



# Is RECESS a Luxury?

By Barbara Hawkins

## **AS ADULTS, MOST OF US INTUITIVELY KNOW WHEN WE'VE STOPPED CONCENTRATING**

and need to take a break. Many of us are able to stand and stretch, go for a coffee or take a short walk to refresh and recharge before we go back to the task at hand. Children are not given the same latitude at their job.

Recess has been shortened and even eliminated in the search for higher test scores. Since the implementation in 2002 of No Child Left Behind, many schools have replaced recess with increased amounts of academic learning. Where recess still exists, children with behavioral issues can still lose recess as a consequence for loss of attention, impulsive acts, fidgeting, and calling out.

Are our children paying a price we've only just begun to understand? The research that there is a set of skills that are not learned in a classroom is clear and well documented. A study published in *Pediatrics* suggests that recess of fifteen minutes or more may play a role in "improving learning, social development and health in elementary school children." According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the authors write, "free unstructured play is healthy and is essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones." The U.S. Centers for Disease Control recommends sixty minutes of physical activity daily. A study published in *School Psychology Quarterly* looked at the effect of recess on classroom behavior on children with and without ADHD. The study results showed that levels of inappropriate behavior were consistently higher on days when participants did not have recess.

Not all schools or school districts have jettisoned recess, however. What kinds of recess programs are being implemented at those schools?

### **Jemicy's unique approach**

At the Jemicy School, a small private school north of Baltimore, a unique approach to recess has been intrinsic since its founding. No one ever loses recess and multiple recess options exist for the students. Two recesses are scheduled every morning, one seventeen and one twenty minutes in length. The school is located on a former farm, tucked back behind a lovely neighborhood. In addition to standard playground equipment, students can enjoy exploring the woods, climb down to a stream, make a fort, divert water from the stream or play in a second wooded area that is a little more open and level. There is a vegetable garden, and students have access to a science classroom stocked with animals and small appliances that they can dismantle. Art and woodworking supplies and tools are also available.

Science instructor Emily Stanley, PhD, did her dissertation on the importance of recess. In an article she wrote for *Thresholds in Education*, she describes the approach taken at Jemicy. The article is based on a study she did of outdoor play. Stanley demonstrates the value of free play in the

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development of children's social skills with special emphasis on language development. She explains how the informal development of language skills is enhanced by the free play, sometimes as simple as an exchange between two students each holding a guinea pig, or group of students constructing a fort or setting up trades for items found in the woods.

### Playworks

A much more structured recess program is offered by Playworks ([playworks.org](http://playworks.org)), a fifteen-year-old California-based nonprofit organization with programs at two hundred and fifty schools in thirty cities. Schools can purchase a recess program for \$60,000 per year, although Playworks helps schools obtain grants and donations to cover some of the cost. Playworks provides recent college graduates and Americorps volunteers who they have trained as recess coaches.

In "Hard Times for Recess," a recent *New York Times* Fixes column, David Bornstein discusses a little of the history of play and outlines why he feels children may need coaches. "In decades past, when neighborhoods were perceived to be safe children had lots of times to play outdoors and they naturally picked up the culture of play from older kids," Bornstein writes. "Today, children are indoors more...and engage in vigorous activity for only 12.6 minutes per day—nowhere near the sixty minutes that the surgeon general recommends."

Playworks coaches teach the children how to play. They teach the students how to organize the playground and they introduce games, dividing various area of the playground for different games. They teach conflict resolution and help develop "junior coaches" to assist with younger children. A recent article in the *Star Tribune* by Daarel Burnett II suggested satisfaction with the program. "Kris Petersen, principal of Jayden Heights and Prosperity Heights in St. Paul, said Playworks couldn't have come at a better time," Burnett writes. The principal observed that the "structured recess helped us build a vibrant community and connected kids to create an inclusive community."

### Can parents make a difference?

What can parents do if recess is being taken away as a consequence for behavior? In meetings with the teacher or at an IEP or 504 meeting, it's important to have concrete descriptions of why the child is losing recess. Obviously, the teacher is trying to solve a problem. Once the problem is identified, alternative solutions can be suggested. If the child is not finishing the work, perhaps the work needs to be shortened for that child. If the child can demonstrate competence, is it necessary to continue? If the child is fidgeting, is there an acceptable fidget item the child can use that will not distract other children?

In their book *ADHD in the Schools: Assessment and Intervention Strategies*, George DuPaul of Lehigh University and Gary Stoner of the University of Rhode Island wrote a chapter that describes em-



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pirically supported school-based interventions to change and manage impulsive behaviors. They stress that the intervention must occur as close in time as possible to the targeted behavior. In other words, a consequence designed to help the student stay on task in reading must take place during the reading instructional period. A consequence given an hour later—such as missing recess—will be much less effective. Another excellent source of information is the *CHADD Educators Manual on ADHD*, edited by Chris A. Zeigler Dendy, MS, which contains many valuable suggestions for accommodations and interventions that can be shared with the child's teacher.

Do you know how much recess is scheduled into your child's day? Do you know what kind of recess is planned? Is it structured or free play? Does your child have the opportunity for games as well as small-group peer experience?

If recess seems to lack any of the elements considered important for your child's overall development, can you find or structure replacements? Are there areas near you that your child and a friend can explore? Is there a nature center nearby that is open and accessible for hikes? Are there parks where your child can run free or organize games with friends?

If you find that recess has been curtailed or eliminated at your child's school, you might start by asking other parents if they are aware of the situation and begin to form a group of concerned parents. Gather information on the value of recess, ask to meet with policymakers, and find out how to present the information to your local school board. Enlist the help of experts in child psychology and child development. 🗨

### Resources

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