



The Value of Recess and Outdoor Play

The delights of the outdoors are among the deepest, most passionate joys of childhood, however increasing demands on parents working outside of the home have resulted in growing numbers of children with less time to play under adult supervision in their neighborhoods or in their yards. Instead, they are spending more time behind locked doors watching television, playing video and computer games, and as recent studies have shown, growing obese. Other children often have afternoon schedules full of structured activities, including music, dance instruction, drama classes, and tennis lessons.

Compounding the dilemma is a trend among many public school districts throughout the United States to eliminate recess in elementary schools. Those doing away with outdoor activity claim that it is a waste of time better spent on academics, that playground injuries promote lawsuits, that children are at an increased risk of coming in contact with threatening strangers while outdoors, and that there is a shortage of teachers and volunteers willing to supervise play activities.

While these concerns are valid, school recess is often the only time during the work week that children are able to be carefree--a time when their bodies and voices are not under tight control.

It is a widely held view that unstructured physical play is a developmentally appropriate outlet for reducing stress in children's lives, and research shows that physical activity improves children's attentiveness and decreases restlessness. Following are a few reasons why school administrators should carefully consider the benefits of outdoor play before eliminating recess from their curriculum.

1. Play is an active form of learning that unites the mind, body, and spirit. Until at least the age of nine, children's learning occurs best when the whole self is involved.

2. Play reduces the tension that often comes with having to achieve or needing to learn. In play, adults do not interfere and children relax.

3. Children express and work out emotional aspects of everyday experiences through unstructured play.

4. Children permitted to play freely with peers develop skills for seeing things through another person's point of view--cooperating, helping, sharing, and solving problems.

5. The development of children's perceptual abilities may suffer when so much of their experience is through television, computers, books, work-sheets, and media that require only two senses. The senses of smell, touch, and taste, and the sense of motion through space are powerful modes of learning.

6. Children who are less restricted in their access to the outdoors gain competence in moving through the larger world. Developmentally, they should gain the ability to navigate their immediate environs (in safety) and lay the foundation for the courage that will enable them eventually to lead their own lives.

Our society has become increasingly complex, but there remains a need for every child to feel the sun and wind on his cheek and engage in self-paced play. Children's attempts to make their way across monkey bars, negotiate the hopscotch course, play jacks, or toss a football require intricate behaviors of planning, balance, and strength--traits we want to encourage in children. Ignoring the developmental functions of unstructured outdoor play denies children the opportunity to expand their imaginations beyond the constraints of the classroom.

Additional Resources

Rivkin, M.S. 1995. *The Great Outdoors: Restoring Children's Right to Play Outside*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. #108/\$8

Rogers, C.S. and Sawyers, J.K. 1988. *Play in the Lives of Children*. Washington, DC. NAEYC. #301/\$6

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