

School recess offers benefits to student well-being, educator reports

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A high-quality recess program can help students feel more engaged, safer and positive about the school day, according to Stanford research.

In fact, recess can yield numerous benefits to an elementary school's overall climate, said Milbrey McLaughlin, the David Jacks Professor of

Education and Public Policy, Emerita, founding director of Stanford's John W. Gardner Center, and a co-author of the journal article.

"Positive school climate has been linked to a host of favorable student outcomes, from attendance to achievement," the study noted.

In an interview, McLaughlin said, "Recess isn't normally considered part of school climate, and often is shortchanged in tight fiscal times, but our research shows that can be a critical contributor to positive school climate in low-income elementary schools."

McLaughlin's co-authors are Rebecca London (lead author), formerly of Stanford and now a researcher at UC Santa Cruz; Lisa Westrich, a former Stanford research and policy analyst; and Katie Stokes-Guinan, a former Stanford graduate student researcher.

Benefits of recess

A positive school climate has been linked to a host of favorable student outcomes, from attendance to achievement, according to the study. It includes four key elements for students – physical and emotional safety at school; positive relationships with peers and adults; support for learning; and an institutional environment that fosters school connectedness and engagement.

Prior research attests to the importance of play or recess time for children, McLaughlin and her colleagues wrote.

For example, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights recognizes the right of all children to play, regarding it as an essential part of their well-being, especially for the economically disadvantaged. And the state of California now includes school climate as one of eight priority areas for local education agencies.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has outlined a set of guidelines intended to help schools develop positive recess programs – guidelines necessary because recess today does not always meet these standards, according to McLaughlin and her co-authors. Many schools had cut back recess programs watering down their effectiveness, or eliminated them altogether.

"The quality of recess is in question," they wrote.

Because recess offers opportunities for both positive play and experience in learning how to resolve conflicts, it can have powerful implications for a child's education, McLaughlin said.

Improved attitudes

The researchers examined six low-income elementary schools during the 2009-10 school year that had implemented a non-profit organization's recess-based program aimed at encouraging a safe, healthy and inclusive environment.

Trained, full-time "coaches" were sent into low-income elementary schools with the goal of improving recess. They worked with students to establish recess games with a common set of rules, introduced conflict-resolution tools, and encouraged positive language and inclusive behavior. Each school had two recess periods during the day.

The findings were based on teacher, principal and recess coach interviews; student focus groups; recess observations; and a teacher survey. Schools on the opposite ends of the recess spectrum – good and poor – were compared as well.

Adults are integral to a well-rounded recess experience, McLaughlin said.

"Recess seems like a time for kids to get some exercise or just have fun, but unless there are adults actively paying attention to and supporting a high-quality recess, it can be a time when kids feel unsafe, physically and emotionally," she said.

Teachers and principals said that previously when students did not know or could not agree on game rules, conflicts arose. Overall, 89 percent of teachers surveyed agreed that there was improvement in recess organization.

A teacher from one school said, "It's more of a structured, fun environment. You can see that they're playing soccer, whereas, before, you weren't sure what they were playing."

The students felt safer. Fostering positive language, although challenging, was seen as key. About half of teachers (49 percent) reported that students frequently encouraged each other with positive language. One teacher said, "There's a lot more collegiality between the kids. They're using, 'Hey, good job, nice try,' instead of 'Ha ha, you're out.' "

Less bullying among students was found for schools with high-quality recess programs as compared to those with low-quality recess. And student-to-student conflict was lessened.

Students more often initiated games in the pro-recess environments (83 percent of the students initiating games, compared to 33 percent in the lesser environment), and female students felt more engaged overall (85 percent to 55 percent). Finally, an overall improvement in how students felt was recorded (91 percent to 59 percent).

The study concluded that schools with well-run and well-organized recesses feel better, safer and more engaged, which in turn was

associated with improvements in overall school climate. Teachers began to more highly appreciate the importance of recess time.

"This analysis points to a new framing for how a high-quality recess can positively contribute to a school's climate," the authors wrote.

Change to better recess routines isn't always easy, McLaughlin said. School cultures are frequently resistant to change; sometimes student attitudes and behaviors are at odds with well-established norms of behavior on the playground.

"We saw how a positive recess experience can benefit classroom climate in low-income elementary schools through [students'](#) improved conflict-resolution skills and sense of teamwork," she added.

More information: "Playing Fair: The Contribution of High-Functioning Recess to Overall School Climate in Low-Income Elementary Schools." *Journal of School Health*, 85: 53–60.
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