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Recess Is 'In Recess' As Schools Cut Child's Play

The timeless institution of recess is in jeopardy. A survey by the American Association for the Child's Right to Play shows that about 40% of public schools have already cut, or are planning to cut, at least one recess period from the school day.

Since the birth of the American schoolhouse, children have enjoyed regular breaks from textbooks and classroom routines. Teachers 100 years ago knew what modern research studies prove today: Recess provides the means for fidgety students, especially boys, to expend their energy and refresh their minds. As Time.com put it: "Multiple studies show that, when recess time is delayed, elementary-school kids grow increasingly inattentive. Goodbye recess, hello Ritalin."

New elementary schools in Atlanta have been built without playgrounds, and recess has been curtailed in other Georgia school districts as well. Schools in Pennsylvania, Illinois, Texas, New Jersey, Florida, and California have all jumped on the eliminate-recess bandwagon. "This is an example of good intentions gone awry," Paul Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, told the Chicago Tribune (9-27-01). "There's huge pressure these days on superintendents and boards to show that they're serious about achievement, so they do something symbolic - they get rid of recess."

Filling the void are computer classes, foreign language lessons, creative writing, and even dance lessons. Some educators point out that students no longer sit at desks lined up in rows, but work mostly in groups and are more free to move around. Along with phys-ed classes, this new structure "takes care of physical activity needs," they say. But parents worry that their children are wandering around in groups during class time at the expense of real learning, and fear that academics are being sacrificed along with recess.

Parents, teachers, physical education experts, psychiatrists, psychologists and others who speak out in favor of recess have failed so far to buck the trend. One notable exception is Rebecca Lamphere, a mother in Virginia Beach, Virginia, who waged a two-year battle to reinstate recess at her daughter's elementary school. Dubbed "the Erin Brockovich of the swingset" (after the academy-award winning film Erin Brockovich starring Julia Roberts), Lamphere mounted her campaign in 1998 when her daughter entered first grade. She circulated petitions and solicited input from pro-recess experts. When the school board told her she was "just a parent, not an expert," she enrolled in early-

childhood education classes at Tidewater Community College and took a public-speaking course. She became a regular at school board meetings and butted heads with teachers.

Lamphere's crusade received considerable media attention and resulted in the Virginia Beach public schools mandating "daily, unstructured recess" in April 2000. When news of her victory spread, the state of Virginia followed suit four months later, mandating recess for all public elementary school students. "A childhood without recess is missing something," Lamphere says.

Many adults agree. Alvin Rosenfeld, co-author of *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap*, calls child's play "joyful and emotionally nourishing," and says it "may even make children smarter."

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends that elementary school children get at least one hour of exercise per day, preferably in 15-minute bursts. Association Director Judy Young advocates recess as "a time to socialize and exercise, without the structure of a physical education class."

Florida Department of Education physical education curriculum specialist Brandy Bartol told the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* (2-12-01): "Especially today, with more kids on Ritalin, more TV watching and video games, if exercise isn't encouraged at a young age, kids will be missing a core component of a healthy life."

As recently as 1981, the University of Michigan published research showing that, after school work, sleeping, eating, and participating in organized activities, 40% of the average school-age child's day was free for play. By 1997, this figure was down to 25%. There is no evidence that all this structuring has improved student performance. Despite the national push to "raise standards and achievement," test scores have remained flat.