



Recess

Recess has traditionally been a cornerstone of the school day as it provides children with an essential opportunity to play with their peers within the confines of the school yard.¹ It is first and foremost a social activity.² Recess is defined as regularly scheduled periods within the elementary school day for unstructured physical activity and play.³ Experts believe that it is a necessary component of the school day and should not be withheld for punitive or academic reasons.⁴ The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that recess should complement and not replace physical education.⁵ Despite this recommendation, the decline of school recess continues to spark debate in North America,⁶ and one study that documented children's perspective of recess identified challenges related to social conflict, lack of activities, lack of equipment and minimal supervision.²

The need for recess

Children spend upwards of 30 hours per week at school and scheduling time for recess is crucial to ensuring that children can be physically active and play. Play during recess contributes to children's physical activity levels, gives them a break from academic work, and offers a chance to improve their social skills.⁴ Despite these benefits, an increasing emphasis on academic achievement has resulted in more time spent in the classroom, thereby relegating recess to an afterthought in many jurisdictions.⁷ This development is troubling as eliminating recess can negatively affect children's attention in the classroom.⁸ Time spent during recess has been found to improve grades and standardized test scores, as well as indicators of cognitive skills (i.e.: attention, concentration, and memory), and academic behaviours such as attention and the ability to remain on task.⁹ Even 15 minutes of recess a day can contribute to better classroom behaviour¹⁰ and empathy for peers.¹¹ Interviews with elementary school children reveal that physical education classes do not provide children with the opportunity to organize their own games and choose peer groups.¹ Recess provides one of the few forums for children to interact with their peers on their own terms¹² as classroom instruction is often focused on individual learning and free play after school is diminishing.

While play at recess is important, there are barriers. Bullying in the form of equipment theft, vandalism, and peer intimidation that is gender- or weight-related is negatively correlated with active play,¹³ prevents children from playing, and can contribute to negative experiences.¹ Bullying may place a heavier burden on teachers, who must spend time dealing with these incidents. Similarly, a survey of students in grades four through eight demonstrated alarming rates of verbal and physical victimization and isolation during recess.¹⁴ Such situations, however, can be remedied through the implementation of programs that foster belongingness which, in turn, increases activity levels and engagement, responsibility and empathy, inclusion and acceptance, and positive interactions and friendships.¹⁵ (Play related projects that support recess are identified in the [Promising Practices in Canada](#) portion of the tool kit.)

Another barrier includes teachers or principals withholding recess as a punitive measure. This is counterproductive because without outdoor play, children are missing opportunities for social and emotional learning, such as the ability to control aggression and regulate feelings of anger and frustration.¹

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Banning, limiting or restricting children's engagement in recess is also shown to disproportionately affect marginalized children.⁶ One study in the United States found that 56% of a test group of children residing in households with incomes at or below the poverty level had access to recess compared to 83% in households above the poverty line.¹⁶ The same study also showed that fewer African-American children have access to recess than non-African-American.

In Canada, over 80% of schools have one or more active school policies, including recess.¹⁷ However, school yard bans on hard balls¹⁸ and rules limiting physical contact,¹⁹ including games like tag, show that we are not immune to policies limiting opportunities for free play.

Weather considerations

Cold temperatures are known to deter children's outdoor play²⁰ and making sure that children are adequately dressed for frigid temperatures complicates the issue. Environment Canada advises that wind chill temperatures of -28°C to -39°C pose a high risk of frostbite and hypothermia, and exposed skin can freeze in 10 to 30 minutes.²¹ This concern is reflected in school board policies which prevent children from playing outdoors to avoid the potential harms of exposure to inclement weather. Many school boards in Ontario recommend shortening recess or keeping children indoors altogether if temperatures drop below -20°C to -28°C.^{22,23,24} Similar policies are in place in other parts of the country, such as Saskatoon²⁵ and Winnipeg²⁶ which keep children inside at -27°C and -28°C, respectively. In Newfoundland and Labrador, children can stay home from school when the temperature goes below -45°C to -55°C, depending on the age of the students,²⁷ however access to recess varies from school to school. While there is limited empirical evidence regarding seasonality and the impact on outdoor play during recess, children are known to be less active during the winter months and in inclement weather.²⁸

Playground equipment and loose parts

Playground equipment facilitates outdoor play and there is evidence supporting the notion that loose and movable parts and a greater variety of play structures engage children.¹¹ This is not to understate the importance of providing well maintained playground equipment and sporting facilities, which are associated with active play in older children, but to underline the importance of providing children with a variety of resources that are age and developmentally appropriate.²⁹ Children spend more time engaged on playgrounds that incorporate loose parts. Similarly, children at adventure playgrounds with loose parts were more active and more likely to interact with their peers than on traditional playgrounds with fixed equipment.³⁰

Summary

Strategies to increase outdoor play are necessary, but they need to be supported by policies that promote the physical, academic, and social benefits of recess. When recess breaks are extended, more children are engaged and play happens at a more vigorous intensity.¹ Policy issues that infringe upon children's right to play include over-supervision, extensive safety rules, and limited access to diverse equipment and play spaces.²⁸ Interviews with children indicate the importance of teachers' supervision, but inadequate or excessive supervision can deter active play, as can excessive safety rules that ban running or prevent the use of equipment.²⁸ Recess policies should be addressed from a balanced approach, considering safety alongside the benefits of outdoor play.

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