[Recess Is Not A Luxury: Here’s What Happens When Kids Sit Too Long At School](http://www.scarymommy.com/recess-is-not-a-luxury-heres-what-happens-when-kids-sit-too-long-at-school/)

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# Recess isn’t a luxury and play time shouldn’t be optional

After years of schools reducing recess time and teachers using the threat of taking away recess as a disciplinary tool, experts are tsk-tsking them for doing so – and it’s about time. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention recently issued a [**comprehensive set of strategies for recess**](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/pdf/2016_12_16_schoolrecessstrategies_508.pdf) that highlights the benefits of recess and reminds parents and educators that recess shouldn’t be optional, nor should it be taken away as a punishment.

Not only is recess fun, but it serves a critical function in the learning process. Unfortunately, in recent years, many schools have been cutting recess time to keep up with stricter academic demands – with disastrous results. Angela Hanscom, a pediatric occupational therapist who [**first wrote about the recess deficiency problem in the Washington Post in 2014**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/07/08/why-so-many-kids-cant-sit-still-in-school-today/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.2f3aba5ddda6), warned that when children are constantly in the upright position – as they are these days – they have an underdeveloped vestibular system (which is really just a fancy way of saying “balance”).

A strong vestibular system isn’t just important for physical reasons, but for academic reasons as well. If a child doesn’t have a strong balance system, they are less capable of focusing. What’s more, movement alone isn’t enough. Kids need to move in all directions – including sideways and upside down – in order to build a strong vestibular system.

“When we continuously expect children to be seated for hours everyday, whether that is sitting for lengthy stints of time in the classroom, being driven from one event to the next, or doing homework till it gets dark outside — children are often found in an upright position with little sensory stimulation,” Hanscom wrote. “[Kids] need ample opportunities to move their bodies in all different directions such as going upside down, spinning in circles, rolling down hills or even climbing trees.”

These kinds of movements aren’t just necessary to help kids get the jitters out and release excess energy, but they also cause fluid to move in the inner ear, which stimulates hair cells that develop a child’s sense of balance, which supports all other senses.

The need for occupational therapy services has been on the rise, [**according to Hanscom**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/03/17/the-consequences-of-forcing-young-kids-to-sit-too-long-in-class/?utm_term=.8c19fc5ff41d), and teachers are reporting a significant decline in kids’ ability to pay attention in class. Kids are literally falling out of their chairs, and they can’t “keep their hands off each other” during recess breaks – all of which she attributes to underdeveloped vestibular systems caused by reduced recess time and lack of unstructured free play.

Recess and free play shouldn’t be treated as a luxury; they’re a necessity. Without recess, kids will continue to have a hard time paying attention and sitting still in class. In fact, the [**American Academy of Pediatrics’ Council on School Health**](http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/131/1/183.full.pdf) issued a statement in 2013 affirmatively stating that, “Recess is a crucial and necessary component of a child’s development and, as such, it should not be withheld for punitive or academic reasons.”

Fortunately, some schools are starting to recognize the importance of physical movement on a child’s well-being and are [**increasing recess time and character building activities**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/09/13/recess-four-times-a-day-why-some-schools-are-now-letting-kids-play-an-hour-a-day/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.6297b2192a44). For instance, a handful of schools in Texas recently began using the [**LiiNK Project**](http://liinkproject.tcu.edu/about-us/), which is designed to connect academic learning with social, emotional, and physical development. Other schools are increasing recess to four times a day in 15-minute increments, and the [**Georgia House of Representatives recently voted**](http://times-herald.com/news/2017/03/30-minute-recess-bill-passes-state-house) overwhelmingly in favor of a bill that would require 30 minutes of daily recess for students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

But there is still a lot of work to be done, [**as Hanscom recently reminded parents and educators in the Washington Post**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/03/17/the-consequences-of-forcing-young-kids-to-sit-too-long-in-class/?utm_term=.5320a814cb31). It’s not enough just to read an article and nod your head in agreement. She recommended bringing information regarding the benefits of recess to school administrators, connecting with other parents to advocate for increased recess time, and getting outdoors with your kids.

“It starts with you and me,” Hansom concluded. “May you gather your courage and start taking the steps necessary to create this change our kids need.”

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