

The Global Recess Alliance, a newly formed group of scholars, health professionals, and education leaders, argues that attention to recess during school reopening is essential. Recess is the only unstructured time in the school day that provides space for children’s physical, social and emotional development, which are essential for well-being and learning. When schools reopen, children will need space to heal from their collective trauma. Seeing their friends, playing, and being outside add normalcy to the school day and are important ways to heal. We urge educational leaders and policymakers to include recess in their reopening schedules and to ensure that time is physically and emotionally safe, healthy, and productive for all children and adults.

SCHOOL REOPENING? MAKE SURE CHILDREN HAVE DAILY TIME FOR RECESS

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After months of sheltering in place, children will feel the effects of interrupted routines, family stress, boredom, loneliness, anxiety, and a lack of physically active and social play. A critical part of [returning to school](#) will be healing from collective trauma and focusing on [mental and physical health](#). It is important—for both teachers and students—to ensure that they have the time and space in the school day to connect with others in activities that allow for meaningful and playful engagement.

Is Recess Necessary? YES!

Decades of [research](#) indicate that rather than detracting from student learning, recess supports learning and well-being. The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), which represents 67,000 children’s doctors, states: “Recess is a necessary break in the day for optimizing a

child's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. In essence, recess should be considered a child's personal time, and it should not be withheld for academic or punitive reasons." When students experience [stress](#), it is difficult for them to access the aspects of the brain that allow for thinking and reasoning. Providing children with regular [opportunities](#) to play, socialize, rest, and re-energize is imperative. These opportunities improve mood, well-being, school engagement, behavior, learning, focus, attendance, and overall [school climate](#). Without these opportunities, learning, school engagement, and mental health are severely compromised. This unprecedented moment in time is no exception.

However, all recesses are not created equal. Our [collective research](#) indicates that many schools do not have a history of quality recess experiences for their children. Some schools, especially those serving the most vulnerable children, have reduced or eliminated recess. As well, some schools lack equipment, space, and supervision for recess, leading to exclusion, bullying, loneliness, and boredom. Given that for many children recess is the *only* time in their entire day that they have access to peers and recreation, there is much more to do to secure their [right to play](#) and support them at this time.

As schools re-open, recess must be included in the schoolwide planning, with a focus on creating an overall setting that is conducive to meaningful, inclusive interactions and healthy play.

But what about COVID-19?

COVID-19 is an evolving situation. We have combined our expertise to provide answers and concrete strategies for a recess that not only works under the current evolving circumstances but paves the way for a fundamental shift in the ways many schools approach recess. The objective is to ensure children's well-being while minimizing the spread of the virus. These recommendations should be considered in collaboration with local health officials.

The [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) currently recommends segregating recess by class. Smaller groups not only will minimize the spread of COVID-19, but will provide an opportunity to ensure recess is much more manageable, inclusive, and enjoyable.

RETHINKING SCHOOL RECESS POLICIES

- Schedule sustained periods of recess for every child every day, at least twice per day, preferably more.

- Count recess as instructional time to allow teachers to be with their classes during recess; provide dedicated break times for teachers separately.
- Hold recess outdoors whenever possible.
- Consider all the available indoor and outdoor spaces to provide a range of activity options and minimize crowding.
- Involve children in the planning and organizing of recess time, including discussion about activities, inclusion, social harm, equipment management, fair play, and importantly handwashing.

SAFE RECESS PRACTICES

- Allocate separate bins of equipment for each class, to be used only during recess; clean equipment between recess periods.
- Do not allow children to bring equipment from home.
- Offer a variety of outside spaces where free choice of different activities can take place, including quiet, creative, and solo activity spaces.
- Mark out 'zones' to reduce the number of children who are in contact with each other and shared equipment.
- Minimize contact sport engagement during recess to ensure social distancing.
- Provide leadership opportunities for students to help support each other and maintain the equipment.
- Recognize the importance of physically active play and consider a risk-benefit approach; strict rules like 'no running' and 'no ball throwing' can [undermine](#) the benefits of play and physical activity.
- Add handwashing stations to be used before, during and after each recess and model their use.
- Wipe down or spray all equipment and playground structures (if open) after each recess; see the U.S. Centers for Disease Control guidelines for disinfecting community facilities [here](#).

SUPPORTING A SAFE AND HEALTHY RECESS

- Advise recess staff so they are prepared to support students who have just experienced a major life disruption. Students may be more energetic, aggressive, or withdrawn, and

they may have less capacity to self-regulate, resolve their own conflicts, or figure out how to play together.

- Some students will need help getting connected. Adults should be prepared to support healthy and inclusive play that attends to the needs of all children.
- Have a list of inclusive games handy, including those that need no equipment.
- Structured or sedentary activities—like watching movies or activity break videos that do not provide students free choice and peer interactions—are not substitutes for recess.

Given the many physical, social and emotional benefits of recess, do not withhold recess as punishment for any reason (e.g. as a consequence for missed schoolwork or poor classroom or lunchroom behavior). We must continue to ensure—now and in the future—that all children have access, feel safe and included, and are able to experience meaningful connections during the school day.

These recommendations should be considered in collaboration with local health officials who can advise on the levels of COVID-19 in the community, the capacity of the local public health and healthcare systems, and other relevant factors.

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