

Pros and Cons of Recess Time in Schools

Is Recess a Mere Tradition or a Vital Piece in Education?

Dec 20, 2009 Barbara Pytel

Recess has been a long-standing tradition in elementary and middle schools. Currently, recess time is being cut to allow for more instruction in math and reading.

Recess is not only being cut back in schools but some new schools in larger cities are not even allowing space for an outdoor playground. Has the trend to cut recess gone too far? What are the pros and cons of recess based on research?

Work Breaks are Needed

It would be unthinkable in the adult workplace to not give short breaks throughout the day and a longer break for lunch. Morning and afternoon breaks are often 15 minutes and lunch break is 30-60 minutes. Children's learning process in school is also work and breaks are expected, as well.

Why Schools are Cutting Recess Times

Demands grow each year on schools to raise test scores. Recess time can be used to spend more instructional time with students. Schools are beginning to see recess as a waste of time and some have totally eliminated recess (Johnson, 1998).

- Legal liability is another justification for cutting recess times. Children could fall while jumping rope or get hit with a baseball. Some administrators are skittish about making themselves vulnerable to any legal action.
- As schools cut back on expenses because of budget cuts, paraprofessionals are often cut from the staff and supervision at recess becomes a problem. Volunteers are difficult to find for a recess duty.
- Strangers can access a playground easily at some schools and sexual predators could be a concern.
- Bullying can also thrive in an unstructured environment. Bullying usually takes place outside of the classroom in hallways, locker rooms, playgrounds, buses, and bathrooms. Less recess time allows for less bullying time.

These issues are valid concerns that need to be considered. However, research shows many benefits to having recesses in a school day.

Three Theories Supporting Recess

Researchers, Evans and Pellegrini (1997), have learned that there are three theories that strongly support the need for recess.

Surplus Energy Theory

Elementary teachers are strong believers in the theory that when children sit for long periods of time, they build up surplus energy. If children don't get breaks when needed, learning declines and symptoms shown are:

- Fidgeting
- Restlessness
- Waning concentration
- Off-task behavior

Evans and Pellegrini believe that only after using up this surplus energy through active play can students return to learning and are able to focus.

Novelty Theory

Evans and Pellegrini maintain that when classroom work becomes "boring" and repetitive, a break is needed. When the break is taken in the form of an active recess, the students return to the same information and it now seems new again. They are more able to focus.

Cognitive Maturity Hypothesis

Evans & Pellegrini theory suggests that learning is better spaced over time rather than concentrated. Recess provides the break to optimize attention and increases time-on-task behavior.

Just like adults need to get away from a project for a moment to reduce stress and have time to rest, children also need that time to regroup.

There is growing concern that boys especially are being seriously hampered by a lack of active recess time. The slogan, "The more boys sit, the less they learn" may just have some validity. The social and emotional benefits of recess may contribute to a more balanced individual.

Sources

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