**UConn CSCH Podcast Episode Transcript:
The Importance of Physical Activity on Wellness**

Helene Marcy: Hello and Welcome to the CSCH Podcast. My name is Helene Marcy, Program Manager for the UConn Collaboratory on School and Child Health, or CSCH. The CSCH mission is to facilitate innovative and impactful connections across research, policy, and practice arenas relevant to school and child health. I invite you to take a look at our website at csch.uconn.edu.

Last fall, CSCH conducted a podcast series on social and emotional wellness and we talked to experts on staff, family and child wellness. In this podcast episode we wanted to talk about the importance of physical activity on both physical and emotional wellness. This episode is made possible in part by funding from the Neag Foundation, which serves as a philanthropic force for positive change in education, health, and human services initiatives.

Today I’m here with Jaci VanHeest, Nneka Arinze, and Cassandra Rowett. Jaci is Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology in the UConn Neag School of Education with a focus in kinesiology and is Director of the Public Health Learning Community at UConn. Nneka is a recent graduate of UConn’s doctoral program in sports management, has focused on sports-based youth development and has been a program leader in the HuskySport program at UConn. Cassandra is a physical and health education teacher and coach at E.O. Smith High School in Mansfield, CT. She is also a Lecturer in the Health and Physical Education department at Eastern Connecticut State University

Welcome to all of you.

Jaci Van Heest: Happy to be here.

Cassandra Rowett: Hi.

Helene: So my first question is for everyone but Jaci, let’s start with you. What sparked your interest in focusing on physical activity and physical education in your work with and in schools?

Jaci: My training is in exercise endocrinology and I’m very interested in how movement impacts our health. The obesity epidemic in children and youth really impacted me. Too many children thought physical activity was a horrible thing. So after many discussions with parents, teachers, friends, and family, I developed a before-school program for overweight children, with the focus of making movement fun. So, from there my passion for play and for movement has grown.

Helene: Nneka, what about you?

Nneka Arinze: I got into this work because I was interested in girls and their reasons for participating in sport. I was a practitioner who was trying to get girls more engaged in physical activity and then that springboarded into an opportunity to work within a school setting to provide programming. From there I started to become more aware and interested in the ways in which various aspects of the school environment shaped choices to get involved.

Helene: Thanks. And Cassandra?

Cassandra: So I started off my journey in sports medicine, which combined my love of helping people, human anatomy, wellness and sports, and kind of combined all of it. And it wasn't until a few years after that I realized how much I actually loved the teaching aspect of it. That is when I then became a physical and health education teacher. I am passionate about helping our youth create a wellness routine for themselves, from my students in high school, all the way through teaching my students at Eastern Connecticut State University.

Helene: Thanks—these are such interesting backgrounds. Jaci. Can you tell us a bit about what the research tells us about the importance of play and physical activity for kids? Why is it so important?

Jaci: Absolutely. Active play impacts the physical, psychological, and academic health of children and youth. It helps to develop coordination and balance, muscle and bone strength, fundamental motor skills, endurance and cardiovascular fitness, and enhanced immune function. And that's just a few things. Research on play illustrate benefits like: improved empathy, trust, resilience, creativity, optimism, and adaptability. Children who play have a drive to acquire new skills and to master those skills. The outcomes translate to many settings including the academic realm.

Helene: That's a lot of benefits. And Nneka, you’ve been addressing the need to create positive spaces for adolescent girls of color in terms of physical activity because they’re at higher risk for inactivity. Given what we’ve just discussed about how important physical activity is for kids and how beneficial, can you tell us about this problem and what you found about potential solutions?

Nneka: As Jaci mentioned, there are a number of benefits that come from participating in physical activity. But you can’t get those benefits if you’re inactive, if you’re not participating in physical activity. So what the research is showing that oftentimes girls of color are starting at lower physical activity levels than their White or male counterparts, their peers. So then as they age, this gap begins to widen, and this is particularly as they enter adolescence. What I ‘ve found is that part of the solution really lies in thinking about some of their social influences. So this means thinking more about their friends and their peers as sources of support. It also means that we need to think about adults and how we are engaging with them, making sure that we’re not only providing the physical resources—the spaces and the opportunities for them to play—but are intentionally encouraging them and also modelling physicaly active behaviors ourselves.

Helene: So thinking about the importance of that peer and adult engagement, and about the benefit of physical activity on both kids’ physical and emotional health, I wanted to pivot to talking about the impact of the pandemic on physical activity. Cassandra, your school has been in hybrid mode. How have you seen the effect of the pandemic on physical activity play out with your students and how has your school pivoted to address student needs?

Cassandra: So we are in hybrid and about 30% of our students are fully online, so we have remote learners. And as a whole we are still uncovering how COVID-19-related closures and the cancellations and the restrictions have impacted the physical activity among our students. And as each week kind of goes by, we realize just how much catching up that we need to do. And that's only with the students that are in person. The cancellation of sports and activity classes have also inspired some programs and some coaches and other independent fitness professionals to do some online streaming services and we have allowed our students to take part of those as well and tried to give them as many opportunities to take advantage of those as well as doing that ourselves.

However, there are enormous disparities and access to different opportunities based on the household financial considerations, digital technology access, the size of our students’ houses, their yard size, as well as their social and emotional capability to get on and be self-advocating to get on to those platforms. It has been argued that COVID-19 school closures will lead to increased obesity rates in our students, in part because there are times when we are the only ones who provide physical opportunities for physical activity through physical education. And students typically engage in lower levels of physical activity and more sedentary time on weekends as compared to school days. So, because of COVID-19 school closures and then the sports teams and activities canceled, we do see a similar inactivity pattern that we've seen in the past on weekend days or in the summer. And so we are anticipating that even next year, there's going to be many consequences for our students’ overall physical health.

With that being said, as a school in my department, we have provided as many different opportunities for our students to be successful, based on the resources that they have at home as well as getting them the resources that they need to be successful. So they're responsible for creating their own goals—for tracking their own goals. Do they have a phone? We heavily use our phones, and luckily a lot of our students do have that technology, but not all. We’ve provided heartrate monitors for our students so that they are able to track their progress and then also coordinate it with the teachers here to keep accountability. For the students that are fully remote, we do live recordings—we have them working out with us in tandem. We give them the opportunity to do it at home and then reflect upon it later. We give them pre-recorded lessons, as well as them having the opportunity to go out and go on a hike and just be in nature, which has been wonderful as well.

Helene: Sounds like there are some terrific resources being put together for those students despite all of the obstacles that they're facing. Nneka, we've seen a lot of media reports about how the pandemic has exacerbated the disparities that Cassandra mentioned in terms of kid's access to learning. Tell us about how it has impacted sports-based youth development programs and access to sports for kids.

Nneka: So I would say some of the issues that Cassandra and schools overall have noticed in terms of those disparities are also showing up in the ways in which children can access sports-based youth development programs. So the issues with access to computers and quality internet has also affected them as many programs shifted to virtual programming. So this means that not everybody continued to have access. In addition, a lot of the benefits of these programs were the social interaction. So, without that, you can imagine how many kids have not had those benefits anymore. So, as we as a country are beginning to reopen, you’re also seeing a disparity in terms of which programs are getting started again. So, those that are pay to play, have been able to get back on but a lot of the free programs and those that rely on public facilities are still waiting to provide access again.

Okay so there are positives. A lot of this has led to a lot more virtual programming for coaches. So a lot of the organizations have put a larger focus on providing trainings for coaches and leaders to start rethinking how they're providing programming and how they're addressing the socioemotional needs that kids are experiencing right now, and the ways in which they're going to need to be supported as they come back to being in person again.

Helene: And let's hope they can be back in the fall. I’m glad that there’s an opportunity to take stock of what works and to prioritize those socio-emotional needs at the very least. Jaci and Cassandra –if you could have one recommendation implemented for improving student physical health, what would it be? Jaci?

Jaci: I would require a daily play vaccination for every student across the globe. And I know right now, vaccinations might not be the topic we want to think about but let's think about that for a second. From preschool aged children up to Individuals who are students in graduate or professional schools, if each and every day we could spend time—20 minutes, 30 minutes, or even longer—with the goal of playing of being active, of interacting, the benefits to our physical, our emotional, our spiritual health would be life-changing.

Cassandra: I second that. I believe first, we need to create positive experiences in school-type settings for students to move and to exercise. They need to feel confident and they need to feel successful at whatever they're doing. I was fortunate enough to enjoy physical education in high school and also have a great experience in sports, but that's not everyone's experience. There is a growing trend of adolescents, particularly females, who have negative experiences and thus stop engaging in physical activity once they graduate high school and no one's forcing them to. So, I would really hope to have all students engaged in a way that will increase their appreciation of sports and physical activity by creating a positive PE experience. Giving them some autonomy to what they are doing. And then also getting them excited about what they are doing to hopefully continue to be physically active throughout their lives. Secondly, I would love for students to feel better prepared for the outside world and outside activity by letting them choose what they are doing inside of school as far as exercise. So why not create programs specific to yoga or mindfulness or bike riding or skateboarding? Something that they're going to feel confident and continue on throughout their life.

Helene: Thanks. I have two last questions that everyone could answer: First, what should districts and schools be thinking about with regard to physical activity and education in their planning for next year? And second, what are some ways that families can encourage physical activity and promote physical education, starting today and as we head into the summer? Jaci?

Jaci: Well, first school districts should work to engage students in physical activity both inside and outside of school. And they need to think of that in more creative ways. We're hopefully moving out of the fearful stage into the creative stage where what we've learned in the virtual environment we’re able to then take advantage of. I presume that we'll probably still be wearing masks, but active play is still possible. Both outdoors in field settings or sport settings, but also in the classroom, where we can do physical activity breaks in a classroom. So while you're doing your mathematics tables, you can spend a couple of seconds and do them while doing a couple of jumping jacks. That's not an out of the question idea.

Families should also look to engage with each other in a physical way. We have spent an extraordinary amount of time together over the last year during the pandemic. But have we thought about taking a walk or maybe a bike ride or playing with your family pet—a lot of families have gotten pets over this time. Or maybe just, maybe, you might want to dance together to somebody's favorite song. Those are some ways that you can be together, you can smile and laugh together and you can connect not only through this pandemic time, but through movement. So, every morning, you know, it would be kind of fun to begin your day with a little family dance party and imagine what that would do to a family as we interact in our mental, emotional and physical state. So, I say, keep dancing and more importantly, keep playing.

Helene: Nneka?

Nneka: I would second what Jaci said and specifically I want to say to parents and guardians that the best way to encourage the kids to be active to be active yourself. Set the model you want them to follow. Use encouraging language, ask them what activities they want to participate in, whatever they want to try. But most importantly make sure that you're doing it together so they're able to see you and you can be the model for what you want them to do.

Cassandra: I second both of those comments. They are wonderful. When we're in school, physical activity can be added into every single curriculum by taking time from other subjects without the risk of hindering student academic achievement. But adding time to academic or curricular subjects, or core subjects, by taking time from physical education programs is proven not to enhance grades in those subjects, which therefore may be detrimental. So, in school, instead of thinking about them as being brain breaks, that we all keep saying, think about it as being a brain booster, because doing those couple jumping jacks or push-ups before we take a test or to get all of our wiggles out or whatever we need to do actually enhances our production in those core classes. And so really promoting that and promoting movement and not thinking of it as a negative, especially in our younger generation, that elementary middle school, where we want them to move as much as possible so that they can then focus.

And then, similarly at home, I loved what you said about dancing and modeling, because that is exactly what I believe. And making sure that our students are prepared and valuing exercise, just as much as anything else that we do. So before we get on technology, before we sit down and watch a movie, we're going to, as a family, go for a walk because that's what's important. And on top of our chore list at home, part of our daily responsibilities is moving our bodies because that's what's going to keep us healthy as a family. I always say that our immune system does not have legs and we need to move our legs in order for it to work. So, if we're not moving our legs, then our immune systems aren't going to work and that's what's keeping all of us healthy right now.

Helene: Thanks. So whatever role you have in kids’ lives, I’m hearing from our guests that we should provide not only positive encouragement but also get active ourselves (as we are able) and be an example because the kids are watching. All of you gave great examples, and Jaci: we haven’t had a family dance party in a while so I need to get on that. Thank you all so much for joining us today to talk about the importance of play and physical activity.

Cassandra: Thank you so much.

Jaci: Thanks for the opportunity.

Helene: We will add links about how to follow Jaci, Nneka, and Cassandra’s work in the podcast description. And a reminder to our listeners that you can find information about them and all of our affiliates at the CSCH website, csch.uconn.edu. You can also follow us on social media @UConnCSCH. Thanks for listening.