

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL RECESS: Then and Now

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A complete history of elementary school recess in the United States has yet to be written. In fact, little is recorded about the nature of this school practice prior to the latter part of the 19th century, although early lithographs and old prints of children playing outside their schoolhouse imply that recesses were the norm. However, even then recess was a controversial topic.

In 1885, David Howell, the Superintendent of Schools in Lansing, Michigan, published a report in which he gave eight reasons why a "no recess plan" should be nationally implemented. His concerns were:

- *Health.* Children often rushed to the school yard "bareheaded, thinly wrapped, with feet clad in paper-soled shoes," greatly increasing their risk of "diphtheria, catarrh, and pneumonia."
- *Safety.* Howell "trembled for the little ones who may be maimed for life" due to the boisterous play of older children.
- *Bullying.* Nearly all cases of corporal punishment resulted from recess conflicts involving stronger children tyrannizing younger and weaker children.
- *Moral contamination.* "Improprieties

of conduct" involving vulgar and obscene language could be reduced without recess.

- *Convenience.* Without recess, children could be released earlier to assist the family at home.
- *Concentration.* Students had trouble focusing and forming good study habits following recess.
- *Need for adequate light.* Without a recess break, children would be able to study in the morning, when natural light from the windows could "prevent eye injury and myopia."
- *Time efficiency.* Following recess, children wasted time recovering from their "breathless condition."

Recess Today

The situation has changed since 1885 and many of Howell's concerns are no longer major problems. Around the world, recess has become an important part of the school day. For many children, it is their only opportunity to play outdoors with their peers. Some British primary schools have three daily recess periods: 15 minutes in the mornings and afternoon, and 80 to 90 minutes at lunch (Pellegrini 1995). Japanese schools typically have recess periods of 10 to 20 minutes between 45-minute lessons, or five-minute breaks

between lessons with a long play period after lunch (Lewis 1995).

According to a 1989 survey, 90 percent of U.S. school districts had some form of recess, usually 15 to 20 minutes, once or twice a day (Pellegrini 1995). Since then, a number of school systems have opted for a no-recess policy, reflecting a growing tendency to devote school time only to those activities that impact academic achievement. Since recess has no designed educational objectives, there are those that believe that it should be eliminated in favor of more time for additional learning, computer training, or individualized instruction. Research suggests, however, that recess has value and cannot be abandoned without loss to the children and to the school.

Research and Recess

From a research standpoint, recess is a multi-dimensional activity. The following are six key areas where research has addressed characteristics of recess in elementary schools:

Breaks. The most obvious characteristic of recess is that it constitutes a break in the school day. For people of all ages and in all occupations, breaks are considered essential for satisfaction and alertness. Dempster (1988) and Toppino et al. (1991) found that recall is improved when learning is spaced rather than presented all at once. In their research on recess, Pellegrini and Davis (1993) and Pellegrini et al. (1995) found that elementary school-age children became

progressively inattentive when recess was delayed. Jarrett et al. (1998) concluded that fourth graders were less on-task and more fidgety in the classroom on days when they had no recess, and that hyperactive children benefited most from the recess experience.

Choice. A second characteristic of recess is that it involves choice. In interviews of fourth graders on the difference between physical education and recess, the dominant response was that recess involved a choice of play activities and partners, whereas in physical education classes they were told what to play and with whom. Some of the children noted that recess was the only time of the school day when they could make choices, which increased their feelings of importance (Maxwell et al. 1999).

Outdoor Play. In meeting today's needs for homes, shopping malls, and parking garages, many city planners have ignored the equally important need for outdoor play areas. Day-long trips to the malls have replaced traditional family outings to local parks, and for many children a 20-minute recess period may be the longest time in which they are outdoors on a given day. Research cited in Rivkin (1998) indicates that today's children have much less experience with outdoor activity than previous generations.

Vigorous Movement. Between the ages of 4 and 12, the body experiences tremendous physical growth. Vigorous physical activity during recess not only

enhances muscle growth, but also stimulates the growth of the heart, lungs, and other vital organs (Clements 2000). Studies reported in Werner et al. (1996) indicate that children who lead sedentary lifestyles suffer increased health risks. Research also reveals that the child's need for vigorous movement usually is demonstrated by a burst of energy during the first six or seven minutes on the playground (Pellegrini and Davis 1993; Pellegrini et al. 1995).

Social Interaction. Educational psychologists and childhood development experts have long understood that the nature of their play affects the personality, character, and abilities of every child, and therefore greatly influences the type of adults they become. According to Jambor (1994), recess is one of the few settings where today's children can actively "confront, interpret, and learn" meaningful social interactions. In organizing their own games, children learn to respect rules, control aggression, develop problem-solving and planning strategies, practice leadership styles, and resolve conflicts (Schaefer and Reid, 1986; Nichols 1995; DeVries 1998). Although game-playing can occur in the classroom as well as on the playground, recess provides a more open setting where children are free to leave the play situation and where they must learn to cooperate to keep the game going (Hartup and Laursen 1993; Jarrett and Young in press).

Recess also may be the only opportunity for some children to practice their social skills with other children (Maxwell et al. 1999). Most classrooms allow very little

social interaction and many children spend hours alone after school viewing television or playing computer games.

Observable Behaviors. Social development researchers often conduct their studies during recess because the playground is where children can select and organize the direction of their activities, and decide with whom they wish to interact (Ladd and Price 1993). While socially accepted behaviors, like active participation, sharing, and abiding by rules are observed most of the time, there are infrequent examples of non-desirable behaviors, like fighting, teasing or bullying.

Recess also gives teachers opportunities to observe spontaneous peer interaction, leadership styles, and social isolation, as well as positive and negative social behavior (Pellegrini 1995; Jarrett and Young 1999). According to Serbin et al. (1993), such playground observations "add a valuable dimension in assessing problem behaviors." Knowledge of which children display aggressive or bullying behavior enables the teacher to intervene and begin the corrective process (Pellegrini and Bjorklund 1996; Jarrett and Young, in press).

Recess: The Fourth R

Synthesizing what research says about the need for recess is like working on a jigsaw puzzle. While individual studies contribute small insights into the needs for recess, when the pieces are assembled, the need for recess is obvious. The American Association for The Child's Right To Play (IPA/USA) has

the following recommendations for all school administrators providing play spaces and daily recess periods for elementary school students:

Schools should plan diverse playground settings that offer opportunities for both physical and passive play;

- Playground settings should include natural elements;
- Playground equipment should include swings and large, age-appropriate structures that afford a variety of movement;
- The school yard should contain a specific play area whose surface and equipment is maintained on a weekly basis;
- Props should be provided for creative play and an ample supply of playground equipment, such as jump ropes and balls, should be available; and
- Playground supervisors should receive training in safety, group organization, equipment management, and cooperative and traditional recess activities.

For More Information

These groups and organizations offer free or low-cost resources on playground topics, including design, safety, supervision, and behavior problems.

American Association for Leisure and Recreation

1900 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191-1599
1-800-213-7192, ext. 472

American Association for The Child's Right to Play
c/o Rhonda Clements, Ed.D.
220 Hofstra University
Hempstead, NY 11549
1-516-463-5176
<http://www.ipausa.org>

National Program for Playground Safety
c/o Donna Thompson, Ph.D.
School of HPELS
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0241
1-800-554-7529
<http://www.uni.edu/playground>

National Recreation and Park Association
22377 Belmont Ridge Road
Ashburn, VA 20148
1-800-626-NRPA
<http://www.nrpa.org>

United States Consumer Safety Commission
1-800-638-2772
<http://www.cpsc.gov>