

Why Recess and Social Connectedness Matters – Now, More Than Ever.

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Considerable research documents what many of us have long suspected: what happens at recess influences children's engagement with school, classmates, class work and teachers. From a student's perspective, recess is much more than a break - it's an important social space that reflects their social and emotional needs. Now, more than ever, children will need safe, supportive and meaningful opportunities to connect with their peers in their school communities.

The Niagara Catholic District School Board, in partnership with Dr. Lauren McNamara and the Recess Project, is working to ensure recess is a meaningful, inclusive and accepting space for students. Director of Education John Crocco has begun the facilitation of dialogue between Dr. McNamara and the Ontario Ministry of Education, the Ontario Ministry of Health, the Directors of Education and Superintendents in support of the important research, insights and practical application for professional development of staff, students and parents in all schools across Canada.

“We are committed to working collaboratively with Dr. McNamara to advance research on recess and provide a positive, safe and inclusive environment for all students,” Crocco said.

Rethinking Recess

Many of us are now aware that attending to children's social and emotional needs is critical, as healthy children are clearly better learners. Yet, despite progressive improvements over the last 100 years, the way schools approach recess has gone relatively unchanged, even as conflict and discipline issues increase. In fact, of all the developed nations, Canada has one of the highest rates of school-based violence – and much of it happens during recess.

Research on recess indicates that a low-priority approach leads to minimal levels of supervision, planning, training, equipment, space and accountability. Familiar recess issues of social conflict, behavioural challenges and safety concerns continue, year after year. Children are often bored, sedentary and anxiously navigating a social space where bullying and exclusion are routine and normalized behaviours.

Recess, Social Connections and Mental Health

When recess is viewed as a social space, we can see how powerful it can be on children's well-being. Social relationships – for better or for worse – carry intense emotional and psychological weight.

The importance of social relationships is best explained from an evolutionary perspective. It would have been difficult for our ancestors to survive in isolation; relationships provide protection, shared resources and reproductive opportunities. We can see this, for example, in babies: fear, separation anxiety and crying ensure infants remain close to the caregiver, increasing the odds they receive essential nourishment, nurturing and protection to survive.

As children grow more sophisticated, so too do their interactions. These interactions provide context for emotional support, enjoyment, creativity, physical activity, social competence and the development of social identities. These interactions are designed to shape the development of the brain, language, thinking, emotions and behaviours – and the biological, psychological and social become inseparably entwined. Consider how we feel when others understand us – we feel content. What we are feeling, specifically, is a sense of belonging – a framework with well-established links to positive emotions such as elation, security and calmness. In this way, our biology is designed to ensure we remain close.

Conversely, then, this need to maintain connections is so powerful that, just like hunger, unmet needs disrupt our thinking, emotions and behaviour. For example, feelings of exclusion and rejection are emotionally unsettling, even physically painful. Those who feel rejected or betrayed often focus attention on restoring social bonds, using up cognitive resources that could be better used elsewhere. Given that recess is the only school-based opportunity for children to freely connect with peers, there is much more we can do to support them.

Recess, Equity and Moving Forward

Negative social experiences disproportionately affect children from vulnerable populations, undermining the positive benefits of social connection. Moreover, school play-spaces in more vulnerable neighbourhoods tend to be disproportionately smaller, barren and lacking equipment than more advantaged counterparts, resulting in higher incidences of boredom, conflict and negative social patterns that further reinforce inequality. As many of us are aware, the pandemic has not only exposed but also exacerbated the effects of inequality.

Moreover, the isolation, instability, stress, fear and uncertainty of the last few months have resulted in significant deterioration of our collective mental health. Given that the majority of mental illness starts in childhood, school planning efforts must ensure that children have the time and support to heal and reconnect with their peers in meaningful ways. Doing so will mitigate increases in anxiety and depression that undermine well-being and school engagement.

The Right to Play

The need for healthy, meaningful play and social connection has been deemed so fundamental to development that the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child established it as a basic right for every child. Article 31 was designed to ensure all children have meaningful opportunities for play and leisure, emphasizing the need to be protected from the effects of social exclusion, discrimination and social harm. Long overlooked, this information needs to be reflected in provincial education acts.

Though we are faced with many challenges as we plan for reopening, we have an unprecedented opportunity to discard outdated practices and replace them. But widespread systemic changes will depend greatly on the ways in which administrators engage in serious conversations about recess, convey its importance to principals and educators and provide durable supports that will enable sustainable and meaningful change.

Some concrete steps that administrators can take to mobilize change may include:

- Creating a recess committee;
- Setting annual goals in board plans that support improved recess
- Ensuring questions specific to recess experiences are included in school climate surveys;
- Allocating funds to support recess in schools;
- Ensuring professional development opportunities; and
- Focusing conversations with the board and school staff about the following
 - meaningful, engaging and supported recess breaks for students of all ages;
 - the importance of risk in play;
 - thoughtful space design;

- children's rights with respect to rest and play;
- insurance, safety and liability concerns;
- and the timing and duration of recess, including accommodations for recess supervision.

Lauren McNamara holds a PhD in the psychology of education and an MA in learning sciences. She is an Ashoka Fellow and the founder, director and senior research scientist of The Recess Project. Lee Ann Forsyth-Sells is the Superintendent of Education, Equity and Inclusive Education at the Niagara Catholic District School Board. Christine Battagli is a research, assessment, evaluation and reporting consultant with the Niagara Catholic District School Board.

For a full list of references associated with this article, please email Editor Kaitlin Vitt at kvitt@matrixgroupinc.net.