

Let's look at the relevance of recess in our schools

By SUZANNE KENNEDY

Ask a room of adults a question about recess and most will answer that it was their favorite part of the school day, not including lunch. A 1989 survey of state superintendents conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals found that 96 percent of districts had recess.

But in the late '90s, No Child Left Behind resulted in a significant decrease in the number of districts with recess and the overall amount of recess time. According to official figures, 20 percent of districts decreased recess time, averaging cuts of 50 minutes per week. By 2006, only 57 percent of districts required a regularly scheduled recess. One Atlanta Public School superintendent said, "We are intent on improving academic performance. You don't do that by having kids hanging on the monkey bars."

Of course, there aren't many studies that compare the same children with and without recess, and no longitudinal studies of the effects of recess deprivation over time. (Who would want their children to participate in that research?) So, we have to harvest from various studies that look at past history, socioeconomic breakouts, grade levels, and school size with regard to recess.

Pediatricians say recess offers children cognitive, physical, emotional, and social benefits. The brain cannot maintain attention for long periods of time and requires some sort of change to regain focus. Downtime is needed to recycle the chemicals crucial for long-term memory formation. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics states that recess should not even



be withheld as a punishment. It's that important.

What's going on at recess time? Aren't the kids just messing around, wasting time? Nope. They are exercising. As the amount of recess decreased, the frequency of childhood obesity increased. Kids who have recess at school during the day are more likely to play outside at home and the opposite is true, as well. Kids without recess don't make up for it at home.

They are learning social skills. Non-teacher directed interaction with other kids leads to confrontations, learning social cues, negotiating, and cooperating. They are learning problem-solving techniques, creating and following rules, and practicing leadership skills. These are things that cannot be taught, or at least not taught well, in a classroom where the teacher is in charge. They choose and make decisions. These are the attributes that future employers are looking for, the characteristics of highly successful people.

It's during recess that children physically process what they've

spent the day learning. That means they take the information presented to them and, by moving around, put it into the correct areas of their brains. They pretend and create, and pass down cultural games and traditions from previous generations.

What can you do? Get involved. Be knowledgeable. For every hour of academics, there should be about ten to fifteen minutes of playtime. Check your student's schedule. Are they moving every hour by going to PE, recess, or some other non-academic focused activity? If not, start by talking to the teacher and the principal. Check with the school district to



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see if there is a policy in place.

According to shapeamerica.org, Oregon requires at least 150 minutes per week of physical education in K-5, and at least 225 minutes in grades 6-8. It does not require schools to provide daily recess or physical activity classroom breaks.

Are you a teacher? (Thank you!) Rather than taking recess away as a punishment for misbehaving students, consider having the student walk with a teacher, or not be allowed to play certain games (no basketball or tetherball), but still allowed to run and play. Understand that kids need both PE and recess, not one or the other.

I would personally love to see PE as an everyday subject in elementary school because I believe it's every bit as important as reading and math, but that's a story for another day.

Suzanne Kennedy is a former middle school teacher who lives in Pendleton with her husband and three children.

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