

## Ballschule: Introductory Concepts of Ball Play for Caregivers

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**Summary:** Ballschule is a program designed to help children acquire a series of ball-related senses through playing, and to help them learn the basic skills of ball games. It is not only about learning the skills of running, catching, kicking, and throwing, but also about cultivating the abilities to make decisions and to grasp space. It is characteristic of Ballschule programs that children learn how to grasp and judge in the ever-changing situation around them and to move their body accordingly. The underlying philosophy of the Ballschule program is to go back to the origin of sports, which is play. Experiencing the joy of physical exercise as play in early childhood leads to interest in all physical activities and exercise in school life, and fosters rich social skills. Ballschule is a form of physical activity that should be introduced in early childhood.

**Key words:** Ball-related sense, Basic skills, Enjoyment, Early childhood

### Author Note

This report was first presented at the 15th APEC Asian Society of Physical Education of Young Children Conference and slightly revised after feedback from the audience. Currently, it is common for university faculty members in Japan to participate in international conferences and give presentations in English. Many university English programs pay special attention to English presentation skills and provide presentation training. Under such circumstances, I had been participating in international conferences but had not yet given a presentation in English. As a milestone in my academic career, I decided to give a presentation at the international conference. My colleagues encouraged me by saying that if I clearly delivered my idea, my pronunciation would not matter. As a result, I received the best presentation award. It would bring me pleasure if this English report could show the importance of English presentations and a positive mindset at the foundation of STEAM Lab and its research bulletin.

### Background

In Japan, the government established standards for a

physical fitness test in 1964. In 1999, the test was revised and a new physical fitness test was created. Researchers continuously conduct the test and analyze chronological changes in children's physical strength and motor skills. From 1964 to the mid-1980s, children's physical strength saw a continuous increase. After that, a downward trend continued until around 2005, and the situation has remained the same until now. Although there are some items in the test that show a slight recovery trend, a polarization is apparent between children who exercise regularly and those who do not. Among the items tested, grip strength and throwing ability continue to decline. It cannot be said that children's physical strength and throwing skills have improved since the mid-2000s (fig. 1).

It has been said that children are naturally fond of physical activities. Children, especially in their early childhood, develop physical strength, motor skills, and social skills and build human relations through playing. In recent years, however, the environment surrounding children has been changing at an accelerating pace. Japanese children are facing a decrease in outside space and time available for physical activities. It is also said that their average number of friends is decreasing. The restrictions on outdoor activities due to global warming and the spread of video game devices also contribute to this trend. With these drastic changes in mind,

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I believe that it is necessary for instructors of early childhood physical education to intervene and guide children in physical activities. Even with intentional guidance by instructors, the essence of physical activities should be “enjoyment.” I believe that it is important to naturally increase children’s opportunities for physical activity by making them feel that physical activities are fun and that they want to do them again. In investigating possible activities, I was also looking for ways to improve children’s grip strength and throwing ability, which have been on a downward trend. After some time, I came across the concept of Ballschule.

### What is Ballschule?

“Ballschule” literally means “ball school” in German. The program was established in 1998 by Dr. Kraus Roth at the Institute of Sports and Sports Science, University of Heidelberg, Germany (Hirose 2015). The program attracted attention as a cross-disciplinary ball game instruction program for children. Cross-disciplinary here means that, by following the program, children can learn the basic elements shared by a lot of ball-related games before they start learning individual disciplines such as volleyball, soccer, and tennis. It is designed so that children can acquire the abilities needed for the ball-related games through playing, and learn the basic skills of various ball games in a balanced manner. It is not only about learning the skills of running, catching, kicking, and throwing, but also about cultivating the abilities to make decisions and to grasp space. It is characteristic of Ballschule programs that children learn how to grasp and judge in the ever-changing situation around them and to move their body accordingly.

### Basic Principles of Ballschule

As a principle, Ballschule emphasizes improving the abilities necessary for ball-related movements. These abilities are common to various ball sports. To put it differently, the abilities needed for ball-related activities overlap and intertwine with each other. It is believed that these common abilities play a connecting role in the later acquisition of advanced skills in individual ball games.

Instructors should choose the content of the program according to the age of the target children:

- Baby Ballschule: 1.5 to 3 years old.
- Mini Ballschule: 3 to 6 years old, free play, pretend play, play with some tasks.
- Ballschule: 6 to 8 years old.
- Ballschule should satisfy these criteria:

1. It should be grounded in the children’s developmental stage.
2. It should be fun.
3. It should involve latent learning (instructors do not give clear and specific instructions during practice).

### Teaching Qualifications

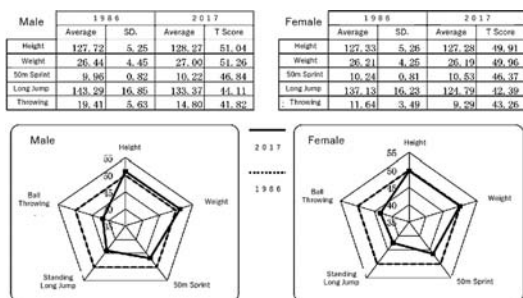
The main feature of the Ballschule program is that only those instructors who understand the concepts and theories of the program and have the skills to lead children can be in charge of teaching. The qualifications for teaching are clear, and the theories, contents, and methods of the program are shared by all qualified instructors.

### Teaching Methods

In addition to professional knowledge of Ballschule, it is also necessary to learn the educational basics of being an exercise instructor. These include:

1. Greeting children by name.
2. Welcoming new children.
3. Starting and ending the program with a greeting.
4. Discipline.
5. Individual feedback.
6. Conflict resolution.
7. Oral explanations, body language, and cues.

As an instructor, it is necessary to develop a firm attitude, verbal skills, and the ability to give specific explanations to children before starting the teaching practice. The use of visual and auditory cues is also recommended as a supplement.



**Figure 1** Comparison of physical fitness and athletic abilities of 8-years-old children in Kanagawa prefecture between 1986 and 2017 (comparison of T score) (Kanagawa Prefectural Board of Education 2018)

tary method.

### **Ball Games in Physical Education in Governmental Curriculum Guidelines**

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's elementary school curriculum guidelines for physical education categorize ball games into three types:

1. Goal-type games — basketball, soccer, handball, rugby, flag football.
2. Net-type games — soft volleyball, prell ball.
3. Baseball-type games (where defense and offense take turns) — softball, tee ball.

The guidelines describe the purpose of the games and list the skills, attitudes, and thoughts which should be fostered through playing ball games. In the lower grades, ball games are described as “ball games” that involve simple ball manipulation, and “ball throwing games” and “ball kicking games” that are played with simple rules. As can be seen from the curriculum guidelines, ball games are already covered in the early grades of elementary school. I believe that it is necessary to develop ball-related sense and a foundation for playing ball games in a fun way by playing Ballschule in early childhood.

### **Issues in Children's Sports Today**

Some of the issues in children's sports today have been analyzed as “specialization in specific sports,” “early burnout,” and “lack of creative play.” Okuda summarizes Roth's

thoughts as follows: Children are not specialists, they are all-rounders. Therefore, early specialization, which imposes an unbalanced load copied from the adult world, often has negative effects. This approach does not promote harmonious development and discourages children's motivation. It also often leads to burnout, as the athletes climb to the summit before reaching the age at which they can produce the best performance. Focusing too early on a single sporting discipline often results in failure to reach a high level of performance, even if performance is improved continuously and over time (Okuda 2017). It is interesting that the founder of Ballschule also mentions the issues heatedly discussed in Japan.

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