

The Science of Recess

STUDIES SHOW THE IMPORTANCE OF RECESS, SO WHY DO SCHOOLS TREAT IT AS OPTIONAL?

BY VICTORIA VARELA

Remember the student in your third-grade class who couldn't sit still? It was always hard for them to focus on their work at school. Their favorite part of the day was recess. Without it, they would not be able to concentrate at all and would never finish their assignment. Oftentimes, the teacher made them stay inside during recess to get it done, but they never could. Without recess, students like this can't focus on what they are doing. Instead



of taking it away, science shows teachers should preserve recess and take their kids outside to move their bodies and move their minds.

Only 12 states in the country mandate recess. Florida is one of these states, but it only requires 20 consecutive minutes of play (that's less time than it takes to pick a show to watch on Netflix). Recess helps kids be more physically active and builds their confidence. But there are many hidden benefits, such as strengthening your memory and helping you learn how to make friends. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), recess actually helps behavior within the classroom, which is ironic because improving behavior is the main reason teachers take away recess.

"Taking away recess does not help a kid's behavior," said Dr. Cathy Ramstetter, who wrote the recess policy for the American Academy Of Pediatrics (AAP). "In fact, it just makes it worse." Taking away a child's recess makes them even more fidgety and anxious, which leads to more problems inside the classroom.

Finland and Korea have earned a reputation of being extremely high-performing in academics. Guess how much time students in these countries have for recess? Kids in Finland get 15 minutes in between every 45-minute class, which totals to at least 90 minutes per day. Kids in Korea may only have two recess periods, one in the morning and another in the afternoon, but they are quite long, lasting about 50 minutes each. They also have two months for winter break and two months for summer break.

Most, if not all parents want their kids to flourish and have lots of friends. Without recess, kids would not have as much time to connect and make real relationships with their peers, and therefore, kids may not have as many close friends. Recess is the main period of time for socializing and forming bonds with others. Many adults still have friends from their younger years when they were in school, and recess helped them connect with them. Students here in Questa still have friends from early

childhood, where they bonded over the sandbox or dinosaur toys. Many students create lifelong connections with people that most would never want to lose. Friendships are good for mental health, and so is recess.

"Not having enough recess is like not having enough sleep," said Lucy Dathan, a representative for the state of Connecticut. Recess has played a big part in her life. She and her family moved to Connecticut from California and naturally, her kids had to switch schools. She noticed her kids were coming home from school more tired or cranky. She checked in on them and asked what was wrong. They told her they barely got any recess compared to their last school. Rep. Dathan took action and was able to change the policy for the whole state of Connecticut.

Recess also helps our brains grow to become the people we want to become. "I think playtime fosters the creativity that we need to solve crazy world problems, like global warming, or other issues we need to face as a planet," Rep. Lucy Dathan said. Recess is proven to help kids concentrate better in class, so how come it is taken away as punishment?

Ask yourself or your kids if they have ever had recess taken away because of something they did wrong or took too long to do. Odds are the answer will be yes. Even though it doesn't seem like it, recess is extremely important- it helps kids build self-confidence while they use their imaginations and adapt to different environments. Kids and teens alike must take a break from math and reading and go outside to refresh their brains. A study from Oregon State University shows that recess isn't just a break to play, but it also helps kids with their memory, attention and concentration.

Dr. Ramstetter, a.k.a. Dr. R, has seen the good recess does. She first discovered her passion for recess when she began to work with the AAP. She was just beginning a new career when she was assigned to write a report on the importance of recess. She worked on it for a while and found her profound interest in the subject. Dr. R believes that kids should have more than just one recess break per school day. Five minutes in between each class to drink some water or even socialize with a friend can make all the difference when it comes to a child's attention span.

Dr. R empathizes with teachers and wants them to know there are ways to manage their classrooms without taking recess away. For example, when kids in class feel jumpy, Rep. Dathan recommends teachers have them stand up and do 10 jumping jacks. Questa students suggest giving kids a reward, tell students if they stop talking or misbehaving you will give them an extra five minutes of recess. There are many different ways teachers can keep everyone well-behaved and ensure their playtime outside of the classroom. After all, adults take breaks, for Dr. R makes the point, "Recess is a term for government officials, so why do kids not get the same break?"

At Summit-Questa, middle school students mentor lower elementary students to help teachers, teach kids and gain service hours. One day, a Questa student remembers, lower elementary students were given a certain amount of time to finish their book reports before recess. One student could not focus and did not finish their report before the time limit. The teachers made them stay inside to finish it and it took that student longer than ever to write a short book report. The student ended up being tired, upset and cranky for the rest of the day. This example shows how important recess can be for kids.

Two seventh graders remember that feeling. They



remember having their recess taken away on the day of the most important test of the year. The students say they were socializing instead of reading the book they needed to and their teacher took their recess away. Another seventh grader remembers when she was forced to write her book report while all the other students got to go outside and play. Another student points out how unfair the punishment of taking away recess was, saying, "If anyone around you was misbehaving, they would get their recess taken away, as well as the ones who didn't do anything wrong."

Ms. Judy Dempsey, principal of Summit-Questa, said she did not know this was happening. "Recess should not be taken away under any circumstances," she said. As a teacher herself, Ms. Judy knows

managing a classroom can be challenging, but taking away recess is not an effective way to do so. The recess policy at Summit-Questa is one hour for lunch and recess. Teachers can decide how much time is spent for each. Most elementary classrooms split it in half and give kids 30 minutes for play. That's not bad, but if you take any away, then it's quite likely kids will come back as restless as when they went out.

People sometimes forget that kids are the future of this world and that depriving them of creativity builders, like recess, makes it seem like the world might be a dull place in a few years. Paint a boring, black-and-white picture of the world in your head. That's the world kids are living in when teachers take recess away.



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