Why Elementary Kids Need Recess

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Rethinking Recess
Creating Safe and Inclusive Playtime for All Children in School

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PLAYWORKS

GLOBAL RECESS ALLIANCE
Ensuring the Right to Play
Bottom Line: Policy Recommendations

1. Provide minimum number of recess minutes for all California elementary and middle schools

2. Prohibit withholding recess as punishment for misbehavior or missed school work

3. Establish standards for quality of recess to support students to engage in safe and healthy play

4. Provide release time for recess supervisors to be trained
Why Recess? Why Now?
Why Now?

- It is always a good time to think about the well-being of children and youth, but...
- California children and youth are in crisis right now
- Events of the past two years have led to trauma, isolation, fear, and unprecedented levels of mental health problems
Why Recess?

- What about “learning loss”?
- Play is healing – helps students to regulate
- Recess is excellent place to practice social and emotional skills
- Connections with peers and adults is essential for building positive school climate
- Physical activity has multiple benefits
"We have the capacity for neuroplasticity throughout our lives, and our environments shape the way that our brains respond to our experiences.

Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships are healing for kids, and for all of us."

Nadine Burke Harris, M.D.
SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL SKILLS
- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY
- 60 Minutes/Day
- Improved Cognition
- Increased Attention
- Play!

SCHOOL CLIMATE
- Peer Relationships
- Connection to Adults
- Physical Safety
- Emotional Well-Being

= STUDENT SUCCESS

Recess Adds Up!
Three Problems Undermine Recess

1. There is an opportunity gap in who has access to daily recess
2. Withholding recess is routinely used as a punishment for misbehavior and missed school work
3. Recess needs attention and organization to make it safe, healthy and inclusive
Access to Daily Recess
“We are intent on improving academic performance. You don’t do that by having kids hanging on the monkey bars.”

Benjamin O. Canada
Former Superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools
Reported in the *New York Times*, 1998
Recess Opportunity Gap: Two Views

Students:

- Black/African American: 41% Regular Recess, 59% No or Minimal Recess
- Latinx: 62% Regular Recess, 38% No or Minimal Recess
- White: 77% Regular Recess, 23% No or Minimal Recess

Schools:

- Urban & Low-Income:
  - Regular Recess: 28%
  - Everyday <30 Min: 61%
  - Not Everyday: 11%
- All Others:
  - Regular Recess: 44%
  - Everyday <30 Min: 50%
  - Not Everyday: 6%
States Legislating Recess
California Policy on Recess Provision

Encourage school districts offering instruction in kindergarten and any of grades 1 to 12...to provide daily recess periods for elementary school pupils, featuring time for unstructured but supervised play.

Recommended Language for Mandating School Recess Provision

1. Include “mandatory” recess
2. Specify recess specifically rather than physical activity
3. Include grades TK-8
4. Include a number of minutes per day (30-40)
   - Can do this by including recess as instructional minutes (e.g., UT, TX)
Recess Withholding
Recess Withholding Exacerbates Equity Issues

- Teachers report withholding is the best option for reinforcing behavior expectations
- Three-quarters of schools nationwide allow teachers to withhold recess
- But, not an evidence-based practice
- There is whole-class withholding
- Individual withholding tells students they don’t belong
- Repeated withholding can be step onto school-to-prison pipeline
State Policy on Using Recess as Punishment

- States with Recess Required: 3
- States with Phys Activity Required: 3
- States without Recess/PA Requirements: 28

- Withholding Recess Prohibited: 7
- Withholding Recess Not Prohibited: 14

Withholding Recess Prohibited
Withholding Recess Not Prohibited
A pupil shall not be required to remain in school during the intermission at noon, or during any recess.

Recommended Language for Disallowing Recess Withholding

1. Prohibit withholding recess for misbehavior and missed schoolwork
2. Include all school faculty and staff, including recess supervisors and lunch personnel
3. Include grades TK-8
4. Accompany with guidance on alternatives to withholding recess
Access to Safe, Healthy and Inclusive Recess
Recess is Not Always a Positive Environment

The Problem of Bullying at Recess

In recent years, cases of bullying at recess have increased. Here, we'll explain more about this problem that many kids experience every day.

Recess Struggles: Students Help Teachers Maintain a Peaceful Playground

By Anthony Bencivenga
January 8, 2007

At lunchtime recess on elementary school playgrounds, ball fields, and schoolyards across the nation, the joyful sounds of children at play are often interrupted by shouts of distress: "She took my basketball!" "He cut ahead of me!" "It's my turn!" "You cheated!" "Stop pushing!"

Bullying Prevention in School: Recess

Bullying can threaten students' physical and emotional safety at school and affect their ability to learn and concentrate in class. It's crucial that educators and the school culture itself focus on providing the right information to both students and their caregivers in an effort to prevent bullying. Check out these three ways your school can help to prevent bullying from occurring during recess.

3 Ways Schools Can Decrease Bullying at Recess

Recess is the time when students get a break in their day to connect with their friends, participate in unstructured physical activity and get some sunshine and fresh air. Students look forward to recess and are excited to get outside and play, but it is not a positive experience for everybody. With a large number of kids and a limited number of adults, recess provides many opportunities for bullying to occur. Here are some strategies to help prevent bullying at recess and allow all students to enjoy their free time.
Evidence from My Research

There was a very negative vibe to this whole recess. Although there was a fair amount of physical activity in spurts, it was all to run away from being punched or tackled. There were a lot of students not at the recess at all because of school work or punishments...The actual time that students were out on the yard was quite short – only about 10 minutes total – but that time was full of bullying and negative play.

At first, the basketball game seemed like a good example of positive play with boys cooperating and playing together. Then an argument derailed the game entirely and they were unable to get the game moving. Worse, they continued to argue as they left the court and moved into line and also while they waiting in line [to go back inside].

This recess has very little structure to it and, while kids are running quite a bit, very few are playing any games beyond what might be a massive game of tag. The space itself is not very conducive to playing games because the lines are too faded to use and the grass isn’t really a field appropriate for playing an organized game ...The adults are fairly hands off.
The Role of Adults is Important

...the two lunch monitors walk around, occasionally engage with kids, tell them to clean up, and largely ignore the bullying and running around that is happening all around them. There was one kid punching another kid in front of another adult, and he did nothing.

The kids who played “tap” with the monitor had a good time and were engaged and sustained as long as she stayed there. But when she left, the game waned. She kept leaving and coming back.

I observe the other [yard monitor] talking to a small boy, berating, “what is the problem?? Take the shoe off and quit whining!!”
Organize Recess for a Safe, Healthy and Inclusive Break

- Organized recess is a hybrid between “structured” and “unstructured” recess
- In an organized recess, and what Playworks promotes:
  - Games have common rules are set up in predictable locations
  - There is space for creative or imaginary games
  - There is free choice
  - Games are inclusive
  - Equipment is centralized and available for play
  - Conflict resolution techniques are known
  - Youth leadership opportunities
  - Alternative spaces (middle school)
  - Adults support student play and engagement
What Happens with Organized Recess?

PLAYWORKS SCHOOLS HAVE LESS BULLYING
Playworks teachers report less bullying and exclusionary behavior than teachers at schools without Playworks.¹

96% of teachers agree that Playworks reinforces positive behavior during recess.

91% of teachers agree that Playworks helped students stay out of trouble.

STUDENTS ARE READY TO LEARN
Playworks teachers report less time to transition from recess to learning.²

27% less time to transition from recess to classroom learning at a Playworks school.

STUDENTS FEEL SAFER AT RECESS
Teachers at Playworks schools say students are safer and more inclusive at recess.³

There was a lot of bullying going on in the past. I think there’s less room for that when you have set rules and you have good supervision, and everybody’s having fun. It just eliminates the opportunity for bullying to happen.

Teacher at a Playworks School

Also: improving recess quality improves students’

- Executive functioning
- Resilience
- Emotional self-control
- Classroom behaviors

Massey et al., 2021

Mathematica Policy Research and John W. Gardner Center for Youth & Their Communities @ Stanford


Implications and Recommendations
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<th>Guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics (2013)</th>
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<td>1. Recess is a necessary break in the day for healthy child development and should not be withheld for academic or punitive reasons.</td>
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<td>2. Children and adolescents need regular breaks from concentrated classroom work to improve cognitive processing and academic performance.</td>
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<td>3. Recess is a complement to, but not a replacement for, physical education.</td>
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<td>4. Recess can serve as a counterbalance to sedentary time and contribute to the recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per day.</td>
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<td>5. Recess should be safe and well supervised. Environmental conditions, well-maintained playground equipment, and well-trained supervisors are the critical components of safe recess.</td>
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<td>6. Peer interactions during recess are important for developing skills such as communication, negotiation, cooperation, sharing, problem solving, and coping. These are foundations for healthy child development and a positive school experience.</td>
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Implications for California State and Local Practice

1. Recess should be included in all school-level reforms and initiatives – school climate, character development, behavioral, social-emotional

2. State policy should support both quantity and quality of recess – professional development and funding for trained recess leaders

3. Access to recess can be built into the California School Dashboard, conditions and climate section

4. Recess provision and practice can be built into the school or district wellness policy

5. Recess provision and spending can be tracked in the LCAP, priority 6: school climate

6. We need better data on local policies, school provision of recess, and student experiences with recess and withholding
Specific Recommendations for Amending CA Education Code

1. Provide minimum number of recess minutes for all California elementary and middle schools
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4. Provide release time for recess supervisors to be trained
Understanding the Recess Opportunity Gap: We Need Data!

- To track equity, it is essential to gather data on a school and student level, including background characteristics like gender, ethnicity, and economic status
- There is no consistently collected data on:
  - School recess provision – number of days/week, minutes
  - School policies and practices for withholding recess
  - Number and characteristics of students having recess withheld
  - School supports for recess
Questions and Discussion

- Readiness to learn
- Engagement
- Climate
- Exercise
- Social-Emotional Skills
- Safety