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Out of play

Florida schoolkids can name the presidents, speak foreign languages and studiously practice the FCAT. But they don't know what recess is.

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For 25 minutes every Friday, the first-graders get to play.

They don't run laps or do pushups, practicing for some president's fitness test. They don't get pushed into whole-class kickball, where someone always gets stuck on the team with slow Stanley. They don't do anything where their teacher referees or anyone tells them what to do or with whom.

They just play. Really play.

"Friday is open court," a first-grader wrote last month. "You can dig. Sometimes you can shoot baskets. And sometimes you can play soccer . . ."

I was helping my youngest son's class make a newspaper. I was editing a sports story with the boy who wrote it. "Friday is my favorite day of PE," he wrote. "Everybody likes open court."

"I can see why," I told him. "It sounds just like recess."

The boy looked up and asked a question that scared me: "What's recess?"

He's 7 years old and he doesn't know what recess is.

He's in public school in Pinellas County, at a magnet elementary with 800 other children who never hear the word recess.

Who get only 25 minutes, once a week, to play.

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Remember recess?

Four-square, jump rope, hanging upside down on the jungle gym. Red Rover, stickball, climbing trees, hunting for caterpillars. Or just being by yourself.

I met my best friend at recess, in first grade. I got my first kiss at recess, in fifth grade.

Recess meant diving into leaf piles, hurling snowballs, blowing dandelion tufts. Gossiping and freeze tag and getting dirty.

Sure, recess could be a drag. Bullies and crybabies showed their true selves on the playground. You got skinned knees and bruises and sand in your eyes.

But good or bad, everyone over 30 remembers recess. It was a chance to run and swing and use your outside voice, to climb and jump and hang out without grownups butting in, to invent games and rules, to form your own teams and make your own choices.

"Recess provides children with the opportunity to develop friendships, negotiate relationships and build positive connections," says psychologist Robert Friedman, who chairs the University of South Florida's Department of Child and Family Studies.

"Recess leads to physical, social and emotional development and is an important component of an elementary school day."

With less neighborly neighborhoods, over programmed schedules and electronic toys, Friedman says it's even more important for today's children to have school recess.

But my kids - many of our kids - don't get it. At all.

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"The old-fashioned recess is a thing of the past," says Hillsborough County Schools spokesman Mark Hart. "It's been dying for the last 30 years."

At least 40 percent of schools in the United States have cut recess or are considering dropping it, says a recent report in Education World.

Around Tampa Bay, some principals allow recess if the teacher requests it; others say PE is enough. And thousands of children are made to sit in assigned seats for six long hours every day.

Sit at your desk. Stay in your seat and be quiet in the cafeteria. Assigned seats in music and art. Assigned teams in PE. Even assigned benches on the bus ride home.

"It's hard to figure out who would be our friends because we never get to pick who we sit by," says my elder son, who's 8. "Even in the cafeteria, you can't save seats for somebody."

Imagine if adults didn't get coffee breaks, if you got detention for talking at the water cooler, if your boss made you eat lunch with that weird guy from the copy room.

Everyone needs a chance to shake their legs, blow off steam, get their ya-yas out. Especially elementary-age children.

So why is recess disappearing?

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Some blame lawyers. Others, "helicopter parents."

Test makers, teachers and principals all helped kill recess. Politicians demanding more standardized tests. Fewer people volunteering to police playgrounds. Federal laws requiring equal access.

"The impetus for getting rid of recess really started with the liability," says Hart, the Hillsborough schools spokesman. "Kids were getting hurt on blacktops, injured on playgrounds. As society got increasingly litigious through the 1980s, schools started eliminating the possibility of recess accidents."

Also, schools now spend more time preparing kids for government-mandated tests. "The school day is just getting squeezed," Hart says.

Some teachers miss recess as much as the kids do. A few, recognizing the need for recess, have started what Hart calls "teacher-directed PE." With the principal's permission, a teacher can take his or her class outside for 15 minutes. For the kids, it's like a jailbreak.

"It would be nice to go back to the good old days of rough and tumble recess. But that's not going to happen," Hart says.

"It remains to be seen what the long-term effects will be on these children."

Even schools that have recess may not have playgrounds. Jungle gyms and monkey bars are becoming extinct even faster than free time.

And as the playground equipment ages, it won't be replaced.

"You can't build new jungle gyms because they're not ADA-approved," Hart says, citing the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires equal access to public places. "If we get new playground equipment, it has to be modular and plastic - and wheelchair-accessible."

It's great to include everybody. I'm sure kids could figure out how to have fun even without playground equipment, if they had the time.

And if they could just get us parents to stop hovering.

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Childhood is less carefree than it used to be. Kids' lives are so structured, from aftercare to piano lessons, soccer games to gymnastics. No one just runs around the neighborhood, making their own fun.

Mostly, kids don't walk to school with their friends anymore. No kick the can, no detours on the way home. Most parents are afraid to let 10-year-olds ride their bikes around the block.

Hardly anyone plays street hockey or hikes down to the creek to catch tadpoles. There's no such thing as pickup baseball on a sandlot.

Our children play Little League. And most moms and dads stay through every practice, sitting rapt at every game.

"My mom was my Cub Scout leader, and she'd have 12 of us boys in the basement, wreaking havoc," Hart says. "The boys rode their bikes or walked to our house. There weren't 12 other moms there staying to help with activities, intervening in the kids' interaction."

Hart calls such moms and dads "helicopter parents," and says most of us hover too much.

Another part of the problem is distance. My boys go to a magnet school that's a 45-minute drive away. Some of their classmates live 90 minutes north of us. It's not as if they could ride their bikes to those friends' houses, even if I would let them. So we form play groups, with the parents sitting in the corners, watching. We hover at birthday parties, at ballet lessons. When there's a problem, we jump in to fix it instead of letting kids solve it on their own.

"Kids need to learn to form and join groups on their own, instead of always being assigned to them," says Friedman, the psychologist. "Unstructured play has benefits distinct from directed play."

Children who have recess are less fidgety when they get back to class. They pay better attention. Get better grades, Friedman says.

And PE isn't recess. PE is led by an adult with expectations. Recess has to equal some sort of freedom, says the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. When educators ask, "Can PE be substituted for recess?" the group says, "No." Kids need to "have choices, develop rules for play," the PE teachers say.

Other groups have joined an effort to bring back recess. The National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the American Association for the Child's Right to Play all promote recess as an important part of children's physical and social development.

Add to that the National Association For Giving My Kid a Break, which I just formed, right here at my desk.

My younger son's teacher has been in elementary classrooms for more than 30 years. She wishes they would bring recess back, so the kids wouldn't be so restless. Recess, she says, would cut down on roaming fees.

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After lunch, when we used to have recess, the first-graders are supposed to come back to class. But it's hard to sit still when you're buzzing on chocolate milk and Fruit Roll-Ups. It's hard to write spelling sentences when you've got all that energy.

The kids climb over each other to sharpen pencils, put lunch boxes in backpacks, anything but park in their assigned seats.

"Okay, the meter is running. I'm going to start assessing roaming fees," the teacher calls above the buzz. The children earn points for good behavior, for asking good questions. They get points taken away for walking around: roaming fees.

Still, too many children seem unable to settle. They're wasting time. They're not ready to pay attention. So the teacher claps her hands above her head. "Line up by the door," she tells them. "Go ahead, stand by whoever you want.

"We're going on a walkabout."

She leads the children out the door, along the sidewalk, winding through the courtyard. The first-graders follow her, arms spread, skipping along. "Sometimes, when they're just too fidgety, you have to do something," the teacher says.

It isn't exactly recess. But it helps.

Especially when it's Tuesday and your weekly allotment of free play is three days away.