



# RECESS C K S

## Celebrate the Benefits of Unstructured Play

By Heidi Smith Luedtke

**I**n our achievement-driven society, recess may seem frivolous. After all, college applications won't ask for your kid's funniest knock-knock joke, or give points for dodge-ball ability. Parents may think playtime would be better invested in academics. But experts say recess is crucial for kids' development. And, unfortunately, it's on the decline.

### The Downturn in Downtime

Third-grade students in public schools get an average of 20 minutes of recess per day, according to the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics. Time

out is less for urban minority students, and slightly higher for private school pupils. But even those lucky few may not get enough free play.

In and out of school, "children's lives tend to be

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more structured now than they were a generation ago,” says special educator and licensed psychologist Nicole Beurkens, M.Ed., Ph.D., founder and director of Horizons Developmental Resource Center in Caledonia, Mich. Class lessons are mostly teacher-led and after-school hours are consumed by tutoring, music lessons and sports practice – activities often directed by adults.

Veteran elementary teacher Kristi Sayles remembers when kindergarteners played with toy kitchens and dress-up clothes. They also took naps in school. “Those days are gone,” Sayles says. “Today’s teachers have to cover an overabundance of concepts to meet required standards.”

## WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Does your school’s recess need a redo? Here’s how to get involved:

- Speak up. Administrators need to know parents support playtime.
- Make sure children wear clothes and shoes appropriate for outdoor play.
- Volunteer to help supervise recess. Most schools welcome extra eyes on the playground.
- Ask about safety inspections of playground supplies and equipment. They should occur at regular intervals.
- Raise PTA funds to purchase new equipment and/or repaint lines on the black top. Studies show game-related upgrades boost recess quality.
- Offer to lead a game that all kids can join, so everyone feels included at recess.
- Talk about timing. It’s best to schedule recess before lunch and to offer frequent, short free-play periods throughout the day.

Good intentions may be to blame. “I think this drive to structure more of children’s time stems from a well-intentioned but ill-founded desire to help children get ahead,” Beurkens says. Recess is restricted when schools are pushed to perform on standardized tests.

Unstructured recess allows kids to rest, play, imagine and move. And that leads to better health, greater happiness, and (yes!) higher grades. Here’s how:

### Physical Benefits

It’s no secret that almost one in three American kids ages 6 to 19 is overweight or obese, says San Diego family physician Kristin J.A. Brownell, M.D., M.P.H. Recess can help kids hit the recommended target of 60 minutes of physical activity per day. It also improves their eating habits. Studies show kids who have recess before lunch eat more fruits and vegetables, drink more milk, waste less food and behave better than those who play after eating. Many schools adopt a “play first, eat later” policy for just this reason.

Exercise builds “strong bones, heart and body muscles, and increases blood flow to the entire body, including the brain,” Brownell says. It also decreases risk for coronary artery disease, by lowering blood sugar and fat levels, and by raising artery-cleaning HDL cholesterol. Cholesterol and heart disease are not just adult concerns. A 2015 Centers for Disease Control report found 21 percent of American children have abnormal cholesterol levels that increase their risk for heart disease and stroke in adulthood.

Although gym class gets kids moving, Brownell says it isn't a substitute for recess.

"Exercise should be fun," she says. "Free-range play is a big part of that." Freedom to choose activities encourages kids to make movement a life-long habit.

### Social & Emotional Benefits

Sports activities aren't the only upside of downtime. "Kids need to laugh and enjoy getting to know other children. They need time to just relax with a buddy, discussing fun things like video games, superheroes and family trips they've taken," says Sayles. Kids connect on the playground.

"Recess gives children the golden opportunity to practice social skills," says family psychotherapist Fran Walfish, Ph.D., author of *The Self-Aware Parent*. "When there are already two children playing and a third child wants to join in, there are complicated skills involved in making entry."

The playground is a perfect place to practice joining a group, to share information about yourself, to develop empathy and to learn how to be a good winner or loser. These skills may be harder to build in the classroom, where teachers orchestrate the activities.

"As adults we may find that going for a walk, working out or playing golf improves our ability to manage stress," Beurkens says. Free play gives kids the same benefits. Fresh air and exercise reduce depression and reinvigorate kids' spirits. Movement also raises levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin, a chemical involved in mood and well being. This mood boost helps kids de-stress.

### Academic Benefits

Unstructured play also makes students smarter. Unpredictable playground problems offer a sort of hands-on "training for the unexpected," says anthropologist and play advocate Abby Loeberberg, Ph.D., an Honors Faculty Fellow at the Barrett Honors College of Arizona State University. "Essentially the theory is that as we play we are helping our brains to create neural pathways that we can use to be more creative when faced with an unfamiliar problem" in the future.

When a ball is stuck in a tree, or a friend is sad because she is left out, your child has to think about how to respond. She tries a possible solution and observes the outcome. If needed, she may try a

## NO RECESS AS PUNISHMENT?

Experts disagree: Should kids lose recess due to misbehavior? Despite the benefits of recess, a Gallup survey of elementary principals found 77 percent take recess away as a consequence for misbehavior. Family psychologist Dr. Fran Walfish, author of *The Self-Aware Parent*, says it may be useful to withhold recess from some kids. For example, if a child is talking during class and doesn't finish his work, you may motivate him to get work done by keeping him inside during playtime.

Clinical psychologist Nicole Beurkens, Ph.D., disagrees. She believes withholding recess may aggravate problems rather than solving them. "Children with sensory processing problems ... require specific types of stimulation to function well. What appears to be misbehavior is often a red flag for teachers that a break is needed." Walking, stretching or playing outside can help re-engage the brain.

"Too often these children are punished by removing opportunities for physical movement, such as recess, which only compounds the problem and makes things worse for the child," Beurkens says.

Classroom teachers take a pragmatic approach. "Sometimes [this strategy] will set a kid straight," says second-grade teacher Lara Bean, "but most times, it doesn't work." Kids need to decompress. That is what recess is for.

different approach or seek help from a peer or adult. These real-world problem-solving opportunities teach life lessons not covered in the classroom.

Recess quality – not just quantity – counts. Students benefit most when they feel physically and emotionally safe, have positive interactions with peers, receive support for solving conflicts and have opportunities to participate in activities. Positive playground experiences follow kids back into the classroom. Kids who feel good about school have better attendance, improved attentiveness and higher achievement across the board.

### Give Recess a Redo

In light of these benefits, it may be time to rethink recess. "Our increasing focus on sitting at a desk to do academic work for hours at a time is backfiring, as evidenced by our overall achievement outcomes as compared to other countries," Beurkens says.

Parents and teachers need to speak up in support of recess and work with school leaders to make sure playgrounds have adequate staffing and safe (fun!) equipment. Kids need to learn how to reenergize their brains and their bodies so they can focus, learn and achieve. This self-regulation skill is key to living a healthy, happy life. ■

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