

The Essential
Role of Recess in
Children's School
Success and Health



Recess: An Important Aspect of School Success



PRODUCED BY

Complementary educational services office,
Commission scolaire de Montréal
Coordinated by Pierre Chartrand

Urban environment and healthy lifestyles service,
Direction régionale de santé publique du Centre intégré
universitaire de santé et de services sociaux
du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal

Coordinated by Véronique Duclos

EDITORIAL TEAM

Marylène Goudreault

Health promotion consultant, Direction
régionale de santé publique du Centre intégré
universitaire de santé et de services sociaux
du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal

Marie-Hélène Guimont

Physical education and health consultant,
Bouger une heure par jour Action Plan,
Commission scolaire de Montréal

SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION

Carole Carufel

Volunteer physical educator,
Commission scolaire de l'Or-et-des-Bois

France Dionne

Planning, programming and research officer,
Direction de santé publique du Centre intégré
universitaire de santé et de services sociaux
de la Capitale-Nationale

Olivier Tessier

Planning, programming and research officer,
Specialized services — health promotion and
prevention, Direction de santé publique du
Centre intégré universitaire de santé et
de services sociaux de l'Estrie

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Secteur du loisir et du sport, ministère de l'Éducation
et de l'Enseignement supérieur

Marie-Eve Jalbert

Consultant, promotion of physical activity,
Direction du sport, du loisir et de l'activité physique -
Secteur du loisir et du sport, ministère de l'Éducation
et de l'Enseignement supérieur

Benoit Laberge

Planning, programming and research officer,
Direction de santé publique du Centre intégré
de santé et de services sociaux de
Chaudière-Appalaches

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Commission scolaire de Montréal

Annick Lavigne

Special education teacher, academic and
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Commission scolaire Marie-Victorin

Marie-Claude Lemieux

Consultant/Leader of the Actif au quotidien
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Réseau du sport étudiant du Québec,
Québec — Chaudière-Appalaches

Véronique Marchand

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et des éducatrices physiques du Québec

Carole Marcoux

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Commission scolaire de Montréal

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de la garde scolaire

Julie Simard

Project manager, Association québécoise
de la garde scolaire

Katerine Smuga

Planning, programming and research officer,
early childhood and youth team, Direction
de santé publique du Centre intégré de santé
et de services sociaux de Montérégie-Centre

Mathilde St-Louis-Deschênes

Consultant, knowledge management,
Québec en Forme

Cat Tuong Nguyen

Medical specialist in public health and preventive
medicine, early childhood and youth service,
Direction régionale de santé publique du Centre
intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux
du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal

TEXT REVISION, FRENCH VERSION

Sylvie B. Roberge

Administrative agent, Direction régionale de santé
publique du Centre intégré universitaire de santé
et de services sociaux du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-
de-Montréal

François Pratte

Writer-editor

ENGLISH VERSION

Sylvie Gauthier

Translator, Direction régionale de santé publique du
Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services
sociaux du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal

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sociaux (CIUSSS) du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal
1301, rue Sherbrooke Est Montréal (Québec) H2L 1M3
Phone: 514-528-2400
www.ciuss-centresudmtl.gouv.qc.ca

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Foreword

More than ever, children's health and well-being is top of mind for education and health professionals. Policies such as Policy on Educational Success (*A Love of Learning, A Chance to Succeed*), Policy on prevention in health (*A large-scale project to improve population health and quality of life*), Policy on Physical Activity, Sport and Recreation (*Quebecers on the Move!*), and Framework Policy *Going the Healthy Route at School* underline the importance of young people developing in environments that help them grow and reach their full potential. In this regard, parents, educators and other individuals working with children are encouraged to make the most of each available moment to provide these youth opportunities to play freely and be physically active at least an hour a day, before, during and after class time as well as on weekends and during the summer.

As stated by the World Health Organization, schools are the perfect place to access the greatest number of young people and heighten their awareness of healthy and active lifestyles.¹ From that point of view, a number of opportunities to get children moving arise during the day. This is especially the case for recess, a good time for children to increase their physical activity levels; it is a perfect opportunity for kids to develop citizenship skills and recharge their batteries so they can be in better form when they go back to class.

This document focuses on the importance of recess periods to children's educational pathways. It looks at the invaluable effects of recess time on concentration, behaviours and overall development. By supporting this document, we wish to highlight the importance of recess in the daily lives of young people and raise awareness of all stakeholders about how to optimize this period to ensure children grow in a stimulating environment that fosters health and school success.



Sylvie Bernier

Sylvie Bernier
Healthy Lifestyles
Ambassador



Robert Gendron

Robert Gendron
Director general,
Commission scolaire
de Montréal



Richard Massé

Richard Massé, M.D.
Director, Direction
régionale de santé
publique de Montréal



Recess: An Important Aspect of School Success

The Essential Role of Recess in Children's School Success and Health



WHAT IS RECESS?

Recess is a regularly scheduled break during two teaching periods. It is usually held in the schoolyard and allows children to engage in a variety of activities (games, reading, talking, etc.) in a safe environment.²⁻³ It is a necessary break during the day that enhances children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development, allows them to get all the benefits of being outdoors, and especially provides momentary distraction.⁴ In other words, recess is a break from the conventional educational framework where children are in restricted environments and spend between 50% and 70% of their time at school sitting.⁵






Recess is a right, not a privilege

According to article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, recess is the right of every child.⁶ *The Journal of Pediatrics* even notes that recess is a crucial and necessary component of a child's development.⁷ In light of the above, **if a recess lasts 15 minutes, students should be playing for the full 15 minutes.** The time allotted for recess should not include getting in line or the time it takes for students to get dressed when it is cold or rainy outside.

Similarly, in 2013, the *American Academy of Pediatrics* declared that recess is so important, **it should not be withheld for academic or punitive reasons.**² Research has shown that students who don't participate in recess can have more difficulty concentrating on specific tasks in class, are more tired and may be more easily distracted.⁸ Indeed, it is ironic that **withholding recess from a student to give him time to finish schoolwork rather than letting him take full advantage of the break may be counterproductive to academic achievement, since recess promotes not only physical health and social development, but also cognitive performance.**⁴ This is why **recess is so important to school success.**³



The human brain needs breaks

Research has found that memory and attention improve when learning is spaced rather than presented all at once; breaks between tasks allow for better energy expenditure and increase children's cognitive performance.⁹⁻¹⁰ Studies conducted in American elementary schools have found that the longer children worked without a break from standardized tasks, the less attentive to the task they became.¹⁰ This is due to the fact that attention span starts to wane after 40 to 50 minutes of academic instruction. On the basis of this premise, **recess should be scheduled at regular intervals throughout the day** to provide children sufficient time to renew their energy and regain their focus before instruction continues.⁴ **Recess periods should be held in adequate spaces, and their frequency and duration of breaks long enough** to allow students to mentally decompress.⁴



Socialization: an essential element for child development

In Finland, during the first six years of school, children get a 15-minute break after every 45 minutes of instruction.¹¹ Yet, even though Finnish schools hold the record for the minimum hours of class time among Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development member countries, children in Finland are considered the best in Europe.¹¹ Another example establishes this cause-and-effect relationship. In a Texas elementary school, there are four 15-minute recess periods every day. Total daily recess time has risen from 20 minutes to an hour. Teachers at this school have reported that in class, children are less distracted, more attentive and less disruptive. Initially, teachers were worried they would fall behind in their school program; instead, they realized that, beginning in the middle of the school year, recess periods were helping children get ahead faster.¹²

Peer interaction during active periods is a unique complement to class time, and inevitably contributes to one of the goals of Québec schools: socialize to learn to better live together. The lifelong skills acquired for communication, negotiation, cooperation, sharing, problem solving and coping are not only foundations for healthy development, but also fundamental measures of the school experience.⁴ **Recess should enable children to socialize and develop positive relationships with their schoolmates.**⁴⁻¹⁰ Aside from being a time to develop friendships, recess periods also provide opportunities to interact with peers in a manner that differs from what is possible in class. An important educational and socialization experience is lost when children are not allowed to participate in free play.¹³

Because recess is one of the few moments during the school day when children can interact freely with peers, it is a valuable time in which adults can observe children's social behaviours, the games they like, their leadership and prosocial behaviours.⁹ Teachers get to know the children better (e.g. their strengths and challenges) when they watch them play and interact among themselves.⁶

Children who have more recess time at school behave better, are in better physical health, and display better social and emotional development.¹²


When children are fidgety, recess is a solution



Students are more agitated in class when they are tired, bored or need to make considerable effort to stay focused. Some studies have confirmed that disruptive behaviours decrease when students are given enough breaks.² **If fidgeting becomes a problem in the classroom, recess is the perfect solution** since students who have regular breaks and are especially active during them are less agitated and get better grades.¹⁴ It has also been proven that children with attention deficit disorder with or without hyperactivity (ADD/ADHD) are those who benefit the most from regular breaks.⁶ Yet, these kids are also the ones from whom recess is withheld, on the pretext of bad behaviour. It is known that allotting more time to physical activities does not negatively affect students' academic achievements and may even improve learning,⁸ and that recess can have beneficial effects on children's behaviour. With this in mind, teachers would do well to include recess periods in their schedules, given that children will be much easier to manage when they return to class—which is not insignificant to the former.

Recess provides children with discretionary time and opportunities to engage in active free play that helps them develop healthy bodies and enjoy movement.¹⁰ By offering children more than one play period a day, the school gives them opportunities to put into practice what they have learnt in physical education and health classes, to move and, as a result, achieve the suggested 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per day.⁴ This is especially important considering that more than a third of 6- to 11-year-olds don't achieve the recommendation.¹⁵

Physically active children are more mentally alert and more attentive in class.¹⁶ Exercise itself doesn't make you smarter, but it does put the learner's brain in an optimal position for learning.¹⁷





Children
don't play
to learn; **they
learn because
they play.**¹⁸

By giving children enough time to engage in active play, school helps them develop their creativity, imagination, concentration and physical health, as well as their cognitive functions.²²

Thanks to play, children learn important life lessons that are rarely taught in class.¹⁹ During recess, children should have the freedom to be autonomous so they can discover a capacity to take initiatives and accept challenges.²⁰ In this sense, during recess, **children should be able to play with whoever they want, and choose games they like and that fit their needs, tastes and interests.** They should have the possibility to learn about differences, take risks, manage anger, resolve conflicts, and deal with fear and limits without adult guidance.¹⁹⁻²¹ School staff should do everything they can to help children achieve those possibilities, allowing for the specifics and constraints of the schoolyard.⁸

Let's play outside!



Outdoors, children have a lot of space to move freely; they can discover and try out activities that result in their expending more energy and running risks which, in time, help them develop movement skills.²³ There are many other benefits linked to playing outside, which is why its important to schedule outdoor breaks:²³

- outdoor play encourages children to be physically active and expend more energy than when they play indoors;
- allows them to use their imagination, try out new games, develop their creativity and discover the pleasures of doing outdoor physical activities in winter;
- helps prevent myopia^a and alleviates symptoms associated with attention deficit disorder, among other things;
- etc.

For these reasons, it is highly recommended that recess periods at school be held outdoors. Children can also benefit from outdoor environments (walks in the neighbourhood, use of outdoor facilities and city parks, etc.) especially during daycare periods, which are more conducive to these types of activities. No matter the season, children are enriched by playing outdoors and being in touch with nature.²⁴

However, sometimes recess is held indoors. This is the case especially when it's raining or very cold, or when the schoolyard is iced over. It is worthwhile to plan indoor activities in a variety of settings that would enable children to move and expend their excess energy (mini-hockey in the hallway, activities in the gym, active breaks in classrooms, etc.), should the need arise.

a. Focusing at a distance when playing outdoors can slow the development of myopia.

Very young children also need to move

Active free play is encouraged for children attending kindergarten (4 and 5 years old); it helps them learn to control various parts of their bodies, develop coordination, balance and muscle tone, as well as build capacity to develop the concept of space and time.²⁰ Through movement children also discover a variety of actions and become increasingly able to adapt those actions to the environment, and so develop their independence.²⁵

In light of the above, and of the time allotted to Competency 1 of the Preschool Education Program (perform sensorimotor actions effectively in different contexts),²⁶ **unstructured active breaks and recess periods should be part of the daily routine and be longer.**² While children perceive play as a source of pleasure and entertainment, adults see it as a valuable learning tool and a key approach to optimizing development of motor, affective, social, cognitive and language skills.²⁷⁻²⁸

To sum up, an ideal learning context for children should include a good amount of playtime. However, although the *Education Act* states that, “Elementary students shall also have a recess in both the morning and the afternoon”,²⁹ nothing is specified for preschool children, who need more breaks at shorter intervals to foster their overall development.² If there is a grade level where many periods of free play should be scheduled, it’s definitely preschool.² **Schools should adopt measures that enable children to take advantage of those daily breaks: centres of learning!**





The schoolyard: A place where all children should come **together** and have fun



In Québec, there is still little effort to demonstrate the true impact of the schoolyard on young people's success and health. Yet, it is an ideal setting where children can all gather outdoors, at the same time and in the same place, to move, play and recharge their batteries. **Elementary schools should develop schoolyard management action plans** that would make play areas safe, and conducive to the practice of physical activities and the development of harmonious relationships. Consequently, involvement in all aspects of the schoolyard will clearly help counter several issues (violence and bullying, conflicts, accidents, injuries, constraints related to the weather and clothing, etc.). To attain this goal, **a committee should**

be set up to consider all aspects related to the schoolyard (student guidance, design and layout, organization and animating activities); the committee should also carry out a survey of the children so the school can provide a safe, attractive environment where various games are offered that correspond to what they want and meet their needs.⁴ Although such an approach requires significant commitment from school staff and parents, but the time and energy invested in the process will produce significant gains:

- children more open to learning when returning to class;
- fewer conflicts to manage;
- more effective time management;
- more coherent interventions;
- an increase in the practice of physical activities among children;
- and others.

Therefore, given the importance of the schoolyard to young people's educational pathways, school staff and parents should do everything they can to ensure that children perceive it as a happy and fun place.

In Québec the *My Schoolyard: A Place To Have Fun!* guide³⁰ proposes a process to help education stakeholders think about the schoolyard to ensure it meet the needs expressed by the children. As a complement to the guide, an integrative model has been developed to illustrate the importance of considering the following components to carry out schoolyard projects successfully: involvement of the school team, guidance for children, schoolyard design, organization and activities.³¹ The guide also suggests that educators use the schoolyard as a teaching tool.

What about other activity periods?

At school, aside from recess periods, children have many other opportunities to move, socialize and expend their excess energy—all of which contribute to their health and well-being. This is the case with extracurricular and intramural activities, as well as active breaks in class. The same applies to periods spent at the school daycare, in the morning for instance, when many children get to school very early and enjoy an active period before going into the classroom, or at lunchtime, the longest period of time spent in the schoolyard during the day. Just as important as recess periods, these moments must be as effective as the latter since they constitute opportunities to get children to be more active every day, to enable them to mentally decompress and, as a result, to be more disposed to learning when they return to class.



PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND HEALTH CLASS

It has been proven that good quality physical education can not only have positive effects on children's physical health and development of motor skills, but also encourage them to acquire knowledge and skills that can be used in many areas related to physical education, sport and health. In addition, it can instill the will and desire to do better and improve personal capacities that will last throughout their lives.³²⁻³³ The Physical Education and Health program aims to help students develop motor efficiency and psychosocial skills, to acquire the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours they will need to manage their health and well-being wisely, and to adopt healthy, active lifestyles.²⁶ However, even though physical education and health classes, recess periods, time spent at the daycare service and active breaks have noticeable effects on children's health and school success, they are all complementary and distinct moments. That being said, **physical education and health classes should never be substituted for recess or other active breaks, and vice versa.**



We need to plan ahead, work together and recognize the essential role of recess in children's school success and health



Still today, some schools only set aside one recess period a day; others are considering abolishing a recess period, citing scheduling, logistical or safety constraints.³⁴ Yet, knowing the benefits of recess, not only for children's health but also for their capacity to concentrate in class and school success, it is recommended that recess periods be considered an essential complement to class time. Therefore, it should be at the heart of education professionals' and parents' concerns, as well as a priority for health and education stakeholders. **In this regard, it is recommended to support the development and implementation of public policy where recess is an integral part of the preschool and elementary school curriculum (e.g. bring changes to the *Education Act*; add targets to the *Policy on Physical Activity, Sport and Recreation (Quebecers on the Move!)* and to the *Education Success Policy (A Love of Learning, A Chance to Succeed)*; develop an institutional recess policy for school boards).** Such actions would explicitly highlight the undeniable importance of recess and its role in children's education.²⁻¹³ Rather than cancelling recess periods because it takes children too much time to get dressed, the weather is not ideal for outdoor play, teachers need time to finish school work or conflict management encroaches too much on teaching time, school staff will appreciate the importance of recess in children's life at school.

It has been clearly proven, recess is an opportunity to foster children's overall development. It is more than just a break and should be seen as free, creative learning time. It is our duty to safeguard this period and ensure it is harmonious and fosters all children's development.

The scientific literature confirms it, Finland's education system has demonstrated it, and schools have noticed it: recess is essential to children's health and school success.

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Take action!

The following recommendations set out avenues for actions to optimize recess periods in elementary school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

P: Actions proposed at the provincial level

R: Actions proposed at the regional level

L: Actions proposed at the local level

Recess is a right,
not a privilege



KEY MESSAGES

- Recess should not be withheld for academic or punitive reasons.
- Recess time should not include getting in line or the time it takes for students to get dressed.

AVENUES FOR ACTION

- PRL** Adopt an institutional policy on the importance of recess.
-
- L** Schedule another time than recess to finish school work that has not been completed.
-
- L** Teach behaviours expected from students rather than punish them by withholding recess.
-
- L** Based on grade level, set aside a reasonable amount of time for children to get dressed before the bell rings so they can fully benefit from every minute of the outdoor recess period.

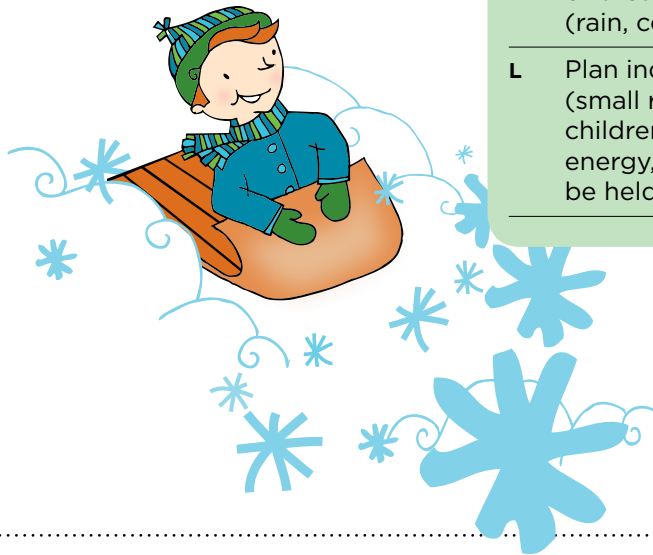
Children benefit greatly from **periods spent outdoors**

KEY MESSAGES

- Outdoors, children have a lot of space to move freely; they can discover and try out activities, and thus expend more energy.
- Children are enriched by playing outdoors and being in touch with nature.

AVENUES FOR ACTION

- P** Specify in the *Education Act* where breaks take place.
- R** Formulate a policy, measure or resolution to the board of commissioners which indicates that recesses should be held outdoors.
- L** Ensure that recess periods are held outdoors, except in case of rain, intense cold or ice in the schoolyard.
- L** Establish measures to ensure children can play outdoors even if it isn't warm outside.
- L** Take advantage of outdoor environments around school (walk in the neighbourhood, municipal parks and facilities, etc.), especially during daycare periods.
- L** Make parents aware of the importance of dressing their child for the weather (rain, cold, sun).
- L** Plan indoor activities in various places (small rooms, library, hallway, etc.) where children can move and expend excess energy, in case recess periods cannot be held outside.



Very young children **also need to move**

KEY MESSAGES

- Active free play helps young children learn to control various parts of their bodies, develop coordination, balance and muscle tone, as well as build capacity to develop the concept of space and time.
- The younger the child, the shorter his or her attention span.

AVENUES FOR ACTION

- P** Add prescribed breaks for preschool children to the *Education Act*, specifying the number and duration of breaks and where they will take place.
- R** Formulate a policy, measure or resolution to the board of commissioners that specifies the number and duration of recess periods for preschool children, as well as where those breaks will take place.
- R** Raise awareness of school staff and parents about the importance of recess on children's development.
- L** Add several outdoor recess periods and active breaks to the daily preschool schedule.
- L** Include a good amount of free, active playtime for children in preschool.

Use all possible opportunities to enable children to move at school

KEY MESSAGES

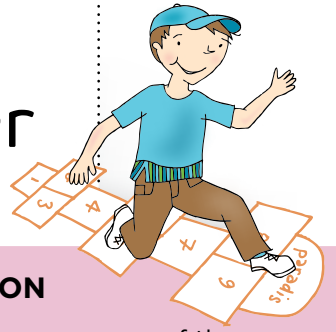
- During the school day, it is possible to achieve the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity a day by making use of all time periods during which children can be active (daycare and lunchtime periods, active breaks in class, extracurricular and intramural activities, etc.).
- Periods spent at the daycare service (morning, lunchtime and evening) are good opportunities to get young people moving.
- Good quality physical education can not only have positive effects on children's physical health and development of motor skills, but also encourage them to acquire knowledge and skills that are useful in many areas related to physical activity, sport and health.
- Physical education and health classes, recess periods, time spent at the daycare service and active breaks have noticeable effects on children's health and school success; they are complementary and distinct moments.

AVENUES FOR ACTION

- P** Implement measures that allow young people to be more physically active at school.
- R** Talk to education professionals and parents about the importance of moving at school, and their roles in getting children to adopt and maintain physically active lifestyles.
- R** Train and provide tools and support to education professionals so they can increase scheduled physical activity time.
- L** During recess, make sure children are offered a variety of activities that meet their needs and match their interests.
- L** Ensure that most daycare and lunchtime periods are spent doing physical activities.
- L** Ensure that physical education and health classes are never substituted for recess or other active breaks, and vice versa.
- L** Set up ways that will enable children to use, throughout the day and in other contexts, what they learn in physical education and health classes.



The schoolyard is a place where children should come **together and have fun**



KEY MESSAGE

- Involvement in all aspects of the schoolyard (guidance for children, schoolyard design, organization and activities) helps offset issues such as violence and bullying, conflicts, accidents, injuries, constraints related to the weather and clothing, etc. It also allows to more effectively manage time, play equipment and facilities, ensures more coherent interventions with children, and boosts children's practice of physical activities, among other things, etc.

AVENUES FOR ACTION

- P** Plan actions that encourage use of the guide *My Schoolyard: A Place To Have Fun!* in Québec's elementary schools.
- R** Train and support educators and parents so they can set up initiatives to make the schoolyard a healthy, safe and stimulating environment for students.
- L** Develop a schoolyard management action plan to make this environment safe and conducive to the practice of physical activities and to the development of harmonious relationships.
- L** Enhance the roles of psychoeducators and education specialists so they can support homeroom teachers as well as daycare and lunchtime staff with various schoolyard-related elements.

We need to plan ahead, work together and recognize the essential role of **recess in children's school success and health**



KEY MESSAGES

- Recess is more than just a break and should be seen as free, creative learning time.
- Recess is an essential component in children's school success and health.

AVENUES FOR ACTION

- PRL** Support the development and implementation of public policy where recess is an integral part of the preschool and elementary school curriculum.
- PR** Send a signal that recess periods and other active breaks are complementary to class time by identifying them as priorities for health and education stakeholders.
- L** Raise awareness among school staff of the validity and positive aspects of recess periods for children's overall development.



When children are fidgety, **recess** is a solution

KEY MESSAGES

- Disruptive behaviours decrease when students are given enough breaks.
- Exercising doesn't make children smarter, but it puts their brains in an optimal position for them to learn.
- By offering children more than one play period a day, the school gives them opportunities to put into practice what they learn in physical education and health classes, to move and, as a result, to achieve the recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per day.

AVENUES FOR ACTION

- PRL** Inform parents and professionals working with children of the benefits of physical activity, no matter the season.
- R** Provide training to educators so they can develop skills to get the children moving every day, in a variety of contexts.
- L** Enhance the role of physical education and health teachers so they can provide guidance on physical activity to homeroom teachers and lunch and daycare staff (examples of initiatives, tips to manage a group as it moves around, passing out equipment, etc.).
- L** Give children the possibility of moving during short periods when they lose attention (active breaks, use of pedal exerciser, stationary bicycle, interactive white board, etc.).
- L** Propose various work positions to students (standing, lying on the ground, sitting on a ball, etc.).
- L** When necessary, extend outdoor recess periods by a few minutes so children are more open to learning when they go back to the classroom.

Children learn through play

KEY MESSAGE

- When they play, children learn important life lessons that are rarely taught in class.

AVENUES FOR ACTION

- L** Sound out children so you can propose games they like and that correspond to their needs, tastes and interests.
- L** Let children play freely so they have an opportunity to make up their own games, play with whoever they want, solve their problems, make new friends, become aware of differences, show creativity, discover their fears and limits, etc.
- L** Use outdoor play as a teaching tool.
- L** Purchase a variety of equipment, and in a large enough quantity, to encourage free play in the schoolyard.



The human brain needs breaks

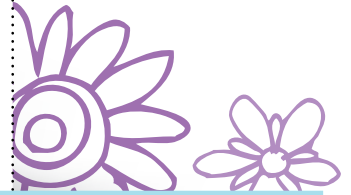
KEY MESSAGES

- Recess is an ideal time to foster children's overall development since they are more attentive in class and perform better mentally after recess.
- Memory and attention improve when there are breaks between learning periods.

AVENUES FOR ACTION

- P** Specify in the *Education Act* the number and duration of breaks.
- R** Formulate a policy, measure or resolution to the board of commissioners that specifies the number and duration of recess periods at school.
- L** Schedule active breaks or recesses at regular intervals (e.g. after 50 minutes of teaching) throughout the day.
- L** Have recess periods that are at least 15 minutes long, twice a day or more, so that students are more open to learning when they return to class.

Socialization: an essential element for child development



KEY MESSAGES

- Interaction with peers during active periods complements class time and contributes to a goal of Québec schools: socialize to learn to better live together.
- Teachers get to know children better when they watch them play and interact together.

AVENUES FOR ACTION

- R** Train and support educators so they can teach students the behaviours expected of children.
- L** Teach behaviours expected in the schoolyard so children can develop social skills they will use throughout their lives (cooperation, respect for rules, waiting their turn, etc.).
- L** Implement measures that foster socialization and development of positive relationships among students during recess periods (buddy bench, mediation space, mediators, conflict resolution process, etc.).





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