



Free!
THE BOSTON
Parents' Paper

Massachusetts' No. 1 Parenting Magazine • BostonParentsPaper.com March 2005

**The Demise of
Recess**

What It Means For Your Kids

Special Needs

- **Parenting Despite Disabilities**
- **When Children Have a Mental Illness**

Education

BY JUDY MOLLAND

The Demise of Recess

Remember school recess? That block of time reserved for nothing but play – jumping rope, shooting hoops, mastering the jungle gym – and hanging out with your friends on the blacktop?

Add recess to the list of activities today's parents enjoyed when they were children but today's kids are, in many cases, denied. Forty percent of elementary schools nationwide have either eliminated or cut back recess time, according to the American Association for the Child's Right to Play.

This is on top of the national trend toward eliminating or severely scaling back on physical education (PE) classes; studies have found that only half of kids in grades K to 6 have any kind of PE.

Ironically, while union rules for many adult workers across the country require a minimum 15 minutes of break time for every four hours of work, and a half-hour for lunch in an eight-hour day, children, it seems, are losing the right to their own breaks.

What's Going on Here?

"We are experiencing a cultural shift toward increased academics at the earliest possible age," says Rhonda Clements, Ed.D., a professor of education at Hofstra University and president of the American Association for the Child's Right to Play. The organization, part of the International Play Association, formed in 1973 with the mission of "protecting, preserving and promoting play as a fundamental right for all children." Since then, it has become a leading advocate of preserving recess in schools.

Susan Ohanian was inspired to write the book *What Happened to Recess and Why Are Our Children Struggling in Kindergarten?* when she read a 1998 *New York Times* article detailing the fact that Atlanta was building a new school without a playground. Then-Superintendent of Atlanta

The Benefits of Recess

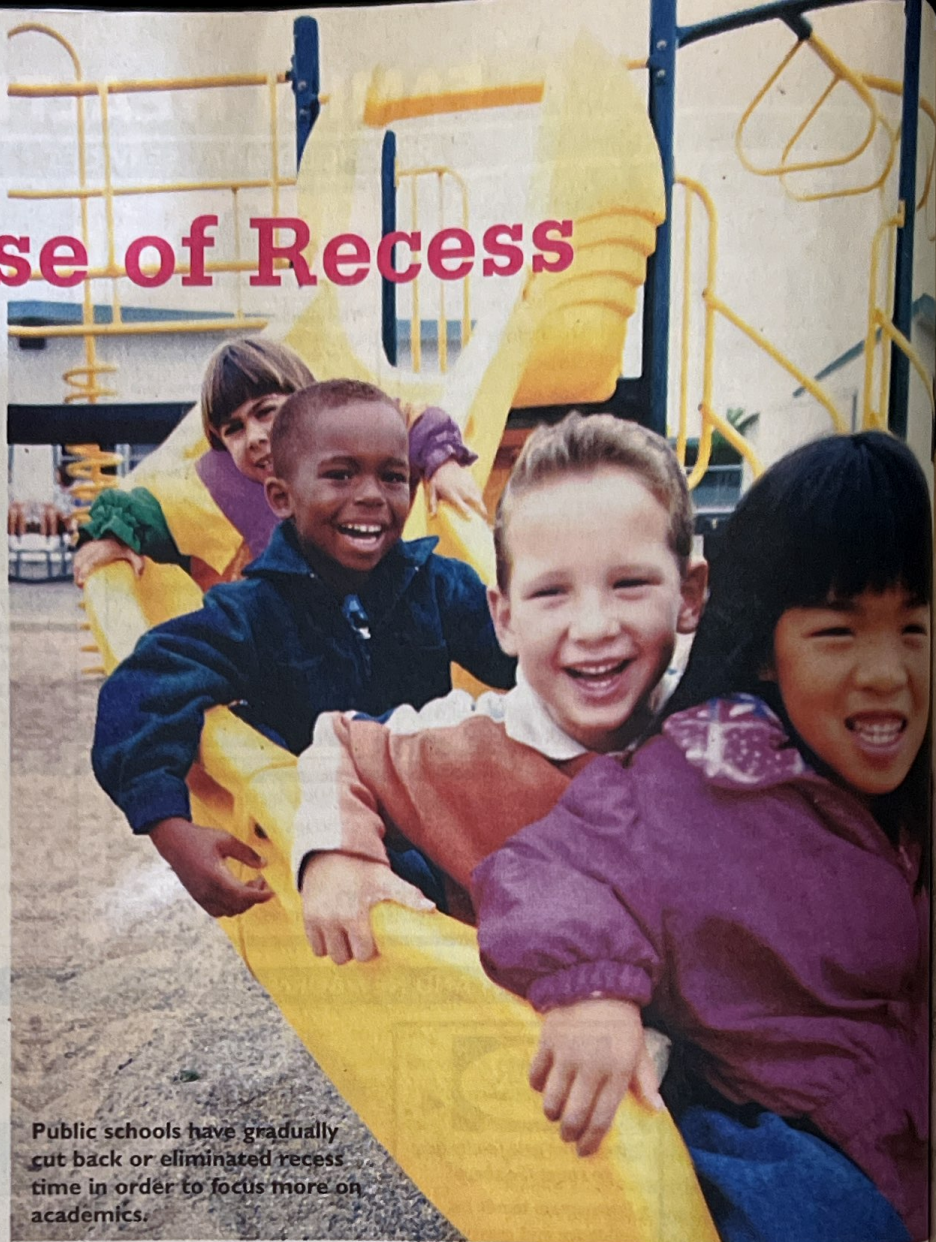
How does recess help children learn? The National Association for the Education of Young Children identifies the following benefits:

- **Improved Learning** – Children learn better when using mind and body.

- **More Relaxation** – Play reduces tension.

- **Healthier Emotions** – Children work out emotional aspects of their lives easier through unstructured play.

- **Increased Perceptual and Problem-Solving Abilities** – Kids experiencing the world around them versus a microcosm of computers and books is a powerful mode of learning.



Public schools have gradually cut back or eliminated recess time in order to focus more on academics.

Schools Benjamin O. Canada explained the policy this way: "We are intent on improving academic performance. You don't do that by having kids hanging on the monkey bars."

Performance Pressure

Many school districts blame the national emphasis on high-stakes testing in the public schools for dwindling recess time. The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, in particular, puts pressure on school administrators to have their districts' standardized test scores improve every year.

"Principals are in a tough situation," says Tony Harduar, president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. These administrators know that kids need exercise, he says, but they

also feel the sting of legislation aimed at improving test scores and bolstering basic skills. "A principal's job can depend on the decision he or she makes," Harduar says of the recess issue.

Some schools have also raised the issue of potential liability on the playground and the prevention of bullying as reasons for cutting recess. But some play advocates find this ridiculous.

"Taking the time to properly train your staff and students in both equipment use and bully prevention techniques will alleviate these potential problems," says PE teacher Suzanne Legge.

Effect on Children

Educators and parents alike are worried that the elimination of recess, coupled with concurrent reductions or outright elimination of physical education classes, poses a serious threat to children's health.

"With soaring obesity rates and increased interest in sedentary activities, a six-hour or longer school day is too long for children to go without breaks or opportunities for substantive

physical activity," says Dolly Lambdin, Ed.D., president of the National Association for Sport & Physical Education.

Plus, a growing body of research finds that even a 15-minute break enhances a child's ability to learn.

"I strongly believe you are doing a disservice to students academically if you do not offer them time to unwind," says Legge. "They come back to class refreshed, and their attention and focus is better."

Consider the country of Finland, whose students score at the top in international standard tests. Children there get a 15-minute recess after every 45-minute lesson.

Along with providing opportunities for need-physical activity, unstructured time leads to and emotional development, education experts say.

"In a well-designed and appropriately supervised recess period, children learn how to cooperate, compete constructively, assume leader/follower roles and resolve conflicts," says Lambdin.

Teacher Martha Jackson, who is also a mother of two, voices the frustration of many parents: "They're treating our children as if they're little machines, but they're not. They're complex human beings."

Academic Jeopardy?

But are the stakes even higher? Will the loss of recess put our children in academic jeopardy? For the National Association for Sport & Physical Education's Council on Physical Education for Children, the answer is a resounding "Yes!"

"Children need a variety of movement experiences to develop a healthy mind and body that is capable of learning," the council asserts. "Schools must schedule daily recess in grades pre-kindergarten through six. The involvement of young children in daily physical activity is critical to their learning."

There's another kind of jeopardy too. For some children, recess, art and music serve as the primary motivators for their interest in school.



Phys-Ed, Too?

Years of budget-tightening and pressure to improve academic achievement have led many school districts to cut back or eliminate physical education for their students. Check out Parenthood.com/PE.html to read about the state of physical education in U.S. schools.

When these students lose these pleasures, they have little left to keep them involved.

"In the short term, we get restless children who can't concentrate on their schoolwork," warns Ohanian. "In the long term, we get angry, emotionally stunted children who grow up to be angry, frustrated adults."

Parents Take Action

The good news is that parents are fighting the demise of recess. In 1999, Rebecca Lamphere was puzzled when she moved into a new neighborhood and never heard the sounds of children playing at the school next door. When she learned that recess had been eliminated at the school, Lamphere founded the Recess Support

Network, which now has recess advocates in 35 states, including Massachusetts. Through this network, Lamphere succeeded in restoring recess to her neighborhood school and every other school in the district.

Last November, elementary school students in Peabody, Mass., lost 10 minutes of their recess time. As a result, nearly 100 parents converged on Peabody Square to demonstrate against the policy. While the policy remains in effect for now, Kathy Leach, mother of a first-grader at Brown Elementary School, speaks for many local parents: "I'm adamantly against this because recess is a time when kids develop not only socialization skills, but it also lets them unwind so they can refocus on school."

In schools across the country, from Washington to Florida, the story is the same: parents angered by the cutting or elimination of school recess are loudly taking a stand. "I totally believe in the goals of No Child Left Behind," says recess advocate and mom Terra Gillett, "but my child needs that oxygen in her brain to get her thinking!"

Judy Molland is the education editor for United Parenting Publications.

Resources

Organizations

- **American Association for the Child's Right to Play** – www.ipausa.org – An organization devoted to protecting children's basic right to play; it is leading the movement to preserve and maintain school recess. The Recess Support Network is part of this organization. The Web site lists contact information for board members of the association.
- **National Association for the Education of Young Children**

(NAEYC) – 800-424-2460; www.naeyc.org – Offers a wide variety of position papers and helpful guides for parents of young children.

Reading

• **Elementary School Recess: Selected Readings, Games, and Activities for Teachers and Parents**, edited by Rhonda L. Clements, American Press, 2000. Filled with fun activities for the playground and the home, this book also speaks eloquently for children's right and need to play.

• **"Recess in Elementary Schools"** – www.aahperd.org/naspe/ – This position paper from the National Association for Sport & Physical Education outlines the benefits of recess and unstructured play for today's children.

• **What Happened to Recess and Why Are Our Children Struggling in Kindergarten?**, by Susan Ohanian, McGraw-Hill, 2002. Filled with details on what's happening in the classroom today, and what parents can do to make changes.

Isis Maternity is expecting again!



Our second Center in Needham, just off Route 128, has a "due date" of March 2005!

- Comprehensive childbirth preparation programs
- State-of-the-art fitness and yoga studio
- Large "kid friendly" classrooms for music, playgroups and more
- Prenatal and postpartum massage
- Unique maternity and baby products in our beautiful boutique
- Breastpumps and nursing accessories

See what families around Boston are raving about!

Visit us at www.isismaternity.com for information on our Grand Opening Celebration!

Two Brookline Place, Brookline, 617.264.4747 | 110 Second Ave., Needham, 781.429.1500 | www.isismaternity.com