

Changes to (primary) school recess and their effect on children's physical activity: An Australian Perspective

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Abstract:

Headlines greet us on almost a daily basis lamenting the declining health of Australian children. They are said to be inactive, unfit, overweight and lacking in fundamental motor skills. It is a disturbing picture. Calls have gone out to parents to encourage their children to be more active and for schools to counter these problems by allocating more time to sport and physical education however, in both instances, there are particular problems to be addressed. One aspect of schooling that is rarely considered in discussions about how to increase children's activity levels is recess. This article examines the problems facing physical education and offers some suggestions as to how schools might preserve and promote physical activity during recess breaks.

Introduction

The health benefits of regular physical activity are widely publicised through the academic and popular press but our attempts to encourage people to find 30 minutes a day to engage in some form of physical activity have, by and large, not met with much success. In the Foreword to the resource manual 'Planning for Action', published by ACHPER (1999), Dr. Adrian Hurley made the following comment;

Participation in regular physical activity is no longer the normal way of life for many children at school, or even out of school hours. Sedentary activities and other priorities compete for children's time.

Convincing the general public of the wisdom of engaging in regular exercise has been so unsuccessful that Bailey (2000) was lead to ask whether or not anyone out there is really listening. He despairs about the future health of the population. He believes that 'the present day lifestyles and habits of many young people are self-destructive in respect to the long-term viability of the skeleton' (p.348). Vigorous physical activity involving weight bearing is needed, he argues, in order for proper bone growth and to avoid problems such as osteoporosis in later life. Pellegrini & Smith (1998) comprehensively review the value of active play and come to the conclusion that not only are there benefits in terms of cardio-vascular and physical fitness but it also contributes to the social and cognitive development of the young child. They too conclude that there are serious public health implications should children not engage in regular and vigorous physical activity.

Despite the mounting research evidence regarding the risks and consequences of inactivity children continue to spend a large percentage of their free time watching television and playing video and computer games. The 'plug in drug', as Winn (1985) once referred to television, consumes a disturbingly high proportion of children's out-of-school time. A recent survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2000) into how children aged 5-14 years spend their free time found that electronic games were more popular than sport and that children were more likely to be seen surfing the Net than surfing at the beach.

Such findings are by no means new. For some years now studies have made us aware of changing lifestyles and leisure patterns and that many children are spending as much or more time watching than playing. Sheehan in 1983, for example, in a survey of Australian children aged between 10 and 12, found that television watching was the activity that occupied most of the children's out-of-school time. And television is by no means the only contributing factor. As has been pointed out elsewhere (Blakely 1994, Buckingham, 2000, Evans 2000) we live in an increasingly urban society and the home environment is often not conducive to active games and the streets may be unsafe for play due to the pace and congestion of traffic. Children often turn to television because they have little else to do in their spare time and they do so with the approval of their parents. Television, video games and computers have become what Kleiber (1999) calls 'an electronic form of in loco parentis' (p.44).

All of this information has been used by the Physical Education profession to argue the case for more time for physical education in the school curriculum; that it needs to be taught by specialist teachers and that schools need to be better equipped and resourced. While there are more schools with an indoor working area, there is very little to cheer about in terms of getting physical education taught more often let alone by specialists. The problems identified by the report of the (Federal Government) Senate Standing Committee (1992) and later reports (eg the Review of Physical and Sport Education in Victorian Schools 1993), continue to plague school physical education. The emphasis now being placed on numeracy and literacy in primary schools only adds to the problems. As one Principal was heard remark recently, "in order to achieve the benchmarks in numeracy and literacy we have little choice other than to set aside all morning for these two areas. The other 6 Key Learning Areas fight over the afternoon session which, in many schools, is as little as 2 hours".

The problems are by no means confined to Australia. Commenting on the situation in American elementary schools Dale et al (2000, p.240) found that 'the time allotted to physical education is decreasing due to budgetary constraints and administrative decisions to support other academic areas'. Student participation in physical education was declining and even during recess periods children were spending more and more time indoors. What did concern them was that the children showed no inclination to compensate for the physical activity missed during the school day.

In a recent survey of the state and status of school physical education internationally Hardman & Marshall (2000) found that that it was rare indeed for the actual implementation of the subject to meet with the statutory requirements. Across the board they found that physical education is suffering from decreasing curriculum time allocation, inadequate financial, material and personnel resources and low status. So despite the existence of a substantial body of research (see Pangrazi, 2000; Pangrazi, Corbin & Welk, 1997; Pangrazi & Corbin, 2000) which suggests that children should be engaging in 30-60 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on a daily basis, most school physical education programs are struggling to provide that amount of time per week. Even where regular physical education programs do exist questions are raised (see Warburton & Woods, 1996) as to whether or not children are active enough in the lessons to have any long term health benefits.

While physical education has struggled recess and lunch breaks provided children with the opportunity to participate in physical activity on a daily basis. As far back as I can recall these breaks were eagerly seen as a chance to escape from class (and by implication from 'work'), from long periods of sitting and from the omnipresent teacher. It was seen as the time to get

outside and 'let off steam'. The lunch hour was particularly popular because it provided the longest uninterrupted break. In most schools the playground at lunchtime would be a hive of activity with children engaged in a myriad of games. However evidence is emerging from both here in Australia and overseas which indicates that even these breaks are undergoing significant change.

Changes to recess/lunch breaks

Today, in many Australian schools, there is no afternoon recess and the traditional lunch hour has been reduced to 45-50 minutes and of that time the first 10-15 minutes is spent eating lunch under the supervision of the class teacher. This leaves some 30-35 minutes of actual playtime. This reduction is not the only concern. We now see a long list of rules which effectively restrict what, where and with whom children can play. Take for example the following list which was prominently placed on the noticeboard in a school I visited recently;

In this school there is to be:

- NO running on or jumping off playground equipment
- NO running in or around the school buildings
- NO fighting or playing games that involve tackling
- NO climbing trees or playing in or under them
- NO ball games played near the school buildings

Admittedly this inner suburban school had a very small playground largely made up of bitumen and concrete which accounted for the strict rules regarding running games. What grassed area existed was available only for passive activity. But this is by no means an isolated example (see Evans 1997). Some version of this list of rules is likely to be found in most primary schools today and what it does is to effectively eliminate a lot of the activities which children enjoy and which are essential for their health and well-being. If you disallow running games, for example, then you take from children one of their most active pastimes. If there is no space or appropriate surface area in which to safely play games which may involve falling over then, again, you take away a whole raft of popular activities.

The rules have come about because schools are now far more conscious of their duty of care and teachers are expected to be vigilant about playground supervision. The days when being 'on duty' meant an occasional glance out of the staffroom window are long gone. Teachers now 'patrol' the playground and are often forced into a 'policing' role which they dislike intensely because it often brings them into conflict with the children. No longer are playground accidents and injuries seen as simply part of the rough and tumble of active play. Rules (such as those above) are in place to reduce the likelihood of accidents and teachers are expected to be alert to danger areas and to games that may result in injury.

Another change, that has clearly had implications for the amount and type of physical activity children engage in, concerns playground equipment. In many schools now most moving and movable apparatus, such as swings, see-saws, round-a-bouts and so on, has been removed principally because it doesn't conform to safety standards and/or it has been shown to be the cause of accidents and injury. Taking action to prevent accidents and injury in the playground is understandable but there is little doubt that the removal of such equipment has taken away a popular form of activity. The research (Blatchford, 1998, Titman, 1994) clearly shows that children love to play on and with equipment which they can change, move and manipulate. That

is why children love to build cubbies and play with bats, balls, hoops, ropes, timber and tyres. Such activities not only encourage active and creative play but they also foster cooperative play.

What is now seen in schools is a much more sanitised play environment – safer perhaps by virtue of the design of the equipment and the strict enforcement of rules determining its use, but also less stimulating in terms of what it offers children who want to be active, challenged and creative in their play. The new apparatus is brightly painted and well designed. It conforms to safety standards in terms of height and the type and thickness of the under surfacing provides much better protection in the event of a fall. These are certainly vital matters but what some schools are finding is that this equipment, installed at considerable expense, gets little use. As Wilkinson & Lockhart (1980) pointed out some time ago it is possible to create an environment that is safe by simply avoiding risk. The problem is, however, ‘that such a setting would not make a good play environment because it would lack many of those elements necessary for meaningful play: variety, complexity, challenge, risk, flexibility, adaptability, etc. Quite simply such a playground would go largely unused’ (p.87).

These are just some of the changes that are occurring in our schools and they have serious implications not only for the type and amount of physical activity children engage in but also for the development of their perceptual motor skills and their peer social relationships. Along with a well planned physical and sport education program the playground at recess and lunch times is an important domain for the acquisition of such skills.

The changes to recess breaks that are occurring in Australian schools are very similar to those which have taken place elsewhere around the world. For example Pellegrini (1995) and Blatchford (1998) report very similar trends in the USA and UK respectively. For many of the same reasons (ie concerns about pupil safety and pressures on staff to increase the academic learning time in order to raise numeracy and literacy standards) schools are reducing the number and length of breaks, demanding closer supervision of the playground and placing many more limitations on what children can and cannot do when they are outside playing. Writing about the situation in the UK Blatchford (1998) concluded that recent changes to the organisation of the school day and to the school grounds had lead to growing restrictions on the traditional freedoms children had to interact and play.

What is most worrying is that the research reveals that children are not only playing less but playing less actively. Kraft (1989, see also Slep & Warburton 1992, 1994) studied the activity patterns of children during recess and physical education and concluded that ‘children do not voluntarily engage in sufficient aerobic activity during recess, nor do physical education programs provide the appropriate activities to adequately promote fitness’ (p. 24). McKenzie et al (1997) examined just how much physical activity children engage in during free play periods when at preschool (aged 4) and 2 years later (at age 6) when at primary school. In both pre-school and primary school they found (see also Pellegrini & Smith 1998) that children were sedentary most of the time but what was disturbing was that children were less active in primary school.

So what steps can schools take to promote physical activity at recess/lunch times?

Sallis & Patrick (1994) argue that there are two health-related reasons for promoting physical activity in children. The first is that physical activity promotes physical and psychological health and well-being during childhood and the second is that participation in regular physical activity may increase the probability that children will become active adults. As more and more

evidence points to the fact that children are not getting regular physical activity outside school hours or from their physical education program then what they do during the obligatory recess breaks becomes increasingly significant. Despite the changes that have taken place recess/lunch breaks remain a key part of each school day. They represent a time when children are (relatively) free to engage in active pastimes which can provide that vital 30-60 minutes per day of moderate intensity physical activity which is so important.

One of the first things that must be done is to recognise that playtime is important and must be preserved. It is much more than just a 'break' from class; it is a period when, given the right conditions, children can be active players. The 'right' conditions mean providing such things as access to space and equipment which gives children a broad range of play options. Stratton & Leonard (2002), for example, found that by simply painting the playground with bright and colourful markings children's engagement in active play increased substantially. They not only played for longer periods but they played more actively.

It is a delight to go into a school where children have unrestricted access to any part of the playground and where there are both hard court and grassed areas which allow the full range of active games. One of the ironies of our time is that we often see rural schools with a small student population situated on several hectares of land while inner suburban schools with large enrolments are located on a quarter of the space. The latter environment rarely provides an ideal play setting not just because of the lack of space but also because the school has to devise rules about how the available space is to be used.

It is often the case that schools are unable to do much to change the space they have but they can make sure that children do not have to compete for resources. Making sure that children can borrow a broad range of equipment is one sure way of encouraging active players. The provision of equipment needs to be seen as an investment in children's health. If, as is often the case, schools do not allow children to bring equipment from home, then it must be provided. Not only do children gain from participation in active play but they can learn to use and take responsibility for the equipment.

There is a clear connection between a well planned physical education and sports program and an active playground (Kraft 1989). If, during physical education, children are introduced to a variety of activities involving ropes, hoops, bats, balls, bean bags, and so on then, with a little encouragement, they will use this equipment in their own time during recess/lunch breaks if they have access to it. This not only provides them with the opportunity to practice and extend their skills but it motivates them to be active. The key word is 'IF'. What is increasingly evident is that fewer and fewer opportunities are being provided for children to play freely and actively during recess breaks.

My preference is for children to be left alone to devise their own games and activities during recess/lunch breaks with minimal intervention from supervising adults. Because so much of the school day is spent undertaking adult organised and controlled activities children need some time and space to themselves. In the best of circumstances playtime gives them the opportunity to make choices about what, where and with whom they will play. I admit then to some reservations about the growing trend for schools to organise activities for children to do during recess/lunch breaks. Concerned about the inactivity of many children and (most particularly) the incidences of misbehaviour in the playground some schools have taken to organising games and sports during lunchtime (the longer break). This may mean that more children are active but it comes at a cost for both the teachers and the children. As Blatchford (1998 p.171) points out

what this represents is a tension between exercising greater control of student behaviour on the one hand and the value of their independence on the other. I also think that there is a real danger that these organised activities may come to be seen as a defacto physical education program.

Pellegrini & Blatchford's (2000) recent summary of the research literature attests to the contribution recess breaks have made to children's physical and social development. But, as they acknowledge, times are changing and these breaks are coming under increasing scrutiny from parents and teachers who are looking at ways to reduce disruptive behaviour in the playground and increase the amount of time devoted to the academic curriculum. Any loss of recess time, however, has the effect of further reducing children's opportunities for active play. The need to encourage children to be more active is so important that any reduction to recess breaks needs to be taken seriously. If getting and keeping children active and healthy is a worthwhile goal then it is imperative that these breaks are preserved. As Corbin (2001, p.350) reminds us 'school children need both regular daily physical education as well as recess (personal activity time). Properly scheduled and conducted, these programs can lead to feelings of enjoyment in activity and intrinsic motivation for participation'.

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