

# Executive Summary

## National Position Paper on Recess



Prepared by:



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# Position

Recess plays a critical role in shaping positive social relationships, overall health, academic performance, and long-term health trajectories for children and youth. It provides a necessary daily outlet for physical activity that is fundamentally essential for children's physical development. Equally important, recess provides routine peer-to-peer interaction, the cumulative effects of which can influence positively—or negatively—the way children relate to each other, the kinds of individuals they will become, and the kind of society they will create. We recommend that recess be prioritized in policy and provincial/territorial legislation that:

- acknowledges the right of every child to benefit by rest and play;
- applies the use of universal design principles to create spaces for meaningful, inclusive play, relaxation, and positive social interaction; and,
- provides opportunities for children and youth to learn and apply life-long skills that support healthy social behaviour free from physical and emotional harm.

## Preamble

This Position Statement is applicable to children and youth attending school from Kindergarten through Grade 8. We conducted both action research and reviews of scientific research completed in Canada and internationally on the health and social benefits of a quality recess experience, as well as the lasting ill-effects of a recess experience characterized by social conflict.

We support a thoughtfully designed, well-supported, high-quality recess that provides a variety of options, equipment, activities, and play spaces that are intended to encourage an inclusive, prosocial, restful, playful, and creative environment, one that is protected from the effects of physical violence and social harm.



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## Context and Rationale

Increasingly, we live in an era in which Canadian educators and school administrators are overly burdened with growing demands to achieve curriculum outcomes in the face of finite and sometimes diminishing resources. Competing priorities for staff time and budgets mean not all essential aspects of structured and unstructured learning and social interaction during the school day are being supported. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has established that play and rest are

fundamentally necessary for the physical and mental well-being of children<sup>1</sup>. Recess—often perceived as time spent in frivolous or unproductive activity—is typically given low priority, minimal attention, and fewer resources. Consequently, the physical and social opportunities inherent to recess have been left unrealized. Instead, minimal supervision and planning, risk aversion, strict rules, limited equipment, and barren landscapes are common concerns for both students and school staff<sup>2</sup>. The consequence is social conflict, exclusion, victimization, fighting, boredom, crowding, and discipline issues<sup>3</sup>. Many children note that recess can be one of the most lonely and feared times of the school day<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, the current recess setting in most schools appears to undermine the ability of many children to acquire the social, emotional, physical, and academic benefits of recess.

**Play and rest are fundamentally necessary for the physical and mental well-being of children.**

– United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

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## Key Evidence

- Non-curricular aspects of school unequivocally shape academic success—socially adjusted and healthy children are better learners<sup>5</sup>.
- Research on recess in Canada characterizes recess as having minimal supervision, limited equipment, barren spaces, strict rules, safety concerns, social conflict, and descriptions of a culture where social exclusion and rejection are normal and routine behaviours<sup>6</sup>. Such conditions compromise meaningful play and invite social conflict, safety concerns, liability fears, theft, and discipline issues<sup>7</sup>.
- During recess children have opportunities to interact through play and social engagement, and thus, they learn important social skills such as cooperation, sharing, negotiating, patience, communication, problem-solving, and conflict resolution<sup>8</sup>.
- Relationships are a key component of all major theories of children's development<sup>9</sup>. A prevention approach rather than an intervention approach is recommended, as it gives children a set of social tools to help them navigate,

more effectively, any social setting<sup>10</sup>.

- Through social interactions, play exchanges, and shared activities, during recess children develop their language and social behaviours. They come to a shared understanding of what is behaviourally appropriate. The patterns of interactions during recess are likely to take root and have a significant influence on children's beliefs, behaviours, routines, and habits that follow them home, into adulthood, and into their communities—shaping the later social conventions of society<sup>11</sup>. It is well understood that biases, barriers, and power dynamics—whether overt or subtle, intentional or unintentional—compromise children's ability to engage with others, learn, develop, and fully contribute to society. These barriers can be related to race, ethnic origin, religion, socio-economic background, physical or mental ability, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and/or other factors. As well, factors often intersect to create compounding challenges for some children<sup>12</sup>.

Healthy children are more likely to engage in school and have more successful life trajectories<sup>13</sup>. Healthy adults contribute to a healthy society, boosting individual and social economic outcomes<sup>14</sup>.



**"Non-curricular aspects of school unequivocally shape academic success."**

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# Calls to Action:

## Creating a culture of meaningful play and social connection

Overall, a prevention model is recommended to encourage meaningful, positive, physically active play. Schools should include recess in their wider school-improvement efforts. When approached proactively, recess can be thoughtfully designed to prevent adverse childhood experiences rather than react to them. The Calls to Action, below, are aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

### Policy and Legislation:

1. Review and amend relevant policies and the Education Act in each province and territory to reflect and commit to UNCRC Article 31, a timetable for its implementation and strategies to address findings included in the UNCRC General Comment 17<sup>15</sup>.
2. Establish policies that include a commitment to engaging children and youth directly in planning and decision making, including for-youth by-youth approaches, such as the Junior Recess Leader program for children in Grades 5–8. Train and support them to facilitate play zones, manage equipment, encourage inclusive play, and model effective conflict resolution<sup>16</sup>.
3. Work with school health representatives and parent-teacher volunteers to support and advocate for healthy social development at recess as part of the four core components of a Healthy School Communities approach<sup>17</sup>.



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## Supportive Environments for Educators and Children:

4. Provide and require staff training in best practices for recess and children's right to play, in both formal teacher education programs and as ongoing professional development.
5. Provide and require culturally-appropriate, age-level student training that increase children's appreciation for diverse cultures and vulnerable populations, cooperation, sharing, negotiating, fair play, self-regulation, problem-solving, acceptance, and belonging as skills to avoid, combat and/or manage social conflict, victimization, discrimination, loneliness, exclusion, rejection so that all children are free from physical and emotional harm.
6. Designate a staff member as a school Recess Coordinator to create and oversee a Recess Committee, establish a master plan, ensuring that recess is part of the overall school-wide improvement efforts<sup>18</sup>.
7. Require a minimum of 4 blocks of recess of 15 minutes each for Kindergarten–Grade 2; and, two blocks of 20 minutes of outdoor recess for Grades 3–8.
8. Minimum time requirements should not include the time it takes for students to line up or put on their winter clothing<sup>19</sup>.
9. Require and monitor a maximum ratio of one adult supervisor to 12 students for Kindergarten through Grade 3; and, one adult supervisor to 30 students in Grades 4 through 8.

## Practice:

10. Designate play spaces (or zones) during recess for a wide variety of activities that provide opportunities for children to participate in free play, active play, physical activity, and quiet enjoyment.
11. Hold recess outdoors whenever possible. Thoughtfully plan indoor activities during inclement weather days when children have no option to be outside.
12. Beyond, traditional structures, swings, etc., provide loose parts and natural materials (e.g., grass, flowers, trees, rocks, hills). See the Canadian Public Health Association's [Loose Parts Policy](#) for more information.
13. Provide a continuum of different play areas and activity options to meet the range of children's needs and desires across ages, stages, preferences, activity levels—including unstructured, semi-structured, and structured spaces.

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# Foundation

This Position Statement was prepared based on a review of the best available evidence, including the results from 14 research projects conducted in Canada, as well as a review of 44 published articles on recess and relevant research topics. [\*The Role of Recess in Canadian elementary schools: A National Position Paper\*](#) applies a closer examination of the recess landscape supported by these research projects and published articles. The Position Statement was reviewed by the members of the Recess Project Advisory Committee and is endorsed by Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE Canada).

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