughs at me?” or “What if no one agrees with me and stops talking to me?” can be scarring if they are actualized. Project Adventure's core concept known as the Full Value Contract is a tool that will minimize this risk and maximize the potential for students to feel genuinely supported and safe as they work to develop physical skills. The FVC is no secret weapon, but it is a structure that gives common language and understanding to behaviors appropriate in a given setting. This safety net can give students the confidence they need.

The adventure concept of Challenge by Choice provides both teacher and student with a tool to assist students in making sound choices. Coaxing young people to do difficult tasks or exercises teaches them only that they can be talked into a particular action. On the other hand, helping students to see that they have the right and ability to choose their level of challenge, and how to assess what is and isn't an appropriate level of challenge, teaches them how to make positive decisions for life. This is critical to a well-taught adventure and/or fitness program.

Many fitness programs incorporate activities that offer choices to students, but the process for making good choices based on principles is never explained. The Challenge by Choice concept gives language to the notion that I as a participant have choice, but within that choice I must still challenge myself and still work hard to meet my goals. Choosing not to be challenged at all is not OK. If a student is not challenged at all, they can not improve their fitness level.

There are many approaches to teaching fitness. There are only a few that will captivate and motivate students to participate, help them believe that they can be fit, and give them the

tools to choose to sustain that fitness over a life time. Achieving Fitness, combining the supportive nature of a class using the PA Curriculum for Physical Education with engaging and rigorous activities as well as a time for reflection in individual student journals, is such an approach. We believe that this is a model that can change lives.

### Making the Case for More Movement in Schools

As a nation, we are getting fat. And getting fat is not a problem of appearance; it is a problem of health. The US spends billions of dollars on obesity-related illnesses every year. Fat is killing us. Secondly, we are not getting any smarter. The US lags behind the world in science and math, and reading scores of 12th graders fell significantly from 1992 to 2005. (NEA Reading Study, November, 2007) This is only one statistic of many that will tell us that our youth are not getting smarter. Here is the critical link that so many of us are not making; not only is our sedentary nature making us fat, it is limiting our cognitive potential. Simply reading more and doing more math is not the answer to our cognitive and academic challenges.

Moderate to vigorous physical activity is the key to directly impacting both our waistlines and our brains. The impact of exercise on obesity is commonly understood – burn more calories than you eat through vigorous exercise and you will lose weight.

There is more and more data available to substantiate what the Greeks understood thousands of years ago – the mind and body are very connected. Current brain research is helping us to understand why. For example, in the developing brain of a child, the impact of exercise can be long lasting because of physiologically changing and growing brain tissue. The effects are still being studied, but results show enhanced executive functioning as well as improved math, logic, and reading skills. Exercise can enhance our brain's ability to learn by increasing the level of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) which fuels almost all activities that lead to higher thought. Researchers are also discovering clues that vigorous exercise can stave off the beginnings of Alzheimer's disease, ADHD, and other cognitive disorders through causing older nerve cells to form dense, interconnected webs that make the brain faster and more efficient.<sup>1</sup>

The impact of such research, if applied, can change how we operate our schools. The State of California completed a comprehensive study in August of 2007 matching reading and math scores with fitness scores of 353,000 fifth graders, 322,000 seventh graders, and 279,000 ninth graders. Key findings of the study include:

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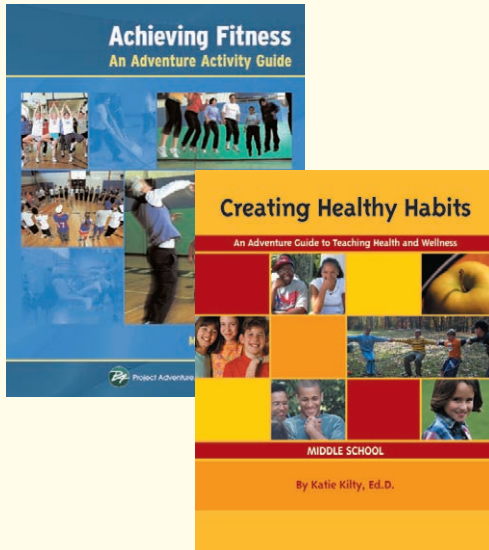
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Mary Carmichael, "Stronger, Faster, Smarter," March 26, 2007.

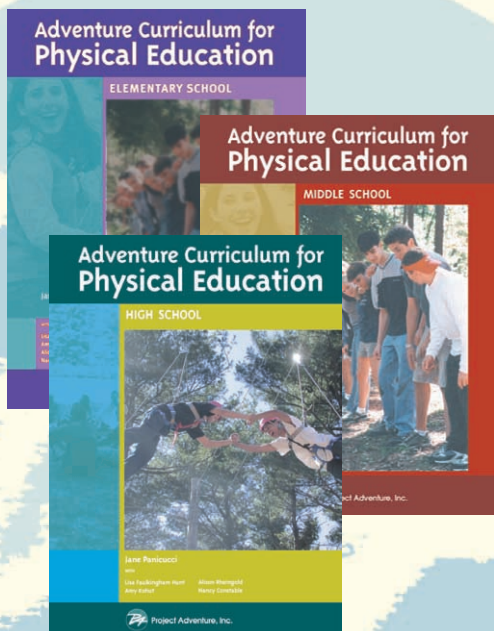
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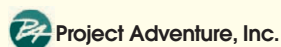


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- Higher achievement was associated with higher levels of fitness at each of the three grade levels measured.
- Students who met minimum fitness levels in three or more physical fitness areas showed the greatest gains in academic achievement at all three grade levels.
- Females demonstrated higher academic achievement than males particularly at higher fitness levels.

*Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*, by Dr. John Ratey, is a must-read for any educator. This book details, in layman's terms, the physiological impact that exercise has on the brain. Ratey links exercise and its positive impact on academics, stress, anxiety, and ADHD. He also cites research that indicates that exercising in a social setting can have more positive effects on the brain. With this research in hand, making the case for quality Physical Education programs that incorporate quality fitness and vigorous activities is easy. The question then becomes, which program will work and why? The answer is: Achieving Fitness, and here is why.

To improve and maintain one's fitness, a person needs to show up for the program, class, or experience, stay involved, and push one's limits while engaging. Adventure captivates participants, involves them in vigorous activity that they enjoy, and can include a safe environment in which individuals feel comfortable to reach. This book will help you implement such a program.

—From *Achieving Fitness: An Adventure Activity Guide*

The premise of the Achieving Fitness model is not only to do activities that are physically rigorous, but to intentionally work to improve a participant's belief in the notion that he or she can achieve a health-enhancing level of fitness. In my years of working with adults, I have heard so many people recount negative stories from past Physical Education classes or recreation experiences where they were embarrassed, or made to feel they could not succeed. They tell of experiences from 20-30-40 years earlier as though they happened yesterday, and they carry that with them as a reason to be inactive today. This is not OK. People need to learn to want to participate. The number one factor that dictates participation in physical activity is fun. Adventure is laughter, adventure is play, adventure is fun for people.

Jane Panicucci, M.Ed., Harvard University, is currently Vice President of Project Adventure and author of *Achieving Fitness: An Adventure Activity Guide* and the *Adventure Curriculum for Physical Education* series. Jane is the leading expert on the integration of adventure into Physical Education programs and schools. As a public school physical educator in the mid 80s, Jane designed an Adventure curriculum that is still going strong. She is an international keynote speaker addressing the issue of adventure play and effective teaching to support positive change.