

The Developmental and Educational Significance of Recess in Schools Early Report Newsletter Spring 2002

Introduction

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In Britain and the USA, recess (or break time) is slowly being phased out of the school day. For example, a national survey conducted in England in 1995-1996 showed that lunchtime break had been reduced, relative to 1990-1991, in 38% of the elementary schools. Further, afternoon breaks have been eliminated altogether in 27% of the elementary schools surveyed and 12% and 14%, respectively, of preschool and middle schools (see Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000).

Proponents of recess reduction in both countries maintain that recess detracts from an already limited instructional time budget and provides opportunities for students to exhibit anti-social behavior, such as negative peer relations and aggression. However, we maintain that recess plays a positive role in children's academic achievement and social development and, ultimately, in school adjustment. Our research has shown that breaks, or play, actually encourage academic achievement. Furthermore, youngsters learn valuable social skills by interacting with peers at break time, and these social skills help them to adjust to school.

Recess and Academic Achievement

Educational research, in contrast to current educational policy, consistently indicates that break time does have positive "educational value." For example, in four field experiments conducted in American elementary schools, we found (Pellegrini & Davis, 1993; Pellegrini, Huberty, & Jones, 1995) that the longer children worked without a break on standardized tasks, the less attentive to the task they became. In addition, children were more attentive to class work after recess than before.

Why is this the case? Two current theories in educational research attempt to answer this question.

- * One theory maintains that breaks inserted between periods of intense work serve to distribute effort and increase cognitive performance. For over a century, experiments have been conducted in this area with consistent results participants, regardless of age, learn better and more quickly when their efforts are distributed compared to when they are massed. Children and adults alike benefit from breaks during periods of intense work.

- * Another theory states that when children are exposed to a series of demanding cognitive tasks, cognitive interference occurs, with a resulting decline in performance. Learners of different ages are released from this interference in different ways young children respond well to non-structured breaks, whereas older learners benefit from simply changing tasks.

Recess and Peer Relations

In addition to its apparent academic benefit, recess is extremely valuable to social development. Recess may be one of the few times during the school day when children can interact with peers on their own terms and learn and practice important social skills. Games, in particular, seem to serve an important role for young children

since they provide a familiar routine (Bateson, 1976) around which unacquainted children can interact. These interactions form the basis for subsequent social relationships in school.

In a recent study of playground games in elementary schools in Minneapolis, we found that children's recess was spent in cooperative interaction, much of which involved rule-governed games with peers. Importantly, and consistent with other research (Pellegrini, 1988), very little aggressive behavior was observed. Being good at games on the playground was important to general social competence, which we measured as a combination of peer endorsements and adult-rated social competence.

In addition, children's success at games during the first part of the school year predicted their social competence at the end of the year. Playground games are especially important at the start of the school year, when peers are not familiar with each other. Shared knowledge of a game can be used by relatively unfamiliar children as an initial basis for interaction. After repeated interactions in games, children become familiar with each other and then interact in other domains.

Expertise with the sorts of games played on the playground results in high peer status as children of this age choose to affiliate with others with whom they share play activities (Hartup, 1983). Children who are leaders in playground games are sought out by peers as sources of group activity.

We found, however, that children's roles in games changed across the school year. In a study of playground games in elementary schools in Guilford, England, children came to school with knowledge of games learned from an adult or an older sibling, but in the course of interacting with their peers, they adapted the behavior to their new environment. At the very beginning of the school year, games appeared to support new social contacts initiation of games could be seen as initiation of a new social relationship. As the school year continued, games reinforced existing social groups and friendships.

However, children differ in their willingness and ability to initiate and sustain playground games. The Guilford Study identified a few pupils who took on the responsibility of suggesting, maintaining, and terminating games. These "key players" appeared to have a crucial role in the development of friendships and games. Case studies indicated that key players are likely to be popular and to be seen by peers as group leaders, but differences within this group were also apparent, particularly between boys and girls. Boys identified as "key players" seemed to hold this position because of physical prowess, girls because of social skills and imagination, possibly associated with academic progress.

These results were replicated in the Minneapolis study, wherein children nominated by their peers as game leaders were also the most socially competent, or "popular." Game leader status also "increased" with the size of the play group in which children were observed. Size of play groups, in turn, was correlated with social competence. We suspect that the leadership skills of game leaders make them attractive to their peers, as indicated by their receipt of peer nominations and their attraction of many peers to their play groups. Once in these play groups, leaders gain additional skills to boost their social competence by practicing and learning additional social skills.

Children's success with one dimension of peer relations (being good at playground games) predicted their adjustment to school. Using preliminary data from our Minneapolis sample, we found a positive association between children nominated by their peers as being good at games and sports and school adjustment in the first year of elementary school (as rated by teachers and researchers). We suspect that the success that children experience at playground games translates to more general feelings of competence in school.

These findings are especially interesting given the ethnic diversity of the children in the Minneapolis sample. In the two elementary schools studied in Minneapolis, the majority of children were of African American, Latino, or Asian American (mostly Vietnamese and Hmong) backgrounds, not of European American backgrounds. A major developmental task for children of this age, of course, is adjustment to school. This task is especially difficult for different cultural groups because the culture upon which American public education is based is, generally, different from that of these minority cultures (Heath, 1983). Our results suggest that when children, regardless of their cultural background, are valued by their peers for success in one dimension of school (success with games in the playground), it has a positive influence on their adjustment to this new environment.

Playground games are also important in the development of heterosexual relationships for older children. Differences in how boys and girls play, spend break time, and develop social networks are well documented (Maccoby, 1998; Pellegrini, 2001). For example, in elementary school boys tend to play with other boys because they enjoy physically vigorous activities, and girls segregate themselves from boys' play groups because they do not enjoy rough play (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998).

Boys and girls do, however, begin to interact with each other socially during early adolescence (Pellegrini, 1995, 2001). For example, Pellegrini (2001) found that as boys progressed through middle school, they engaged less frequently in physically vigorous play and more frequently in sedentary social interaction during break times. Adolescents used these break time opportunities to explore heterosexual relationships (Pellegrini, 2001). For example, boys and girls alike used forms of "poke and push courtships" to interact with peers of the opposite sex (Maccoby, 1998). They would push, play hit, and tease opposite sex peers as a relatively safe way in which to initiate cross-sex interaction. These early forms of courtship are "safe" because they are ambiguous. If there is a positive response to the overture, fine interaction with an opposite sex peer was successfully initiated. If the overture is rebuffed, the initiator saves face with his/her peers because it was playful, i.e., not a serious overture.

Conclusions

Recess improves academic achievement, peer relations, and school adjustment. For young children, it can provide a welcome respite from intense cognitive activity. During the elementary school years, it is especially valuable as rare time in which children can develop peer relations and social skills. These skills, in turn, are important to children's successful adjustment to school.

Successful peer relations in school and academic success directly support each other (e.g., Coie & Dodge, 1998; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000). The idea that school breaks provide opportunities for children to learn and practice social skills with their peers is noted in the context of decreasing opportunities for peer interaction in children's lives. For example, a survey in the early 1990s found that London students

are now far less likely to walk to school, presumably accompanied by other students, than they were 20 years ago (Hillman, 1993). Likewise, after school, many American children return to empty homes, waiting for their parent(s) to return from work (Steinberg, 1988), instead of going to a friend's house or an after-school program.

In both America and England there is concern with antisocial behavior in youth generally and in schools, specifically. By way of solutions, many American politicians are calling for special programs to teach social skills in school. We suggest that most children learn social skills by interacting with their peers in meaningful social situations, such as recess.

Recess provides an "extended classroom" in which children can learn important social skills. These skills should be considered "educational." In addition, spaced break times directly improve children's attention to class work. Further, the social skills learned on the playground relate to more general school adjustment.

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