

Give them a break

AAP policy touts physical, mental, social benefits of recess

by Patrick M. O'Connell • Digital Content Editor

In recent years, some schools have cut back on recess, citing safety concerns or the need for more time to focus on academics. But a new AAP policy statement touts the array of benefits that unstructured play provides, including helping children concentrate during class and allowing students to work on social skills. Physical exercise is only one component of the equation.



Dr. Murray

The advantages of recess apply equally to teens as to younger children and hold even if students spend most of the recess period talking idly with friends instead of physically exerting themselves, according to the statement, *The Crucial Role of Recess in School* (*Pediatrics*. 2013;131:183-188; <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2012-2993>).

"The power of recess in the model of a complex academic day is that it allows the child to decompress and also for the mind to revamp and revitalize, and get ready for another round of academic challenge," said Robert D. Murray, M.D., FAAP, a co-author of the report and member of the AAP Council on School Health.

Even short breaks essential

Time away from the classroom allows children to relax and reset. For some children, that means playing sports or games. Others may choose to spend that time in a less active way.

Research indicates that it doesn't matter what a child chooses to do with recess time, as long as it is free play and a break from academic study, said Dr. Murray and co-author Catherine L. Ramstetter, M.S., Ph.D.

As they examined the research on recess and breaks from the school day, Dr. Ramstetter said she was struck by how the physical activity aspect of recess was "just one piece of it." She said she was surprised that a simple break from the school day, no matter what the child did during that time, was an essential element to recess.

"The real message is that this is the child's time, and they should have a say in how they experience that break," Dr. Ramstetter said. "Children just need a break. It needs to be a cognitive break in the day."

Just as adults take lunch and coffee breaks during the workday, the same concept applies to children, but is even more important because of their limited ability to sustain concentration, Dr. Murray said.

"A child who is allowed to have regular breaks can perform far better in the classroom than someone

who has it taken away," he said.

Unstructured play, free of direction from adults, also allows children to work with others, be creative, solve problems and think independently.

Pediatricians, the report states, "should be cognizant, however, that in designing a structured recess, they will sacrifice the notion of recess as an unstructured but supervised break that belongs to the child ... a time for the child to make a personal choice between sedentary, physical, creative or social options."

Lifelong benefits

Some schools have been cutting back on recess due to safety concerns. As long as schools ensure that their play equipment is safe and recess is well-supervised by adults, the benefits of play and exercise far outweigh injury risks, Dr. Murray said.

In other situations, teachers deny recess as a punishment for inappropriate behavior or poor academic performance. But taking away recess for punitive reasons is counterproductive, since the downtime can actually improve a child's focus, attention span and behavior, according to the policy statement.

Dr. Murray participated in the 2012 Nutrition and Physical Activity Learning Connection Summit, where physicians and members of several partner agencies discussed the importance of physical activity and nutrition for children, which dovetails with the AAP policy statement on recess.

The premise of the gathering, and an updated report from Action for Healthy Kids to be released this month, is that "a well-fed, active and healthy child is a much better learner, a much more successful student," Dr. Murray said. That message also is emphasized in the recess policy statement.

"There's a lot more going on than initially meets the eye," Dr. Murray said. "Children are developing many, many skills during recess that will assist them for a lifetime. It's more than just activity and more than just fitness."



Dr. Ramstetter