



BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Recess and PE Class Are Both Important for Academic Success (Brain Performance) and Brain Health

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain healthy lifestyle protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **Today, we look at how recess and physical education classes are important for academic success and brain health, development, and performance for all ages.***

While learning subjects like reading, math, and science in school is essential, academic success and recess are not mutually exclusive. Recess is not only “playtime.” There is growing evidence that recess and physical activity contribute to improved brain performance, demonstrated in grades and test scores.

According to the CDC, recess is a regularly scheduled period in the school day for physical activity and play that is monitored by trained staff or volunteers. During recess, students are encouraged to be physically active and engaged with their peers in activities of their choice, at all grade levels, kindergarten through 12th grade (adults too).

The American Academy of Pediatrics has also weighed in, describing recess in a 2012 [policy statement as a](#) “necessary break in the day for optimizing a child’s social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development” that should “not be withheld for punitive or academic reasons.”

Recess should be distinct from other physical activity opportunities during the school day and provided to all students in addition to physical education and classroom physical activity. Recess is a chance for students to take a break from the rigors of school and get a bit of physical activity into an otherwise sedentary day. In addition to just being a chance to think about something else and get in some exercise, recess is also a chance for children to develop relationships and social and emotional skills.

The fundamental benefits that recess provides students of any age do come with a few challenges to consider, however, and cannot replace a more formal physical education program. Recess is by nature a break from the rigid structures of school and a time for students to relax and play.

Not all students play the same way though, and while some students may play kickball, tag, or some other active physical activity, others will prefer to chat in groups, play with toys or games, and other calmer activities. Because of this, students will still require a more structured physical education class where they can learn about health, their bodies, functional fitness, and exercise together ensuring all students participate in at least some fun and physical activity each day.

While many understand the benefits of recess for elementary students, some schools have questioned the benefits of recess for older students. However, is there ever a time when a person stops benefitting from a break from work, some physical activity, and a chance to develop relationships?

The benefits and opportunities of recess and play time are particularly important for students with special needs, functional limitations, or physical disabilities because they may have more behavioral issues and limited experiences interacting socially with other students.

Some might suggest that a physical education class can serve as a recess break for students from the mental pressures of the classroom and that a separate recess is simply wasted unstructured time. However, in this case, the students who relax by doing calmer activities will never get a chance to really relax in the way that works for their minds.

Research shows that recess and physical education classes actually work together in a mutually beneficial way and suggest that time be scheduled for both periods during the school day. According to a University of Cincinnati [study](#), “Recess is a complement to, not a replacement for, physical education. Both promote activity and a healthy lifestyle; however, recess—particularly unstructured recess and free play—provides a unique contribution to a child’s creative, social, and emotional development.”

Only recently in Florida has recess been required for all students through grade 5. The law states that **“each district shall provide at least 100 minutes of supervised, safe, and unstructured free-play recess each week for students in kindergarten through grade 5”** so that there are at least 20 consecutive minutes of free-play recess per day.

The [2018 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans](#) recommends that children and adolescents engage in 60 minutes of physical activity each day. Being physically active can improve strength and endurance; help build healthy bones and muscles; help control weight; reduce anxiety, stress, and depression; improve academic achievement; and increase self-esteem for children and adolescents.

Recess and Physical Education classes can help students increase their daily physical activity and contribute to getting the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity each day. In addition, researchers found that children with a longer recess period spent a larger percentage of their recess time being physically active than students who spent less time at recess. They also found

that having more adults on the blacktop participating in play and mediating conflicts also increases students' level of physical activity during recess.

Recess also is an essential part of students' school experience that contributes to their normal growth and development. Recess helps students practice social skills (e.g., cooperation, following rules, problem solving, negotiation, sharing, communication), positively engage in classroom activities (e.g., being on-task, not being disruptive), and enhance cognitive performance (e.g., attention, memory).

In addition, students who are physically active tend to be healthier, happier, and better learners, have better grades, school attendance, classroom behaviors, and cognitive performance.

Recess that is well-organized will include, for example, a written school recess plan, coordinated schedules and transition times, and professional development for school staff and volunteers. When implemented properly, recess will not only help students be more physically active, but may improve their brain performance, health and well-being, including behavior and attention level in class. It can also reduce bullying and exclusionary behavior among students. By helping students feel safe and more engaged in the classroom, recess also contributes to higher levels of school connectedness. This higher level of connectedness creates a positive school climate, which affects every aspect of school, including attendance, engagement, and academic achievement.

Each school is unique, and one prescribed plan for recess is not appropriate for all schools. Below are some general parameters for adopting a successful recess policy and a link to a document that provides strategies that can be implemented by school staff or groups in a school that are responsible for leading recess. These strategies are an integral part of recess planning and should result in increased mind, brain, and body health and performance, including physical activity, positive behavior during recess, and improved behavior and engagement in the classroom.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

The CDC, [SHAPE America](#) and other national organizations offer ways to improve students' recess experience, regardless of age:

- Provide students with adequate spaces, facilities, equipment, and supplies for recess.
- Ensure that spaces and facilities for recess meet or exceed recommended safety standards. Prohibit the exclusion of students from recess for disciplinary reasons or academic performance in the classroom.
- Prohibit the use of physical activity during recess as punishment.
- Provide recess before lunch.
- Provide staff members who lead or supervise recess with ongoing professional development.

For more information check out [Strategies for Recess in Schools](#).

BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:

- Stress resilience
- Nutrition
- Physical activity
- Sleep
- Social connection
- Emotional well-being
- Meaning and Purpose
- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative, Inc. (BHI), a 501(c)(3) non-profit, uses a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is building brain healthy communities, cultures that promote brain healthy lifestyles, foster protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes at the individual and community level for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. ***Brain Health Matters and Lifestyle Makes a Difference.***