

9 Tips to Make The Most Out of Recess



Regular, positive recess experiences can benefit children academically, mentally, socially, and emotionally. The following tips can help you make the most of this essential period during the school day.

1 Dedicate time for recess, preferably more than once a day. Childhood experts such as the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend that children, especially those in elementary school, get two to three recesses per day. Older students also benefit from breaks from the classroom—sometimes referred to as “brain breaks.” Physical education class doesn’t serve as a substitute for student-driven recess periods.

2 Know that recess can boost “soft” skills and improve overall learning readiness. Recess can provide an authentic setting where students practice essential life skills, like cooperating with peers, problem-solving, resolving conflicts, and regulating emotions. Recess breaks that involve connection and physical activity can also help students concentrate and behave better when they come back into the classroom.

3 Be aware that students’ recess needs differ. Recess allows students a chance to rest and recharge. How this happens doesn’t look the same for every kid. Some need to run at full speed. Others crave participating in lively sports competitions. Still others prefer quiet time, either alone or with a few friends.

4 Consider adopting “facilitated” recess. Recess facilitated by an educator offers students the choice of various activities—from playing on playground equipment to participating in a more structured game, like kickball or tag. Facilitated recess tends to work best when overseen by staff members who either know students or willingly engage them to foster participation, whether that means offering to referee a soccer scrimmage or swing a jump rope.

5 Check out how other countries do recess. Students in most developed countries spend far more time at recess than in the United States. For instance, in Finland, students enjoy 15 minutes of recess for every hour of academic instruction. Children in Costa Rica get up to 55 minutes of recess daily, plus additional shorter breaks throughout the school day.

6 Stop withholding recess as a punishment. Withholding recess as a punishment to students may actually exacerbate the negative behaviors that led to the disciplinary actions in the first place. All students benefit from the physical release that recess provides. Those who need it most—for instance, students who have trouble sitting still and focusing for long stretches—tend also to be the most likely to have recess revoked for poor behavior.

7 Recognize that recess can improve teacher-student relationships. Recess affords teachers a relaxed setting in which to build relationships with students. That can mean proactively engaging students in a game or activity or simply being available to students who want to chat.

8 Enlist community resources to elevate recess. Not every school budget can stretch to accommodate adequate recess resources. External resources may be able to fill in gaps. Several nationwide grants aim to enhance positive recess experiences—funding things like playground equipment and shade sails in hot environments. Local charitable organizations may be effective partners in fundraising or even physically building safe spaces where students can play.

9 Be prepared to account for additional recess time. School administrators need to find pockets of time in a crowded school schedule where recess can be added without cutting into instructional requirements. Finding the solution—whether it’s extending the school day, tacking on an optional recess in the morning, or some other approach—takes commitment, creativity, and knowing the needs of one’s school community.

SOURCES: Education Week reporting; Rebecca London, professor of sociology at University of California, Santa Cruz; American Academy of Pediatrics; Global Recess Alliance

