Recess is a crucial and invaluable part of childhood development, giving children opportunities for rest and play. Not only is recess play and physical activity fun, but it has also been associated with numerous academic, emotional, and physical benefits in children!

This resource explores **5 benefits of recess**, and gives ideas for how you can be part of creating positive recess experiences for the children you work with!

**Recess can improve students’ academic outcomes.** Play at recess has been shown to improve 11-12 year old children’s ability to regenerate their attention and reaction time (Mezghanni et al, 2019). After doing physical activity at school, 10-12 year old students expressed feeling more capable of concentrating, thinking clearly, focusing in class, and felt that it was easier for them to solve problems (Harvey et al 2018). One study showed that the addition of a recess period positively impacted K-Gr 6 students’ math achievement outcomes (Erwin et al, 2019).

**Ideas in Action**

Take advantage of recess benefits in your classroom! If possible, plan your day so that more challenging and focused activities are scheduled after a recess period so that students have the opportunity to engage their brains and bodies in different ways.

**Beyond Recess**

How can curriculum be taught with movement in mind? See this example of **Math Around the World using Yoga Techniques for the Classroom** to get you thinking about other opportunities to engage active learners!

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**Recess is unique from, and a complement to, physical education—not a substitute for it.**

*American Academy of Pediatrics*

**RE•CESS (noun)**

1. A regularly scheduled period in the school day for physical activity and play that is monitored by trained staff or volunteers.
   *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*

2. A suspension of business or procedure often for rest or relaxation.
   *Merriam-Webster*
Increases Physical Activity

Recess is a great time for children to be physically active. Studies have shown that children’s average physical activity was significantly greater during recess (free play and structured) versus classroom setting activities (Frank et al 2018). Children were also more active after recess following free play recess (Frank et al 2018).

Physical activity at recess can also be promoted by the equipment and activities available. 8-10 year old children were found to spend significantly more time in activity games and less in sedentary activities during an organized recess that involved parkour activities (Coolkens et al 2018). Their moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) also increased in comparison to their time spent sedentary. Increasing the amount of equipment available to students is also effective, and has been shown in 4th graders to increase MVPA and decrease sedentary activity (Behrens et al 2019).

Ideas in Action

Try placing equipment near the doors in a child-accessible location, or in classroom bins so that students can easily grab and go during recess without having to wait for a teacher to provide equipment. This can also work for indoor recess, having ready to play activities, stations, or games can help with positive indoor recess experiences.

Is there an opportunity for a lending program for recess and break times? Working with the school library or classroom teachers, can equipment, winter clothing, or game ideas be lent out to students over break periods?

What about winter? Download Ever Active Schools Cold Weather Recess Planning Guide to ensure students are ready to be active in all weather conditions! This also includes a How to Dress for the Weather Guide.

Beyond Recess

Try introducing game ideas and ways to play with equipment that students might be unfamiliar with during physical education classes or intramurals. This allows time to discuss the rules and how to play before recess time. This can also be a great time to review behaviour at recess, strategies for play, and conflict resolution strategies as a group.

Introducing the Move & Play at Recess Activity Cards, or other tarmac games in the spring during Physical Education class, primes students for active opportunities once the snow melts. In addition, laminating the cards or posting the game rules where students play can also support play options with four square or other painted tarmac lines!
Fosters Youth Emotional Safety

Recess is a period that can help children and youth to feel emotionally safe at school. Unstructured recess time provides children freedom and space to take time out or move around! Youth have expressed feeling emotionally safe when they feel free in a recreational context.

Ideas in Action

Try encouraging students to personalize their recess experience in order to get a break. This could involve physical activity, a game, talking to friends, or roaming around the school property. Letting youth decide how they want to spend their recess empowers them, and can foster their emotional safety!

Beyond Recess

School wide surveys, focus groups and school action teams can help to support positive student leadership opportunities at recess whether a student chooses to rest, participate in leisure activities or play! Get the whole school involved to ensure that their recess time is a positive and fun break.

Facilitates Positive Peer Relationships

Recess gives children and youth the opportunity to build positive relationships as they play! Physical activity during recess has been linked to positive peer relationships at school in grade 4-5 and grade 7-8 school students. Physical activity during recess has also been positively linked to relatedness among grade 4-5 students, and the school climate for girls (Haapala et al 2014).

Ideas in Action

Recess leaders are a great option to build leadership opportunities for students, to have additional games and activities ready to play at breaks, and to provide opportunities for students to build relationships with students from different grade levels.

Movement Dice is a great way to resolve conflicts, try new activities, or add some excitement to a game that has outs. E.g. When playing four square, roll a movement dice to change the game, stand on one foot, close one eye, can’t bend your legs or arms while playing.
Beyond Recess

The Move & Play at Recess games were designed by students, for students. Most of the games and activities in this resource are designed to be played to promote participation for all in small groupings.

Trying new activities that not everyone is familiar with such as a ParaSport, which might provide an opportunity for all students to be at the beginning level in an activity. Learning a new game, sport or activity can also be a great opportunity to build relationships with peers.

Encourages Creative Thinking

Recess can promote creative-thinking in children and youth as they interact with equipment and play with others. For example, one study has shown that painted designs can spark creativity and imaginative play in children (Wong in press).

Ideas in Action

Incorporate painted designs-based games in classroom activities, such as math. The Move & Play at Recess games are a great place to start, then have students create their own games using tarmac stencils, open play spaces, or playground equipment!

Thinking about physical activity, play and beyond, what other low cost tools or suggestions can be provided to students at recess to get creative? Sidewalk chalk, shovels, bubbles, books, puzzles, magnifying glasses, nature scavenger hunts...what other ideas might be of interest for students during the recess break?

Engaging with loose parts is a component of Adventure Play, focusing on creativity, engineering, risk and imagination. Take a look at The Loose Parts Handbook - for Medicine Hat and Area to get some ideas on what might work in your area!

Tips for Success

- Remember: recess is just one opportunity for physical activity – physical activity can be incorporated throughout the school day!
- Consider having student ambassadors or physical activity leaders to teach games and set up equipment!
- Have activities and different movements posted in the school hallway!
- Instead of raising hands to talk, have children stand up!

Beyond Recess

Can the whole school be involved in creating a school culture for a positive recess experience for all? Is there interest in tarmac stencils, a quiet sitting area, a spot to explore in nature? Get students thinking creatively about what they would like to do at recess and break times, year round!

Activities and clubs can be modified into student led opportunities at break times. Eg. A student led theatre club might have improvised play created at recess. A music club might practice playing or singing a song at break time.
References


