

# Anna Tells Ernesto About Physical Fitness

A story that introduces fitness concepts

by *Nicholas J. Cutforth*

Concern about declining health standards among young people has led to the provision of fitness programs in schools. Physical educators are often looking for interesting and innovative ways to make these programs meaningful and relevant to their students. They want their students to

understand and value the important concepts of physical fitness, and to feel competent and be able to participate in a variety of activities.

If programs are to motivate children to adopt a healthy life-style, however, the fitness experience must be an exciting challenge rather than a boring threat. Whether an experience is considered a challenge or a threat does not depend on the perceptions of the teacher, but the perceptions of the student.

I had these thoughts in mind when I was asked to speak on the topic of "Building Self-Esteem through Physical Fitness" to a group of fourth and fifth graders at a Chicago elementary school. I approached the topic by writing this story, which the students could relate to and place within their real-life experiences. I offer it to readers as one way of introducing fitness activities to their students.

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nce upon a time there were two fifth grade kids at Cooper Primary School. One was a girl named Anna, and the other was a boy named Ernesto. Ernesto was a new student at Cooper.

On the first day that Ernesto's class was supposed to go to gym, he felt nervous. As they were getting ready to leave their classroom to go to the gym, Ernesto panicked and looked around to see who he could ask about what happens in gym. He saw Anna and she looked safe and nice enough to talk to. So he went up to her and said, "You know, I know that this sounds kind of stupid, but um, I'm really worried about gym. Can you give me some idea of what goes on in gym class at Cooper? I wouldn't want to do anything that would make me look like a fool."

Anna smiled. "Well, we do a lot of things in gym like games and sports. But one of the neatest things we do is physical fitness." Anna added, "Mrs. White is our gym teacher and she's pretty okay."

Ernesto knew what games and sports were because he had done them at his other school, but he had never heard of physical fitness before. He was a little worried and scared, because after all, he was new and it was his first time in gym at Cooper.

Anna could see that Ernesto was worried and said, "Don't worry, physical fitness is really cool and it's actually a lot of fun. We do running and get to work out on machines. It's kind of like playing, but you're actually working because you sometimes get hot and out of breath. To be good at fitness, all you have to do is to try hard and do your best. The harder you try and the harder you push yourself, the fitter you get."

Ernesto listened and he liked what he heard. He felt a little happier and he actually smiled. But he still had some more questions for Anna.

"How do you know when you are getting fitter?" he asked.

Anna thought for a moment and said, "Mrs. White gives us fitness tests every few weeks which help us know how fit we are."

When Ernesto heard the word "test" he freaked. He stopped smiling and looked scared again. He said, "I hate tests. I thought gym was supposed to be a fun class with no tests. That's why I liked gym. In my old school I didn't have to be worried about all these tests like in math and all."

Anna noticed that Ernesto was scared out of his pants about tests. She told him that these tests weren't anything to worry about. She said, "Hey, chill out! You don't have to worry about these tests. They're not paper and pencil tests. They're a different kind of test, and they're okay. Like all tests you've gotta try your best and sometimes you get kinda tired, but they're still a lot of fun." Ernesto listened carefully to Anna's every word.

"Hey, Ernesto, I'll give you an example of a test which is my favorite. It's called the shuttle run and it tells you how good your running fitness is. What you gotta do is run loops for six minutes. What I mean by loops is that you've got to run between two chairs that are at opposite ends of the gym. At one chair you've got to pick up a tennis ball. Then you have to run across the gym and around the other chair, and at the same time drop the tennis ball into a box which is on the chair. You keep doing the same thing over and over again, and everybody is cheering you on, cuz, you see, the whole point of running these loops is to see how many tennis balls you can get into the box before the time is up. Last time we did the shuttle, I got a score of 19 cuz I had 19 tennis balls in the box.

"We do some other tests and they're okay too. You measure how strong your tummy muscles are by counting how many sit-ups you can do in one minute. You get to work on the Total Gym too. It's a machine, like those machines that they show on the commercials on TV for Chicago Health Club. The Total Gym helps you to see how strong your arms and shoulders are. You also get to have your body fat measured. I know it sounds kind of gross and embarrassing but it's good for you because it gives you an idea of what you've got to do as far as exercising and diet go. We use skinfold calipers and they look kinda weird, like big pinchers, but they don't hurt, just tickle a bit. And we also get to see how much we have grown by measuring how tall we are and what we weigh."

"Wow! That's a whole lot of measuring," Ernesto said. "What do you do with those scores? Does Mrs. White give you a grade like we get when we do a test in our classroom?"

"No!" Anna laughed. "I told you before, fitness tests are not like tests in the classroom. They just tell you how fit you are at his moment, like right now. You can use your scores on the tests to set your own goals and figure out how to improve your scores and, more importantly, your fitness."



Ernesto looked confused and Anna could see that he didn't quite understand. So she explained some more.

"Say you manage to get 19 tennis balls in your box when you do the running test for the first time. Your score tells you that you are pretty good at the running kind of fitness. But next time you want to do better, right? So when you take the test again you try even harder and push yourself, and then maybe get 20 balls in your box or even 22."

"Oh, I understand now," Ernesto said. "So the whole point of gym here at Cooper is to exercise and play games so that we get stronger and fitter. And we get to see how much stronger and fitter we are through doing these tests, right?"

"That's right, you've finally got it," said Anna. "Although Mrs. White always gives us time to practice on the Total Gym and has us do running, sit-ups and pull-ups, you can do even more to improve your fitness. After school and on weekends, instead of sitting around and watching TV and playing Nintendo, you could try being more active. You could run in the park, or ride a bike, or play soccer or basketball, or learn to dance, or jump rope. By doing these activities you will get fitter, especially if you do them for a little longer each time."

Ernesto seemed to be getting the picture now, but he had one more question for Anna. "So getting better at fitness depends on how hard you try, how often you try, and how long you try?" he asked.

"Exactly!" replied Anna, smiling. "You'll feel great when you are fit and strong, and if you keep doing these activities when you get older, like in high school, and even after college, then you'll be as healthy as you can be. If you eat right and continue to stay fit, then there's less of a chance of you being overweight or having a serious problem like a heart attack."

As he made his way out of the classroom, Ernesto felt much more relaxed. "I like the sound of this physical fitness thing," he announced, as he began walking up the three flights of stairs to the gym. "I'm sure that the kids at Cooper are some of the fittest kids in Chicago, because they have physical fitness in gym."

Anna followed him and laughed to herself because she knew he was right. The students at Cooper were getting fitter and fitter each day. She felt good about herself because she was improving in fitness and she knew that Ernesto would try hard and improve too. It was good to have a new student in class, and to know that he would like physical fitness. As he reached the gym, Ernesto thought how lucky he was to be at Cooper School and how very happy he was that he would be taking part in a physical fitness program. He already felt good about himself and was beginning to make plans for how he would try hard in the gym and improve his physical fitness. *tepe*