



Recess redress: The importance of play in education

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Ask any child what his or her favorite subject is in school, and most will say recess. Yet a 2010 Gallup poll conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that up to 40 percent of U.S. school districts have reduced or eliminated recess to focus more on academics.



Despite these changes, recess still remains an important part of a child's education. Here's how.

Brain development

A [new study released in August](#) by the University of Lethbridge in Canada showed that free play can help with the core essentials for development in the brain.

"The experience [of play] changes the connections of the neurons at the front end of your brain, which are a major part of the executive control system of your brain," researcher Sergio Pellis said. "And without play experience, those neurons aren't changed."

Recess also provides the brain the opportunity to "regroup" during playing time.

Countries like Finland are a perfect example of this idea at work. In Finland, students are allowed 15-minute breaks after every 45 minutes of instruction. [Tim Walker](#), an American educator teaching in Finland, didn't see the point of these breaks at first.

"As a teacher in the United States, I'd spent several consecutive hours with my students in the classroom," he wrote.

Walker decided to follow the way he was used to teaching in America by teaching two 45-minute lessons followed by a 30-minute break. He noticed when he switched to the two consecutive lessons that his students were not as refreshed and focused when he didn't incorporate the 15-minute breaks.

"Once I incorporated these short recesses in our timetable, I no longer saw feet-dragging, zombie-like kids in my classroom," Walker said.

These 15-minute breaks during instruction have made Finland one of the most successful education systems in the world.

[Ninety-three percent](#) of Finns graduate from academic or vocational high schools — 17.5 percentage points higher than the United States — and 66 percent go on to higher education, the highest rate in the European Union. Yet Finland spends about 30 percent less per student than the United States.

Social skills

Recess also allows students to develop important life skills such as communicating with peers, teamwork and conflict resolution.

According to a [study](#) conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics: "Recess promotes social and emotional learning and development for children by offering them a time to engage in peer interactions in which they practice and role-play essential social skills."

Schools who have cut recess from a child's daily schedule do look for alternatives to allow children to continue to have some type of physical activity and to continue to develop a child's social skills.

Organizations such as [Playworks](#) have come to the aid of these schools. Playworks, a nonprofit organization, works to create a positive atmosphere for play for both the student and the teacher.

"Yes, it gives kids the physical activity and the opportunity to play, but it's also the social-emotional learning aspect of it," said Nancy Barrand, a senior adviser for program development at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which provides funding for Playworks. "It's helping kids learn how to socialize, how to take turns, how to be able to wait, how to be able to compete without killing each other. It's all the things that one learns from play. Sometimes it's easier to learn those things from play than from reading a rule book and being told what to do."

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), the most important ages for social development are 6-8 years old, also known as middle childhood. These are the years in which children show more independence from parents and family, want to be accepted and liked by their friends and pay more

attention to friendship and teamwork.

In a [study](#) conducted by the Mathematica Policy Research, the Playworks model actually works.

The study showed that teachers at Playworks schools reported 43 percent less bullying and exclusion than at non-Playworks schools. It also showed that Playworks students spent 43 percent more of their recess engaged in rigorous physical activity than their non-Playworks counterparts.

Health

The [U.S. Surgeon General](#) recommends that children engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity a week. Fewer than half of children between the ages of 6 and 11 meet that recommendation.

Since the passing of the [No Child Left Behind Act](#) in 2001, 44 percent of schools administrators have cut time for physical education classes and recess. A study conducted by the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) shows that children can accumulate up to 40 percent of their physical activity during recess.

"Even minor movement during recess counterbalances sedentary time at school and at home and helps the child achieve the recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per day ... which can help lower the risk of obesity," says [Catherine Ramstetter](#), a health educator at The Christ College of Nursing and Health Sciences.

Childhood obesity has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the past 30 years, according to the CDC.

Since U.S. school districts want to put more emphasis on education, researchers have shown that the school districts can do just that with allowing children to have recess. With all of the benefits associated with breaks, it's time for U.S. school districts go back on their decision to reduce the amount of recess.

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About the Author



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