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The Importance of Recess and Outdoor Play: Part 1

by Dani Kinsley, MS, OTR/L

Across the United States, many schools are greatly reducing or even eliminating recess time altogether due to increasing pressure to meet academic demands. But what does this really mean for kids? How is the elimination of recess time negatively impacting their bodies, attention, and ability to learn? In this Handy Handout (and in *Part 2*), we'll explore the importance of recess and why it needs to be protected in schools.

So, What Do Children Need When it Comes to Daily Exercise and Outdoor Time?

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, *all* children and teenagers should get at least 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous activity (preferably outside).



- Kids aged 3-5 need *even more*: at least 3 hours of physical activity per day, or about 15 minutes every hour that they are awake.



- We're talking about joyous, exciting, heart-pumping, sweat-inducing play: things like running, jumping, climbing, tumbling, swinging, sliding, balancing, throwing, catching, building, pedaling, chasing, and playing cooperative games with friends.



- The type of play that is most beneficial is open-ended, child-directed, sensory-stimulating, and has opportunities for developmentally-appropriate risk taking.



- Children with disabilities need equal access to safe, accessible, and inclusive play spaces where they can join in with peers for unstructured play and socialization opportunities. For students with sensory sensitivities, quiet and shady areas should be provided to offer a calming respite from the chaos of some playground spaces.



So, We Know What Kids Need – But What Are They Actually Getting?



- On average, American children currently spend only about 4-7 minutes per day in unstructured outdoor play.



- In comparison, some experts estimate that children are spending an average of 7-8 hours in front of a screen for entertainment each day. That number doesn't even include the time they spend on the computer at school or home for educational purposes.



- Schools continue to decrease recess time in order to allocate more minutes to direct instruction to meet increasingly rigorous academic standards. However, this plan is actually counter-productive, as kids need to play and move their bodies in order to learn optimally.

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Their brains are not in a state of alert receptiveness when they have been trying to sit still too long.

- While many elementary schools continue to offer a short recess period for K-5th grade students, most middle and high schools offer little to no unstructured outdoor recreation time for students.



Now We Know That Most Kids Need Much More Outdoor Play Time Than They're Getting, But Why is This Time So Important? Why is it Worth Protecting?

- For a lot of kids in public school systems across the nation, the time they spend in unstructured free play at school may be the only safe, quality outdoor time they're really getting in an entire day.

- Children who misbehave in school frequently have their recess time taken away as a form of punishment. We should never take recess away from children.
- Often the students who are most likely to lose that recess time are the ones who need it the most. These are the kids who are constantly fidgeting, can't stay in their seats, are disruptive during class, or may even exhibit extremes such as falling asleep or having outburst-type behavior. And these are the students who really benefit from and need the sensory input of intense physical activity during recess.
- To learn more about how to get involved with protecting recess at your local school, contact your child's teacher or school administrators to learn more about how much recess students are receiving. You can also join your local Parent Teacher Association or Organization (PTA/PTO) or attend public School Board meetings in your community to advocate for protecting or extending daily recess.

Read Part 2 in this series for more information on the benefits of daily unstructured outdoor play.

References:

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Additional Resources:

- <https://www.gonoodle.com/> (WEBSITE FOR RAINY-DAY CLASSROOM SONGS AND ACTIVITIES)
- <https://childmind.org/article/ideas-for-getting-your-kids-into-nature/> (IDEAS FOR GETTING YOUR KIDS INTO NATURE)
- <https://www.timbernook.com/blog/> (TIMBERNOOK BLOG)
- <https://www.1000hoursoutside.com/> (1000 HOURS OUTSIDE WEBSITE)

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