

Recess: Should We Give Kids a Break?

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Ask my first-grader what his favorite period at school is and you'll get a prompt reply — recess, of course!

My family is lucky to live in New Jersey, whose laws mandate at least 20 minutes of daily recess for children in kindergarten through fifth grade. Many [public schools around the country](#) have restricted or banned recess altogether, despite the abundant research indicating the many academic, physical, and social benefits of recess for children.

Why is recess being cut short?

Authorities have cited various reasons for reducing, or completely cutting out, recess from the school day:

Lack of Time

For over a decade, administrators have cited a lack of time as one of the reasons for cutting rec programs. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was passed in the 2001–2002 school year, resulting in large increases in instructional time for both language arts and math. A consequenc of this legislation, however, is that by 2013, [20 percent of school systems](#) shortened recess.

More recently, in January 2015, 23 elementary schools in Orange County, Florida [removed recess altogether](#). This decision came after teachers argued they did not have sufficient time to cover the [Common Core curriculum](#).

Lack of Playground Space, Equipment, or Staff

A lot of institutions simply do not have the space they need for students to play freely outdoors. example, when districts in Chicago reintroduced recess in the 2012–2013 academic year after a three-decade absence, many city schools were challenged by a shortage of outdoor space and lack of proper playground equipment for children.

Another issue is that kids need supervision during recreation. A study by the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) shows that many disciplinary problems occur during recess. Children need to be supervised adequately during this time to ensure misbehavior and [bullying](#) do not occur. This requires properly trained staff that schools may lack.

Concerns About Safety

Some urban schools have placed restrictions on recess, especially outdoors, due to concern for their students' safety. In early June 2015, the [Gale Community Academy](#) in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood [cancelled outdoor recess](#) after a man was shot just a short distance away from the school's playground.

Withholding Recess for Disciplinary Reasons

The same Robert Wood Johnson report mentioned above states that 77 percent of principals reported punishing students for misbehavior by revoking recess privileges. A report entitled [The Crucial Role of Recess in Schools](#) from the American Association of Pediatrics (AAP), however recommends that children should not be deprived of recess as a punishment. In fact, kids may misbehave as a result of being forced to stay at their desks for too long — these children may *need* recess as an outlet for their physical energy.

Replacing Recess with P.E. or Enrichment Activities

Many schools across the country have replaced recess with physical education classes, while others, particularly certain [top-ranked New York City public schools](#), have replaced recess with clubs and enrichment options for students — like [Suzuki-method violin lessons](#), cheerleading, and computer class.

The AAP encourages free play over structured recess because the former allows children to exercise their free choice, imagination, and creativity. Physical education or enrichment classes consist of structured lesson times and have very different objectives from those of recess. For instance, the objectives of P.E. are developing motor skills, learning about different sports and their rules, and ways of incorporating healthy physical activity into one's lifestyle.

For more information, follow this link to read more about [the role of P.E. K–12 education](#).

What are the benefits of recess?

The primary aim of the AAP policy paper on recess was to illustrate the important benefits with which recess provides students. Here are some of the findings that are explained in the paper:

Academic/Cognitive Benefits

Several studies show that recess — whether indoors or outdoors — leads to improved focus and attention in the classroom. Periodic breaks during the day help both adolescents and younger children perform better.

High school senior and youth radio reporter [Eli Arbretton](#) advocates for recess in high school. He makes the point that students get an early start to the day and rush from class to class until the lunch break, which may be a full four hours later. He says, “If I had a little break or some time to move around, I think I could do better in and out of school.”

Social Benefits

Children learn important social skills through play: taking turns, sharing, negotiation, and cooperation. They also learn coping skills like perseverance and self-control. Recess is the time children spend socializing with classmates and friends. My son looks forward to recess because it is the one time of the day during which he gets to see his best friend (who happens to be in a different classroom this year).

Physical Benefits

First Lady Michelle Obama's [Let's Move](#) initiative to combat childhood obesity recommends at least [60 minutes of physical activity for children every day]. Recess allows children the opportunity to be physically active, and to counter the effects of excessive sedentary activities (watching television, using a computer, or playing video games). According to the AAP report, even those kids who don't play vigorously benefit from being away from their desks and engaging in moderate

Check here for [ideas about how to make sure kids get the exercise they need](#).

How can parents advocate for recess?

If your child's school doesn't include recess in its schedule, or if it is in danger of being removed, here is what you can do:

- Reach out and network with like-minded parents. Educate yourselves about the research that proves the benefits of recess and share it with your [local school board](#). You can start with the AAP and Robert Wood's Foundation reports linked above.
- Find out whether your district has a policy about recess. If it exists and your school isn't enforcing it, talk to your school board about making your school compliant. If there is no such policy, then talk to the board about creating one.
- Peaceful Playgrounds, an organization that provides blueprints, game guides, and a choice of playground games, offers a free [Right to Recess Campaign Toolkit](#) that includes recess research, information on policies and legislation, handouts, and presentations that you can download and use in your campaign.

These [five strategies to help you change school policy](#) will help you advocate effectively for your proposal.

What initiatives make recess even more effective at schools?

Some schools are taking the following steps to make recess a more inclusive and positive experience:

- Hiring one or more recess coaches to supervise and encourage participation. [Playworks](#) is an organization that offers full-time recess coaches to low-income schools at an affordable cost. They also offer professional development in managing recess for existing school staff.
- Recently, some schools have adopted a more structured form of recess in which supervisors instruct and direct games on the playground. Even though the AAP recommends recess that centers around free play, a structured recess affords opportunities for all kids to be involved in playground games and helps them to expend their energy while keeping conflicts and disciplinary issues to a minimum.

What disciplinary measures can schools take instead of taking away a student's recess time?

- A positive approach in which children are rewarded for good behavior instead of being punished for bad behavior.
- [The Responsive Classroom approach](#) to elementary education, used in our school district, recommends “logical consequences” to teach appropriate behavior to young children. This means that the consequences for a child’s misbehavior should be related to the actions of the child. For instance, incomplete homework need not result in missed recess. Instead, the teacher could have a talk with the child to figure out a method that will prevent a recurrence of the problem. On the other hand, if a child breaks playground rules and misbehaves during recess, she can be asked to take a timeout from play to cool down.

From a child’s perspective, recess is an essential part of the school day. To me, nothing expresses this better than the following lines from a collaborative poem entitled “Recess,” written by my second grade class:

“I feel the breeze on my face when I am on the swings I smell the flowers and spring”