

Pediatricians: Recess 'Crucial' for Kids

By DAN CHILDS, ABC News Medical Unit | Good Morning America – Fri, Dec 28, 2012

The statement by the American Academy of Pediatrics is the latest salvo in the long-running debate over how much of a young child's time at school should be devoted to academics -- and how much should go to free, unstructured playtime.

The authors of the policy statement write that the AAP "believes that recess is a crucial and necessary component of a child's development and, as such, it should not be withheld for punitive or academic reasons."

"The AAP has, in recent years, tried to focus the attention of parents, school officials and policymakers on the fact that kids are losing their free play," said the AAP's Dr. Robert Murray, one of the lead authors of the statement. "We are overstructuring their day. ... They lose that creative free play, which we think is so important."

The statement, which cites two decades worth of scientific evidence, points to the various benefits of recess. While physical activity is among these, so too are some less obvious boons such as cognitive benefits, better attention during class, and enhanced social and emotional development.

Pediatricians not directly involved with the drafting of the statement applauded the AAP's move to save recess.

"It fascinates me ... that this continues to be a debate," said Dr. Barrett Fromme, associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Chicago. "The business world repeatedly lauds the corporate culture of companies like Google who offer opportunities for play and community collaboration, and suggests that such culture is the reason for the success and happiness of its employees. Yet, we do not encourage the same culture in our children who are at a far more critical developmental period."

"This policy statement is not only important because of the physical, but also the cognitive ability of our children," said Dr. Shari Barkin, director of the Division of General Pediatrics and of pediatric obesity research at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine. "This policy has created a thoughtful, comprehensive look at what is to be gained by coming back to an emphasis on physical activity and recess."

Research Supports Benefits of Unstructured Playtime for Kids

A considerable body of research appears to support the AAP's stand on the issue. Among this research is a study of 11,000 third-graders that appeared in the journal *Pediatrics* in 2009. This study found that kids who had little or no recess tended to behave worse in class and learn less than children who had at least 15 minutes of recess per day. A 2009 Gallup poll of nearly 2,000 principals and other high-level administrators in the elementary school setting appeared to back up this finding; it found that more than eight in 10 principals believed that recess helped boost academic achievement.

"The science indicates that these kinds of breaks in the day for recess are necessary for cognitive processing," Murray said.

Yet, various studies in recent years have revealed the erosion of this school staple. In most cases, research finds that elementary school children are getting some -- but not much -- unstructured recess time.

For example, according to 2005 numbers from the National Center for Education Statistics, only 7 to 13 percent of public elementary schools had no scheduled recess for children. From a relative standpoint, that's the good news. But this same report also found that "the percentage of public elementary schools that had more than 30 minutes per day of recess ranged from 19 to 27 percent across elementary grades."

Another study in 2005, published in the journal *Childhood Education*, found that up to 40 percent of the country's school districts have either cut back recess or eliminated it in favor of additional academic activities.

Despite these trends, Murray said, many are not even aware that kids' recess time had been dwindling.

"Most of the time when I talk about this issue with people, pediatricians and parents alike, they're shocked that there is even an erosion of recess," he said.

Murray said at least some of the explanation for this trend lies at the feet of policymakers' best intentions to improve the country's schools -- specifically, the No Child Left Behind Act. The program launched in 2002 to increase children's performance in such areas as math and reading, and effectively increased the amount of school time devoted to these subjects. As a necessary consequence, this forced cutbacks in time devoted to other school activities: art and music instruction -- and, most dramatically, unstructured recess time.

"As schools are evaluated more and more on science and math scores, they have looked for opportunities to get more academic time in," Murray said. "Some of the other [subjects and activities] have definitely taken a hit."

It is a sacrifice, Fromme said, that deserves a second look.

"Though the argument that more time needs to be spent in teaching essential academic topics is valid, the time should not be taken from recess," Fromme said. "The argument needs to be how to optimize the time that is spent in the classroom, and recess is part of that answer."

"Which is more effective: 60 minutes in class with half the attention, or 45 minutes with 100 percent focus? If recess can create the latter, then its existence is actually more valuable than its absence."