

Recess Is Not All Fun and Games

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Abstract

When recess is well-planned out, carefully taught, and expectations are clear, it is a time that can have a multitude of benefits for students. On the contrary, recess time can also be a breeding ground for bullying, name-calling, and aggressive behaviours, which can have detrimental effects on our youth. It is crucial that we recognize the true realities, such as bullying, that take place on our school grounds each day. We must do everything in our power to make the changes necessary to increase our students' safety and well-being while on our playgrounds.

Recess is a time for students to get outside, get fresh air, mingle with their friends, and burn off some energy. Some students state that recess is their most enjoyable part of the day, whereas others argue that it is their least favourite. We know that positive experiences on the playground have physical, social, and cognitive benefits (Lodewyk et al., 2020), but we are often blinded by the benefits of recess and ignore the true realities, such as bullying, that take place on our school grounds each day. An underlying issue related to bullying during recess is that students may not always be aware of what bullying looks like, which can be solved through explicit teaching of terms and strategies to instill empathy. Another major issue is that there are ample opportunities for bullying to go unnoticed due to the lack of supervision during recess; administrators need to revise schedules in order to increase the number of adult bodies present during recess. A third issue is that students enjoy participating in competitive team-oriented sports, which can lead to aggressive behaviours. Teachers need to take the time to teach students explicitly the right way to be competitive and how to take a loss graciously (Kaiser, 2021). The final issue is the lack of recess policies within schools, which can easily be solved by co-constructing expectations with staff and students. We know that recess can have many benefits, but we need to look toward solving some of the underlying issues.

The Construct of Bullying

An underlying issue regarding bullying is that people are not always aware of what it means to be a victim or a perpetrator (Hellström, 2020). This is especially evident when students are questioned about the appropriateness of the banter they are exchanging and they immediately revert to the famous line that we have all heard before, "I was just kidding." As students grow older, their understanding of bullying behaviour evolves and an act that was once "acceptable" can often turn to "questionable" (Hellström, 2020, p. 418). Younger students usually view bullying as physical, whereas older students realize that bullying can appear in different ways, such as social exclusion and verbal aggression (Hellström, 2020). Students sometimes lack awareness of what it means to be a bully and what it means to be bullied.

Students need to be explicitly taught what bullying is, what to do if they encounter it, and how to be empathetic. Far too often, we assume that students are aware of what bullying is and that they can understand the feelings of others, when very few actually can. Just like anything else, if our students are unaware or unsure of something, our job as educators is to teach them. Throughout a school day, there are many opportunities to demonstrate and to learn about feelings authentically. Teachers can create "check-in" type questions for their students that stem into powerful classroom discussions around the students' anonymous responses. When students are aware of others' feelings, it sets the stage for empathetic interactions to take place.

These types of conversations can also naturally arise while reading stories and discussing the appropriateness of social interactions (Perillo, 2020). In order for students to learn empathy, they must be surrounded by empathetic role models. By witnessing their teachers cultivate kind and caring relationships with others, students will be more inclined to do the same (Perillo, 2020). As educators, we need to ensure that we are explicitly teaching students how to be empathetic, what bullying is, and what to do if someone sees bullying take place.

Recess Supervision

Lack of supervision is another key factor in the amount of bullying that can take place on a playground. Cliques, power struggles, altercations, fighting, exclusions, injuries, and teasing can all be found during recess in Canadian schools (Lodewyk et al., 2020). As one looks around a playground, one may also see a lack of supervision. This is a common issue in all of the schools that I have taught in, mainly because recess is a time for not only students to “take a break,” but also teachers and educational assistants. The unfortunate result of a lack of supervision is that children are well aware of when they are being watched (Lunder & Tharaldsen, 2020), and when they have “freedom” to display inappropriate and aggressive behaviours that can take the form of physical, verbal, or social bullying.

The simple solution is that recess time needs increased supervision. During the process of making staff schedules, recess is often viewed as less of a priority than subject areas, which results in administrators believing that it deserves less supervision time. The overall idea of recess needs to be shifted, because it is just as important for students to learn how to interact appropriately with their peers as it is for them to grasp the latest math concept in the curriculum (Wood & Freeman, 2015). If supervisors were assigned to active roles, such as teaching students a new game or assisting students in setting the expectations prior to beginning a game, the students would display more positive behaviours (Wood & Freeman, 2015). Usually, the supervisors’ role is to react to the problems that arise at recess; however, shifting the role of the recess supervisors will help them to be more proactive in dealing with behaviours. Recess is an important part of the school day that deserves more supervision.

Students’ Learning To Lose

During recess, students commonly participate in competitive team-oriented games (Lodewyk et al., 2020), which can result in disagreements that escalate into hurtful exchanges and even aggressive physical acts. These issues often arise when students are playing a game with some sort of point system, because all parties are able to recognize the “winners” and the “losers,” and the fact is that some children do not know how to handle loss well (Stewart, 2021). Students may revert to, and claim to be, “play fighting,” but it is important to have the perspective that the situation may not be as benign as students let on (Richards & Burns, 2016). Recess is the most common place where I see bullying behaviours occur. Students, especially boys, tend to gather in large groups (Pellegrini, 1995), and when aggressive acts are acknowledged by others they are more severe (Hellström, 2020). This is not only because these acts are witnessed by others, but also because students tend to feed off one another’s behaviours and can receive signs of acceptability with something as small as a laugh (Hellström, 2020). Many positives can come from students participating in team-oriented sports during recess, but it is important to be aware of the issues that may arise in such settings.

Students need to be explicitly taught the right way to be competitive and how to take a loss. Students come from all different backgrounds and have varying perspectives on the importance of winning. Some students will come from a household where it is extremely important to be the person or team that comes out on top, whereas others will have been raised just to try their best. Regardless of students’ beliefs around winning, it is essential that they learn how to win and lose politely (Kaiser, 2021). School is an excellent place to teach and instill good

sportsmanship. Teachers can have their students watch videos of sports games and discuss the attributes of strong and supportive teams. Overly competitive students may also benefit from learning coping strategies to use after they lose a game, such as taking a deep breath, grabbing a glass of water, and learning to look forward to the next game. I often like to ask my students, “will this matter in 5 weeks? 5 days? 5 hours?” and when they unanimously reply, “no,” it assists them in putting things into perspective. Teaching students to be resilient will serve them well when they enter life after high school. Life can be full of setbacks, and we must teach students to build a growth mindset, so that they are able to face these setbacks and embrace challenges (Dweck, 2009). We cannot just assume that students come to school equipped with good sportsmanship; they need to be explicitly taught the right way to be competitive and how to take a loss.

Recess Policies

Recess policies are extremely marginal if existent at all, which can be a major contributor to the obscurities of recess expectations. A 15-minute recess break two times a day can seem minimal, but over time the amount of bullying that occurs during this time can add up. The effects of these experiences can take a massive toll on children’s mental health and can negatively affect children for years into their adulthood (Lunder & Tharaldsen, 2020). Overall, in the schools that I have worked in, conversations around the topic of recess procedures and policies have not seemed to hold an important place during staff meeting discussions. In fact, very few schools have recess policies (Pellegrini, 1995). Perhaps this is again because we are blinded by the benefits of recess and feel as though the positives outweigh the negatives; of course, this can sometimes prove to be true, but we also need to protect our most vulnerable students and be aware that if we do not, they may be faced with the cumulative detrimental effects of bullying (Lunder & Tharaldsen, 2020). The lack of recess policies in schools is a major issue.

Recess policies need to be put in place at the individual school level, in order to meet the needs of the students and lower the potential for bullying behaviours. Dynamics and needs vastly vary from one school to the next; therefore, recess policies should not be a blanket-solution. As educators, we know the power of allowing our students to have “voice and choice” within the classroom. I believe that student voices should also be present in the making of recess policies, because students will display more “buy-in” to the end product. An open discussion is an effective way to begin the creation of a new recess policy. One may start by asking students, “Why is recess important to you?” (Wood & Freeman, 2015, p. 177). Of course, co-constructed school-specific rules should be outlined in the policy; however, rules should not make up the entire policy alone. Within the policy, staff and students should include things such as whether students are allowed to be held in to complete missing work, routines for starting and ending recess, and how staff will deal with misbehaviours (Wood & Freeman, 2015). Another topic for discussion might be whether the school should have students or staff teaching new recess games each month, because we cannot always expect that students know how to fill their recess time (Sparks, 2018). Throughout the year, administrators should be checking in with staff supervisors to see if anything in the policy needs to be adjusted (Wood & Freeman, 2015). Creating and implementing recess policies within schools is a surefire way to set clear expectations among students and staff, and lower undesired behaviours during recess.

Conclusion

We know that positive experiences on the playground have physical, social, and cognitive benefits (Lodewyk et al., 2020), but we are also aware that bullying can be a major roadblock that prevents students from having these experiences. Students need to be taught what bullying is, what to do if they encounter it, and how to be empathetic, so that they have a clear

awareness of whether their actions are acceptable. In order to minimize the effects of a lack of supervision during recess, administrators need to shift their mindset and recognize the importance of increasing the number of active supervisors during this time. Students also benefit from learning how to display good sportsmanship so that everyone can enjoy participating in team-oriented games with minimal aggressive behaviours. Lastly, when rules and expectations are not clear, misbehaviours tend to occur; that is why it is essential that recess policies are put in place at the school level, and that all students and staff are aware of what is expected of them. It is crucial that we continue to recognize the true realities, such as bullying, that take place on our school grounds each day. We must do everything in our power to make the changes necessary to increase our students' safety and well-being while on our playgrounds.

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About the Author

At the time of writing, Kelsey Kroeker was in her fifth year of teaching middle years. She began her M.Ed. journey because she would like to open more doors of opportunity for herself. She feels that having her master's degree will help her to attain her goal to become an administrator.