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Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum members Olga Jarrett and Sandra Waite-Stupiansky wrote this column.

The column is available online at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.

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Recess—It's Indispensable!

THE DEMISE OF RECESS in many elementary schools—and of outdoor play in general—is an issue of great concern to many members of the Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum. If there is any doubt that this is a problem, pick up publications as diverse as *Sports Illustrated*, *Pediatrics*, the *New York Times*, or your local newspaper to read about it.

Most of us remember recess as an important part of the school day. It was a time to be outdoors; to organize our own games; to play on the swings, slides, and other playground equipment; or just to hang out with friends.

In contrast, children today are likely to have 10 to 15 minutes of outdoor playtime during the school day, if they are lucky. No wonder there is an upswing in childhood obesity and an increase in childhood heart disease and type 2 diabetes. No wonder teachers are concerned about a generation of children who can't entertain themselves, have social difficulties, and are fidgety and off task in class.

Cutting back on recess

In the late 1980s, some school systems began cutting back on recess to allow more instructional time. The trend accelerated with the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001 and was particularly widespread in urban schools with high numbers of children from marginalized populations (Jarrett 2003; Roth et al. 2003; NCES 2006).

How Many Children Have Recess?

How many children are deprived of recess every day? Although we don't know exactly, statistics reveal a troubling trend.

A 2005 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2006) survey found that

- 7 percent of first-graders and 8 percent of third-graders never had recess; and

- 14 percent of first-graders and 15 percent of third-graders had only 1 to 15 minutes of recess a day.

According to official figures provided by school systems, since the enactment of No Child Left Behind,

- 20 percent of the school systems have decreased time for recess, averaging cuts of 50 minutes per week (Center on Education Policy 2008).

The arguments against recess involved both academics and safety issues. Some administrators believed their school's test scores would improve if children spent more time on school work. Some feared lawsuits from playground injuries.

A number of school systems have a recess policy; others allow the principals or teachers to determine whether the children go out to play. Officially having

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recess and *actually* having recess are two different issues. A recent study in *Pediatrics* (Barros, Silver, & Stein 2009), using a national data set of 11,000 children, found that 30 percent of third-graders had fewer than 15 minutes of recess a day. Recess time is often cut because of academic pressures or as punishment.

Recess's many benefits

To make recommendations for policy changes, we, as members of the Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum, spent the past decade investigating what research says about the need for recess. On the one hand, we found no research to support administrators' assumptions that test scores required by No Child Left Behind could be improved by keeping children in the classroom all day. On the other hand, there is considerable research to suggest that recess has many benefits for children in the cognitive, social-emotional, and physical domains. Jarrett (2002) gives a summary of many of the research studies that found the following cognitive, social-emotional, and physical benefits of recess:

Cognitive

- Children are less fidgety and more on-task when they have recess, and children with ADHD (attention deficit/hyperactivity syndrome) are among those who benefit most.
- Research on memory and attention shows that recall is improved when learning is spaced out rather than concentrated. Recess provides breaks during which the brain can "regroup."
- Brain research shows a relationship between physical activity and the development of brain connections.
- A school system that devoted a third of the day to nonacademic activities (art, music, physical activity) improved attitudes and fitness and slightly increased test scores, in spite of spending less time on academics.

Social-emotional

- On the playground, children exercise leadership, teach games to one another, take turns, and learn to resolve conflicts.
- In a free choice situation, children learn negotiation skills in order to keep the play going.
- On supervised playgrounds, particularly where children are taught games and conflict resolution skills, there is little fighting (see "Reconstructing Recess: One Principal's Story," p. 68).
- Intervention programs during recess can successfully improve social skills.

Physical

- Recess before rather than after lunch leads to healthier eating.
- Children who are active during the day are more active after school, whereas children who are sedentary during the day tend to remain sedentary after school (couch potato syndrome).

Children's activity levels are generally higher during recess than during physical education (PE). PE is not

The Demographics of Recess

A nationwide study on how first through fifth grade children spend their time at school found that on a randomly selected day, 21% of children did not have any recess (Roth et al. 2003). The study noted demographic disparities:

- 39% of African American students versus 15% of White students did not have recess;
- 44% of children living below the poverty line versus 17% of those above the poverty line were deprived of recess; and
- 25% of the children scoring below the mean on a standardized test versus 15% of those above the mean did not have recess.

An NCES survey (2006) also found disparities, with rural schools and affluent schools more likely to have recess. A 2003 survey of Georgia school systems (unpublished data collected by Jarrett and colleagues) found the same patterns but with 25% of kindergartners having no recess.



Photo courtesy of Susan Welteroth

Game Day at Watson Elementary

seen by the PE teachers or the children as a substitute for recess. Recess and PE serve different purposes. Research also suggests benefits for teachers, even when the teacher is required to supervise on the play-

ground. Recess can help with classroom management:

- Teachers rated children's behavior as better in classes where children had at least 15 minutes of recess (Barros, Silver, & Stein 2009).

- Teachers get to know the children better when supervising them on the playground. This knowledge can be useful in developing curriculum and in preventing bullying.

- Time on the playground is a change of pace for the teacher as well as for the children.

Reconstructing Recess: One Principal's Story

At Watson Elementary in central Pennsylvania, a small K–4 school where I am principal, the staff and I noticed conflicts, exclusion, and safety concerns on the playground during recess. We felt strongly that we needed to turn recess around.

We talked extensively and agreed that recess should be respectful, have safe play, include child choice, and encourage all children to participate. We also discussed the teachers' role at recess. We committed to simple, consistent rules—respect for self, others, the play environment, and the play equipment. Teachers brainstormed games that encourage responsibility, cooperation, and communication and made a list of the games to facilitate child choice.

We decided that before recess, children would choose from the list of cooperative games or old standbys (jump rope, hopscotch, four square). Children could also choose not to participate and instead play on their own. Teachers would review the rules and acceptable behaviors for the games before going to the playground (“What does it look like to tag someone?”).

With the start of the new school year, we designated the second day Game Day for the staff to demonstrate the games, modeling the behaviors we wanted the children to use and allowing them to practice the skills in a safe environment. In a reflective writing activity at the end of Game Day, most children and teachers wrote about prosocial skills—inclusion, fair play, and teamwork.

Throughout the school year, teachers reinforced the concepts learned on Game Day. They helped children problem solve issues like what to do when teams had unequal skill levels and what happens if a child wants to jump rope but all the jump ropes are in use. Game Day didn't magically eliminate all of the playground concerns, but we now heard students supporting each other during recess.

Interested in reconstructing recess in your school? Here are some thoughts for teachers and administrators:

- Schedule recess every day for primary and elementary level children. Breaks from academics are important, and children need opportunities to practice positive social interactions.
- Agree on basic rules that apply throughout the school building and the day.
- Build a repertoire of games that encourage cooperation and responsibility and avoid conflicts.
- Teach the games using modeling and practice. Reinforce children's prosocial skills throughout the school year.
- Provide enough materials and equipment for several groups of children to play the same game. Help students make choices about which games to play.
- Provide teacher supervision during recess, and encourage the children during play.

—Susan Welteroth (swelteroth@wrsd.org)

Children's right to play

We believe that recess is a right, not a privilege. Article 31 of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (www.unicef.org/crc) recognizes

The right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

We believe that recess, with its fun, movement, and opportunities to socialize through play, is a basic need and that policies against recess, whether made at the school system, school, or teacher level, discriminate against children. Depriving a child of recess as punishment is similar to depriving a child of lunch. It is not only unfair, it is also unhelpful. Just as hungry children cannot concentrate well, children deprived of breaks cannot concentrate well either. Sometimes the most disruptive children need recess the most.

Stand up for recess!

What can you do? Here are some steps you can take:

- Find out whether the schools in your community have recess, and if so, for how many minutes a day. Do *all* the children get recess?
- Check school playgrounds for safety. The National Program for Playground Safety (NPPS) has helpful online resources (www.playgroundsafety.org). Examine the needs for supervision. Generally, teachers supervise recess; but in some cases, other supervisors are hired.

Advocacy can take many forms, including writing letters to the school board and newspaper, circulating petitions, and organizing rallies.

- Knowledge is power. Stay informed about what research says about recess. The references at the end of this article should be helpful. Also check www.ipausa.org, the Web site of the American Affiliate of the International Play Association, Promoting the Child's Right to Play.
- Organize. Most changes occur because people work together. Teachers and families often make great recess advocates. So do students. Children can collect data, write letters, and make posters. In some

schools, the efforts of children have gotten recess reinstated.

- Meet with principals, the school superintendent, and legislators and elected officials. Share your knowledge, but also be a good listener. Listening helps you learn more about the issues and also builds mutual respect.
- If friendly persuasion fails, advocacy can take many forms, including writing letters to the school board, writing letters to the newspaper, circulating petitions, and organizing rallies. Advocates in several states have even introduced legislation to ensure that children statewide are guaranteed recess.

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Recommended Reading

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