Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting

Recess: Is It Needed in the 21st Century?

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Recess is the time of day set aside for elementary school students to take a break from their class work, engage in play with their peers, and take part in independent, unstructured activities. The scheduling and length of time for recess vary, but traditionally schools have allotted time for recess breaks in the mornings or afternoons (and sometimes both) as well as extra recess time during the lunch period. A 1989 survey of state superintendents conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) found that schools in 90% of school districts had at least one recess period during the day (Pellegrini, 1995).

In recent years, many elementary schools have eliminated or significantly reduced children's recess breaks during the school day [http://www.ipausa.org/recess.htm]. This trend has sparked a debate over whether or not recess should remain a standard part of the elementary school daily schedule. This report identifies the major issues surrounding this debate, summarizes some of the literature relating to the topic of recess, and guides the reader to additional resources on recess.

What are the reasons behind the reduction or elimination of elementary school recess?

The reduction of recess breaks in schools is a growing trend in elementary education. According to one advocacy group, "Nearly forty percent of the nation's 16,000 school districts have either modified, deleted, or are considering deleting recess" (cited in NAECS/SDE, 2001, p. 1). "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, p. A1). Increasing demands to raise test scores and to teach more challenging curricula are among the reasons cited by school districts for eliminating 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).

In addition to the idea that eliminating recess can provide additional time that teachers can use to improve students' academic performance, some schools have eliminated recess for liability reasons. They are concerned about the injuries and lawsuits that can arise from outdoor play. Many administrators are also concerned about strangers' access to children on school grounds and note the shortage of teachers and volunteers to supervise recess (Svensen, 2000). An increasing awareness of playground bullying is another motivating factor that schools consider in decreasing students' opportunities for unsupervised activities (Svensen, 2000).

What are some of the theories behind scheduling recess as part of the school day?

The debate over reducing recess breaks has sparked a discussion of the theories used to support scheduling recess as part of the school day. Evans and Pellegrini (1997) suggest that the literature about recess can be categorized by three major theories of the need for school break time: the

Surplus Energy Theory, the Novelty Theory, and the Cognitive Maturity Hypothesis. It should be noted that the limited research conducted on recess does not definitively support any of these theories; however, all three theories include the belief that children return from recess breaks more attentive and ready to focus on course work.

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).

What are the perceived benefits of recess?

Observers have pointed out that recess may be the only time in a child's day when he or she has the opportunity to exercise, play games, and interact with peers. Clements (2000) states that by participating in these types of unstructured activities, children are able to develop the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills they need to be successful in both school and society.

Other observers suggest that learning can be achieved on the playground in a way that is not possible in a structured classroom. A position paper from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education states

> 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)

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 (cited in Jambor, 1999). 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

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, p. 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

Childhood health problems caused by inactivity or under-activity are a growing problem in the United States. "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) as part of their standard curriculum, but studies show that PE classes are not enough (Council on Physical Education for Children, 2001). 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.

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).

Teacher benefits

It is seldom mentioned in the literature, but teachers also benefit from recess breaks. 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). Recess also often gives teachers a break from the constant supervision of students. "It provides time when they can attend meetings, speak with parents, and prepare curriculum materials for subsequent lessons... 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).

Conclusion

Jarrett and Maxwell (2000) point out that few research studies focus on the need for or value of recess. Most studies related to recess focus on the value of a break in the day. Many research studies support the educational and developmental value of unstructured play activities with peers in the elementary school grades, but whether or not this type of experience needs to be part of the school day remains debatable. The social, emotional, and physical benefits of recess may outweigh the small amount of time recess takes away from class work, although it could also be argued that unstructured play opportunities could be obtained during out-of-school time with neighborhood friends or siblings.

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Web Resources

Recess in Elementary School: What Does the Research Say?
http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/eecearchive/diqests/2002/jarrett02. html

Michigan State Board of Education policy that supports daily recess.
http://www.michiqan.gov/documents/bdpolicy001214_16470_7.pdf

Recess: Necessity or Nicety?
http://www.educationworld.com/a_issues/issues/issues180.shtml

All Work, No Play at School
http://www.csmonitor.com/1998/0311/031198.feat.feat.2.html

The Developmental and Educational Significance of Recess in Schools
http ://www.cehd.umn.edu/ceed/publications/earlyreport/earlyreportspring2002.pdf

IPA/USA Newsletter On-line
http://ipausa.ninq.com/paqe/newsletters-1

National Center for Education Statistics. Spring Teacher Questionnaire A (pp. 39-40 includes recess statistics)
http://nces.ed.gov/ecls/pdf/kinderqarten/springteachersABC.pdf

No-fun zones: schools take a recess timeout
As many as four schools out of ten no longer have time for recess.
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0HKV/is_4_10/ai_82880556

On the Elimination of Recess
http://www.edweek.org/login.html?source=http%3A%2F%2Fceep.crc.uiuc.edu%2Fpoptopics%2Fmiddle.html
Registration required.

Should Schools Take a Break from Recess?
http://www.education world.com/a_admin/admin/admin088.shtml

The Value of School Recess and Outdoor Play
http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Value_School_Recess