



# Active Play with Recess

## Background

Recess, a planned break during the school day, provides elementary school students with opportunities for unstructured free-play physical activity (i.e., active play). Its substantial positive impact on child development – including cognitive, social and physical benefits – is widely recognized, particularly when recess is well supervised and safe.

Recess significantly contributes to improved educational outcomes, including better grades, test scores, classroom behavior and school attendance, and it enhances memory, attention and concentration. Beyond its academic advantages, recess also nurtures positive social and emotional growth. It equips students with crucial skills like sharing and negotiation, supports better social interactions, strengthens their connection to the school and fosters a more positive school environment. Furthermore, recess offers physical health benefits by allowing children to counteract the sedentary time they spend at school.

Research has also found that children and youth partake in higher levels of physical activity when they spend time outdoors. Physically active outdoor play fosters a child's kinesthetic sense while augmenting aerobic fitness, muscular strength and neuromuscular coordination. Outdoor recess should then enhance the opportunity to accrue the recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity, a guideline strongly endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics. In fact, recess accounts for as much as 70% of children's physical activity on weekdays. This is especially significant for marginalized children who may face restrictions on outdoor play in their neighborhoods due to limited space or safety concerns.

Despite its numerous benefits, only 62% of school districts require elementary schools to provide regularly scheduled recess. Additionally, access to recess opportunities diminishes as children get older and is scarcer among children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, especially in urban areas. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has found that low-income urban students and students of color have less scheduled recess time compared to their peers. In contrast, schools with a higher percentage of white students and those serving higher-income families are more likely to provide the recommended 20 minutes of daily recess. While more than 90% of elementary schools offer scheduled recess for students in

grades K-5, only 35% of elementary schools maintain a consistent recess schedule for sixth-grade students. Given the importance of recess for child development, it is crucial to place a strong emphasis on efforts to enhance both access to and the quality of recess opportunities for all students.

States are proactively championing the right to play by enacting new laws that secure access to recess for all public school students. A notable example is Illinois, where, in 2021, the state legislature passed a bill mandating that K-5 students receive at least 30 minutes of unstructured playtime each school day. In 2023, the California state legislature passed into law a bill making 30 minutes of recess mandatory for all elementary school students from kindergarten through eighth grade. Both bills prohibit schools from using recess as a disciplinary measure. To bolster these legislative initiatives, the CDC and the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE) America have developed guidance documents. These resources offer schools 19 evidence-based strategies for optimizing recess and include a planning guide and template to assist in creating a written recess plan that incorporates these strategies.

## ACSM Position

It is the position of the American College of Sports Medicine® (ACSM) that recess is an integral and critical component of the school day that positively impacts child and adolescent development, improves behavior and enhances scholastic achievement. Scientific evidence continues to grow and advance in support of these tenets. By ensuring that recess and active play remain a fundamental part of the school day, we are safeguarding the health of our children and the future of our country.