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New Ways to Play Improving the Quality of Recess

By Nevada Bromley

Many of us hold memories of recess as twenty minutes of liberation, twice a day. Twenty glorious minutes of running like the wind, teeter-tottering, swinging, chatting with friends. A chance to let loose and relax. Yet, we also remember it as a place of tribulation, a place where the balance of power was continually tested and defined, and virtually no guidance was offered from the nearby adults. Often, the conflicts that erupted on the play-ground were continued in the classroom, making it difficult to turn attention to academics.

Sadly, rather than confronting the problems of recess, many elementary schools today are choosing to reduce or even eliminate it, seeing it as a waste of time which could be better spent on academics or as an awkward block of time that compromises the time off granted in teacher contracts. In some new schools, playgrounds are not even a part of the building plan, with lack of space as well as time being rationales for eliminating recess.

Fortunately, there are many other educators taking the opposite approach, educators who believe that recess can greatly enhance children's ability to concentrate on academics by giving them a much-needed break and allowing them to release physical energy. In addition, they see recess as being rich with opportunities for learning and practicing social skills. Recognizing the vital role that recess can play in children's physical, social, and cognitive development, these schools are working to maximize the potential of recess by changing how it is structured.

Chip Wood, co-founder of Northeast Foundation for Children and a strong advocate for keeping recess alive and well in schools, has worked for the past ten years with elementary and middle schools committed to restructuring recess. Believing that "learning time is maximized in school environments where playgrounds are peaceful, friendly, and active," Wood advocates for "teaching recess with the same intentionality as we teach reading or math." The ultimate goal: children will be able to play independently and cooperatively, just as they learn to read independently and work cooperatively in the classroom.

"Children have far less experience with spontaneous play outside of school now than they used to," notes Wood. "You're not as likely today to see groups of children after school playing pick-up games of soccer or kick-the-can. And without these many hours of spontaneous play, how will children learn and practice the social skills, such as cooperation, conflict resolution, empathy, and responsibility, that are as essential to their survival as reading, writing, and computing?"

Olga Jarret, professor of child development at Georgia State University, asks a similar question during an interview for a *New York Times* article on schools eliminating recess: "When do kids learn to interact with kids? We have so many latchkey kids who go home and lock the door until their parents get home. Now if they can't mingle with other kids at school or at home, how are they going to resolve conflicts with their peers?" ("Many Schools Putting an End to Child's Play," April 7, 1998)

In his new book on school reform, *Time to Teach, Time to Learn: Changing the Pace of School*, Wood offers the following recommendations to administrators and teachers working to improve the quality of recess in their schools:

- Prior to the beginning of school, provide playground training for teachers, paraprofessionals, and others (including the school nurse) who will have important roles to play at and around recess. Then use the first two weeks of school recess to model, practice, and reinforce games, rules, and ways of playing together.
- Second, require that your physical education teachers teach playground games as their first academic unit at the beginning of the year. Give physical education teachers supervisory authority and hold them accountable as part of their teaching duties for the nature and quality of the playground/recess experience for children. This does not mean daily recess duty. Instead, it means elevating their professional status to include being part of the administrative team of the school. This may also mean reducing the hours the head physical education teacher has with individual classes so she can train paraprofessionals and supervise the recess program.
- Finally, if at all possible, restructure the middle of the day so that recess comes before, rather than after, lunch. It makes more sense that children would first work up an appetite through exercise and then come in to eat rather than the other way around. In many schools, the mid-day schedule allows for recess, then lunch, then quiet time. Teachers report that this structure works well and helps children to be more productive and engaged in the afternoon.

Schools that have taken these recommendations to heart have seen many positive results, from far fewer playground discipline referrals and reduced injury reports from the nurse's office to an increase in cooperative play and, ultimately, more time for academic learning.

At the Regional Multicultural Magnet School in New London, Connecticut, for example, teachers have become involved in introducing and supervising recess. Mark Farnsworth, a physical education teacher at this school, begins each school year by "teaching" recess to students and teachers. In the fall, he teaches students and teachers how to use the recess space and equipment and introduces a wide range of recess games and activities. Throughout the year, instructional assistants, serving as designated "play leaders," facilitate student- or teacher-led activities at every recess. While students have the option of playing independently, many choose to participate in the planned activities.

Similarly, at Coleytown Elementary School in Westport, Connecticut, three physical education teachers, Gina Forberg, Jennifer Rasmussen, and Lori Buskey, have collaborated to make recess a safer and more peaceful environment by teaching students how to use the playground and structuring games and activities. Recess here is primarily led by teachers' aides, with support from classroom teachers, specialty teachers, and physical education teachers.

In the fall, adults structure most of the play at Coleytown. As the year progresses, children play games more independently. K-2 students are offered options such as tag games, hopscotch, hula-hoops, jump rope, and using the play structure. Children in grades 3-5 often play capture the flag, rounders, soccer, ball games, and jump rope. Some children do elect to walk around or read, but most participate in the structured activities. Buskey points out that "all children feel safe in knowing there is always an adult close by, someone who will step in and help if they're having a hard time resolving a conflict."

Providing more structured activities and having adults available to help children resolve conflicts during recess has had a positive effect in schools in Fitchburg, Massachusetts as well. Bonnie Baer-Simahk is the early childhood coordinator for the Fitchburg Public Schools where several schools have instituted initiatives in recess similar to those above with positive results. Baer-Simahk is also the parent of a child at the J.R. Briggs School in nearby Ashburnham where she has seen the benefits of physical education teacher Bob Weeks' efforts to teach children cooperative sports and games. "There's a difference in the quality of play at these schools during outdoor time, and I've seen this transferring from the school to the community playground near my home, where children of different ages play together. The kids have started to do a lot of pick-up games on their own," says Baer-Simahk.

Mark Farnsworth notes that the restructuring of recess is a work in progress. Initially, the response of many teachers was, "What, something else to fit into our day?" But now that teachers are experiencing the positive results, they are more receptive to the changes. "There are fewer problems that occur at recess and carry over into the classroom," says Mark, "which translates to much more usable teaching time after recess."

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