CHAPTER 12



Playground

Make recess a time of joy and learning

Recess is one of the most dynamic times of school, ripe with opportunities for children to enjoy physical activity and self-directed play, to connect with the natural world, to interact with a diverse peer group, and to practice essential social skills. The "curriculum" of recess includes weighty goals: developing children's social competencies and fostering their imaginations while meeting their need for safety, movement, and fun.

But recess can also be rife with opportunities for discipline problems. Consider all the sharing of equipment, choosing of teams, physical competition, and unstructured socializing that might go on during recess. Combine that with the often minimal adult supervision, and we have a perfect recipe for conflicts and resentments. These problems not only can spoil recess itself, but often carry over into the rest of the day.

So what do we do?

First of all, we keep recess. Some schools, feeling test-score pressure or fearing playground safety and liability issues, have eliminated this part of the school day. Eliminating recess will also get rid of all those discipline problems, the thinking sometimes goes.

But doing away with recess is one of the worst things we can do for children's academics, not to mention their health. And it won't improve behavior. Research has shown that when children have a break to run around

outside, they're more attentive and on-task when they're inside (Jarrett, 2003; Barros, Silver, & Stein, 2009).

Recess is also crucial to children's development because it gives them time for free play. Researchers are learning that free play appears to be a genetically hardwired human need, one that children must satisfy if they're to become socially adept, and school recess is one of the few opportunities in many children's daily lives when they can meet this basic human need.

Even though children "play" soccer, kickball, and hopscotch, such organized games have preset rules. Free play doesn't; it therefore allows children to invent and test out ways to communicate, to be fair, to negotiate, to persist, and to solve problems. Free play also allows children to relieve stress. This kind of play is so important that some psychologists say limiting it can contribute to children's becoming anxious, socially maladjusted adults (Wenner, 2009; Ginsburg, 2007).

Many schools, districts, and states understand this and have instituted policies articulating the rights of children to participate in daily recess. For example, the state of Virginia, in its standards for accreditation of public schools, includes a requirement that "Each elementary school shall provide students with a daily recess during the regular school year as determined appropriate by the school" (Regulations Establishing Standards, 2006, p. 34).

After committing to keeping recess, school leaders need to take specific steps to make recess a safe, peaceful, enjoyable time for everyone. The following list of essential strategies is long, but not all these steps have to be taken at once. Start with one or two that seem most important for your school, get them working well, and then take on a few more. Each of these strategies is explained in detail in this chapter:

- Put recess before lunch if possible.
- Provide ample and active adult supervision.
- Establish recess rules.
- Teach and practice recess behaviors.
- Teach free play.
- Teach recess games.

- Open play areas gradually.
- Establish routines for starting and ending recess.
- Communicate the plan for responding to misbehavior.
- Pay attention to indoor recess.

A final word before we get into these strategies: Advise teachers not to keep children in from recess to make up missed work. Sitting out of recess for awhile may be an appropriate consequence for misbehaving at recess (so the child can regain self-control and recall recess rules), but it's not an appropriate consequence for work incompletion. Children need active play as much as they need food and sleep. If students need to complete missed work, teachers should look for a time during class for them to do that. One possibility is during academic choice period: While other children are doing the work of their choice, these children complete their assigned work.

Put Recess Before Lunch If Possible

If recess comes after lunch at your school, try switching them. This single step can significantly improve children's behavior. Exercising first and then eating fits how children's (and adults') bodies naturally work, and when children's physical needs are met, their behavior generally improves.

Four Corners Elementary School in Greenfield, Massachusetts, is just one of many schools that used the *Responsive School Discipline* approach to reorganize the middle of the day this way. After the school put recess ahead of lunch, the number of playground and lunchroom conflicts dropped, and the conflicts that did occur were more quickly mediated. In addition, says principal Gail Healy, "teachers immediately noticed a positive change in students' emotions and demeanor when they re-entered the classroom after lunch."

The "recess first" idea has gained national attention, with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and some states calling on schools to make the schedule switch (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2000, p. 21; Wyoming Department of Education, n.d.; Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2009; Delisio, 2005).

Admittedly, it's not always possible to schedule recess before lunch for

the whole school. But even if you can schedule this way for some of the grades, the overall middle-of-the-day climate is likely to improve.

Provide Ample and Active Adult Supervision

Having enough adults on the playground and giving these adults active roles sends an important message—to the children and the adults. To the children we're saying, "Kindness and respect are as important on the playground as in the classroom. The adults at school are going to help you be kind and respectful here, just as everywhere else at school." To the adults we're saying, "Teaching recess is just as important as teaching reading and math."

Four Corners Elementary used to have two adults at each recess supervising two entire grades, and the adults' role was limited to intervening when problems arose. When recess discipline problems pushed everyone's frustration levels up, the school, along with reversing the order of lunch and recess, added two more adults to playground duty.

Moreover, the adults each led a game or activity. Their role changed from reacting to crises to proactively teaching positive recess behavior. Discipline problems decreased. As Gail Healy put it, a few weeks after increasing the adult supervision "there was such a dramatic improvement in the quality of play and social interactions that we knew we were on the right track."

Here are ways to increase the adult presence at recess:

- **Spread recess duty among many adults, including administrators.** Not all schools can assign classroom teachers to recess every day. Nor can they hire additional staff. But with careful scheduling, it's possible to free up a few more adults to supervise on the playground. At Sheffield Elementary School in Turners Falls, Massachusetts, the principal and guidance counselor each had recess duty several times a week along with other staff. Leading a game like soccer or Capture the Flag was the principal's usual role. At Four Corners, the principal and the behavior management teacher joined recess whenever possible.
- **Make use of the PE teacher's expertise.** This doesn't have to mean giving the PE teacher daily recess duty. It can mean elevating this

teacher's role to include oversight responsibility for the quality of recess. The PE teacher can train teachers or paraprofessionals in supervising the playground. One way they can do that is by teaching these adults games and activities that they can lead. Also have the PE teacher teach playground games to students as the first unit in the fall. When children come to recess knowing the structures and rules for lots of games and activities, their recess behavior improves.

No matter who's supervising recess, it's essential that the school leader establish the expectations for this time. It must be clear to all adults on the playground that their role is to actively supervise the children, not to socialize among themselves. A simple strategy that will help is to define different areas or zones on the playground and assign adults to supervise each area. This clear definition of space, which can be achieved by placing cones throughout the playground, will also create boundaries for the children and avoid some of the inevitable conflicts that occur when playing space is not well defined (such as tag games spilling over into the hopscotch area).

Establish Recess Rules

A school's recess rules should evolve from a shared understanding of its goals for this time of day. Your school can create a unique set of rules or apply schoolwide or classroom rules to recess (see Chapter 3). Either way, begin with the end in mind. Ask "Why is recess important? What is it we want children to learn at recess? What skills will students need if they're to play joyfully and safely?"

For example, at University School of Nashville, the PE department helped craft a general position statement about the nature of recess games. They named "good sportsmanship, teamwork, and cooperation" as aspects of play that the school strives to develop in children. "Games whose sole purpose is to eliminate players by striking them with a ball (for example, battle ball, dodge ball) do not embrace" these values, the statement said. About team selection when playing team games, the statement said, "Teams should be as equitable and fair as possible and should not be divided along gender or ability lines." The statement also encouraged teachers and recess aides to help children come up with other creative ways to form teams.

Later, when the school was ready to create playground rules, the process was easier because of the common vision articulated in the position statement. The final playground rules captured the values of sportsmanship, teamwork, and cooperation and additionally addressed a few specific safety issues. The final rules were:

- Play safely and take care of yourself and others.
- Rocks, sticks, and sand stay on the ground.
- Climb only on the inside of the wooden structure.
- Slide down the slide and use stairs for getting to the top.

Keep in mind that your school's recess rules, like all rules for common areas, need to be broad enough to be applied in developmentally appropriate ways to the whole range of ages in your school. For example, "Everyone can play," a common recess rule, works well because it embodies the important expectation of inclusiveness but translates to a variety of behavior expectations depending on the children's age. Other possible playground rules that are appropriately broad are:

- Use equipment and structures safely.
- Show teamwork and sportsmanship.
- Solve conflicts peacefully.
- Keep our playground clean.

Teach and Practice Recess Behaviors

Once playground rules are in place, we can't assume that children will know how to translate them into action. Instead, we need to teach this translation explicitly—intensively at the beginning of the year, and then again with extra reminders around vacations and holidays, when it's challenging for children to remember self-control.

Most often it's the classroom teachers who provide this instruction during the first few weeks of school, but it's the school leader's responsibility to set the expectation that teachers will do this teaching. It's also the school leader's responsibility to make sure adults' expectations for playground

behavior are consistent throughout the school. Giving the PE teacher oversight responsibility for the quality of recess, as described earlier, can help ensure this consistency.

Here are important leadership actions for achieving consistent and quality teaching of recess behaviors at your school:

- **Plan who will do this teaching, when, and how.** Begin planning before the end of the previous year, and involve the entire staff. For example, in April or May, make the next fall's recess teaching a topic of an all-staff meeting.
- **Plan for all recess adults to be present at the teaching of recess behaviors.** If at all possible, have all adults who will be supervising recess be with classroom teachers in the classrooms, or with the PE teacher on the playground, when behavior expectations are being taught. If this can't happen due to scheduling conflicts, meet with the recess supervisors separately to explain the expectations for behavior—and provide instruction in how to respond to misbehavior.
- **Take the lead in teaching recess yourself.** By doing some of the actual teaching, school leaders convey to staff the importance of this teaching while demonstrating effective techniques. One method you can use is to give groups of students, accompanied by their teacher, a tour of the recess space on or near the first day of school. During the tour, teach students how to follow one recess rule. Later, in classrooms, teachers can continue teaching the other recess rules.
- **Urge the use of interactive modeling.** It's impossible to overstate the importance of going into detail when teaching recess rules, and interactive modeling is a great method for ensuring that this detailed teaching happens. Support teachers in using interactive modeling with fidelity. (See Chapter 5 for more information.) You can also use interactive modeling yourself when you teach recess rules.
- **Be explicit about which behaviors need to be modeled.** Give staff a list of routines or procedures that they should cover when teaching recess behaviors (or involve staff in generating a list together). This level of specificity is key to consistency among all adults and to the children's success. (See "Recess Behaviors to Teach" on page 180 for details.)

- **Lead a "recess" for adults.** At a staff meeting early in the year, take the staff outside for a mock recess that they participate in. Lead the recess, modeling how to teach positive recess behaviors. Once back inside, lead the staff in reflecting on what they experienced outside and how they can use those teaching techniques with their students.
- **Use reinforcing language when children show positive recess behaviors.** Encourage all staff to do the same. A great time to do this is during lineup at the end of recess before the children go inside. "People shared the hula hoops today like we practiced." "I heard a lot of people complimenting each other on good plays out there." "You stopped and waited calmly until it was your turn, Chris." Such language is powerful. When adults name the cooperative, friendly playing they see, students are likely to continue showing those behaviors. (See page 52 in Chapter 4 for more about reinforcing language.)

RECESS BEHAVIORS TO TEACH

Here are some of the most common behaviors that need to be modeled to make recess successful. There may be many others specific to your school. Share your list with all teachers so that all students learn these routines and procedures.

- How to line up
- How to circle up
- How to respond to the signal (make sure your signal is loud enough for students to hear on a noisy playground)
- What to do if a child gets hurt (one protocol that works well is to have students quickly make a circle around an injured child until an adult arrives, reassuring the child that a grownup is coming but not touching the child)
- What to do if an adult tells you to take a break or to change activities
- What to do if a ball or other equipment goes out of bounds

Teach Free Play

"Teach free play" may sound like a contradiction, but it's actually one of the most important, and most overlooked, aspects of teaching recess. Even when children are playing freely, they need to play with control. Recess rules, which ensure safety and kindness, still apply. And children still need to *feel* safe. So although the teaching of free play can be brief, it cannot be skipped.

Following is an example of how this teaching might look for a group of fourth graders. (These steps can be done by a classroom teacher, PE teacher, or school leader.)

Inside a classroom, the adult leads students in brainstorming what kinds of imaginative play the children might invent on the playground. The class then goes outside. "See that tree line over there?" the adult asks the group. "It's okay to go over there and play. Let's all walk over there and take a look." The children notice the bumps in the ground made by the tree roots. They see that the trees' lower branches are low enough to climb on. One child looks for poison ivy, which he has recently learned to identify.

"There'll always be a teacher here to keep you safe," the adult says. Adult presence is crucial. We must give children the space to play as they like, but we cannot leave them unattended. "You can play at whatever you want to here, as long as you keep your body safe and follow our other recess rules," the teacher continues. She then briefly reviews the rules with them and demonstrates how to follow those rules when hanging and swinging from a low tree branch, when gathering twigs to make boundaries for an improvised game, and so forth. Finally, she asks student volunteers to demonstrate what following the rules looks and sounds like when doing other activities in the free play area.

In subsequent days back in the classroom, the class role-plays ways to solve exclusion problems that can arise in free play—before such problems actually come up. Then, when they do come up, as they inevitably will, the children will have a repertoire of solutions to try.

In this way, we watch over the children while honoring their freedom.

Teach Recess Games

At the same time as teaching free play, we need to give children a repertoire of fun, safe games to play at recess. Kensington Avenue School in Springfield, Massachusetts, demonstrates the necessity and power of teaching playground games.

Located in an urban area, Kensington's playground consists of a blacktop. No basketball hoop, no jungle gym, no swings, no ball field. Without such structures to support them in safe independent play, the children have a special need for adults to teach them blacktop games.

So every day at Kensington, when a class goes out to recess, their teacher or an assistant accompanies them. In the first weeks of school, the adults carefully teach tag games, hopscotch, hula hoops, and jump rope to the kindergartners through third graders, and kickball and other ball games to the fourth and fifth graders. As the children get familiar with the games, the adults join in or actively supervise the play, which keeps the children physically safe and helps them feel emotionally secure. The result is a climate of safety, kindness, and playfulness.

Of course, the need to teach recess games is not limited to schools with small or sparsely equipped recess spaces. Even on playgrounds that have ample play structures and recess supplies, many children don't know what to do during recess. They may not be ready for the social navigation needed for unstructured play with peers, or they may be hesitant to join the highly competitive and physically rough games that sometimes dominate recess. Teaching recess games is therefore critical at all schools.

Here are some recommendations for this teaching:

- **Set the tone by teaching some recess games yourself.** You can convey how committed you are to improving recess by teaching a new playground game yourself once in awhile. Doing so not only sends a powerful message to both the children and the adults at school but also models for staff how to teach games.
- **Teach the rules even for common games.** Remind staff that many games that we think are well known may be confusing to some children. So adults should deliberately teach all game rules and allow some

"no pressure" practice before playing for real to give children a chance to build confidence and mastery. As the year goes on, teachers should continue to review, as needed, the rules of games that students commonly play before the class goes out to recess.

- **Remind children that general recess rules always apply.** Make sure staff frequently reinforce for children that the overall rules for recess always apply, no matter what game they're playing. Additionally, they should teach students how to show good sportsmanship, such as by forming teams in fair and kind ways and recognizing the efforts of the losing team.

- **Teach tag rules.** Since tag will be played so often, be sure children learn rules that apply to all tag games, such as "Tagger's choice" (the tagger is always right, even if his or her tag was so soft that it wasn't felt), "Limited time on safety" (children count to five or ten and then must leave), and "No babysitting" (a tagger must stand five paces away from safety while the player on safety counts).

- **Modify game rules to keep the play fun and safe.** For starters, institute tagging instead of tackling in football and make aggressive moves illegal in soccer. Observe to see what additional rule changes are needed at your school.

- **Emphasize fun and cooperation rather than winning.** For example, in games involving teams and scores, encourage staff to have scorers switch sides after scoring for their teams, or add the final scores of both teams and challenge students to beat that total score the next day. If you notice unhealthy competition creeping into playground games, prompt teachers to talk with their classes about it and engage the children in brainstorming for solutions. To make playground cooperation fun, you can surprise the whole school by announcing a "Wacky Relays Tournament" and asking the children for their ideas on how they can help everyone have fun no matter who wins.

- **Reflect with children after teaching a game.** Help teachers see the value of gathering the class for five minutes after the recess and lunch break to ask "What made your games fun during recess today?" Show

them how to probe for deep understanding. For example, if students say "We cooperated," teachers can ask "What do you mean by 'cooperated'?" and ask students to name examples.

(For recess game ideas, see *36 Games Kids Love to Play* by Adrian Harrison, available from www.responsiveclassroom.org, and *6 Steps to a Trouble-Free Playground* by Curt Hinson, available from www.playfiteducation.com.)

Open Play Areas Gradually

If your school has a play structure, basketball area, or other specialized play spaces, make them closed to children when school opens in the fall. During the first days of school, have adults take the children one class at a time to each play area and guide the children in exploring each part of it, discussing, demonstrating, and letting children practice its potential uses. "What's one safe way to play on the monkey bars? Who would like to show us?" "What's another possible way to play safely here? Who wants to show that?" Provide a language "cheat sheet" if you need to so that all the adults use consistent language. Open the structure or area only after this guided exploration.

Safety, of course, is a top reason for doing this gradual opening. Other important reasons are that it stretches children to invent and try different ways to play, instills the importance of being fair and caring, and encourages them to value the equipment, all of which translate to a more fun and peaceful recess for all.

Older children sometimes complain about having to endure this slow opening of play areas year after year. Their complaining may be a way to show that they're grown up. The truth, however, is that some older students may still need a reminder about how to use the equipment.

Also, children change as they age: At five, they may be learning how to use a playground structure for the first time. At ten, they may be wanting to climb on the very top of it or to do fancy flips off of it. At each age, they'll need demonstrations and reminders of how to use the structure in a way that's fun and challenging for them, yet safe and considerate.

So stick to your agenda while validating older children's feeling of maturity. "I know you know this stuff, but it's important that everyone understands our rules." Or, even better, enlist these students to come to younger classes' guided explorations to help demonstrate the proper use of the spaces.

Establish Routines for Starting and Ending Recess

Transitions are tone setters. If students transition into recess well, many recess problems will be prevented. If they transition out of recess well, many problems during the following period will be prevented. And when recess goes well, the rest of the day goes better, too.

So begin recess at your school with a brief routine that helps children shift calmly from classroom mode to recess mode. The routine should allow the children to take a moment to decide what to play and remind themselves of the recess rules. The routine should also give recess supervisors time to make safety announcements or give brief reminders about the rules.

At Sheffield Elementary in Turners Falls, Massachusetts, recess begins with all students circling up on the blacktop. The lead recess teacher raises a hand to signal for quiet. When the children are attentive, the teacher introduces the day's playground activities. "Today's field activity is kickball. We'll have a game of Knock-Out on this side of the basketball court and Four Square on the other. And we've added longer jump ropes to the equipment cart today. OK, all set?" "All set!" the children respond. "ALL SET?" the teacher calls out again. "YOU BET!" the children chorus. Then they quickly go off to play.

On days when the children need it, the lead recess teacher also takes this time to give a brief reminder about recess social skills: "Who can share a fair solution if two people want to be in the same place on the play structure at the same time?" Children respond, "Rock, Paper, Scissors" or "Take turns."

Some days require a special safety announcement: "It's very windy today. You need to be able to hear teachers calling you in, so we're going to bring the playing area boundaries to the orange cones." All this takes just two minutes, but it makes a world of difference to the children's behavior.

Twenty minutes later, at the end of recess, another routine helps the students shift calmly back to indoor mode. The lead recess teacher calls, "Allie, Allie!" The children, who've practiced responding to this signal since day one of school, come in from the field, return equipment to the cart, line up by class on the blacktop, and watch for a recess teacher's raised-hand quiet signal.

The recess teacher then gives them some quick reinforcing feedback about positive recess behavior observed and a brief calming activity—a

song or rhythm game for younger children and short mental math problems for older students. Then, the classroom teachers escort their classes into the building.

Remember, recess start and end routines will be most successful if all adults teach and use them as carefully and deliberately as all other school routines.

Communicate the Plan for Responding to Misbehavior

It's critical for every adult who has a role in supervising recess to understand the school's protocol for responding to misbehavior and to know how this protocol should look on the playground. Specifically, all supervisors need to know:

- **How to respond to a conflict.** For example, one method might be that the adult offers help in resolving the conflict, but if it can't be resolved quickly, the adult tells the children to play in separate areas and reports the problem to the classroom teacher, who will help the children problem-solve later in the day.
- **When to tell a child to take a break and where the child should go.** For example, two possibilities for a take-a-break spot are next to the adult and at a designated spot (such as a picnic table) that is easily seen by the adults present.
- **How to release a child from take-a-break.** Help all recess supervisors learn and practice using a matter-of-fact and friendly manner and giving a brief reminder about the behavior that's expected. For example, "OK, Alexa, come back in the game. Remember, gentle tagging."
- **What to do if a child refuses to follow a direction.** Decide how recess supervisors are to enlist help, such as from your school's chain of support, for minor problems. Communicate this plan to all recess supervisors.
- **When and how to activate the school's crisis team in the event of major problems.** Make sure all recess supervisors know who's on the crisis team and how to activate their help. Frequently review this information with them.

In addition, since so often adults will be responding to misbehavior on the playground with a brief reminder or redirection, it's critical that you provide supervisors with a mini-course on positive adult language on the playground (see Chapter 4 for a comprehensive discussion of positive adult language). Even one hour of training with you or a lead teacher demonstrating effective ways to talk to students (with real-life examples from the playground, such as two children grabbing the same ball or a child beginning to wander beyond the boundaries), will produce positive results. Emphasize the importance of tone in these examples. Demonstrate how the same words delivered using various tones will send vastly different messages.

Also, make sure you emphasize the importance of being aware of how one's body language can affect children, especially when they're excited or agitated. Often at recess, adults can inadvertently cause a child's negative behavior to escalate by doing the following:

- Getting too close to a child
- Pointing a finger at a child
- Pulling something out of a child's hand
- Raising their voice
- Gritting their teeth or scowling

Finally, invite recess supervisors to come to you with their observations about the playground throughout the year. The adults who are on the playground every day often have the best ideas about how to improve recess. Don't forget to ask their advice!

Pay Attention to Indoor Recess

The principles described above for teaching recess and opening recess options slowly apply to indoor recess as well. Students need to be taught—through interactive modeling, role-playing, and positive adult language—how to apply classroom and recess rules to indoor recess. And board games and other indoor activities should be introduced carefully before they're opened to students.

One wintry day when ice made playing in the schoolyard unsafe, a fourth grade class at Kensington Avenue School in Springfield, Massachusetts, was moving from math to indoor recess. Within a minute, the children settled into small groups at tables. At one table, three students played Scrabble with their teacher. At another, two friends engaged in a simplified form of Yahtzee. At yet another table, a circle of children played cards. The room filled with a contented buzz, punctuated by giggles and laughter. After twenty minutes, at a signal and a word from their teacher, the children put their games away and lined up to go to lunch.

This relaxed orderliness was possible only because indoor recess was carefully taught, practiced, supervised, and revised as needed.

CHIP REFLECTS

Remember to Have Fun

Recess is supposed to be fun. Sadly, many children are under so much stress from school or home life, or both, that they're not having much fun anymore, not even at recess. In my forty years in education, I've observed multitudes of children. In recent years the light seems to have gone out of many children's eyes.

It's up to us adults to help bring that light back. We can allow children to revive or retain their sense of fun while we teach behavior expectations. The message is "Everyone can have the most fun when we all stay within the rules." We school leaders can set this positive tone. Turn mundane tasks like lining up into "beat the clock" challenges. Inject little surprises like having children line up in reverse alphabetical order. Say simple things like "That looks like fun!" Laugh. A little playfulness helps lighten the mood for children—and ourselves.

FINAL THOUGHT

Check In Regularly With Staff

Throughout the year, regularly ask staff how things are going with recess. Make time at staff meetings to surface problems, or set up separate times to check in. Are games getting too aggressive? Are children confused about equipment? Then make needed adjustments to the structure and teaching of recess. Even small changes can make a difference. For example, Sheffield Elementary staff came up with the idea of having the younger grades sit during their brief circling-up at the start of recess as an additional way to help them stay calm and listen. Just that minor tweak improved the children's attention.

These staff check-ins can be brief. The important thing is to have them, to include all the recess adults, and to revise recess practices and policies as needed according to what you learn.