

# Why Recess Is Different from PE

Written by Rae Pica

Saturday, 01 March 2008 00:00 - Last Updated Wednesday, 19 February 2014 09:13

When school began last fall, many parents discovered that recess has disappeared from their children's day. Of those who asked why, some were probably told that because their children have physical education class they don't need recess. But PE and recess serve different purposes for children.

Certainly, if the development of motor skills and physical fitness were the only benefits of recess, then schools offering a daily, developmentally appropriate physical education class might feel justified eliminating recess from their programs. But there are two major points to be considered here: First, daily physical education is about as rare as purple dinosaurs. Second, recess has much more to offer than the development of motor skills and physical fitness. Recess certainly contributes to these outcomes. It is in the outdoors that children can fully and freely experience large motor skills like running, leaping, and jumping; manipulative skills such as throwing, catching, and striking; and gymnastics skills like climbing and balancing. But, because it is unstructured, recess also has a great deal more to offer young children.



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skills like climbing and balancing. But, because it is unstructured, recess also has a great deal more to offer young children.

Physical education is organized and planned. It is an instructional program in which children are expected to participate in specific activities and achieve certain results. In that way, it is like almost every other aspect of the school day.

Recess, on the other hand, is not organized and planned. It is, in fact, a break from structure as well as a break from all of those expectations. As such, children are allowed to engage in choice: choice of activities, choice of companions. Having already spent a good deal of time with other children, they may also choose no companions—to be alone in solitary reflection. All of these options benefit children, who need to learn to socialize, contemplate, and make choices. The latter is absolutely essential for personal responsibility and problem-solving skills, all are essential for a full and rewarding life.

For many children, especially those who are hyperactive or potentially so, recess is an opportunity to blow off steam. Outside, children can engage in behaviors loud, messy, and behaviorally considered unacceptable and amusing inside. And research has shown that children are more active at recess than while outside at home.

Research also shows that prolonged confinement in classrooms results in restlessness and fidgeting. Could it be that we would have fewer children considered hyperactive—that is, being dragged—if we simply allowed them an occasional break? And isn't it sad, not to mention exceedingly counterproductive, that the "problem" children are the ones likely to have recess snuffed due to "misbehavior"?

Finally, unlike physical education class, recess is a time when children can simply and freely play. Unfortunately, much of how we feel about recess is connected to today's attitude toward play in general—that it's a waste of time that could be spent more "productively." In fact, many early childhood

professionals fear play has become a "four-letter word." But, regardless of how we presently feel about it, play has always been and will always be necessary for children. According to Playing for Keeps, a national, nonprofit organization, play is "the single most important activity for the healthy development of young children."

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For many children, especially those who are hyperactive or potentially so, recess is an opportunity to blow off steam. Outside, children can engage in behaviors (loud, messy, and boisterous) considered unacceptable and annoying inside. And research has shown that children are more active at recess than while outside at home.

Research also shows that prolonged confinement in classrooms results in restlessness and fidgeting. Could it be that we would have fewer children considered hyperactive—that is, being drugged—if we simply allowed them an occasional break? And isn't it sad, not to mention exceedingly counterproductive, that the "problem" children are the ones likely to have recess revoked due to "misbehavior?"

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