



The Importance of Outdoor Play and Physical Activity During School Hours

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The Importance of Outdoor Play and Physical Activity During School Hours

1 Introduction

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that children get **60 minutes of physical activity a day.**



Both outdoor physical activity and indoor classroom time are important for kids' growth and development. School provides students with the education they need to have a successful career, and physical activity gives them a chance to stay healthy. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that children get 60 minutes of physical activity a day.¹ Outdoor physical activity is even better for kids, as playgrounds and nature offer a host of opportunities to develop important skills. Unfortunately, not all kids get their daily 60 minutes outside at home because their parents work, in many cases. School is a place where kids can supplement the lack of physical activity they get at home, and recess also helps children perform better in school. Outdoor physical activity provided during school hours helps kids become smarter, healthier and stronger.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/everyone/guidelines/children.html>

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The many health benefits of outdoor play

Outdoor play, as it occurs on playground equipment, offers a variety of developmental benefits to kids.² For example, playgrounds help children hone cognitive skills by way of sensory features (or equipment that stimulates children's auditory, tactile or visual senses). When students interact with the equipment using their senses, they have the opportunity to solve problems and think critically. For instance, a ball maze panel offers kids the opportunity to move a small object through a labyrinth, which requires them to exercise problem-solving abilities, i.e., if the children meet a dead end in the maze, they have to backtrack and rethink their strategy.

Playgrounds are also great environments for kids to learn important social skills. Imaginative play features such as climbers deliver opportunities for students to interact with one another. Kids can race around the equipment, playing games of make believe with others, allowing students to learn team-building and cooperation skills. Furthermore, according to National Public Radio (NPR), imaginative play helps kids develop an emotional skill called executive function, which is the ability to self-regulate and monitor impulses.³

Perhaps the most obvious benefit of playgrounds is the development of physical skills. According to a study performed by Delano, Minn.-based Landscape Structures Inc., the type of equipment kids use will determine the physiological benefits they get while playing.⁴ The study monitored 10 children between ages 6 and 10 as they spent 20 minutes on the playground. The group was divided evenly into boys and girls, and all of the children played on two types of playstructures. One type of equipment (A) included predictable challenges such as platforms, slides and rock walls. The other type (B) had small platforms at numerous

“*Imaginative play helps kids develop an emotional skill called executive function, which is the ability to self-regulate and monitor impulses.*”

² Benefits of outdoor play: CDC page and <http://www.kidsafewa.com.au/playgroundimportance.htm>

³ NPR article: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=19212514>

⁴ Landscape Structures study: “Physiological Research on Playgrounds”

heights and kids climbed on ropes to get to various levels instead of using stairs.

The research showed that children experienced cardiovascular health benefits as a result of the activity they did on playground A. However, the diverse and changing nature of playground B offered kids opportunities to increase strength, agility, balance, motor skills and even the ability to strategize.

3 Getting 60 minutes a day



New technology only increases the amount of time they interact with media rather than engaging in unstructured and outdoor play.

Kids should get an hour of physical activity a day to receive these benefits, but not all do. The invention of the TV brought kids inside, and new technology only increases the amount of time they interact with media rather than engaging in unstructured and outdoor play.⁵

In fact, a study published in The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) Pediatrics found that half of preschoolers don't get outside every day.⁶ This was, for the most part, because parents work long hours and don't feel they have the time to take their kids to the park on a regular basis. Researchers recommend that childcare providers offer children plenty of outdoor play—the recommendation was pointed at childcare because the kids who were studied were not yet in school.

Because many children of all ages don't receive the outdoor physical activity they need, they also miss out on the numerous benefits of nature. Fortunately, school might be the perfect place to change that statistic.

⁵ History of play in America and how TV is detrimental to it: NPR (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=19212514>) and The Atlantic (<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2011/10/all-work-and-no-play-why-your-kids-are-more-anxious-depressed/246422/>)

⁶ JAMA Pediatrics study: <http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1149487&resultClick=3>

4 Transforming the status quo with outdoor classes

Focusing all day in class is challenging—students have to digest a lot of information, and taking a break from strenuous mental activity can actually help kids focus better later in the day. For this reason, recess is just as important to childhood development as class time. According to Time Magazine, recess offers a break in which children can recharge and re-energize to focus better in class.⁷

“Children need to have downtime between complex cognitive challenges.”

“Children need to have downtime between complex cognitive challenges,” Dr. Robert Murray, a pediatrician and professor of human nutrition at the Ohio State University, told the source. “They tend to be less able to process information the longer they are held to a task. It’s not enough to just switch from math to English. You actually have to take a break.”

Of course, schools can offer students several reprieves from the strain of class work: Educators can take class outside and provide plenty of recess time. Both options support healthy outdoor play and help students perform better in class. Teachers can teach lessons on science, math and art while outside. For example, a class could look at cloud formations as part of a meteorology lesson. Additionally, educators may consider allowing students to complete reading assignments outside rather than completing the assignment indoors.

5 Offering students healthy recess opportunities

In order for schools to provide adequate fitness opportunities for students, they should have safe and challenging playground equipment. Equipment like that created by Landscape Structures offers age- and developmentally

⁷ TIME article: <http://healthland.time.com/2012/12/31/yay-for-recess-pediatricians-say-its-as-important-as-math-or-reading/>

appropriate challenge to help kids get all the benefits of playground time. As students run, play and climb, they are getting exercise and have the opportunity to relax their minds after working hard in class.

Schools can support physical fitness endeavors by relying on numerous resources to improve the number of opportunities to engage in outdoor physical activity. Let's Move!, for example, is a program founded by first lady Michelle Obama. The program offers schools and other care groups resources to improve their physical activity programs.⁸ Schools may apply the principles discussed in this campaign to improve the quality of recess and outdoor classroom time.

6 Growing up healthy


Kids need physical activity to be healthy, strong and smart, and they can stay active if schools provide time for outdoor play. For starters, all children should spend time outside and get 60 minutes of physical activity every single day, two things that can occur simultaneously. Unfortunately, many kids aren't physically active and lose out on the benefits of outdoor play. Schools can help change that fact by offering recess or outdoor classroom time where kids can play and learn on age- and developmentally appropriate playgrounds. Kids will grow healthy, strong and smart using school play equipment provided by Landscape Structures.


⁸ Let's Move! School resources: <http://www.letsmove.gov/active-schools>




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