

Read carefully the two passages and then answer **Section 1, Question 1** on the Question Paper.

Passage A: Why do teenagers hate doing PE at school? Let me count the ways.

In the passage below, the writer looks back humorously on her experience of school sports (Physical Education lessons) and considers some of the measures schools today are taking to improve pupil participation in sports.

I argue often that kids today have everything easier than in the 1980s – iPads, 4G, less flammable hair products, and so on – but I have sympathy for them in one development: the war waged by schools on the ‘sick-note culture’.

In a bid to fight obesity, schools are now insisting their pupils take part in PE lessons even if they have a sick note penned by their parents. No more ‘get-out-of-games-free’ cards for teens like me who would have rather died than partake in public PE. It’s either produce a certificate from your already overloaded GP surgery – good luck with that – or you’re out there in vest and shorts doing star jumps with the rest of the poor kids.

This is a sad time indeed for slackers, shirkers and those far too cool to run. I was a goth when I was 13, a subspecies not given to athletic endeavour. But that’s nothing compared to the modern Instagram-obsessed teen, under pressure to radiate ‘cool’ at all times. No one is truly cool still wheezing around the track long after the winner left for the showers. Very few of us are ‘OMG totally gorg, hun!’ heaving a shot put about. Today’s teens relish life’s calamities filmed and uploaded on YouTube. It’s little wonder so many young people loathe PE. At a time when my body was growing, wobbling and emitting a cacophony of spots, for two hours a week I was obliged to reveal the majesty of its awfulness. Furthermore, I may have been naturally academic, but I was depressingly mediocre at anything sporty. It was no fun, I decided, doing things you’re not good at.

‘Dear Sir/Madam,’ one of my typical sick notes might have said, ‘Sadly, Grace will be unable to do the cross-country course today due to a hideous pain in her abdomen which may be oncoming appendicitis.’

But now, quite rightfully, the schools are fighting back. A survey by Chance to Shine, a charity that promotes cricket in schools, found that parents who spent their own school days trying to skip PE were five times more likely to help their children bunk off. Clearly some children today are too mollycoddled, but many others have overly empathetic parents still scarred by the horrors of being ‘bad at games’.

Of course, the irony is that in later life many adults, as I did, have a sudden change of heart. Suddenly, exercise is not only a good idea, but terrifically good fun, mood lightening, life affirming. ‘Why did no one tell me that exercise was this much fun?’ they say. Of course they were told. Their parents told them, their sports teacher told them, their GP told them, the local council told them and the government told them, to no avail, on many occasions as they grew up.

But the selective deafness of youth means most don’t see the joy of exercise for many years. Good luck with forcing kids to do PE with threats of detention or exclusion. You couldn’t have got me to run the cross-country course whatever you threatened me with.

Passage B: Does competitive sport in schools do more harm than good?

Olympic champion Mo Farah's talent was spotted at an early age by his college PE teacher. His teacher channelled Farah's energies into athletics and says this also helped the young athlete focus on his studies.

But not everyone is as enthusiastic about competitive sports, least of all students. According to a recent survey, almost two-thirds of 8 to 16-year-olds said they would be 'relieved or happier' if winning or losing were not a factor.

Childhood obesity is worryingly high in Britain and it's hard to argue against strenuous physical activity during PE lessons. But with so much of the curriculum already fiercely target-driven, must these sessions include an element of competition?

'The incentive to win gives students motivation for taking part in PE,' says Chris Howden, Head of PE at a secondary school in Yorkshire. Twenty-two percent of parents agree, according to the survey above.

While Howden sympathises with children who may have little talent for sport, the answer is not to abolish the competitive element but to tailor activities to meet their needs.

At Howden's school, teachers make sure students are matched appropriately to activities and competitors according to ability. The result is that no girl or boy plays against someone who is more physically developed or experienced. Students choose team games that suit them, such as football, netball, hockey or circuit training. There are also more creative options such as gymnastics, dance and trampolining. Howden encourages the idea of personal bests, rather than competition against other students, which can be demotivating.

Gareth Dodson, a PE teacher, adds that PE offers more than the experience of winning and losing. Competitive sports can teach you how to keep your temper and how to respect others. Competition, Dodson insists, is a crucial element in every adult's life, whether it's going for a job or buying a house.

Young people need to know what it's like to succeed, but equally how it feels to fail. Jon Gardner, headteacher at a small, rural primary school, recently started a football club for children as young as 6 or 7, up to 11. If they are playing against teams chosen from a much wider pool of talent, there is a strong possibility of losing. It's therefore important that the students set themselves their own individual targets, such as scoring a goal. Gardner says students see failing as a learning experience.

'Competitive sports arm students with tactics they can use in the future. The key thing is developing a person who is prepared for life and work.'

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