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Rethinking Recess

As More Schools Trim Breaks, New Research Points to Value Of Unstructured Playtime

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Does recess deserve to get a reprieve?

Schools have been trimming fixed periods of unstructured playtime for years, citing mounting pressure from federal-testing requirements and concerns over playground accidents that can lead to lawsuits.

Now, national groups representing parents and pediatricians are stepping in to champion more playtime, as a growing body of research points to the benefits of the kind of free play that can't be found in gym class.

A report released yesterday by the American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that recess can foster creativity and social skills, arguing that when play is undirected, kids become resourceful in figuring out conflict resolution, negotiation and even leadership -- which might not surface as naturally in an adult-structured atmosphere, when children are more likely to "acquiesce to adult rules and concerns." The report cites academic research and includes advice for pediatricians on how to promote and recommend "free child-centered play."

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 21% to 30% of children in grades one to six get 15 minutes or less of recess a day. Last spring, a survey of 25,000 PTA presidents showed that more than half think their daily recess is at risk because of a need to focus on academics or because of insufficient supervisory staff. The National PTA this year organized a Rescuing Recess campaign, which encourages kids to write letters to local and state school officials to support recess.

Schools blame pressure to meet testing requirements for forcing them to cut back on playtime. This year, Frank M. Silvia School in Fall River, Mass., for example, did away with one of its two 15-minute recess periods for grades kindergarten to five, replacing that time with reading. Creighton Elementary School in Phoenix has eliminated its morning and afternoon play periods, retaining only its traditional lunch recess. And the elementary schools in the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District in Massachusetts no longer offer a morning recess in order to squeeze in more reading and math time, subjects that are closely watched on federally mandated state tests.

"We're trying to maximize every minute of the school day to get kids prepared" for state tests, says Whitman-Hanson Superintendent John McEwan. To compensate for the diminished play time, he says he encourages teachers and students to incorporate more physical activity into regular class periods, such as offering stretches or toe-touching exercises between subjects.

Some experts say that kind of exercise isn't the same. "Play allows a creative outlet for children to build confidence, master their environment and try things out on their own," says Kenneth Ginsburg, lead author on the American Academy of Pediatrics report and a pediatrician specializing in adolescent medicine at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "It's so important to children's resiliency that I am seriously worried if toe touches are replacing that."

Indeed, a number of reports suggest that recess actually helps kids do better in school. One Atlanta-area study led by Olga Jarrett, a professor of early childhood development at Georgia State University, observed fourth-

grade classes on days with and without 20-minute recess breaks. Researchers found that after the breaks, students on the whole were more focused and less fidgety.

Some parents say they have noticed a change in their kids after recess was cut back. Diane Larson, a Tacoma, Wash., parent, says that after her son's elementary school eliminated a second recess in the day two years ago, he would come home more fidgety and restless. She has since changed her after-school routine to allow him to play more in the afternoon before hitting the homework.

Some states have passed laws targeting physical activity in the wake of childhood obesity concerns. Still, though most states mandate physical-education classes, few require recess. Laws passed this year in Connecticut and Indiana encourage daily physical exercise in schools but don't mandate recess.

States generally require schools to teach a certain amount of time per day or hours per year. Recess usually doesn't get counted as instructional time, so school administrators can more easily make a case for nixing it. Also, liability and lawsuit concerns over accidents, fights and bullying give schools additional incentives to eliminate it, says Jonathan Watts Hull, senior policy analyst at the Southern Legislative Conference of the Council of State Governments in Atlanta.

That is part of why the Frank M. Silvia School cut back recess. "If we made that a half hour, we'd have more problems" with discipline, says Denise Ward, the principal.

Other principals say that their teachers, driven to get students performing better on state standardized tests, have reduced playtime. "We only have students between six and seven hours a day," says Rosemary Agneessens, principal at Creighton Elementary, which hasn't met certain testing requirements of the 2002 No Child Left Behind federal law for the last four years. "In terms of the short amount of time and what we're being told we have to cover, something has to give, and it can't be reading."

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Promoting Play

Groups that are advocating for unstructured playtime at school:

- **National PTA** (www.pta.org)
Kicked off a Rescuing Recess campaign this year, encouraging kids to write to school officials in support of recess.
- **American Association for the Child's Right to Play** (www.ipausa.org)
The United Nations-affiliated group has advocates promoting recess in 25 states.
- **American Academy of Pediatrics** (www.aap.org)
The organization representing 60,000 of the nation's pediatricians released a report yesterday advocating the importance of "free" play.