

Recess and the importance of play:

A position statement on young children and recess

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Position

The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education takes the position that 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.

Recess

The term recess refers to a break during the day set aside to allow children the time for active, free play. Schools vary in the number of recess periods given children each day, the length of the periods, and the environments available. Typically recess occurs outdoors and in a designated play area. During inclement weather, schools may have recess periods in a game room, gymnasium, or inside the classroom.

“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), 126]

Rationale

An alarming trend toward the elimination of recess during the school day is affecting many school districts throughout the United States. This policy is being implemented with the advent of increased school accountability and student testing procedures, and the belief that time could be better spent on academics. This disturbing phenomenon has no serious research to back it up, and is actually counterproductive to increasing the academic achievements of students (Skrupskelis, 2000). Professional organizations, educators, administrators, teachers, and parents are becoming increasingly concerned with this present trend.

[...]

Current condition of recess in the United States

In a 1989 survey by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, 90% of the school districts reporting had some form of recess. Most of the responses indicated that a type of recess occurred once or twice per day and lasted fifteen to twenty minutes. Since that date and with the increased pressure from a number of sources to improve achievement, increase test scores, and cover an increasingly demanding curriculum, nearly forty percent of the nation’s 16,000 school districts

have either modified, deleted, or are considering deleting recess from the daily elementary school schedule (American Association for the Child's Right to Play). This trend seems to be increasing yearly (Education Daily, 1998).

In addition to academic concerns, schools cite injuries, a heightened awareness of safety, and a lack of supervision as justifications for abolishing recess, specifically outdoor recess. Claiming the possibility of lawsuits if children are injured on school property, or of children coming into contact with menacing or potentially dangerous strangers, and the increasing curriculum demands, many administrators have determined recess is the easiest part of the daily schedule to eliminate.

Benefits to children

During the period of time commonly referred to as recess, learning occurs in ways not possible inside the regular classroom. An increasing body of research continues to indicate the benefits of unstructured play and specifically outdoor play for young children.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) describes unstructured physical play as a developmentally appropriate outlet for reducing stress in children (Appendix 2). This period of time allows children the opportunity to make choices, plan, and expand their creativity.

In allowing a mental change and release of energy, recess may facilitate subsequent attention to more academic tasks and minimize disruptive [behaviour] once students return to the classroom; recess, therefore, becomes an important element of classroom management and [behaviour] guidance (Bogden & Vega-Matos, 2000).

Recess contributes significantly to the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive (intellectual) development of the young child (Clements, 2001). Recess is one of the few places and times during the day when all these developmental domains are utilized in a context that children view as meaningful. Children must function in all the developmental domains if they are to successfully adapt to school and societal norms. The domains are empirically related and should be considered intertwined. For example, social interaction and physical activity facilitate cognition; recess (indoor and outside) offers the opportunity for this development. On the playground, children can be observed actively practicing the learning and cognitive skills acquired in the classroom.

The benefits of recess in each of the specific developmental domains, as identified by current research, are outlined below. The division of the benefits into domains is only for evaluative purposes. All domains are interrelated as children develop.

- **Social Development:** Social development begins at birth and continues rapidly throughout the early childhood years. Research from the last ten years suggests strongly that close relationships with peers contribute to both social and cognitive development. Recess is that period of time during the school day that allows children the opportunity to interact with peers in ways not usually possible in the typical classroom.
- A wide range of social competencies – cooperation, sharing, language, conflict resolution – can be actively practiced, interpreted, and learned in a meaningful context during recess. Through active, free play and peer interaction, children can:
 - develop a respect for rules,
 - gain self-discipline, and
 - construct an appreciation for other people's cultures and beliefs.
- An important educational and socialization experience is lost when children are not allowed to participate in free play with peers on a regular basis.

- *Emotional Development.* Recess may act as an outlet for reducing anxiety and serve as a means by which children learn to manage stress and gain self-control. During recess play, children also learn the art of expressing themselves to others, and begin rehearsing [behaviours] and practicing skills. Children learn about their own abilities, perseverance, self-direction, responsibility, and self-acceptance. They begin to understand which [behaviours] result in approval or disapproval from their peers. During the primary years, children should begin to develop real friendships and relationships with peers. If children are not given the opportunity and the support to develop these interactions, they may not learn how to maintain and sustain such relationships. A positive social and working relationship with peers helps children develop a sense of social and emotional competence.
- *Physical Development.* Recess provides young children with opportunities to move and participate in physical activities. Two theories on why physical activity improves children's attentiveness and decreases restlessness dominate the research: the surplus energy theory and the novelty theory (Jambor, 1994). The surplus energy theory cites recess as a means for children to release excess energy that has built up over time, while they have been sitting in a classroom. The novelty theory claims that on-task attention can be increased by providing opportunities for diversion from boredom. As indicated by current brain research, if students are given the chance to move around and be active, they return to the classroom more attentive and able to concentrate on the tasks presented. This change enables learning to take place more efficiently (Healy, 1998).

Physical movement is essential for healthy growth and development. Recent surveys have discovered that 40% of our young children have significant cardiac risk factors including obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and an inactive life style. Many children are not getting enough exercise to develop healthy hearts and lungs. Another cause for concern is obesity. In October, 1999, the Agriculture Department released a report that revealed a record 10 million American children – or one in five – are overweight, and that a record 8% of the children are already overweight by preschool age.

Through active play, young children learn about their bodies' capabilities and how to control their bodies. One of the most apparent benefits of recess is the opportunity for sheer physical activity and the practice of physical skills, such as running, climbing, jumping, chasing, [travelling], batting, kicking, catching, balancing, hanging, swinging, stretching, pushing, and pulling.

Physical activity fuels the brain with a better supply of blood and provides brain cells with a healthier supply of natural substances; these substances enhance brain growth and help the brain make a greater number of connections between neurons (Healy, 1998). The connections make the brain better able to process a variety of information, thus leading to improved retention of facts, a greater understanding of concepts, and subsequently higher achievement.

- *Cognitive Development.* There are volumes of recent research substantiating the link between play and cognitive gains. Children learn through play. Children develop intellectual constructs and cognitive understandings through the hands-on, manipulative, exploratory [behaviour] that occurs during play episodes and play opportunities. Play context provides the most appropriate support or scaffolding for children as they develop skills. "Children can remember more, focus better, and regulate their own [behaviour] better in play than in any other context" (Guddemi et al., p. 5). After children practice skills in play, they become ready to utilize these skills in other contexts (Bodrova & Leong, 1999).

Providing opportunities for active, free play with peers facilitates the encoding and decoding of social signals. The mechanisms involved are every bit as cognitive as

math seatwork (Bjorklund & Brown, 1998). With the recent hypothesis that domain-specific brain modules may have evolved to process social information, it could be intimated that some cognitive benefits are a direct consequence of some types of physical play.

Examples of content areas that can be explored in context outdoors and on a playground include:

- the natural elements: experiencing wind, dirt, water, seasons;
- physics: using a see-saw, merry-go-round, swings;
- architecture and design: building with natural materials;
- math and numbers: counting, keeping score; and
- language development: explaining, describing, articulating, seeking information, and making use of oral language/vocabulary/word power.

Recommendations

To ensure all early childhood programs in preschools and elementary schools allow periods of time during the instructional day, in which children may have free and active outdoor play with peers, NAECS/SDE strongly encourages educators, policy makers and parents to:

- Support policies which require recess time to be part of the preschool and elementary school curriculum.
- Ensure and support additional research on the effects of recess on the developmental domains (social, emotional, physical, and cognitive), and on the effect of recess on academic achievement.
- Develop policies and resources necessary to support an awareness of the importance of recess and of active, free play in the development of the young child.
- Support research on the benefits of recess and its possible restorative role for children with attention disorders.
- Support research and professional development that facilitate every educator's skills in observation and assessment of the developmental growth of children through the play process.

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