

RECESS – TIME WELL SPENT!

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RECESS & TIME

Elementary school recess has been an American standard for well over 100 years and by the 1950's, three recesses a day were the norm (Mulrine, 2000).

Throughout history, school recess has been promoted as a time for children to take in fresh air and release their pent up energy. It also provides an unstructured setting where children have the opportunity to practice observation and social skills, develop their imagination and invention techniques (utilizing both mind and body), and enhance vital organ and muscle growth.

Times are rapidly changing. Our society now faces a new era of international competition, safety and liability concerns, and time poverty like never before. Today, our nation's leaders, from presidents to school superintendents are struggling with these issues; even to the degree of how our youngest school-aged children spend each minute of their time.

BACKGROUND: THE ELIMINATION OF SCHOOL RECESS

According to the American Association for the Child's Right to Play, beginning in 1989, a number of school districts in the U.S. have opted to either abolish or reduce school recess.

Schools are beginning to implement "no recess" policies under the belief that "recess wastes time that would be better spent on academics" (Johnson, 1998). University Professors, Anthony Pellegrini and Peter Blatchford (2000) state that proponents of recess reduction in both the US and Britain maintain that recess detracts from an already limited instructional time budget and provides opportunities for students to exhibit aggression and anti-social behavior. In addition, school administrators cite a fear of lawsuits if children become injured, a concern over children's safety from strangers around school grounds, and a shortage of teachers and volunteers to supervise the children during recess (Johnson, 1998, A1).

Surprised? You are not alone. Many of the individuals we recently interviewed had no idea that by 1998, forty percent of schools in the United States had either cut recess or were considering doing so. "School districts in Atlanta, New York, Chicago, New Jersey, and Connecticut are opting to eliminate recess, even to the point of building new schools in their districts without playgrounds" (Johnson, 1998, A1).

The situation sounds grim, but all is not lost as more individuals become informed and educated on the subject matter. Parents and advocates for children have been taking a stand in places like Atlanta, Connecticut, Michigan, Virginia and Washington. These advocates are making a difference, but "the work is on-going" states Maryanne Howell,

Tacoma, WA PTA Council Health & Safety Chair. In 2004, the Tacoma school district changed their policy on recess; the new policy now says “they support recess, yet they refuse to use the PTA’s wording *ensure*”.

THE LINK TO ACADEMICS

Within the public school system, elementary classroom time has been reconfigured to meet standard academic benchmarks that are narrowly applied to all students to obtain continued federal and state funding. It is debated that there is not enough instructional time for students to learn the needed curriculum to pass and to achieve in today’s society.

Karyn Clarke, Tacoma, Washington’s Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Schools states “If we want students learning to high standards, we need them in the classroom, not the playground”.¹ Clarke is not necessarily in the minority as school superintendents feel the increasing pressures of the No Child Left Behind Act. Her justification for recess policy change to school administrators is likely echoed often “The interest that we have is in maximizing our instruction time; our mission is in preparing young people to compete in a global society.”

Educational research, in contrast to current educational policy, consistently indicates that break time does have positive "educational value." For example, four field experiments conducted in American elementary schools, Pellegrini & Davis (1993) & Pellegrini, Huberty, & Jones (1995) found that the longer children worked without a break on standardized tasks, the less attentive to the task they became. In addition, children were more attentive to class work after recess than before.

One theory maintains that breaks inserted between periods of intense work serve to distribute effort and increase cognitive performance. For over a century, experiments have been conducted in this area with consistent results. Participants, regardless of age, learn better and more quickly when their efforts are distributed compared to when they are massed. Children and adults alike benefit from breaks during periods of intense work.

Another theory states that when children are exposed to a series of demanding cognitive tasks, cognitive interference occurs, with a resulting decline in performance. Learners of different ages are released from this interference in different ways; young children respond well to non-structured breaks, whereas older learners benefit from simply changing tasks.

REMEMBERING RECESS

Research cited in Rivkin (1998) indicates that today’s children have much less experience with outdoor activity than previous generations.

School recess brings to mind many images for individuals both young and old, yet most will agree that recess offers the golden opportunity to take a much needed break from sitting still and concentrating on school work.

Tashina Jirivic-Reynolds, a 20-year old Evergreen State College student sums up her recess experiences as "Freedom! Freedom from concentrating and being forced to sit still. Recess also gave me a chance to exercise and run around outdoors, and to socialize with friends...especially the loners. I loved recess!"

Hilde Mott, Web Page Designer and Mind/Body Fitness Instructor shares her memories of recess. "Recess allowed me to spend time with my best friend (still a close friend 30+ years later), who wasn't in my class most years. Recess offered me much needed opportunities to be as physical as I could in a short amount of time. Still a very movement oriented person, I simply loved being and playing outside. It relieved what was often the boredom of the classroom. I learned to interact socially with kids I'd not otherwise have an opportunity to interact with.

PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF RECESS

Below are excerpts from Rachael Sindelar's publication: "Recess: Is It Needed in the 21st Century?" (2004) CEEP.

Cognitive Benefits

During recess time, children's activities are often exploratory. This type of experience stimulates a child's cognitive development in several ways. Research studying the effects of social play on learning reveals that play behavior encourages creativity, promotes problem-solving skills, and improves a child's vocabulary. A child can apply the skills he or she has learned on the playground to classroom lessons and assignments. Research suggests that there may be a correlation (but not necessarily a cause and effect relationship) between engaging in unstructured play activities with peers and higher scores on intelligence tests (Saltz, Dixon, & Johnson, 1977).

Emotional Benefits

Recess may act as a stress reliever by allowing children to work off the tensions they have built up during the day and by reducing the anxiety that can be caused by academic pressures. Newman and colleagues (1996) suggest that through play activities, children can learn valuable methods for managing school and family related stress. For this reason, they have considered playtime as potentially therapeutic.

Unstructured peer interaction may also improve a child's self-esteem by providing opportunities for "children [to] learn about their own abilities, perseverance, self-direction, responsibility, and self-acceptance. They begin to understand which behaviors result in approval or disapproval from their peers" (NAECS/SDE, 2001, pg. 3). This understanding is vital to the early development of friendships. The school playground provides a venue for children to cultivate friendships and reap the benefits of new relationships. Newman, Brody and Beauchamp (1996), note that this type of peer interaction encourages character development by improving children's ability to make better moral decisions and increasing their awareness of individual social responsibility.

Physical Benefits

"The prevalence of childhood obesity in the United States has risen dramatically in the past several decades" (Moran, 1999). Studies suggest that children can significantly reduce their health risks by simply increasing the amount of time that they exercise. Many elementary schools offer physical education (PE) classes as part of their standard curriculum, but 2001 studies from the Council on Physical Education for Children show that PE classes are not enough. The opportunity to engage in additional activities, such as recess play, may help to alleviate or avoid possible health problems and is very important to a child's muscle development and coordination. Studies have shown that *unstructured* play, specifically outdoor play, encourages physical activity in a unique way. Therefore, children benefit from both recess and PE, but neither can be substituted for the other.

Social Benefits

As early as 1901, educational theorists began to talk about the social benefits of active recess play as preparation for adulthood and as beneficial to the child's development. The school playground was a practice site that encouraged games of competition, allowed experimentation with new social strategies, and provided a setting for dramatic play (Jambor, 1999). Jambor suggests that children improve their social skills at recess by practicing the following actions:

- Sharing with peers
- Cooperating
- Communicating with teachers and children
- Solving problems
- Respecting playground rules
- Resolving conflict
- Self-discipline

RECESS FOR TEACHERS AND AIDES

Adults need a break too. Now that recess time is being cut in many of our elementary schools, teachers and aides no longer have the time to re-coop their own energy levels, de-brief with one another or prepare for the next lesson.

"As class sizes increase, as the curriculum which teachers are expected to cover expands, and as teachers are made more accountable for the progress students in their classes make, these breaks become more important because they provide a brief opportunity to sit down and take stock of the day's events" (Evans & Pellegrini, 1997).

Although it may take teachers a few minutes to get their class calmed down after recess, many observers believe that students pay better attention to lessons, and disruptive behavior decreases after the recess break. Therefore, some teachers consider recess to be an important element of classroom management (Bogden & Vega-Matos, 2000).

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING ABOUT RECESS

Recess is one of the few times in the school day when children can interact freely with peers, it is a valuable time in which adults can observe children's social behaviors, their tendency to bully and fight, as well as their leadership and pro-social behaviors (Hartle et

al., 1994). Seeing how their students interact socially can help teachers and other playground supervisors intervene in situations involving aggression or social isolation.

According to Stewart Trost, Assistant Professor of Kinesiology at Kansas State University, children who aren't physically active during the school day are much less likely to get enough activity in their lives. "When the opportunity for physical activity is taken away, kids don't naturally make up for it somewhere else," he said. "There is research that supports if they don't get it there, they won't get it at all, so it's important that we provide kids the opportunity for physical activity during the school day." "Recess helps prepare children for success. They can focus better in the classroom when given that break."

University of Minnesota Professor, Anthony Pellegrini states that not having a recess during the school day is almost inhumane because children are being kept confined in their classrooms for hours each day. Prolonged periods of confinement in elementary classrooms have been found to lead to increased fidgeting, restlessness, and subsequent inability to concentrate (Pellegrini & Davis, 1993).

The National Association for the Education on Young Children has identified several benefits of recess and active play for children:

- Improved Learning: Children learn better when using the mind and the body.
- More Relaxation: Play reduces tension.
- Healthier Emotions: Children work out emotional aspects of their lives easier through unstructured play.
- Increased Perceptual and Problem Solving Abilities: Experiencing the whole world around them versus a microcosm of computers and books is a powerful mode of learning.

RESEARCH & RECESS

Given the current national emphasis on research-based decisions in education, the question of what the research says, and infers about recess is important (Jarrett & Maxwell, 2000).

The most obvious characteristic of recess is that it constitutes a break from the day's routine. For people of all ages and in all fields, breaks are considered essential for satisfaction and alertness. In experimental studies, Pellegrini and Davis (1993) and Pellegrini, Huberty, and Jones (1995) found that elementary school children became progressively inattentive when recess was delayed, resulting in more active play when recess occurred.

Another experimental study (Jarrett et al., 1998) found that fourth-graders were more on-task and less fidgety in the classroom on days when they had had recess, with hyperactive children among those who benefited the most. Clearly, breaks are helpful, both for attention and for classroom management, whether or not the breaks are in the form of recess.

Several studies have shown that physical activity improves reading, writing, and math scores. Research consistently demonstrates an association between physical activity and improved cognitive function, mental acuity, and mental status (e.g., increased self-

esteem and decreased stress and anxiety). School-based physical activity has also been linked with reductions in discipline problems, improved school attendance and reduced likelihood that students will smoke or use alcohol or drugs (Weisner, 2002).

Surplus Energy Theory

This theory suggests that when children are sedentary for long periods of time they build up surplus energy. Fidgeting, restlessness, waning concentration, and general off-task behavior are indications that children need a break. Recess gives students a chance to exercise, fulfilling their need to "let off steam." According to this theory, described by Evans and Pellegrini (1997), only after this pent-up energy is released can children return to the classroom refreshed and ready for more work. Although this theory is widely accepted, Smith and Hagan (1980), among others, contend that there is no independent criterion as to what constitutes surplus energy and that the idea of a build-up of energy in need of discharge makes little sense physiologically. Evans and Pellegrini (1997), point out that children often continue to engage in play, even after they are exhausted.

Novelty Theory

This theory proposes that as their classroom work becomes less interesting, children become less attentive and need playtime to re-introduce novelty (Evans & Pellegrini, 1997). According to this theory, recess breaks allow children the opportunity to engage in activities different from academic lessons. Once the children return to class, students perceive school work as new and novel again.

Cognitive Maturity Hypothesis

This theory suggests that both children and adults learn more by engaging in tasks spaced over time rather than those that are concentrated (Evans & Pellegrini, 1997). According to this line of thinking, recess provides students with the breaks needed during their lessons to optimize their attention to class activities and time-on-task behavior (Evans & Pellegrini, 1997; Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1996).

POSITION STATEMENTS

- The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education

Recess is an essential component of education and that preschool and elementary school children must have the opportunity to participate in regular periods of active, free play with peers.

- The National Association of Elementary School Principals

NAESP recognizes recess as an important component in a child's physical and social development. Research supports the inclusion of recess and other free play activities in a child's daily schedule. NAESP encourages principals to promote the development and maintenance of appropriately supervised free play for children during the school day. (1999, 2004)

- South Carolina Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity

All schools should offer convenient opportunities for students and staff to participate in enjoyable physical activity, and this imperative should be embodied in policy. Recess in elementary schools is particularly important. Recess, while separate and distinct from physical education, is an essential component of the total educational experience for elementary school aged children. Recess should not be viewed as a reward to children or denied in order to punish children. The involvement of children in daily unstructured physical activity during school hours is critical for their current and future health.

- National Association for Sport and Physical Education

Recess provides children with discretionary time and opportunities to engage in physical activity that helps to develop healthy bodies and enjoyment of movement. It also allows elementary children to practice life skills such as conflict resolution, cooperation, respect for rules, taking turns, sharing, using language to communicate, and problem solving in situations that are real. Furthermore, it may facilitate improved attention and focus on learning in the academic program. (Council on Physical Education for Children, 2001)

- American Academy of Pediatrics

A primary goal of activity programs for youth is to promote physically active lifestyles that will be carried into adulthood and reduce health problems related to inactivity.

Cross-sectional studies have shown an association between higher activity levels and lower levels of body fat, increased bone mineral mass and lower levels of tobacco and alcohol use.

Exercise has been successfully used in conjunction with other interventions to treat obesity, hypertension, and other chronic diseases.

Some of these programs using exercise or physical activity have been successfully implemented in the school setting.

The development of a physically active lifestyle is a goal for all children. Traditional team and competitive sports may promote healthy activity for selected youth. Individual sports, noncompetitive sports, lifetime sports, and recreational activities expand the opportunity for activity to everyone. The opportunity to be active on a regular basis, as well as the enjoyment and competence gained from activity, may increase the chances that a physically active lifestyle will be adopted. (May 2000 – reaffirmation October 2004)

UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

“Recess is the right of every child: Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on Children’s Rights states that every child has the right to leisure time. Taking away recess, whether as a disciplinary measure or abolishing it in the name of work, infringes on that right.” (Skrupskelis, in Clements (2000), pg.126)

WHAT'S NEXT?

All across the nation parents, teachers and students are speaking out. These activists are demanding that schools bring recess back, providing a minimum of 15 minutes of unstructured play time each day for children.

Virginia and Michigan now have mandated daily recess thanks to folks courageous enough to take a stand and similar legislation is now pending in Georgia and Connecticut and Washington. Meanwhile, activists in Florida, Texas, Mississippi, California and Pennsylvania are lobbying hard to get their kids one small physical break.

Time is precious. Let's be sure all of our children have their day in the sun.

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SPEAKERS/PRESENTERS

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