

Dear Elementary Teachers, Stop Taking Away Recess

By Shawnta S. Barnes - Posted on July 28, 2018



A popular consequence in elementary school is taking recess away. A child either stays inside or sits near the teachers monitoring recess while his or her classmates are running around playing tag, picking dandelions, getting dizzy on the merry-go-round, or enjoying a friendly conversation. Instead of taking away recess, some teachers have decided to allow the child to enjoy the fresh air outside, but the child has to walk laps around the playground instead. I assert this practice needs to come to an end. It doesn't solve the problem the teacher was trying to punish when taking away recess, and it creates other problems.

Here are some reasons teachers should not take away recess.

Recess allows students to learn how to interact with others.

According to the article, "The Crucial Role of Recess in School"

Through play at recess, children learn valuable communication skills, including negotiation, cooperation, sharing, and problem solving as well as coping skills, such as perseverance and self-control. These skills become fundamental, lifelong personal tools. Recess offers a child a necessary, socially structured means for managing stress. By adapting and adjusting to the complex school environment, children augment and extend their cognitive development in the classroom.

Recess is a daily opportunity for students to work on skills they will need to master to become productive citizens. When children can cooperate with each other outside the classroom, they will be more cooperative inside of the classroom. It doesn't matter how smart a child is if he or she grows up and cannot interact well with others.

Taking away recess doesn't solve the problem the teacher is trying to punish.

If a student loses recess because he or she didn't do homework, this punishment does not ensure the child will complete it in the future. It is best to determine why the homework wasn't done. Maybe the lights are off at home. Maybe the child didn't understand how to do the work. Losing recess is not going to help the child magically figure out the assignment. If the child loses recess for a behavior exhibited earlier in the day, it is best to implement a consequence at that moment rather than later. It is also best to coach the child and to help him or her change the undesirable behavior.

Taking away recess creates more behavioral issues.

When my twin boys were in kindergarten, they had two recess times of twenty minutes each; one took place in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Unbeknownst to my husband and me, one of my sons' teachers had been taking away his second recess. Finally, she got fed up because the punishment wasn't getting the desired response since my five-year-old would fizzle out at the end of the day. On one particular day, she called to tell me she took away his recess because he had been disrespectful. Apparently, she had called the class to line up, and he did not come immediately to the line, so she took away the second recess as punishment. After he lost the second recess, he was cranky and wasn't listening to anything she was saying. She called me for help. This is what I told her, "If you are choosing to take away his recess, then you are choosing to have a child who will unravel at the end of the day."

The students who need recess the most lose it the most.

The study "School recess and group classroom behavior" found:

Children exposed to none/minimal break (30%) were much more likely to be black, to be from families with lower incomes and lower levels of education, to live in large cities, to be from the Northeast or South, and to attend public school, compared with those with recess.

We know from numerous studies that black children, especially boys, are punished more than their white peers. If the same children keep receiving the same punishment, they become numb to it, and school becomes a place they don't want to attend. Children who lose recess repeatedly may not have an opportunity to go outside when they are not at school. The child may live in an apartment and have no access to a playground or there is a playground nearby but it isn't safe because the equipment is damaged or criminal activity takes place.

The bottom line is that children need a break from the rigorous school day. Recess is just as important as reading, math, or science. Without recess, students are more likely to misbehave later in the day because they didn't get an outlet. Taking away recess is an antiquated practice and should no longer be allowed in any elementary school.