

SC GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON PHYSICAL FITNESS



POSITION STATEMENT

SCHOOL RECESS

All schools should offer convenient opportunities for students and staff to participate in enjoyable physical activity, and this imperative should be embodied in policy. Recess in elementary schools is particularly important. Recess, while separate and distinct from physical education, is an essential component of the total educational experience for elementary aged children. Recess should not be viewed as a reward to children or denied in order to punish children. The involvement of children in daily, unstructured physical activity during school hours is critical for their current and future health.

RATIONALE

Various organizations including the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the American Association for the Child's Right to Play support recess as a vital component of a child's physical and social development. Children need a variety of movement experiences to develop a healthy mind and body. In addition, inactivity and poor nutrition, which may begin in childhood, are considered major risk factors for many chronic diseases. Among 5 to 8 year-olds, for example, 40% have significant cardiovascular disease risk factors such as obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and an inactive lifestyle.¹ The National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends that children ages 6-11 participate in *at least* one hour and *up to* several hours of physical activity each day.^{2,3} The activity may occur in periods of moderate to vigorous activity lasting 10-15 minutes or more. Recess is an opportunity for children to acquire some of the recommended daily activity time.

In addition to contributing to physical health, recess also contributes to a child's intellectual and cognitive needs.¹⁻³ As opposed to planned physical education, unstructured play allows children to decide for themselves how to spend their recess time. As a result, children exercise their sense of wonder, which leads to exploration

and creativity. Children whose time is constantly structured may lose the ability to be creative and to entertain themselves. In addition, studies have found that students who do not participate in recess may have difficulty concentrating on specific tasks, are much more “fidgety” in the classroom, and are deprived from interacting with and learning from their classmates.¹⁻³

Recess may also provide the opportunity for students to develop and improve social and emotional skills.¹⁻³ During recess periods, students learn to resolve conflicts, solve problems, negotiate, and interact cooperatively. In addition, recess serves as a developmentally appropriate strategy for reducing or lowering a child’s anxiety.¹⁻³ Elementary school aged children have very few coping strategies, and recess provides a healthy means to manage stress. Recess also provides opportunities for cultural exchange between children. During unstructured play, children from different cultures can learn from one another in a non-threatening way.¹⁻³ Furthermore, recess provides children an opportunity to enjoy playing with friends, and playing with friends is one of the biggest reasons children enjoy going to school!

In summary, recess is an essential component of the total educational experience for elementary aged children. It provides opportunities for unstructured physical activity, which helps students stay alert and attentive in class and provides other cognitive and social benefits. Time should be allotted within every school day for elementary school aged children to enjoy supervised recess that is separate from physical education. Recess should not be denied to children in order to discipline or punish them. The involvement of children in daily, unstructured physical activity during school hours is critical for their current and future health.

STATEMENT ADOPTED BY SC GOVERNOR’S COUNCIL ON PHYSICAL FITNESS, {October 17, 2001}

References

1. The American Association for the Child’s Right to Play. The case for elementary school recess. www.ipausa.com. Viewed August 2001.
2. National Association for Sport and Physical Education (2001). Recess in Elementary Schools. Reston, Virginia
3. National Association of State Boards of Education (2000). Fit, Healthy, and Ready to Learn. Alexandria, Virginia