

Recess in Elementary and Middle Schools

Recommendations for School Board and Provincial Policy Development

This document is intended as a complement to the [National Position Paper on Recess](#) developed by PHE Canada and Recess Project Canada. It provides a starting point for the development of policy and working guidelines.

INTRODUCTION & RATIONALE

For many children, recess is one of the most enjoyable parts of the school day. Yet, the pressures of instructional demands and accountability continue to put this important part of the child's day at risk¹ (Pellegrini and Bohn, 2005). As daily school routines are prioritized and decisions about funding and scheduling are made, the appreciation of social connections and play is often diminished and even considered trivial.

However, play and relationships are considered so fundamental to the development and well-being of children that in 1989 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognised it as a right of every child. The UNCRC is an international treaty that sets out universally accepted rights for children. Schools are included in this obligation to promote, protect, and fulfill children's rights. Under Article 31, children have the right to relax, play, and join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities.

Yet, in a recent review of the implementation of Article 31², the UNCRC Committee expressed concern of the poor recognition of Article 31. The Committee explains that poor recognition of this right "results in lack of investment in appropriate provisions, weak or non-existent protective legislation, and the invisibility of children in national and local-level planning."

Ministries of Education, school districts, and schools are committed to making schools safe and inclusive places to learn and grow. The implementation of a Recess Policy is an important step in creating healthier school communities. To maximize the effectiveness of a recess policy, it is important that all education staff, students, and families understand the importance of healthy and inclusive spaces for rest, play, and socialization during the school day. Expectations for healthy, inclusive play will translate to healthier children, healthier schools, and healthier communities. This document provides recommendations for consideration when developing a recess policy to support the mobilization in each province and territory in Canada.

¹ Pellegrini, A. D., & Bohn, C. M. (2005). The Role of Recess in Children's Cognitive Performance and School Adjustment. *Educational Researcher*, 34(1), 13–19

² United Nations. (2013). *General comment No. 17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31)*.



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BACKGROUND

Recess is the leisure time in the school day in which play and recreational opportunities are available to students. It is a time that is independent of instructional time, meal/snack breaks, or adult-led activities. Recess must provide meaningful opportunities for creativity, self-initiated play, physical activity, engagement with peers in culturally relevant activities, and rest. These necessary breaks throughout the day are fundamentally critical. Simply put, it is a time for students to relax, to play, to catch up with friends, to be silly, to take risks, to relax, and to burn off energy. It is the students' personal time and they should have a wide variety of developmentally appropriate options as to how to spend this time.

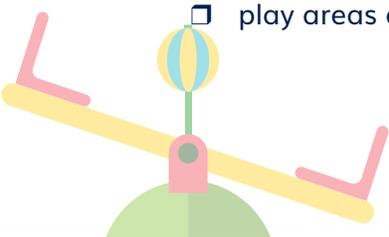
Forethought and planning are required by schools in order to create a setting that is inclusive, universally accessible, and rich with activity options, equipment, and a range of different materials. As such, both students and staff should collectively design this time. Recess should not be withheld as punishment or for academic reasons, not be a replacement for Physical Education class, and should not be undermined by overly strict rules.

Moreover, the social landscape of recess is critically important for children – it matters to them personally but is also a powerful influence on their mental health and well-being. Their diverse social, emotional, and physical needs requires that recess be a supportive environment to enable them to effectively connect with others, establish friendships, and maintain relationships – where they are protected from the effects of social exclusion and victimization. It is important to highlight that children who are at-risk for social marginalization should be supported carefully both by staff and students.

Key Message #1 *“Educational environments should play a major role in fulfilling the obligations under Article 31.”*

Broadly speaking, schools must provide:

- appropriate time, supervision and support during recess to ensure that children have sufficient opportunity for meaningful play;
- adequate indoor and outdoor spaces to facilitate play, leisure, and the arts;
- playgrounds, play landscapes, natural landscapes, loose parts, and equipment that are safe and properly and regularly inspected;
- play spaces, natural landscapes, loose parts, and equipment designed to enable all children, including children with disabilities, to participate equally;
- play areas and materials which afford opportunities for all forms of play;



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- involvement of children in the design and development of play areas;
- outdoor recess breaks, whenever possible.

School staff should NOT be permitted to withhold recess breaks:

- for academic purposes (e.g. to complete schoolwork or homework);
- as disciplinary action (e.g. withholding recess as a punitive measure);
- to fulfill Physical Education curriculum requirements.

Key Message #2: "Article 31 emphasizes the importance of activities appropriate to the age of the child."

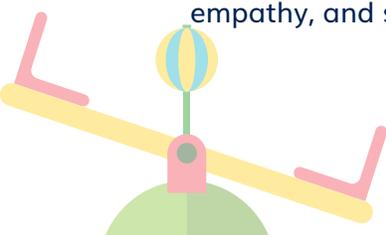
There is an enormous developmental range in elementary and middle schools. Recess should allow for a continuum of opportunities that range from areas for unstructured, spontaneous play to organized, structured and developmentally appropriate activities. The ages, stages, and preferences of children must be taken into account in determining

- the amount of time provided and the frequency;
- the nature of spaces and environments available, both indoor and outdoor;
- forms of stimulation and diversity of activities;
- the degree of necessary adult oversight and engagement to ensure safety and security;
- opportunities that involve risk-taking and challenge;
- opportunities to socialize, be with peers, or to be alone.

Key Message #3: "Children need opportunities to engage with peers of different abilities, backgrounds, social status, and ages in order to learn cooperation, tolerance, sharing and resourcefulness."

Play and recreation create the opportunities for the formation of friendships and contributes towards the social, moral and emotional development of the child, shaping culture, and building communities.

Older peers are important role models, as younger students look to them in regards to knowledge, skills, and behaviour. Schools should establish a peer leadership program for recess. Recess Leaders should be well-trained and supervised. Training should include inclusion, empathy, and social and emotional skills.



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In order to support children to engage with their peers outside of the classroom environment, options for play, rest, and socialization should be available regardless of weather conditions. Specifically, per General Comment #17, during recess children must be provided with

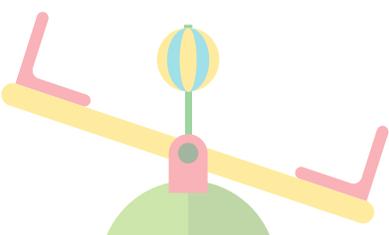
- Opportunities to invest in their own space and time so as to create and transform their world, using their imagination and languages;
- Opportunities to explore and understand the cultural and artistic heritage of their community, participate in, create and shape it;
- Opportunities to participate with other children in games, sports and other recreational activities, supported, where necessary, by trained facilitators.

Key Message #4: *“The Committee emphasizes that States parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that all children have the opportunity to realize their rights under Article 31 without discrimination of any kind...The Committee is particularly concerned about the difficulties faced by particular categories of children in relation to enjoyment and conditions of equality of the rights defined in Article 31, especially girls, poor children, children with disabilities, indigenous children, children belonging to minorities, among others.”*

Students who have positive social experiences are more likely to be supportive of their peers during classwork as well as show more interest in, and commitment to, school. This engagement will influence their overall school success and graduation rates, and ultimately contribute to the individual benefits across the lifespan, as well as population health at large.

Therefore, each school should ensure the availability of spaces and activities that appeal to the diverse needs of children – with special attention to the needs of vulnerable populations. Both social and physical barriers to inclusion must be considered and addressed. Specifically, schools must

- make investments in universal design to enable all children, including children with disabilities, to participate equally;
- provide a recess environment free from stress, social exclusion, prejudice, discrimination, social harm, and violence;
- a timetable in which to implement quality play and leisure experiences.



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Key Message #5: “Children can only realize their rights if the necessary legislative, policy, budgetary, environmental and service frameworks are in place.”

- ❑ Each province/territory, school board, and school should have a policy in place specifically for recess;
- ❑ Each school should have a Recess Committee that includes staff, students, and administrators that develop recess guidelines, plan, purchase, monitor, and review progress of recess space, activities, and materials;
- ❑ Each school should have a designated Recess Coordinator who is allocated appropriate time in their work portfolio to oversee all recess planning and implementation;
- ❑ All school staff should receive systematic and ongoing training on the human rights of children, including the rights embodied in Article 31. Training should include topics such as
 - Conflict resolution or restorative justice practices;
 - Encouraging friendships and positive social relationship building;
 - Impacts of negative social patterns on human connections and healthy play;
 - Fostering a climate of inclusion, care, and empathy;
 - Inclusive spaces, programs and practices;
 - Promoting creativity and imaginative play;
 - Prevention efforts to reduce discipline concerns;
 - Effective Behaviour management;
 - Emergency protocols;
 - Balancing risk;
 - Providing guidance and stimulus without undermining children’s efforts to organize and conduct play activities;
 - Engaging in play with children while minimizing control over the activity;
 - Recruiting, training, and supervising cohorts of students in a Junior Leader program.

