

# Why Kids Need Recess

Written by Rae Pica

Monday, 01 March 2010 00:00 - Last Updated Monday, 18 June 2018 15:48

More and more, parents are protesting school policies that allow teachers and administrators to withhold recess to punish student misbehavior. Common infractions include tardiness, acting out in class and failure to complete homework—everyday childhood behaviors that result in numerous children having to go without recess on any given day.

[The research is clear](#) . [Children need recess](#) . It benefits every aspect of childhood development—physical development, of course, but also social, emotional and intellectual development as well. Following are seven reasons why, if we want our children to succeed, [recess should not be denied](#)

1.



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54 | [movement & learning](#) |

**T**he research is clear: Children need recess. It benefits every aspect of childhood development—physical development, of course, but also social, emotional and intellectual development as well. Following are seven reasons why, if we want our children to succeed, recess should not be denied.

**1 Everyone benefits from a break.** Research dating back to the late 1950s indicates that people learn better and faster when their efforts are distributed, rather than concentrated. That is, work that includes breaks and down time proves more effective than working in long stretches. Because young children don't tend to process information as effectively as older children (due to the immaturity of their nervous systems and their lack of experience), they benefit the most from taking a break for unstructured play.

**2 Recess increases focus.** Dr. Olga Jarrett, with her colleagues at Georgia State University's Department of Early Childhood Education, approached an urban school district that had a no-recess policy. They received permission for two fourth-grade classes to have recess once a week so they could observe the children's behavior on recess and non-recess days. Their results showed that the 43 children became more on task and less

disruptive on days when they had recess. Sixty percent of the children, including five with attention deficit disorder, worked more and/or forgot less on recess days.

**3 Natural light improves wellness.** Sunlight stimulates the pineal gland, which is the part of the brain that helps regulate our biological clock. It is vital to the immune system, and simply makes us feel better. Outside light also triggers the synthesis of vitamin D, which a number of studies have demonstrated increases academic learning and productivity.

**4 Recess reduces stress.** The National Association for the Education of Young Children recommends unstructured physical play as a developmentally appropriate means of reducing stress—a valuable benefit given that stress has a negative impact on learning and health. For many children, especially those considered “hyperactive,” recess is an opportunity to expend energy in a healthy, suitable manner. Outside, children can engage in behavior—loud, messy and boisterous—considered unacceptable indoors. And because recess is a break from structure and expectations, children have an opportunity to take control of their world, which is a rarity in their lives.

**5 Recess develops social skills.** Recess may be the only time during the day when children have an opportunity to experience socialization and real communication. Children don't engage in the neighborhood play of earlier generations, so once the school-day ends, there may be little chance for unstructured, natural social development. After all, in class children generally are not encouraged to converse, but rather are expected to conform and remain quiet. Some school policies even go so far as to prevent children from talking to one another during lunch. How can children with so few opportunities to socialize and communicate be expected to live and work together in harmony as adults? When and where will they learn how?

**6 Exercise is healthy.** Many children suffer from obesity, but even children of healthy weight levels benefit from physical activity, and in fact require it for optimal health. The outdoors is the best place for children to burn calories, practice emerging physical skills and experience the pure joy of movement. Research has even shown that children who are physically active in school are more likely to be physically active at home, and children who don't have the opportunity to be active during the school day don't usually compensate during after-school hours.

**7 Physical activity feeds the brain.** Thanks to advances in brain research, we now know that most of the brain is activated during physical activity—much more so than while sedentary. Movement increases the capacity (and possibly even the number) of blood vessels in the brain. This expedites the delivery of oxygen, water and glucose (“brain food”), thereby optimizing the brain's performance. Furthermore, numerous studies have shown that students who are physically active improve their academic performance, achieve higher test scores and demonstrate a better attitude toward school.

There is one more reason recess should not be withheld from children as punishment: It doesn't work. Experimental studies and anecdotal evidence point out that in any given school, it's generally the same children who tend to have their recess withheld, indicating that the threat is ineffective. And, as Eric Jensen, author of several books on brain-based learning, tells us, remaining seated for periods longer than 10 minutes “reduces our awareness of physical and emotional sensations and increases fatigue,” resulting in reduced concentration and discipline problems.

Demanding that children move less and sit more is counter-productive. Research, and our own common sense, tells us we should be doing the opposite. [↩](#)

 Rae Pica is a children's physical activity specialist and the author of all books for teachers and parents, including *The Pica Perspective*. It is [rpicapica.blogspot.com](#). You can hear her interviews with experts in the fields of education, child development and the neurosciences at [brainandmovement.com](#). View article references and author information here: [pathways.tumblr.com/writers/raepicabooks.html](#)

movement & learning | 55

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