

# The Unhealthy State of Play

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If we are to believe the public press we are in the midst of an obesity crisis and we face dire consequences if we don't act quickly to deal with it. The 'battle of the bulge' is described as being one of the biggest challenges facing the health and well being of our nations youth. In a previous edition of Professional Educator Pill (2006) argues that there is an abundance of evidence to show that the combination of poor diet and physical inactivity presents serious problems for an increasing number of children. 'There is little doubt that decreasing activity levels are significantly affected by our changing – read, more sedentary – lifestyle' (p.37). In his view schools are well placed to address these problems both through formal programs of physical education and sport and the informal times such as recess and lunch breaks.

*Teachers and schools are in a position to influence the level of physical activity, and therefore the health and wellbeing of students.. (p.38)*

Interestingly, not everyone shares the view that there is a crisis. Gard (2006) and Kirk (2006), for example, question the research (and lack of research) that exists and alert us to the fact that there are alternative interpretations. According to Gard (2006) 'there now exists a body of research that questions the medical consequences of overweight and obesity' (p.80). As an example he notes that some studies show that body weight by itself has little effect on people's medical health except in cases of extreme obesity. He also argues that there is too little evidence to support the claims that we are a nation of 'couch potatoes' or that our children are suffering from 'an epidemic of inactivity' (p.83). He goes on to express concerns about the view that it is the role of school Physical education programs to fight the 'war on obesity'. Adopting this approach, he argues, may lead to a curriculum which is too focused on strenuous, repetitive activity of the sort that concentrates on fitness circuits and laps of the oval at the expense of skill development and a more multi-dimensional view of health and well being.

Kirk (2006) is also of the opinion that claims of an obesity crisis have little foundation. He points out that even the terms 'overweight' and 'obesity' which are frequently used interchangeably, actually have quite different meanings. 'So even if we cautiously accept the ubiquitous claim that children appear to be getting fatter, the precise meaning of this claim in terms of its implications for children's health, now and in the future, is far from clear' (p.123). Even the question of just how active children are in this day and age is in dispute. Kirk points to research which suggests that children today are actually more active than they were in the 1980's. Like Gard, Kirk calls for more careful analysis of the research and a warning that we should not draw conclusions that are not warranted by the evidence.

Whether or not we have a 'crisis' on our hands or a significant problem that demands our attention one thing most writers do agree on is that we need to continue to find ways to encourage children to be active. In his article Pill (2006) outlines a five-point strategy which schools could use to promote active and healthy living. One of these ways is to make better use of lunch and recess breaks by providing children with access to space and equipment with which to play. Intuitively this makes a lot of sense because these breaks occupy a significant amount of time in the school day, or at least they did. Recess and lunchtime, once highly active periods of the school day for many children, have undergone a transformation. For a

number of reasons, not the least a concern for safety, the playground is no longer the haven for active players it once was.

### **What are the changes?**

Research both here (Evans 2003) and overseas (Pellegrini 2005) shows that many primary schools have made a number of changes to their recess and lunch breaks which can broadly be grouped into four categories:

- Changes to the number and length of breaks: Not so long ago many schools had three breaks – morning and afternoon recess and a one hour lunch break. More typically now we see schools with only a morning recess (20-30 minutes) and a lunch break of 45-50 minutes of which 30-40 minutes is allocated to free play and the first 10-15 minutes to eating lunch in a designated and supervised area.
- Changes to equipment: Some of the more popular items of equipment such as swings, see-saws and flying foxes have been removed. Strict regulations now apply to such things as the fall height and the type and depth of under surfacing. Loose equipment in the form of tyres, wood, ropes, etc that might once have been used by children for creative and imaginative play are rarely seen today. Even the sandpit has gone in some schools.
- Changes to rules: Perhaps the most significant change of all is the increase in the number and stringency of rules applying to what and where children can and cannot play. For example climbing trees and even playing in and under them is generally banned. Even running has been prohibited in certain areas in schools with limited space and a lot of hard court area. Ball games are not to be played near or against school buildings and games involving tackling or even tag have been placed on the ‘don’t do’ list.
- Changes to supervision; Supervision of the playground is now a more organised and accountable responsibility for teachers. It is not uncommon to see them carrying clip boards, whistles and even mobile phones while on ‘yard’ duty. Children are no longer left to their own devices to organise their own games and resolve disputes that arise. The playground is now closely monitored, some might say ‘policed’ and many teachers now refer to it as being on ‘guard duty’ such is the vigilance that is expected.

### **Why have they come about?**

- The changes have largely come about because of the pressures on schools to provide a safe play environment. While it is understood that active children will occasionally sustain injuries from accidents when playing, we seem now to be less accepting of this fact particularly when the child is in an adult supervised setting such as a school. Parents are now far more likely to demand an explanation and even seek compensation in the event of an injury. We now live in what Wallace (2005) calls a ‘compensation culture’ (p.105). There is very little evidence to show that playgrounds are any more risky or dangerous now than they were in the past but schools are much more conscious of their liability and responsibility. Adopting safe practice means erring on the side of caution. Playground supervision used to amount to an occasional glance out of the staffroom window. Children were encouraged to sort out their own problems and only seek staff assistance in the event of serious injury or unresolvable disputes. Now it is a rostered duty and staff are allocated specific zones of the playground to patrol. Rarely do we see teachers kick the footy with the children or join in a game of hopscotch for to do so would risk accusations of negligence should

an accident occur. According to Shackel (2005) schools are minimising the risk of injury and possible legal action by restricting children's play. Eliminating play opportunities altogether is sometimes considered the best and safest course of action even though it takes away from children the opportunity for developmentally appropriate play. A recent example of this was a school that banned the popular game of 'poison ball' because of a concern that balls thrown at children had the potential to cause injury. The fact that very few incidents had been reported did not stop the school from banning the game. In so doing they took away from many children the chance to play a game they enjoyed and played actively and regularly.

- Another reason why the changes have come about in some schools is that the growth of the school in terms of student numbers has meant that additional buildings have been located on space previously devoted to play and now there is too little space for the number of children. Prized playground space and maybe even equipment is sometimes forfeited in order to add more classrooms. Crowded playgrounds may lead to an increase in the number and severity of accidents with children running into each other or being hit by balls. It can also lead to arguments and conflict about space and equipment. This in turn may lead to additional rules (such as zoning play areas) having to be introduced which may further erode opportunities for active play.
- The increasing pressure to improve academic achievement is another factor. There are reports (see Patte 2006) of schools overseas not only reducing the length of play time but actually cutting recess breaks altogether in order to spend more time in the classroom. This is despite the fact that recent studies (see Pellegrini 2005) show that children need regular breaks. Prolonged periods of academic instruction may actually be counterproductive. As Pellegrini found 'play and recess time can actually help students learn; they do not detract from learning' (p.13).
- Another reason some schools give for reducing the lunch break is because they claim that it is too long; that children can't play happily together for 45-50 minutes. They point out that their records show that most behaviour problems (arguments, disputes, fights) and accidents occur in the last 10 minutes of the long break. Their solution is to shorten the break. The logic is that if children have less time to play they will be less likely to have an accident or get into trouble. And the concerns are not just over what happens during the recess/lunch breaks. Teachers will say that valuable time is spent (wasted!) in settling students down once they return to class particularly if they have been involved in some form of altercation with another student during the break.

### **What are the implications?**

Opportunities for children to play actively during recess and lunch breaks are coming under increasing pressure because of the policy of safety first and because of pressures on schools to devote more time to improving children's learning outcomes. It is a situation with no simple solution. It is expected that schools will take steps to make the play environment safe for children (and staff) but the 'safe' playground may not be one which is conducive to active play. How do we balance the need for safe play against the need for play that is active and vigorous? What are the consequences of denying children such opportunities?

In an interesting study Patte (2006) surveyed 60 elementary (primary) school teachers from 60 public schools in Pennsylvania (USA) and found that 98% believed that recess was important to children's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development and yet 50% of these schools had recently reduced recess time. Patte notes that this is consistent with what is happening in schools across America. They are cutting recess because of concerns about

injury (and litigation) and so that children spend more time in class working on achieving the state academic standards.

According to Hope (2005) we have become obsessed with the probability of damage, illness or death. He writes 'one might be forgiven for thinking that the contemporary world is much more dangerous than the one that existed a few decades ago. However it is not necessarily that society is more dangerous, rather people have become 'risk obsessed' (p.3). We live in what Lupton (1999) calls the 'blame society' and this has had the effect of discouraging teachers and schools generally from allowing children to engage in any activity that has the slightest element of risk.

In an article in *The Australian Educational Leader* recently (2006) Dr. Keith Tronc, a Barrister-at-Law, set out a checklist of 19 rules which, he believes, should be an essential part of each school's playground supervision plan. The motive behind the rules is to help schools keep children safe and avoid potential legal problems. The rules are specific and very much directed at ensuring teachers take their supervision seriously. For example, rule 8 states;

*There is to be immediate intervention by teachers on playground supervision duty, preventing any observed dangerous games and activities, with the aim of protecting the safety of students.* (p. 13)

Even the language he uses is significant. Teachers now 'patrol' the playground and they are expected to maintain 'continuous surveillance'. They have to be constantly alert for children who may be playing out-of-bounds or, as he puts it, engaged in 'illegitimate occupation'. This is perhaps why playground supervision is now often described as being more like 'guard duty' than 'yard duty' and teachers see themselves as 'policing' the playground. The emphasis has shifted from one of facilitation and minimal intervention to one of vigilant surveillance and frequent intervention. Not surprisingly it has become a highly unpopular duty for most teachers.

Intervention is now more frequent in part because the type of games and activities now thought to be 'dangerous' has grown. A good example of this is 'play fighting' (also called rough & tumble play), an activity enjoyed by boys in particular which sees them wrestling, rolling and pretending to fight. According to Reed & Roth (2001) this type of play is immensely valuable not just for its vigorous activity, but also because boys use it as a way of expressing feelings and building friendships. However, as Schafer & Smith (1996) found in their study of school playgrounds, teachers were more inclined to judge such actions as 'real' rather than 'pretend' and insist that the children stop immediately. They saw the activity as being dangerous, likely to result in injury and deteriorate into aggressive behaviour. By adopting such an approach teachers are as much protecting themselves as they are protecting the children.

It is not just that children may have fewer opportunities to be physically active during these breaks but the restrictions curtail opportunities for social play with friends and play which has elements of exploration, uncertainty and challenge. We know from studies that have asked children what they do and what they would like to do during recess times (Bishop & Curtis, 2001, Dockett, 2002, Burke & Grosvenor 2003) that they want the space, time, equipment (fixed and loose) and freedom to play. And they are unhappy when these opportunities are not available which might help explain some of the behaviour problems reported by schools in the latter stages of lunch breaks. Children deprived of opportunities to play become bored

and restless. A child, when asked by Dockett (2002) ‘do you play at school?’ replied ‘we do but you are not allowed to shout and you are not allowed to touch and not allowed to fight’ (p.9). As the title of her article denotes, the children made frequent reference to the fact that the teachers don’t play. According to Dockett this is unfortunate because teachers can be a major factor in promoting and maintaining play. Playing with the children provides acknowledgement that play is important. On the other hand, as Tronc (2006) points out, playing with children while on duty places the teacher at risk of being accused of negligence should an accident occur. His advice (rule 12) is that;

*Teachers on playground duty should not undertake any participation in student games that would prevent them from properly performing their surveillance duties (p.13)*

What we now see in most schools is a built environment rather than a natural one and what natural spaces still exist are often ruled out of bounds to children. This is in complete contrast to what we know children prefer. Titman (1994) found that children enjoy natural landscapes because they offer diversity and the opportunity for risk and challenge. They love trees, bushes, ponds, gardens and sand pits. Given a choice children much prefer to climb trees than play on the fixed climbing frames we see in many schools. The value of trees was their unpredictable nature and the fact that they changed shape and colour (Titman p. 37). And bushes were great places to hide from real and imaginary enemies. They provided a sense of security and a place to retreat to sit and ponder. But the natural environment isn’t easily supervised and ease of supervision is the crucial factor today.

### **Where to from here?**

There is little doubt that some of the playground equipment in schools was well past its use-by date and needed to be replaced. Old wooden (usually pine log) equipment, cracked and splintered, posed dangers for users. Structures such as forts that provided little protection against small children slipping through or getting caught in railings needed to be replaced. And better design now means that chain supports typically found on swings no longer trap little fingers. Research (Hazard 2005, Cavanagh 2005) shows that falls from playground equipment account for the highest number of playground injuries so it would be negligent not to take appropriate action to reduce and, if possible, prevent such accidents. And schools are doing just that. Attention is being given to proper under surfacing and making sure new equipment conforms to national standards for playground design.

The playground at recess and lunch breaks can and should be a time when children engage in a multitude of active games and these games can make a significant contribution to their physical, social and cognitive growth and development. Children need access to space and equipment and they need to be encouraged to play with, where possible, minimal intervention. The difficult question is how do we provide an environment where children play actively, explore, take risks, challenge themselves but do so free of accident and injury? To be truthful the answer is we can’t. We can take precautions but we can’t eliminate risk or the chance of injury short of preventing children from going out to play or regulating it so heavily that they have few options when they do go outside. This is precisely what is happening in some schools overseas but, one would hope, it is not something we want to see happen here. As Jenkins (2006) notes, there are real and significant dangers in adopting an overly protective and regulatory approach. We must resist the temptation to ‘wrap children up in cotton wool’.

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