

Why Recess is important: The role of recess in child development

SUMMARY

Recess is a period of unstructured time commonly given to children at school as a break from academics (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005). Research has demonstrated the wide-ranging benefits of recess, including improvements in social skills, cognitive and academic achievement, physical health, and classroom behavior. Unfortunately, recess is disappearing in schools around the country, including in the Rochester City School District. This trend can be detrimental to students, especially to those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. On behalf of the Division of Neurodevelopmental and Behavioral Pediatrics and Strong Center for Developmental Disabilities at the University of Rochester, we recommend daily recess that is separate from physical education classes.

WHY FOCUS ON RECESS?

Our interest in recess stems from our interactions with Rochester City School District (RCSD) classrooms while carrying out the “Remaking Recess” Project. “Remaking Recess” is a school-based intervention designed to increase both the quality and quantity of interaction among students during social times such as recess. While our main goal was to integrate students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) into peer networks, our strategies were designed to benefit not only students with ASD but also their peers. For example, we coached school personnel on how to interpret a student’s level of social engagement and how to set up activities that would increase engagement. Throughout the 2013-2014 school year, this project was implemented locally in 10 integrated classrooms (1st to 5th grade) in RCSD, as well as in other schools through collaborating sites in Los Angeles and Philadelphia. “Remaking Recess” consists of a total of

sixteen 20-30 minute sessions, with two to three sessions held each week. Team members from the University of Rochester arranged their school visits to coincide with classrooms' scheduled recess times to work with teachers, aides, other adult educators, and students to teach strategies for improving the social engagement of students.

Throughout the “Remaking Recess” Project, the frequency and duration of recess were highly variable across RCSD classrooms, at times compromising our ability to execute the intervention with fidelity. While the Rochester City School Board Policy Manual states in its Physical Wellness Policy that students should be provided with a minimum of 20 minutes of supervised recess per day, five of seven¹ classrooms did not meet this minimum. On average, the students involved in the project accessed 67 minutes of recess per week. Whereas some students had access to 30 minutes of recess daily (150 minutes per week), others only received seven minutes of recess per week. At least one classroom initially had no regularly scheduled recess time. School administrators and teachers of this classroom scheduled one weekly recess so that their students could participate in the “Remaking Recess” project.

DISAPPEARING RECESS

The lack of recess that we observed in RCSD is not unique. Many schools across the country have been minimizing time spent in recess, or eliminating recess altogether, in order to accommodate more time for academics (Pellegrini, 2005; Ramstetter, Murray, & Garner, 2010). However, there is no evidence that eliminating recess will improve children's academic performance. Why then is recess diminishing? Arguments against and barriers to recess are many and varied. These include the notion that recess cuts into instructional time, that children may learn aggressive behaviors during recess, and that some children may get bullied during recess. It has also been suggested that physical education may be just as effective as recess in terms of “taking a break from academics” (Pellegrini, 2008). Barriers to providing recess include

¹ Although the Remaking Recess Project took place in ten classrooms, data on frequency and duration of recess were only recorded in seven of these classrooms.

pressures to increase the amount of academic instruction and limited resources for recess activities. While appropriate supervision of all children is recommended in order to insure safe and socially appropriate play, funding for supervision may be unavailable (Ramstetter, Murray, & Garner, 2010). Staffing deficits, lack of safe playground equipment, or lack of physical space, especially during bad weather, sometimes impact the frequency of recess. Opportunities for children to participate in recess are diminishing, and city and lower-income schools appear to be hit hardest by the reduction in recess times (Ramstetter, Murray, & Garner, 2010). Children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) may have even fewer opportunities to socialize and play than typically developing peers (Shikako-Thomas et al., 2009).

PLAY AND RECESS PROVIDES NUMEROUS POTENTIAL BENEFITS

The Importance of Play

Through play, children can increase their knowledge of the world, develop flexible and creative thinking, learn problem solving, develop and practice social communication and other social-emotional skills, improve motor skills, and improve physical health (Warreyn, Van Der Paelt, & Roeyers, 2014; Fisher, 1992). The development of social competence is a vital preparatory task during childhood and adolescence, and is linked to future social, academic, and vocational success (McFadyen-Ketchum & Dodge, 1998; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Parker & Asher, 1993; Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Children and adolescents with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are at particular risk for social competence deficits compared to their typically developing peers (Guralnick, 1999; Leffert & Siperstein, 2002; Pellegrini & Smith, 1993). A primary contributing factor to this disparity is the lack of opportunities for youth with IDD to develop and practice social skills (Dragow, Lowrey, Turan, Halle, & Meadan, 2008; Shikako-Thomas et al., 2009). In particular, youth with IDD participate in fewer social activities, have limited social connections, and maintain fewer intimate relationships than their peers without disabilities (Abery, 2003; Milner & Kelly, 2009).

The Benefits of Recess

In 2013, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) published a position paper on “The Crucial Role of Recess,” describing the numerous benefits recess provides for children. The AAP further recommended that all children partake in daily, supervised recess (AAP, 2013). Access to recess is important for all children, not only those who are typically developing but also those with special needs such as IDD. The benefits of recess for all children can be divided into four categories (Ramstetter, Murray, & Garner, 2010; AAP, 2013).

1. Cognitive/Academic/Attention

As intellectual constructs and cognitive understanding are developed through interactive, exploratory experiences (AAP, 2013) it is not surprising that recess (unstructured breaks) improves children’s cognitive and attentional skills. Academic achievement and attention benefit from any type of unstructured break, even those that are primarily social (Stellino and Sinclair, 2008). Delaying or reducing access to recess may therefore exacerbate children’s inattention in the classroom (Holmes, Pellegrini, & Schmidt, 2006; Pellegrini, Huberty, & Jones, 1995). Children are less fidgety and work more on days they have recess (Jarrett et al, 1998). Breaks from academics that include physical activity also improve attention to task (Maher, 2011). This is especially important to consider for students with disabilities who are likely to have increased attention and academic difficulties (Chien, Gau, Chiu, Tsai, Shang, & Wu, 2014; Sinzig, Vinzelberg, Evers, & Lehmkuhl, 2014). In addition, physical activity has been linked to improvements in executive function skills (Davis et al., 2011), with which children with IDD often struggle. Improving executive function skills through increased activity has the potential to help children be more successful academically, regulate their classroom behavior, and participate more successfully in social interactions.

2. Social-Emotional

Recess provides an important opportunity for children to develop complex social, language, and emotional regulation skills (e.g., sharing, communication, cooperation, problem solving, coping skills, self-control skills, imaginative skills, compromise, resolve conflicts, perspective

taking, following rules of games). Competence with group games predicts adjustment to school and social adjustment (Pellegrini & Kato, 2002). Furthermore, children with IDD are at-risk for developing internalizing disorders (e.g., anxiety, depression; Strang et al., 2011), which highlights the importance of regular opportunities to develop emotion-regulation and coping skills.

For some children with deficits in social skills, for example, children with ASD or other IDD, inclusive play is a crucial part of intervention. Interventions for children with ASD conducted during recess can improve social, play, and communication skills, as well as challenging problem behaviors such as aggression, pica, self-injury, and stereotypy (Lang et al., 2013). Recess enables children with IDD to develop relationships with peers and practice skills that are important for future success in social interactions (Shikako-Thomas et al., 2009). “By adapting and adjusting to the complex school environment, children augment and extend their cognitive development in the classroom (AAP, 2013, p.184).”

3. *Physical*

Recess provides opportunities for children to enjoy free movement and physical activity, outside of a structured gym class. In addition, children have improved appetite when recess is held prior to lunch. They waste less food (Getlinger, Laughlin, Bell, Akre, & Arjmandi, 1996) and eat more fruits and vegetables (Price & Just, 2015).

Children with IDD are generally less active than typically developing children and may not have as many opportunities for physical activities outside of the school day (Hinkson & Curtis, 2013). Thus, opportunities for physical activity such as during recess are important for all children, including those with IDD. The risk of obesity for all children, and especially for children with disabilities, is lessened with unstructured recess time, even if physical movement is minimal (AAP, 2013).

4. *Behavior*

Appropriate behavior within the classroom facilitates learning. Children with disabilities, especially those with ASD, may experience greater rates of behavior difficulties compared to

typically developing children (Macintosh & Dissanayake, 2006). When challenging behaviors occur at school, they can cause the student distress and distract the classroom from valuable instructional time (Schreibman et al., 2000). Access to recess improves classroom behavior. For example, holding recess prior to lunch may improve behavior during lunch. Following recess, there are fewer interruptions during teaching times. At least one recess of 15 minutes daily is linked to better teachers' rating of class behavior (Barros, Silver, & Steim, 2009).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RECESS

Children and adolescents with and without IDD need increased opportunities to participate together in both structured and unstructured play. In addition to the classroom-specific benefits described above, opportunities for play through participation in leisure and recreation activities, including recess, have been linked to more generalized benefits, such as enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence, the ability to combat negative peer pressure, enhanced quality of life, and increased social acceptance and integration into the community (Berndt, 2004; Devine, 2004; Mulvibill, Cotton, & Gyaben, 2004; Pellegrini, Kato, Blatchford, & Baines, 2002; Shikako-Thomas et al., 2009). However, access to leisure and recreation opportunities is not always equitable, and youth with IDD are at particular risk for being excluded from extracurricular, after school, or summer camp programming. As such, incorporating play into the school day is of vital importance. Recess, in particular, may provide the sole platform for social competency skill development for many youth with IDD.

Many national organizations recommend a daily recess for elementary school children (See Table 1). They further recommend conducting recess separately from physical education and emphasize that recess should not be denied as punishment for behavior or to complete school work. Timing of recess also matters. Recess held prior to lunch improves children's appetite and food choices. Children with IDD should also have opportunities to be included in social play with the children in general education at school. Lastly, although there has been a push for increasing structure and adult-directed activities during playtimes, children benefit from

unstructured recess where they may engage in self-directed social activity (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005; Barros, Silver, & Stein, 2000).

Recommendations:

- The American Association of Pediatrics (2013) recommends 60 minutes of physical activity a day.
- Recess should be separate from Physical Education requirements that should be structured and typically have a cognitive component.
- Because recess time is more limited in urban schools and opportunities for play outside of school may be more limited, it is especially important that urban schools provide structured, scheduled access to recess.
- To focus on equitable access to recess for all students, it is important that reducing recess time is not used as a punishment technique.
- It is especially important that students with disabilities have the opportunity to experience recess time with their typically developing peers in order to develop friendships and social competence. This should be provided on a regular schedule for consistency and maximum access.

Table 1

National organizations that recommend daily recess			
	Recommend recess be separate from physical education	Suggest recess should not be denied to punish behavior	Recommend that recess should be held prior to lunch
Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)			X
National Association for Sport and Physical Education	X	X	
American Academy of Pediatrics	X	X	
Dept of Agriculture			X

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