



Pathways to Research

Education

Let the Children Play: Recess Is Essential for Children

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Research suggests that advocates for the well-being of all children need to be concerned about the number of children who are deprived of recess (Jarrett, 2002; Jarrett & Waite-Stupiansky, 2009; Jarrett et al., 1998). Given the strong evidence suggesting recess meets so many physical, social, emotional, and academic needs, recess for all is a goal worth pursuing (Pellegrini et al., 1993; National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2006; Wascoe, 2006; Mahoney & Fagerstrom, 2006; McNamara, 2013). This goal is echoed by the Brookings Institution, which states that “The pandemic has established new norms throughout our society, and it presents us with that same opportunity in education” (Cushing & Shwe Hadani, 2021).

Based on the data, there is clear evidence that recess has beneficial effects on children’s physical health, behavior, social competence, and academic performance (Bohn-Gettler & Pellegrini, 2014); however, the pressures to improve test scores are prompting many schools to cut back on recess time. According to Jarrett (2019), nearly 40 percent of the nation’s 16,000 school districts have either modified, deleted, or are considering deleting recess. Where recess does still exist, it has become overly regulated, supervised, and increasingly adult-directed (such as physical education classes) (Ohanian, 2002). Some of these statistics are over five years old, and more recent numbers are sparse; however, given current school climates and legislative action, it is likely that this trend to reduce the amount of

free-play recess time that children are allowed will continue (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010).

Keywords

recess, stress, young children, child development, play

Recess Is Essential for Optimal Child Development and Learning

One of the purposes of research is to guide and direct future decision-making. This is especially true in the education field. Educational research and statistics should guide the decisions that school administrators, teachers, and legislators make regarding the education of children. It is critical that all educational policy decisions and instructional practices be based upon evidence-based research (Bohn-Gettler & Pellegrini, 2014). However, one area where research and practice seem to be at odds is the erosion of recess time for children in primary and elementary schools.

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Recess is beneficial for children's physical health, social competence, and academic performance.

Photo courtesy Getty Images.

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2006; McNamara, 2013). The COVID pandemic has exacerbated many of the problems as schools rush to catch students up on lost classroom time. The pressures on teachers and schools to increase formal education time are immense.

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The Value of Play

In the Spring of 2018, when my youngest child was in fifth grade, I was informed by a teacher at his school that the administration had quietly reduced recess for all grades (including kindergarten) to one thirty-minute session that was combined with and included time for them to eat lunch. Other recess times were to be replaced with in-class “stretching” and “movement” activities that would be conducted by the teacher. Teachers even received in-service training on how to conduct these in-class activities.

The idea was to minimize the time lost to “transition time” to allow for more academic instruction. However, some teachers were not comfortable with this lack of recess and still took their children to the playground. This prompted the principal to send an email to the teachers reprimanding them for not following the new procedures. One teacher forwarded this email to me, and I forwarded it to a parent group on Facebook. Luckily, enough parents spoke up that the policy was abandoned, but this scenario is not an isolated event. Schools, principals, and teachers are under pressure to increase instructional time (and, by relation, test scores) (Bohn-Gettler & Pellegrini, 2014). Usually, the time for extra reading or mathematics instruction is created by eliminating or shortening the time that children get to participate in self-directed free play.

It is the free and self-directed aspect of the play that makes recess so valuable for children. It is very different from just physical activity, such as a child might get in a physical education class. Bohn-Gettler & Pellegrini (2014) define recess as:

a time that is unstructured and undirected by adults. Adults primarily supervise children's behavior, ensure children's safety, and intervene when there is conflict or aggression. Otherwise, children choose their own activities, physical activity levels, and social interaction styles and levels. They are not restrained by adults and will often develop their own games and engage in free play. (p. 313)



The free and unstructured nature of recess—as compared to the teacher-directed nature of physical education classes—is highly beneficial for children.
Photos courtesy Getty Images.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) also supports recess in its policy statement that free play is a fundamental component of a child's normal growth and development (Ginsburg, 2007). The AAP emphasizes the importance of freedom for the child to escape the structured aspect of the school day and the restraints on their mind and body that formal education often imposes. Recess is a time when children can self-direct their activity, self-regulate their behavior, and self-learn about the world around them. This idea is not a new one. Philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and educators such as Johann Pestalozzi, John Dewey, A. S. Neill, Ivan Illich, and John Holt have all advocated for more choice for children in the schooling process.

Academic Achievement

One in five principals indicates that annual yearly progress (AYP) testing requirements have led to a decrease in recess minutes at their school (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010). This is driven by a faulty assumption that reducing recess time and increasing academic time will equate to higher test scores.

One of the most powerful forces driving school policy today is to increase achievement. In line with this, many politicians, superintendents, and school principals argue that recess is a waste of valuable time that could be more profitably spent on instruction. It is often argued that recess can disrupt sustained concentration, work, and classroom patterns. The increased instructional time should, commonsensically, have a positive effect on achievement (Bohn-Gettler & Pellegrini, 2014).

However, the data does not support the contention that more instructional time and less recess equates to higher scores. There are few studies that show that shortening recess time improves test scores (Wascoe, 2006; Moyer, 2014). In fact, empirical research seems to suggest that more recess time is related to better test scores (Pellegrini et al., 1993; Pellegrini et al., 2005; Guzman et al., 2011; Moyer, 2014). Schools in Taiwan and Japan, for whom American schools are often compared in terms of mathematics and science scores (Mullis & Martin, 2017), provide up to five recess periods a day. These breaks seem to increase academic achievement by preparing the student to re-enter the classroom ready to learn following the break period (Ginsburg, 2007).

Spacing tasks out over time can help make academic work seem less boring, which improves students' attention. Recess may be beneficial for children because it provides a break from sustained work periods. The long spates of academic time without a break increase stress and exacerbate boredom and inattention (Bohn-Gettler & Pellegrini, 2014).



Extended stretches of academic time without a break such as recess can intensify boredom and distraction in students.

Photo courtesy Getty Images.

Stapp and Karr (2018) found behavioral and academic advantages of providing elementary students with a recess break during the school day. Their findings demonstrated that recess significantly increased the on-task behaviors of fifth-grade students (Stapp & Karr, 2018). They state in their conclusions:

While it is recommended that children receive at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day, the stark reality is that many students in countries across the world, including the United States, receive short recess breaks or no breaks at all due to educational policies that have increased instructional time (Stapp & Karr p. 453).

Brez & Sheets (2018) suggest that recess is an important factor in children's performance in school and should be considered an important part of the school day. Other research also supports the fact that increasing recess time can actually

improve test scores (Jarrett, 2002). Research on memory and recall found that children learn better if learning is spaced out rather than presented all at once (Toppino et al., 1991). Ramstetter & Fink (2019) state that for the best cognitive processing, the child needs a period of interruption following a period of concentrated instruction. These should be unstructured breaks, like recess, rather than merely shifting from one cognitive task to another. The intent of these unstructured breaks is to diminish the stresses and distractions that interfere with cognitive processing.

Taking Away Recess as Punishment

Here I think it is again useful to convey a personal anecdote to illustrate the problem. When my oldest son was in fifth grade, he was quite good at mathematics. He consistently scored above the ninety-ninth percentile on math achievement and standardized tests. However, he was very thoughtful and meticulous about any work that he undertook, so it took him longer than other students to complete his in-class assignments. Because of this, he was often kept in from recess to complete his work. His school euphemistically referred to this as the “opportunity room.” He was missing out on recess to have the “opportunity” to complete his work.

One evening, he spent so much time on a writing assignment that it was well past his bedtime, and he had not completed some required online math practice. I told him to go to bed, and I would email the teacher about it. At school the next day, the teacher kept him inside from recess and had him write out his multiplication tables because he did not do the work the night before. If I had known this, I would never have emailed the teacher about the situation.

This is not an isolated or unique case. About 77 percent of principals report taking away recess as punishment for behavior problems or not finishing work, according to *The State of Play* report by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2009). Children such as my son, who have trouble concentrating or who take a lot of time to complete their work, need recess more than anyone else, and they are the ones less likely to get it (Adams, 2011).

It is not just a modern problem either. Here is a quote from the *Journal of Education* in 1894 by Robert Burdette (1894):

If I had my way, I would make it a misdemeanor to keep school children “in at recess.” As I don’t have my way—save only when I am alone, and even then, I always get caught at it and have to smart for it—I can only growl. But I really would like to see this punishment banished from all schools. I don’t believe it accomplishes anything. I believe it aggravates the evils it is intended to correct. Let’s away with it. Substitute for it some rational punishment. And I believe it has a bad effect on the pupils. It has on some boys, I am positive. There was a boy went to “our school” forty years ago, a good boy too, a real good, loving, gentle, earnest, ambitious boy. He used to keep tally of the recesses he lost by being “kept in.” Then, when they amounted to a half day, this boy, good and gentle, and in the main obedient, would whoop off to the lake, “play hookey,” and fish all day, and so “make it up,” he used to say. And I’d do it again under the same circumstances (Burdette, 1894, p. 423).

Children’s need for play is as fundamental as their need for food, water, or other biological necessities. Withholding food or water for punishment or not allowing a child to go to the toilet when needed is considered unethical and abusive. Withholding play should be seen in a similar way. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international treaty that spells out the universal rights of every child. Article 31 of that document specifically relates to play. It ensures:

That every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. That member governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

Many parents are having a similar experience. Skenazy (2018) asked a group of parents for their experiences with teachers taking recess away from their children:

When I asked on Facebook if parents were seeing recess withheld, the answers cascaded in. “My kid misses recess most days because he has to rewrite his assignments due to poor handwriting.” “Used regularly at my

boys' elementary school as punishment...for using the restroom during 'non-break' times." "For not turning in a parent signature on a form." "For not filling in her reading log." "For being disruptive in class." That last reason is particularly ironic, since recess is the best way for high-energy kids to blow off some steam in order to make it through the afternoon (Skenazy, 2018, p. 12).

Research supports these parents' experiences. Children who are allowed recess show less disruptive behavior in the class. Barros et al. (2009) found that among eight- and nine-year-old children, having at least one daily recess period of fifteen minutes in length was associated with better teachers' ratings of their class behavior.

Yet, despite the research, many principals and teachers still insist that taking away recess is a viable punishment. When parents in Berkeley, California, pushed for a policy to eliminate withholding recess, the teachers pushed back. The president of the Berkeley Federation of Teachers stated that there were times when taking away recess time was "the logical and natural response to behavior." She did not want it to be impossible for teachers to use taking away recess as a disciplinary tool because, according to her, there are times when it is "absolutely the right tool" (Blad, 2015). Again, the empirical research disagrees with her sentiment.



Removing a student from recess, either to complete school work or as a punishment, can be detrimental to their physical, emotional, and behavioral development.
Photo courtesy Getty Images.

Fink and Ramsetter (2018) found teachers who enforce academic and behavioral expectations through withholding recess may inadvertently be undermining the mutual respect and trust between themselves and their students. They also suggest that the strategy of withholding recess may introduce the notion to children's peers that some children are "bad." Some students would take this as a judgment of character, not just on academic habits or classroom deportment. This can lead to the child becoming at risk for rejection by their peers (London, 2019). Finally, they found that most teachers seemed to doubt the withholding of recess was having a positive effect on the students who were being kept out of recess the most frequently. The researchers suggest that teachers should think creatively about ways to encourage more children to meet both academic and behavioral expectations without putting a crucial component of a child's learning experience on the chopping block.

The need for recess and free play is especially critical during the uncertain times of the COVID-19 pandemic as children go back to school after a year and a half of remote learning and dealing with the trauma of living through the pandemic. Rebecca London said in an interview with Mary Ellen Flannery published on the National Education Association website:

Withholding recess is still the most common form of punishment in elementary schools, even though no research shows it is effective. Teachers will say they don't want to take play time away, but it's the only thing kids care about so it's an effective punishment. I don't ever agree with this, but at this time especially, when we're trying to heal, nobody should have recess withheld (Flannery, 2021).

Conclusion

There is ample evidence that recess supports physical, emotional, and cognitive development and well-being. Free play offers opportunities for children to run, jump, and climb, as well as interact with the outside natural environment. Physical activity is the best way to guard against problems such as childhood obesity. Being outside has been shown to have great benefits for physical and emotional well-being (Mainella et al., 2011). Emotional well-being is also supported by the simple

process of playing with and making friends. Recess supports positive social-emotional development in children of all ages. These activities also have a positive impact on cognitive and academic development.

With all of the evidence about the benefits of recess on the physical, emotional, and cognitive development of children, what can we do as parents, teachers, and advocates to make sure that recess is valued? A few suggestions are outlined next.

We need to remember that children spend a great deal of their time at school or doing homework. This often leaves them little free time for themselves. Schools and communities need to recognize that time at school needs to address not just academic development but physical and social-emotional development as well.

We all need to be advocates for children. The world in which children live today is very fast-moving and puts a lot of demands on them. We need to remember to let them have room and time to be frivolous, play in the mud, ride their bikes, or any other activity that makes them happy.

We should never underestimate the importance and power of friendships to a child's development. Human interaction is vital for a child's healthy development, and formal education does not offer much time for children to freely interact. However, recess offers a time during the day when children can interact in many different ways with their peers. Play is where friendships are made.

Think about children's needs first. Too often, adults get caught up in schedules and timelines. As adults, it seems like there is not enough time in the day to get done all that we need to get done. This anxiety often filters down to our children, and without recognizing it, we rush them from one activity to the next. However, sometimes children just need to play, and we need to make sure that their need to play is prioritized.

A child's need for play is well documented, and we need to be sure that school policies, rules, schedules, and other adult concerns do not interfere with the needs of the child. Taking away recess as punishment sends the message that play is a privilege that can be taken away rather than a right. Let the children have recess. Let the children play.

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