

Active Recess



Objective

Increase the quality and quantity of physical activity during recess for school-aged children.



Key Messages

Most Dakota County youth do not get enough daily physical activity.

- Health experts recommend that school-aged children and adolescents participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day.¹
- In 2010, fewer than 60% of Dakota County students reported engaging in physical activity for a combined total of 30 minutes per day on at least five or more days of the week.²

Recess is a necessary educational support component for all children.

- Children need unstructured breaks after periods of classroom learning to maximize cognitive processing, attentiveness, and productivity in the classroom. The cognitive benefits of recess have been shown to apply equally to children and teens.³
- Giving 3rd grade students daily recess breaks of at least 15 minutes is associated with a better rating of classroom behavior by teachers.⁴
- Play at recess enables children to learn valuable life skills including cooperation, communication, problem solving, and self-control.³
- Unstructured play provides children with an essential opportunity to optimize brain development as well as reach social, emotional and cognitive milestones.⁵

Recess is the single biggest opportunity to raise the level of physical activity for all children.

- Recess reaches the most children for the most minutes each week. Recess is an opportunity to engage children in meaningful, fun physical activity that increases their heart rate.⁶
- Health experts recommend that children ages 5-12 years old not remain inactive for more than 2 hours at a time; recess offers the opportunity to break up long periods of classroom inactivity.⁷





Key Strategies

- **Include opportunities for structured play.** Games and physical activity led by trained adults who engage youth in play in an organized and safe way and offer the opportunity to teach children meaningful conflict resolution skills.⁶
- **Include opportunities for unstructured free play.** A break of 20 minutes or greater during the school day gives children the opportunity to use their imaginations to organize their own games and develop social, problem-solving and leadership skills.
- **Offer recess for at least 20 minutes, daily.** The National Association for Sport & Physical Education recommends that recess time not be offered in place of daily PE.⁸
- **Dedicate resources to train recess staff and purchase equipment.** Quality professional development and equipment should be provided for leaders of recess programs to equip them to make recess more active and manage conflicts on the playground.
- **Recess should be scheduled before lunch and not directly before or after PE classes.** Research shows that when elementary school students receive lunch after recess they consume significantly more nutrients and food than when recess is scheduled after lunch.⁹
- **Avoid denying recess as a punishment for poor behavior or to finish incomplete assignments.** Denying recess is counterproductive to academic achievement and student wellness as it contributes to cognitive, social and physical development.



Success Stories

Garlough Environmental Magnet Elementary School, ISD 197, West Saint Paul, MN Recess Running Club

To provide students with an opportunity to gain the cardiovascular benefits of increasing their heart rates during unstructured recess time, Garlough's PE teacher, Jo Zimmel, implemented a recess running club program. This practice change was easy to implement and has been a huge hit with students in grades 1st through 4th. A path in the backyard of the school was outlined. At the start of each recess students were asked to take a jog around the path before doing other activities. Any additional laps around the path are incentivized with a mark on their running cards; each card represents 3 miles. On their way into the classroom teachers collect running cards when they're completed and in exchange the students receive a foot bead for their bracelets. In the initial fall semester after implementation, two 4th grade students completed 11 cards each. By the end of the first school year, including a long winter hiatus through the end of April, the 4th grade students collectively ran 176 miles. A map was placed outside the gym where students could track how close their running mileage compared to mileage to Duluth, Minnesota!

In addition to the running club, Garlough's recess aides participated in an active recess training where they gained skills to engage students in fun, age-appropriate structured and unstructured play activities suitable for all skill levels. Concepts discussed at the training included: how to best utilize playground space and equipment to keep kids active, how to reinforce positive behaviors without using or withdrawing physical activity as punishment, and how to set positive rules and expectations for the playground.



Sample Policy Language

“All elementary schools shall have 20 minutes of daily recess, during which schools shall provide space, equipment, and an environment conducive to safe and enjoyable activity.”

“Staff shall not deny participation in recess or other physical activity opportunities as a form of discipline or punishment unless the safety of students is in question.”

“Cancellation of recess for instructional makeup time is discouraged.”



Resources for Implementation

- **Active Recess: A Strategy of the Active Schools Minnesota Initiative:**
<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/Nutr/PhyActiv/053514>
- **Recess Moves: A Toolkit for Quality Recess:**
http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/storage/documents/teams/minnesota/Recess_Moves_A_Toolkit_for_Quality_Recess.pdf
- **Peaceful Playgrounds™** - Playground stencils and blueprint designs for creating permanent play areas on grass and blacktops: <http://www.peacefulplaygrounds.com/>
- **Playworks®** - Free downloadable book of games and training options: <http://www.playworks.org/about>
- **Ultimate Playground and Resource Game Book** - Free recess games: <http://www.gameskidsplay.net/>
- **Log it.** Free pedometer tracking program for ages 3rd grade and older: <http://peclogit.org/logit.asp>
- **Recess Before Lunch: A Guide to Success:** Resources, research, policy development and more to support offering recess before lunch: <http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/state-resources/recess-lunch-guide-success>

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Smart Choices is a partnership of the Dakota County Public Health Department and school districts in Dakota County committed to making the healthy choice the easy choice by creating opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity before, during and after school.

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