Appropriate Practices for Elementary School Physical Education

A Position Statement of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education Developed by the Council on Physical Education for Children (COPEC)

Acknowledgments

COPEC Executive Committee

Vicki Worrell, Chair Cam Kerst-Davis
John Breaker Kim Rampmeyer
Gloria Napper-Owen Frances Cleland

Principal Writers

Shirley Ann Holt/Hale

Melissa Parker

Appreciation is extended to the following contributors to this document:

Patricia Abraham, Marybell Avery, Sam Baumgarten,
Dolores A. Black, Rosie Castenada, Barbara Cusimano,
George Graham, Margaret L. Holmes, Christine Hopple,
Steve Klesius, Dolly Lambdin, Mark Manross,
Rip Marston, Wendy Mustain, Tom Ratliffe,
Marion Sanborn, Steve Sanders, Michael Soules,
Marianne Torbert, Debbie Vigil, and Karen Weiller

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Preface

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education has provided leadership to the field of physical education for over 100 years. A central aspect of this leadership is the development of standards and guidelines for quality physical education programs. These standard-setting efforts have culminated in recent years in published documents, which establish standards for the following:

What students "should know and be able to do" relative to physical activity and exercise:

Moving Into The Future: National Physical Education Standards: A Guide to Content and Assessment, 1995.

Appropriate instructional practice at elementary, middle, and high school levels:

Appropriate Practices for Elementary School Physical Education, 2000. Appropriate Practices for Middle School Physical Education, 1995 Appropriate Practices for High School Physical Education, 1998

Program support factors which ensure students the "opportunity to learn" in physical education:

Opportunity to Learn Standards for Elementary Physical Education, 2000. Physical Education Program Improvement and Self-Study Guide for Middle School, 1998.

Physical Education Program Improvement and Self-Study Guide for High School, 1998.

Qualifications for teachers in physical education:

National Standards for Beginning Physical Education Teachers, 1995.

Taken together, these documents describe standards for quality physical education at elementary, middle, and high school levels, respectively.

This document, *Appropriate Practices for Elementary School Physical Education*, addresses key aspects of instructional strategy and practice that are essential to delivery of quality physical education to children between 5 and 11 years of age.

Introduction

The Council on Physical Education for Children (COPEC) of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) recommends that quality, daily physical education be available to all children. Quality physical education is both developmentally and instructionally relevant for all children being served. Appropriate instructional practices in physical education are those, that recognize children's development and changing movement abilities. Children's past psychomotor, cognitive, and affective experiences are also recognized and accommodated in developmentally appropriate instruction. A variety of individual characteristics such as developmental status, fitness and skill levels, body size, and age are considered in designing lessons and selecting instructional strategies. Appropriate instruction in physical education incorporates the best-known practices, derived from both research and teaching experiences, into a pattern of instruction that maximizes opportunities for learning and success for all children. The quality lessons reflect the National Standards for Physical Education and local curricular direction in the design of physical education programs for children. Teachers evaluate student progress, thus accepting accountability for student learning.

The outcome of a developmentally and instructionally appropriate program of physical education is a physically educated person who does the following:

- Demonstrates competency in many movement forms and proficiency in a few movement forms.
- Applies movement concepts and principles to the learning and development of motor skills.
- Exhibits a physically active lifestyle.
- Achieves and maintains a health-enhancing level of physical fitness.
- Demonstrates responsible personal and social behavior in physical activity settings.
- Demonstrates understanding and respect for differences among people in physical activity settings.
- Understands that physical activity provides opportunities for enjoyment, challenge, self-expression, and social interaction.

Premises of Physical Education Programs for Children

In any discussion of physical education for children, there are five major premises that guide thinking about, planning for, and evaluating physical education programs.

The ultimate purpose of any physical education program is to guide children into being physically active for a lifetime.

More than ever we live in a world of rapid change. Tomorrow's physical activities may look quite different from those of today. Present programs need to develop competency in basic movement skills that can be used in any activity, whether it be popular today or yet to be invented. Mastery of basic movement skills encourages the development and refinement of more complex skills leading to safe and enjoyable participation in physical activity.

When basic movement skills are developed at an early age and expanded during childhood and early adolescence, children will gain access to a wide variety of physical activities. Early specialization in specific sports and a limited range of opportunities to master basic skills in physical education limits later participation options.

Children should engage in physical activity appropriately designed for their developmental levels.

Children are not miniature adults. Physical activity and sports that are appropriate for adults are not appropriate for children. Kindergarten boys and girls are not the same as sixth-graders; their programs of physical education should not be the same. The physical education curriculum should reflect the natural physical and mental development of children. To be effective in promoting lifetime activity habits early in life, selection of developmentally appropriate activities for elementary-age students is essential.

Recess and physical education are important, but different, parts of the school program.

Recess is an important part of the school day for children. Activity breaks may enhance participation and learning in the classroom in addition to the benefits gained from physical activity. Not only does recess provide opportunities for needed physical activity, but this unstructured time also provides opportunities for student decision making and contributes to creativity and social learning. Children learn how to cooperate, compete constructively, assume leader/follower roles, and resolve conflicts by interacting in play. Play is an essential element of children's development. Whereas recess is unstructured time, physical education is a planned instructional program with specific goals and objectives. An essential part of the total curriculum, it is the role of physical education programs to increase the physical competence, health-related fitness, and self-responsibility that facilitates enjoyment of physical activity for all students. Children who establish physical activity habits when they are young are more likely to remain active as

adults. Children who do not participate in physical activity are more likely to be inactive as adults, and at risk for the negative results of inactivity.

Physical activity and physical education are not the same.

Physical education is an instructional program taught by teachers with professional credentials in physical education. Physical education programs facilitate the achievement of national standards for physical education. Physical activity is the subject matter of physical education. The goal of the physical education program is participation in health-enhancing physical activity for a lifetime. The physical education instructional program provides the skill base for that participation. Participation in physical activity is an important **component** of physical education as well as a goal. Physical education programs should provide a significant amount of time for physical activity, i.e., active participation for all students. Other opportunities should also be provided daily for physical activity in the school setting (recess and short activity periods), and physical activity should be promoted outside the school setting. Children should be provided a wide variety of learning experiences related to physical activity options and instructed in how to make positive choices regarding activity.

Physical education and athletic programs are different.

Athletic programs are essentially designed for youngsters who have special skill and/or would like to specialize in one or more sports and refine their skills in order to compete with others of similar interests and abilities. Developmentally appropriate physical education programs are designed for every child—from the gifted to the physically challenged. The intent is to provide children of all abilities and interests with a foundation of movement experiences and understanding that will lead to lifelong active and healthy lifestyles.

Intended Audience

This document is written for parents, school administrators, and policy makers as well as teachers who are responsible for the physical education of children. It is intended to provide specific guidelines that identify practices that are in the best interests of children (appropriate) and those that are counterproductive or even harmful (inappropriate). The components associated with appropriate instructional practice, which are described in this document, are, in actuality, interrelated. They are separated here only for the purposes of clarity and understanding. In addition, while these components are not all-inclusive, they do represent important characteristics of appropriate physical education programs for children.

Curricula Decisions

The physical education curriculum has an obvious scope and sequence based on goals and objectives that are appropriate for all children (NASPE National Standards). The curriculum includes a balance of skills and concepts in the areas of games, educational gymnastics, and rhythmical activities and dance. Teachers design experiences and select benchmarks to enhance the psychomotor, cognitive, and affective development of all children.

Inappropriate Practice

The physical education curriculum lacks age appropriate developmental goals and objectives and is based primarily on the teacher's interests, preferences, and background rather than those of the children. For example, the curriculum exists primarily of large group and competitive team games. Activities are the same for all grade levels.

Designing Learning Experiences

Appropriate Practice

Teachers design lessons that provide frequent practice opportunities that are both meaningful and appropriate based on previous movement experiences and maturation. These experiences enable individuals to develop a functional understanding of movement concepts (body awareness, space awareness, effort, and relationship) and provide opportunities for children to build competence and confidence in their ability to perform a variety of motor skills (locomotor, non-locomotor, manipulative).

Inappropriate Practice

Children participate in a limited number of activities where the opportunity to develop psychomotor skills and concepts is restricted. This environment fails to provide the opportunity for individual children to build competence or confidence in their movement abilities.

Facilitating Cognitive Development

Appropriate Practice

Teachers design activities with both the physical and the cognitive development of children in mind.

Teachers provide experiences that encourage children to question, integrate, analyze, apply, and communicate cognitive concepts. Children learn to search for answers and use critical thinking skills to understand concepts that are presented to them, thus making physical education a meaningful part of the total educational experience.

Inappropriate Practice

Teachers fail to recognize and explore the unique opportunities in physical education to provide integration of the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of learning.

Children do not receive opportunities to connect movement concepts and skills into their learning experiences in other subject areas.

Children participate in activities without understanding the benefits and contributions of the activity to an enjoyable and healthy lifestyle.

Supporting Cultural Diversity

Appropriate Practice

The physical education teacher and the overall environment are supportive of all students regardless of their race, ethnic origin, gender, religion, or ability. Teachers provide displays that show participants from different countries and in many environments; activities celebrate diversity within the school, the community, and the world at large.

Differences are acknowledged, appreciated, and respected.

Inappropriate Practice

Teachers allow the physical education environment to support Caucasian, athletically gifted males more fully than girls and others. Images of the world are presented from a single perspective, while individual differences are ignored or put at a disadvantage by the teacher and/or other students.

Teachers fail to select activities that are attractive to all students in a culturally diverse environment.

Teachers fail to address harassing remarks, physically harmful activities, and behavior that is hurtful to others.

Developing Affective Skills

Appropriate Practice

Teachers intentionally design activities throughout the program, which allow students opportunities to work together for the purpose of developing social skills (cooperative and competitive) and responsible behavior. Situations are designed for purposeful teaching of these skills; they are not left for "teachable moments" only.

Teachers help all children experience the satisfaction and joy that can result from learning about and regular participation in physical activity. The environment is supportive of all students, including those of lesser skills, and promotes the development of a positive self-concept. Children are given chances to try, to fail, and to try again, free of criticism or harassment from the teacher or other students.

Teachers fail to systematically enhance the affective development of children. They do not use activities and instructional strategies, such as choice of equipment, peer teaching, and class involvement in establishing rules, which foster the development of cooperation, social skills, and personal responsibility.

When teachers do select activities that have the potential to foster social development, social development skills are not taught but are assumed as a by-product, e.g., fair play as a product of sport participation.

Teachers offer activities in which some of the children are excluded and regularly ignore opportunities to help children understand the impact of participation or non-participation in the activity.

Developing Health-Related Fitness

Appropriate Practice

Children participate in activities that are designed to help them understand the concepts of health-related fitness and to value the contributions they make to a healthy lifestyle. Activity-based fitness is emphasized rather than fitness through formal exercises/calisthenics.

Fitness is presented as a positive experience in which students feel socially and emotionally comfortable, able to overcome challenges on a personal level. They joy of participation in health-enhancing activity leading to lifetime fitness is the goal of fitness development in elementary school physical education.

Inappropriate Practice

Teacher requires participation in group fitness activities but does not help students understand the reasons for fitness development. The process of fitness development is not monitored, and guidance for setting personal goals and strategies for goal attainment are not provided.

All children are required to do the same fitness activities regardless of their fitness levels.

Teachers do not teach students the difference between health-related and skill-related fitness.

Calisthenics/mass exercise is THE avenue for fitness development.

Physical Fitness Testing

Teachers use fitness assessment as part of the ongoing process of helping children understand, enjoy, improve and/or maintain their physical fitness and well-being.

Test results are shared privately with children and their parents as a tool for developing personal goals and strategies for maintaining and increasing the respective fitness parameters.

As part of an ongoing program of physical education, children are physically prepared in each fitness component so they can safely complete the assessments. (Assessment packages, such as Fitnessgram, provide a scientifically based fitness assessment while educational materials such as Physical Best are essential for providing the scientific and health-related background necessary for comprehensive fitness education for effectively implementing health-related fitness education.)

Inappropriate Practice

Teachers administer physical fitness tests once or twice each year for the purpose of identifying children to receive awards or to meet a requirement of the school district or state department.

Children complete physical fitness test batteries without understanding why they are performing the tests or the relationship to their activity level and individual goals. Results are interpreted based on comparison to norms rather than in terms of how they apply to children's future health and well-being.

Individual scores are publicly posted, comparisons are made between student scores, and/or grades are based on fitness scores.

Children are required to take fitness tests without adequate conditioning.

Exercise and the Use of Exercise as Punishment

Appropriate Practice

Elementary school children are taught the purpose of exercise, correct procedures for exercise, and the different exercise categories—stretching, strengths, etc. They experience a variety of exercises within each type, thus providing them with the knowledge and selection of exercises to match the purpose. Children are taught the difference between correct and counter-productive exercise, enabling them to be wise consumers of fitness information and decreasing the likelihood of engaging in potentially harmful exercise.

Exercises are taught as positive physical activity learning experiences but are not a primary part of elementary physical education.

Children perform standard calisthenics routinely with no specific purpose in mind and without following safe, appropriate techniques.

Exercises are used which compromise body alignment and place unnecessary stress on the joints and muscles (e.g., deep-knee bends, ballistic stretches, and/or standing toe touches).

The time or repetition for any individual exercise is insufficient to provide a warm-up or affect the designated muscle group(s).

Exercise (running or push-ups, etc.) is used as a punishment for misbehavior and/or lack of participation.

Assessment

Appropriate Practice

Teacher decisions are based primarily on ongoing individual assessments of children's performance as they participate in physical education classes. This information is used to individualize instruction, plan yearly curriculum and weekly lessons, communicate with parents, identify children with special needs, and evaluate the program's effectiveness.

Individual children's evaluations are obtained through a variety of assessment techniques that assess children's cognitive and affective learning as well as their physical performance. Many different forms of assessment, including checklists, self and peer assessment, portfolios, and student journals are incorporated in the process.

Inappropriate Practice

Assessment addresses primarily compliance with classroom rules and procedures. Dress, attendance, and effort are counted as the affective portion of the grade.

Assessment is not multifaceted but addresses only a single performance score on fitness tests, rules tests, and/or motor skills tests. Assessment only occurs in the context of grading; for example, children receive a grade in physical education based on their scores on a standardized fitness test or on the number of times they can continually jump rope.

Assessment items focus on isolated skills in an artificial context (e.g., dribbling between cones for time as compared to dribbling in a game situation).

Active Participation for Every Child

Teachers involve ALL children in activities that allow them to participate actively, both physically and mentally. Classes are designed to meet a child's need for active participation in all learning experiences.

A philosophy of inclusion assures every child meaningful participation in physical education.

Inappropriate Practice

Activity time is limited because children must wait to participate, have inadequate directions or equipment available, or are engaged in activities in which few are active (e.g., relay games).

Teachers use large groups in which student participation is based on individual competitiveness or aggressive behavior, use rules permitting elimination with no reentry or alternative activity, or allow students to remain inactive for long periods of time. Activities such as relay races, dodgeball, and elimination tag provide limited opportunities for everyone in the class, especially the slower, less agile students who need the activity the most.

Teachers provide activities that are physically and/or psychologically unsafe for many children (e.g., dodgeball, in any form, promotes the use of fellow students as targets, and Red Rover calls inappropriate attention to the lesser-skilled students as well as increases risk of injury).

Teachers limit participation of students with special needs to activities that don't facilitate learning, such as keeping score or counting repetitions for other students.

Rhythmical Activities & Dance

Appropriate Practice

The physical education teacher includes a variety of rhythmical, expressive, and creative dance experiences designed with the physical, cultural, emotional, and social abilities of the children in mind. Activities using manipulatives such as instruments (drums, etc.), scarves, ropes, ribbons, and hoops are incorporated into the rhythmical experiences.

Inappropriate Practice

The physical education teacher does not design rhythmical, expressive, or creative dance experiences for children as part of the physical education program.

Developmentally inappropriate or very limited forms of dance are taught to students without sequence or progression from simple to more complex.

Educational Gymnastics

Appropriate Practice

Teachers facilitate children's development through lessons designed to sequentially develop skills appropriate to their ability and confidence levels in gymnastics situations centered around the themes of balancing, rolling, jumping, landing, and transferring weight.

Children practice on apparatus designed for their levels of skills and confidence and design sequences which support and challenge their personal skill levels.

Inappropriate Practice

Teachers require all students to perform the same predetermined stunts and routines on and off apparatus, regardless of their skill level, body composition, and level of confidence.

Teachers have students perform solo while the remainder of the class sits and watches and compares performances to other students. Activities require extensive teacher direction and spotting.

Use of Games and Setting Rules for Game Play

Appropriate Practice

Teachers select, design, sequence, and modify games to maximize the attainment of specific learning, skill enhancement, and enjoyment. Games should reinforce a "lesson theme."

Teachers modify the rules, regulations, equipment, and playing space to facilitate learning by children of varying abilities or to focus learning on particular games or skill components.

Inappropriate Practice

Teachers use games with no obvious learning purpose or goal other than to keep children "busy, happy, and good."

Official, adult rules of sports govern the activities in physical education classes, resulting in low rates of success and/or lack of enjoyment and participation from many children.

Regulation equipment (adult size) is used regardless of the developmental or skill level of the children.

Forming Groups/Partners

Groups/partners are formed in ways that preserve the dignity and self-respect of every child. For example, a teacher privately forms groups or teams by using knowledge of children's skills abilities in ways that will facilitate learning. Groups or teams may also be formed by grouping clothing colors, birthdays, and favorite activities.

Inappropriate Practice

Groups or teams are formed by student "captains" publicly selecting one child at a time, sometimes with a system of alternating gender, and always exposing the lower skilled children to peer ridicule or embarrassment.

Groups/teams are formed by pitting "boys against girls," emphasizing gender differences rather than cooperation and working together.

Students regularly are asked to select partners without strategies to assure that no children are left out.

Gender Equity

Appropriate Practice

Teachers facilitate equal access by girls and boys to individual, partner, small group, and team activities. Both girls and boys are encouraged, supported, and socialized towards successful achievement in all aspects of physical activity. Teachers are unbiased in their selection of activities and in their teaching.

Teachers use gender-neutral language and interact equally with both boys and girls to provide feedback and answer questions. Statements by physical education teachers support leadership opportunities and provide positive reinforcement for all students.

Inappropriate Practice

Teachers encourage girls to participate in activities that stress traditional roles, whereas boys are encouraged to participate in higher skill activities (i.e., girls play right field and boys pitch).

Physical education teachers provide limited opportunities for girls to assume leadership roles; boys most often are team captains and squad leaders.

Teacher language is gender-biased (e.g., "you guys" and "man-to-man defense"). Teacher attention focuses on one gender, as in calling on one gender more often to answer questions, providing more feedback to one, using one more often to demonstrate skills, sending one gender off to play while providing feedback to the other. (Note: Research has shown that male students usually receive more attention.)

Facilitating Maximum Participation

Appropriate Practice

Teachers organize small games, e.g., 2-3 per team that allow numerous practice opportunities for children while also allowing them to learn the various aspects of the game being taught.

Equipment is provided to permit active participation and practice for every child. A variety of equipment is selected to accommodate the size, confidence, and skills levels of the children.

Teachers make sure that equipment is kept up-to-date, and routinely inspected for safety.

Inappropriate Practice

Teachers organize full-sided or large-sided games (e.g., the class of 30 is split into two groups of 15 that play against each other), thereby limiting practice opportunities for individual students.

An insufficient amount of equipment is available to maximize practice repetitions.

"Adult size" equipment is used which may inhibit skill development, injure, and/or intimidate the children.

Teachers use outdated and potentially unsafe equipment.

Competition

Appropriate Practice

Teachers plan activities that emphasize self-improvement, participation, fair play (shaking hands, positive comments, etc.), and cooperation.

Teachers are aware of the nature of competition and incorporate appropriate levels and kinds of competition for children. For example, children may be allowed to choose between keeping score and skill practice in selected situations.

Teachers provide choices in level of competition and teach participants how to compete positively and constructively at each level.

Inappropriate Practice

Teachers require children to participate in activities that designate children as "winners and losers."

Teachers use strategies that compare one child's or one team's performance against others.

Teachers use rewards and punishments for winning and losing in class games.

Success Rate

Appropriate Practice

Teachers facilitate opportunities for children to practice skills at high rates of success adjusted for individual skill levels within a "try again" environment.

Children are provided opportunities to work toward common standards at individual rates of development and are recognized for their success at their individual levels.

Inappropriate Practice

Teachers ask students to perform activities that are too easy or too hard or use a single standard for all children, thus causing frustration, boredom, and/or misbehavior.

All children are expected to perform at the same rate with no allowance for individual abilities and interests.

Facilities

Appropriate Practice

Teachers provide an environment in which students have adequate space for movement learning, space to move freely and safely, and acoustics that allow them to clearly hear instruction.

Both inside and outside areas are available so classes need not be canceled, or activities severely limited, because of inclement weather or other school activities, e.g., PTA meetings, pictures, play rehearsals, assemblies.

Inappropriate Practice

Teachers utilize spaces for physical education classes that restrict opportunities to move freely, safely, and without obstruction.

Teachers willingly give up instructional time and facilities for other purposes (special events, assemblies, lunch, etc.) without making the case for appropriate support for student learning in physical education.

Field Days/Special Events

Appropriate Practice

Teachers plan field days so every child is a full participant and derives satisfaction and joy from a festival of physical activity.

Opportunities are provided for children to voluntarily choose from a variety of activities that are intended to be culminating positive experiences for the activities selected.

Recognition is based on positive participation rather than achievement.

Inappropriate Practice

Teachers facilitate field days that encourage intense team, group, or individual competition with winners and losers clearly identified. Extensive recognition is given to winners.

Skilled children are chosen to represent a class in a limited number of activities.

Expectations for Student Learning

Appropriate Practice

Teachers demonstrate high expectations for student psychomotor, cognitive, and affective learning.

Clear goals and objectives for student learning and performance are conveyed to children and parents.

Inappropriate Practice

Teachers have minimal expectations for student achievement of skill, fitness, or affective objectives.

Teacher objectives focus only on keeping children safe and in compliance with rules of behavior.

Students are unaware or unclear as to the expectations for learning.

Class Organization

Appropriate Practice

Teachers use systematic class organization that includes opening and statement of lesson objectives, an instructional component (with demonstrations as needed), practice, and closure/summary.

Formative and summative assessments are used.

Teachers are aware of maximizing learning time; providing targeted, descriptive feedback; and refining, modifying, or extending learning tasks for maximum student learning.

Teachers function as supervisors of children's playtime where distributing equipment, officiating, and maintaining safe participation are the primary teacher actions.

Assessment is not a part of instruction. Little or no feedback on performance is given.

Establishing the Learning Environment

Appropriate Practice

Teachers systematically plan for, develop, and maintain a positive learning environment where students feel safe (physically and emotionally) and supported by teachers and classmates.

The environment is focused on maximizing learning, challenging students, and maintaining an atmosphere of respect and high expectations for student engagement/participation.

Inappropriate Practice

Teachers ignore or are unaware of the need to intentionally establish a positive learning environment. The resulting environment is inconsistent in supporting student learning; students show lack of self-control and respect for others, and many are bored or frustrated.

Resources

Published by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education for quality physical education programs:

Moving into the Future: National Standards for Physical Education, Second Edition (2004), Stock No. 304-10275

Concepts and Principles of Physical Education: What Every Student Needs to Know (2003), Stock No. 304-10261

Beyond Activities: Elementary Volume (2003), Stock No. 304-10265

Beyond Activities: Secondary Volume (2003), Stock No. 304-10268

National Physical Education Standards in Action (2003), 304-10267

Physical Activity for Children: A Statement of Guidelines (2003), Stock No. 304-10276 National Standards for Beginning Physical Education Teachers (2003), Stock No. 304-10273

Active Start: A Statement of Physical Activity Guidelines for Children Birth to Five Years (2002), Stock No. 304-10254

Appropriate Practice Documents

Appropriate Practice in Movement Programs for Young Children (2000), Stock No. 304-10232

- Appropriate Practices for Elementary School Physical Education (2000), Stock No. 304-10230
- Appropriate Practices for Middle School Physical Education (2001), Stock No. 304-10248
- Appropriate Practices for High School Physical Education (2003), Stock No. 304-10272

Opportunity to Learn Documents

- Opportunity to Learn Standards for Elementary Physical Education (2000), Stock No. 304-10242
- *Opportunity to Learn Standards for Middle School Physical Education* (2004), Stock No. 304-10290
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1900 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191• <u>naspeinfo@aahperd.org</u> • (703) 476-3410