

Why are human target games banned in the United States? This is a question that keeps coming up again and again when discussing appropriate practices in Physical Education. The knee jerk reaction from most people in the profession is that dodgeball is physically and emotionally unsafe for some students. The problem with that response is that human target games and dodgeball are not synonymous. We can not use them interchangeably as most in the profession do. Let's look at the difference between the two.

"The purpose of the game of dodgeball is to eliminate all players on the opposing team by getting them "out" through hitting opponents with a "live" thrown ball or catching a "live" ball thrown by an opponent before it touches the ground while also staying within a set boundary area (National Amateur Dodgeball Association, 2015). A ball is considered "live" if it has been thrown and has not touched anything; including the floor/ground, wall, or ceiling, or another ball, player, or official. A team wins by legally eliminating all opposing players." (1) For the sake of this blog, we will define humans as students or children and targets as a person selected as the aim or goal of the activity. In Physical Education targets are usually images (from a projector), bowling pins, cones with a ball on top or any other inanimate object that we are aiming for. Human targets replace the inanimate object with a human being.

Dodgeball is a human target game but not all human target games are dodgeball. We discussed in my last post that dodgeball puts students in a position that creates an imbalance of power. This imbalance can cause physical or psychological harm. There is no way to stop this from happening without changing the rules and equipment of classic dodgeball. Therefore it is my opinion that students should not be forced to play dodgeball in class.

The problem with eliminating dodgeball (and most of education) is that we are so reactionary that we swing the pendulum too far in the opposite direction. [They state on their appropriate practice guidelines](#), "1.3.2 Human-target games (dodge ball) and/ or drills that allow aggressive behavior toward other students are permitted." Instead of just outlawing a game where students can get hurt SHAPE America outlawed all human target games. This is the classic mistake of organizations. This overreach has caused many activities to be put out to pasture that are quality games that are not damaging to our students in any way.

Tag games are human target games. Students attempt to tag other students either with a ball, a foam noodle, or their hands. Children love tag games. The reason is that the target can move and think. They are not attempting to tag an inanimate object. The difference between tag and dodgeball is safety. We teach our students how to tag properly and it is much easier to control than throwing a ball wildly at an individual. Tag games still have the same opportunity to bully or create that imbalance of power though. Students can target one child or a group of weaker children. This is where the teacher has to create an atmosphere or culture that doesn't allow this to happen.

My next example of a target game is less benign than just classic tag. This game is usually called partner ball tag. Students choose a partner and one of them has a ball. The object of the game is to hit their partner with the ball from the waist and below. If they do that their partner is now it and the roles are reversed. This eliminates the elimination aspect of dodgeball which is not quality physical education. In my opinion, it also eliminates the emotional fear because you can pick the partner you want to play with. Students are much closer when they throw the ball so they don't need to use the same force which increases accuracy. In addition, students usually choose their friends so there is not the chance to bully students. I would not choose a partner that would bully me. A teacher needs to make sure that this is clear so that no one is put in that position. I play this game at my summer camp and during birthday parties that I run. I have never had an issue in over five years of playing it.

Another human target game is setting up a dodgeball-like game where students are sliding bean bags or rolling a ball so it hits them in the knee and below or only their feet. If the student gets hit they join the team that hit them. This creates a never ending game which eliminates elimination. The biggest problem with these games are not that they use human targets but the students may trip on the ball or bean bag. The students love these games and they are in no physical or emotional harm at any point during the game.

Andy Vasily once responded to a blog about human targets with this poignant post:

"One teacher was playing a game that was very similar to dodgeball in the sense that students were throwing balls at one another. The difference was that this teacher called it the 'Watch out for the falling coconut' game. She was trying to teach her students a touch pass by having to lob it in and over the opposing team. There were loads of different sized balls out, loads of them. The students were picking them up and lobbing them in. Opposing team could catch and throw back. If they dropped it, they had to do 10 jumping jacks to join back in. If the ball hit them, they had to do 10 jumping jacks. They kids were engaged, active, laughing, and enjoying the game.

Were humans targets, YES. It was extremely clear to see that the teacher had a culture and environment of respect going on. Not one student abused the rules, got angry or hurt. They were working on multiple skills."

If we take away the obvious problem that students were penalized with physical movements for not being successful in their desired task you can see that students were playing a game that taught them the valuable skill of a lob and were still physically and emotionally safe. Some Physical Educators may push back with the idea that there are other ways to teach the same skills of lobbing, overhand throws, and dodging without having a moving projectile propelled at someone. They would be correct. One difference is that human targets can analyze where the projectile is coming from and to it. There is no way to substitute that. The major difference between using an inanimate object and a human target is joy. Students get

enjoyment out of being or aiming at human targets. That can not be emphasized enough. Our goal for students can not be to love movement in one breath and take away the games and activities that they love in the very next. Joy is something that is underrated in Physical Education. Listen to Andy Vasily interview Scott Kretchmar here to get a much deeper understanding of why joy is the missing link in our classes.

Some final thoughts on human targets are that we have to allow teachers to be in control of their areas. Blindly banning all human target games takes the control away from the teachers. That decision is also based on faulty logic that lumps all target games as dodgeball. A master teacher who has established a positive culture and control of their class can alleviate ALL of the worries that have been addressed above. The key is to ask your students what their feelings are on human target games. If one student is fearful for their emotional or physical safety any activity should be modified. This involves listening to your students and creating a true class of shared experiences.

Another idea that has to be addressed is that banning target games is largely an American issue. I have interacted with Physical Educators from around the world. They play human target games with a high rate of success. Their students don't seem to be scarred in any way shape or form. I encourage Physical Education teachers from all over the world to respond to this on Twitter with the hashtag #physed or hop on Voxer by going to voxerpe.com. This is a conversation that should be had with other professionals across the world. Our students need us to question everything.

1. Manning, R. Douglas, Seth E. Jenny, Margaret C. Keiper, and Dan D. Drane. "Hall of Shame Revisited: The Appropriateness and Legal Implications of Employer-Sponsored Dodgeball and Kickball Events." *Journal of Contemporary Athletics*. Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 01 July 2016. Web. 09 May 2017.