

The Value of Playtime

Play is not a break from learning. Play is learning. Fred Rogers, aka Mr. Rogers, called play "the work of childhood." What happens on the playground as kids negotiate games and navigate their world gets to the heart of social and emotional learning (SEL), another casualty of the NCLB era. Kids need to be able to make up their own rules, to learn to get along with each other, to solve problems—and they don't do that at an organized soccer practice. In fact, one study found that six-year-olds who engage more in unstructured play are better decision-makers, and more capable of social relationships.

"If we're really walking the talk about 21st century skills, creativity is one of them, and it goes hand-in hand with play," says Terri Drain. "Think about those high-tech companies, like Google, and how they provide their employees with opportunities for play. They know it's how to get the best productivity out of them." A 2014 study found that 6-year-olds who engage more in unstructured play are better decision makers, and more capable of social relationships. It's not just Silicon Valley. This is yet another lesson on effective schooling that we could learn from Finland. Over there, Finnish teachers and students typically break for 15 minutes every hour. Similarly, in much of East Asia, it's 10 minutes after every 40-45 minutes.

In the early 1990s, University of Minnesota's Anthony Pellegrini, the wise elder of recess research, proved the wisdom of brain breaks. By measuring students' attention before and after recess, he found students were significantly more attentive to schoolwork after the four-square balls were stashed. He also found that the more delayed the break—in other words, the longer a lesson dragged on—the worse students' attention was. "In a perfect world, students would be getting

out of the seats, getting physically active and increasing their heart rate, every 20 minutes," says Collin Brooks, physical education teacher. You need to establish a really positive school culture where students understand inclusion, that we play with everybody, and where they've learned the skills to resolve conflict." - Terri Drain, physical education teacher.

Meanwhile, even as headlines acclaim the relationship between exercise and brain function in aging adults, an expanding body of research shows that children get the same benefits. While one study showed students score better on math tests if they go for a walk first, another found that the areas of the brain devoted to learning are bigger in kids who exercise more. In 2014, a University of Illinois study invited 100 children to participate in an activity-based, after-school program, while 100 other students kept to their usual routine of TV and PlayStations. One year later, the well-exercised children showed more improvement in cognitive scores. And then, there are the benefits to physical health to consider, too. In 2012, more than a third of U.S. children and adolescents were obese, and every one of them faces increased risk for heart disease, diabetes, bone and joint problems, and social and psychological issues. "That alone should encourage schools and school districts to incorporate more physical activity during the day," says Brooks. They're probably not getting it at home. Concerns about neighborhood safety, coupled with the multiplication of video game technology, means a whole lot of kids sitting around for a whole lot of hours. "When kids sit in front of a screen for three, four, six hours a day, you can figure out what's being taken out of their day—it's play and physical activity," says Drain.