RECESS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

A Position Statement on Young Children and Recess

National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education

Position

The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education takes the position that recess is an essential component of education and that preschool and elementary school children must have the opportunity to participate in regular periods of active, free play with peers.

Recess

The term recess refers to a break during the day set aside to allow children the time for active, free play. Schools vary in the number of recess periods given children each day, the length of the periods, and the environments available. Typically recess occurs outdoors and in a designated play area. During inclement weather, schools may have recess periods in a game room, gymnasium, or inside the classroom.

> "Recess is the right of every child. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on Children's Rights states that every child has the right to leisure time. Taking away recess, whether as a disciplinary measure or abolishing it in the name of work, infringes on that right." [Skrupskelis, in Clements (2000), 126]

Rationale

An alarming trend toward the elimination of recess during the school day is affecting many school districts throughout the United States. This policy is being implemented with the advent of increased school accountability and student testing procedures, and the belief that time could be better spent on academics. This disturbing phenomenon has no serious research to back it up, and is actually counterproductive to increasing the academic achievements of students (Skrupskelis, 2000). Professional organizations, educators, administrators, teachers, and parents are becoming increasingly concerned with this present trend.

With forty percent of elementary schools in the United States reducing, deleting, or considering deleting recess (according to the American Association for the Child's Right to Play), the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) has prepared this statement containing a summary of research, delineations of current concerns, and recommendations about recess and the young child. The members of NAECS/SDE compliment the Council on Physical Education for Children and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education for issuing a

position paper, *Recess in Elementary Schools,* in July 2001 (Appendix 1). The position paper states that, while recess is an essential component of the elementary school program, it is inappropriate to substitute recess for physical education or physical education for recess. The paper also addresses the fact that recess provides the opportunity for young children to develop and improve many social, life, and physical skills.

Current condition of recess in the United States

In a 1989 survey by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, 90% of the school districts reporting had some form of recess. Most of the responses indicated that a type of recess occurred once or twice per day and lasted fifteen to twenty minutes. Since that date and with the increased pressure from a number of sources to improve achievement, increase test scores, and cover an increasingly demanding curriculum, nearly forty percent of the nation's 16,000 school districts have either modified, deleted, or are considering deleting recess from the daily elementary school schedule (American Association for the Child's Right to Play). This trend seems to be increasing yearly (Education Daily, 1998).

In addition to academic concerns, schools cite injuries, a heightened awareness of safety, and a lack of supervision as justifications for abolishing recess, specifically outdoor recess. Claiming the possibility of lawsuits if children are injured on school property, or of children coming into contact with menacing or potentially dangerous strangers, and the increasing curriculum demands, many administrators have determined recess is the easiest part of the daily schedule to eliminate.

Benefits to children

During the period of time commonly referred to as recess, learning occurs in ways not possible inside the regular classroom. An increasing body of research continues to indicate the benefits of unstructured play and specifically outdoor play for young children.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) describes unstructured physical play as a developmentally appropriate outlet for reducing stress in children (Appendix 2). This period of time allows children the opportunity to make choices, plan, and expand their creativity.

In allowing a mental change and release of energy, recess may facilitate subsequent attention to more academic tasks and minimize disruptive behavior once students return to the classroom; recess, therefore, becomes an important element of classroom management and behavior guidance (Bogden & Vega-Matos, 2000).

Recess contributes significantly to the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive (intellectual) development of the young child (Clements, 2001). Recess is one of the few places and times during the day when all these developmental domains are utilized in a

context that children view as meaningful. Children must function in all the developmental domains if they are to successfully adapt to school and societal norms. The domains are empirically related and should be considered intertwined. For example, social interaction and physical activity facilitate cognition; recess (indoor and outside) offers the opportunity for this development. On the playground, children can be observed actively practicing the learning and cognitive skills acquired in the classroom.

The benefits of recess in each of the specific developmental domains, as identified by current research, are outlined below. The division of the benefits into domains is only for evaluative purposes. All domains are interrelated as children develop.

- *Social Development:* Social development begins at birth and continues rapidly throughout the early childhood years. Research from the last ten years suggests strongly that close relationships with peers contribute to both social and cognitive development. Recess is that period of time during the school day that allows children the opportunity to interact with peers in ways not usually possible in the typical classroom.

  A wide range of social competencies – cooperation, sharing, language, conflict resolution – can be actively practiced, interpreted, and learned in a meaningful context during recess. Through active, free play and peer interaction, children can:
  - develop a respect for rules,
  - gain self-discipline, and
  - construct an appreciation for other people's cultures and beliefs.

  An important educational and socialization experience is lost when children are not allowed to participate in free play with peers on a regular basis.

- *Emotional Development:* Recess may act as an outlet for reducing anxiety and serve as a means by which children learn to manage stress and gain self-control. During recess play, children also learn the art of expressing themselves to others, and begin rehearsing behaviors and practicing skills. Children learn about their own abilities, perseverance, self-direction, responsibility, and self-acceptance. They begin to understand which behaviors result in approval or disapproval from their peers. During the primary years, children should begin to develop real friendships and relationships with peers. If children are not given the opportunity and the support to develop these interactions, they may not learn how to maintain and sustain such relationships. A positive social and working relationship with peers helps children develop a sense of social and emotional competence.

- *Physical Development:* Recess provides young children with opportunities to move and participate in physical activities. Two theories on why physical activity improves children's attentiveness and decreases restlessness dominate the research: the surplus energy theory and the novelty theory (Jambor, 1994). The surplus energy theory cites recess as a means for children to release excess energy

that has built up over time, while they have been sitting in a classroom. The novelty theory claims that on-task attention can be increased by providing opportunities for diversion from boredom. As indicated by current brain research, if students are given the chance to move around and be active, they return to the classroom more attentive and able to concentrate on the tasks presented. This change enables learning to take place more efficiently (Healy, 1998).

Physical movement is essential for healthy growth and development. Recent surveys have discovered that 40% of our young children have significant cardiac risk factors including obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and an inactive life style. Many children are not getting enough exercise to develop healthy hearts and lungs. Another cause for concern is obesity. In October, 1999, the Agriculture Department released a report that revealed a record 10 million American children – or one in five – are overweight, and that a record 8% of the children are already overweight by preschool age.

Through active play, young children learn about their bodies' capabilities and how to control their bodies. One of the most apparent benefits of recess is the opportunity for sheer physical activity and the practice of physical skills, such as running, climbing, jumping, chasing, traveling, batting, kicking, catching, balancing, hanging, swinging, stretching, pushing, and pulling.

Physical activity fuels the brain with a better supply of blood and provides brain cells with a healthier supply of natural substances; these substances enhance brain growth and help the brain make a greater number of connections between neurons (Healy, 1998). The connections make the brain better able to process a variety of information, thus leading to improved retention of facts, a greater understanding of concepts, and subsequently higher achievement.

- *Cognitive Development:* There are volumes of recent research substantiating the link between play and cognitive gains. Children learn through play. Children develop intellectual constructs and cognitive understandings through the hands-on, manipulative, exploratory behavior that occurs during play episodes and play opportunities. Play context provides the most appropriate support or scaffolding for children as they develop skills. "Children can remember more, focus better, and regulate their own behavior better in play than in any other context" (Guddemi et al., p. 5). After children practice skills in play, they become ready to utilize these skills in other contexts (Bodrova & Leong, 1999).

  Providing opportunities for active, free play with peers facilitates the encoding and decoding of social signals. The mechanisms involved are every bit as cognitive as math seatwork (Bjorklund & Brown, 1998). With the recent hypothesis that domain-specific brain modules may have evolved to process social information, it could be intimated that some cognitive benefits are a direct consequence of some types of physical play.

Examples of content areas that can be explored in context outdoors and on a playground include:

- the natural elements: experiencing wind, dirt, water, seasons;
- physics: using a see-saw, merry-go-round, swings;
- architecture and design: building with natural materials;
- math and numbers: counting, keeping score; and
- language development: explaining, describing, articulating, seeking information, and making use of oral language/vocabulary/word power.

Recommendations

To ensure all early childhood programs in preschools and elementary schools allow periods of time during the instructional day, in which children may have free and active outdoor play with peers, NAECS/SDE strongly encourages educators, policy makers and parents to:

- Support policies which require recess time to be part of the preschool and elementary school curriculum.

- Ensure and support additional research on the effects of recess on the developmental domains (social, emotional, physical, and cognitive), and on the effect of recess on academic achievement.

- Develop policies and resources necessary to support an awareness of the importance of recess and of active, free play in the development of the young child.

- Support research on the benefits of recess and its possible restorative role for children with attention disorders.

- Support research and professional development that facilitate every educator's skills in observation and assessment of the developmental growth of children through the play process.

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Appendix 1

RECESS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Council on Physical Education for Children

A Position Paper from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education

National Association for Sport and Physical Education, an association of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance

Recess, An Essential Component

Recess, while separate and distinct from physical education, is an essential component of the total educational experience for elementary aged children. Recess provides children with discretionary time and opportunities to engage in physical activity that help to develop healthy bodies and enjoyment of movement. It also allows elementary children to practice life skills such as conflict resolution, cooperation, respect for rules, taking turns, sharing, using language to communicate, and problem solving in situations that are real. Furthermore, it may facilitate improved attention and focus on learning in the academic program.

Various organizations including the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the American Association for the Child's Right to Play support recess as an important component of a child's physical and social development. Children need a variety of movement experiences to develop a healthy mind and body that is capable of learning. Inactivity is considered a major risk factor for heart disease, and patterns of inactivity may begin at early ages. As a result of parents working outside the home, neighborhood safety issues, and a lack of community support, a growing number of children have limited time to participate in unstructured play in their neighborhoods. They spend more time watching TV, playing computer games or other sedentary activities. The result of this inactivity, coupled with poor nutritional habits, is that more children are overweight and obese, showing early signs of heart disease, diabetes and other serious health problems. The involvement of young children in daily physical activity during school hours therefore is critical for their current and future health.

Recess may also provide the opportunity for students to develop and improve social skills. During recess periods, students learn to resolve conflicts, solve problems, negotiate, and work with others without adult intervention. Cognitive abilities may also be enhanced by recess. Studies have found that students who do not participate in recess may have difficulty concentrating on specific tasks in the classroom, are restless and may be easily distracted. In addition, recess serves as a developmentally appropriate strategy for reducing stress. Contemporary society introduces significant pressure and stress for many students because of academic demands, family issues and peer pressures.

Based on this information, COPEC recommends the following:

♦ Recess should not replace physical education. Recess is unstructured playtime where children have choices, develop rules for play, and release energy and stress. It is an opportunity for children to practice or use skills developed in physical education.

♦ Physical education provides a sequential instructional program with opportunities for children to learn about and participate in regular physical activity, develop motor skills, and use skills and knowledge to improve performance.

♦ Schools should develop schedules that provide for supervised, daily recess in pre-kindergarten through grades five or six. The use of facilities for recess activities should not interfere with instructional classes (separate locations for each activity). If possible, recess should not be scheduled back to back with physical education classes.

♦ Recess should not be viewed as a reward but a necessary educational support component for all children. Students should not be denied recess as a means of punishment, or to make up work.

♦ Periods of moderate physical activity should be encouraged and facilitated while recognizing that recess should provide opportunities for children to make choices. NASPE recommends that children ages 6-11 participate in at least one hour and up to several hours of physical activity each day. This activity may occur in periods of moderate to vigorous activity lasting 10-15 minutes or more. Recess may provide some of this activity time.

♦ Schools should provide the facilities, equipment and supervision necessary to ensure the recess experience is productive, safe and enjoyable. Developmentally appropriate equipment, as outlined in the NASPE Guidelines for Facilities, Equipment and Instructional Materials, should be made available. Adults should regularly check equipment and facilities for safety.

♦ Physical education teachers and classroom teachers should teach children positive skills for self-responsibility during recess.

♦ Adults should direct or intervene when a child's physical or emotional safety is an issue. Bullying or aggressive behavior must not be allowed, and all safety rules should be enforced.

Quality physical education along with daily recess are necessary components of the school curriculum that enable students to develop physical competence, health-related fitness, self responsibility, and enjoyment of physical activity so that they can be physically active for a lifetime.

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*Additional information on recess may be obtained through the International Play Association.

Appendix 2

early years are learning years

The value of school recess and outdoor play

National Association for the Education of Young Children
1997

The delights of the outdoors are among the deepest, most passionate joys of childhood; however increasing demands on parents working outside of the home have resulted in growing numbers of children with less time to play under adult supervision in their neighborhoods or in their yards. Instead, they are spending more time behind locked doors watching television, playing video and computer games, and as recent studies have shown, growing obese. Other children often have afternoon schedules full of structured activities, including music, dance instruction, drama classes, and tennis lessons.

Compounding the dilemma is a trend among many public school districts throughout the United States to eliminate recess in elementary schools. Those doing away with outdoor activity claim that it is a waste of time better spent on academics, that playground injuries promote lawsuits, that children are at an increased risk of coming in contact with threatening strangers while outdoors, and that there is a shortage of teachers and volunteers willing to supervise play activities.

While these concerns are valid, school recess is often the only time during the work week that children are able to be carefree--a time when their bodies and voices are not under tight control.

It is a widely held view that unstructured physical play is a developmentally appropriate outlet for reducing stress in children's lives, and research shows that physical activity improves children's attentiveness and decreases restlessness. Following are a few reasons why school administrators should carefully consider the benefits of outdoor play before eliminating recess from their curriculum.

1. Play is an active form of learning that unites the mind, body, and spirit. Until at least the age of nine, children's learning occurs best when the whole self is involved.

2. Play reduces the tension that often comes with having to achieve or needing to learn. In play, adults do not interfere and children relax.

3. Children express and work out emotional aspects of everyday experiences through unstructured play.

4. Children permitted to play freely with peers develop skills for seeing things through another person's point of view--cooperating, helping, sharing, and solving problems.

5. The development of children's perceptual abilities may suffer when so much of their experience is through television, computers, books, worksheets, and media that require only two senses. The senses of smell, touch, and taste, and the sense of motion through space are powerful modes of learning.

6. Children who are less restricted in their access to the outdoors gain competence in moving through the larger world. Developmentally, they should gain the ability to navigate their immediate environs (in safety) and lay the foundation for the courage that will enable them eventually to lead their own lives.

Our society has become increasingly complex, but there remains a need for every child to feel the sun and wind on his cheek and engage in self-paced play. Children's attempts to make their way across monkey bars, negotiate the hopscotch course, play jacks, or toss a football require intricate behaviors of planning, balance, and strength--traits we want to encourage in children. Ignoring the developmental functions of unstructured outdoor play denies children the opportunity to expand their imaginations beyond the constraints of the classroom.

Additional Resources

Rivkin, M.S. (1995). *The Great Outdoors: Restoring Children's Right to Play Outside*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Rogers, C.S. and Sawyers, J.K. (1988). *Play in the Lives of Children.* Washington, DC. NAEYC.