



The Role of Recess in Canadian Elementary Schools: A National Position Paper

July 2020

Introduction

This National Position Paper has been developed through a collaborative partnership between The Recess Project and Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE Canada), with support from The McConnell Foundation.

Recess plays a critical role in shaping positive social relationships, overall health, academic performance and long-term health trajectories for children and youth. It is a time for children to exercise their right to play, be active, and make friends—all fundamentally essential elements for healthy child development. Moreover, recess is one of the few times in the school day when children interact directly with each other on a social level without direct adult management. Importantly, the cumulative effects of recess can positively or, often, negatively influence the way children relate to each other, the type of people they will become, the kinds of social conventions they will foster, and the standards of humanity they will create.

For the healthy development of all children and youth, recess must be thoughtfully designed and well-supported, and provide a variety of options, equipment, activities, and playspaces that are inclusive, prosocial, restful, playful, creative, and protected from the effects of social harm.

Even though quality recess can have significant health and social benefits and is one of the most enjoyable parts of the school day for some children, it has been long neglected.

The Recess Project Background

Born from action research conducted in Canadian Kindergarten to Grade 8 schools on recess experiences and a collaborative design process that includes the perspectives of educators, school system administrators, parents, and children themselves, The Recess Project includes the following two components:

- [The Recess Project Change Manual](#): a blueprint for a new approach to recess; and,
- an advocacy campaign targeted at driving systems-level change and paving the way for quality recess experiences.

In tandem, these components seek to address our research findings that show an alarmingly high incidence of negative experiences and ill-effects during recess. Specifically, current research suggests many playspaces are characterized by barren landscapes, a lack of meaningful engagement among children, minimal support and supervision, high levels of social harm, and a harsh social climate that marginalizes and excludes many children—particularly many of our most vulnerable children—from enjoying this time. Canadian educators and school administrators express feelings of being 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 structure and unstructured learning and social interaction during the school day are being supported. Moreover, the research found that each of the provincial and territorial Education Acts do not adequately address recess.

To support the development of a healthy recess setting in all elementary schools, this Position Paper delineates the important role of recess in schools. Moreover, it gives direction to school system administrators and policy makers to enable change. At the same time, The Recess Project aims, through its Change Manual, to influence everyday practice and provide sustainable tactics that will ensure a supportive setting—one that that invariably influences the well-being, overall health, and school success of Canadian children.

For more information about The Recess Project and to access supporting documents and resources visit [Activate Recess - PHE Canada](#).

Research Team and Authors

Dr. Lauren McNamara: Dr. McNamara holds a PhD in the Psychology of Education from Simon Fraser University and an MA in Learning Sciences from Northwestern University. After years of exploring the role of cognition, learning, motivation, and technology, Dr. McNamara has turned her attention to recess and school engagement. Specifically, as the lead researcher and author, Dr. McNamara has studied the cumulative influence of daily recess on children's prosocial behaviours, developmental health trajectories, and academic success. Through action research and collaborative design, Dr. McNamara has launched the results and worked to leverage them into a campaign to address systemic changes in the way schools approach recess and social relationships among children. As well, the findings have been translated into practical ways to promote and transform the culture of recess into one that is characterized by inclusion, prosocial play, and compassion. Dr. McNamara is an Ashoka Fellow and Founder, Director, and Senior Research Scientist of The Recess Project.

PHE Canada: Physical and Health Education Canada champions healthy, active kids by promoting and advancing quality health and physical education opportunities and healthy learning environments. Supporting community champions with quality programs, professional development services, and community activation initiatives, PHE Canada's vision is a future wherein all children and youth in Canada live healthy, physically active lives. PHE Canada is committed to ensuring that children and youth develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be healthy and active for life, ensuring positive experiences throughout the entire school day—including recess. PHE Canada champions a comprehensive school-health approach which aims to support the following: Teaching and Learning; Policy; Physical and Social Environment; and Community Partnerships and Services collectively.

PHE Canada has brought together key experts from a range of sectors to support the work of Dr. McNamara and provide guidance and input on the project. The Recess Project is supported at PHE Canada by its Director of Programs and Education, Tricia Zakaria.

Partnership

In 2017, with funding from The McConnell Foundation, Dr. Lauren McNamara and PHE Canada formalized a strategic partnership to mobilize systemic changes in the way Canadian elementary schools approach recess. The results of their collective efforts have led to the launch of a national campaign that aims to accelerate top-down changes to education policy and bottom-up grounded program delivery, broaden and expand research and knowledge translation, and develop a deeper awareness and understanding of the importance of play in healthy child development. This Position Paper, therefore, reflects the rationale for change.

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Disclaimer

The content of the Position Paper remains the sole responsibility of Recess Project Canada and PHE Canada. The findings and conclusions reflect the views of the expert advisors and reviewers but any errors or omissions in fact or interpretation remain the sole responsibility of Recess Project Canada and PHE Canada.

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Approach

Purpose

The purpose of this Position Paper is to

- ensure the context of recess is included in the conversations about healthy schools, well-being, and active outdoor play
- delineate the pathways between the social and physical setting of recess and the influence on the overall well-being of Canadian elementary school students;
- underscore the need for urgent changes to policy and practice that support children's well-being during recess; and
- align and empower stakeholders to redesign and support school-based spaces that promote and protect children's need for rest, recreation, and play during the school day.

Format and Limitations

The information in this Position Paper reflects a combination of the following:

- peer-reviewed research on the social landscape of recess in Canada and abroad, including the barriers and challenges faced by students, staff, and administrators;
- a review of provincial and territorial Education Acts and policies;
- an analysis of the recess setting from a variety of perspectives that reflect updated theories of child development, health, well-being, and school health;
- reflections on the widespread cultural assumptions about the role of recess in school, including fears of injury and liability;
- a review of children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Although it reflects a significant compilation of information, this paper is not intended to be a comprehensive representation of all issues, data, and perspectives related to the setting of recess. Rather, it is intended to provide insight, create focus, and mobilize action of this long-neglected and ill-defined space. As such, we consider this to be a dynamic and evolving document that will be continuously updated as we move forward.

Child Rights

First, we would like to call attention to children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, of which Canada is a ratified member. These rights established that play and rest are fundamentally necessary for the physical and mental well-being of children (UNCRC, Article 31). In this context, we emphasize the role of the school system as duty bearers and, through this position paper, aim to build the capacity and ability of members of the school system to meet their obligations.

The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child defines the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of every child, regardless of their race, religion, or abilities. The Convention consists of 54 articles that define children's rights. Under the terms of the Convention, governments are directed to meet children's basic rights and help them reach their full potential. Of the 54 rights, several align with recess. The one that aligns most closely is Article 31:

That every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

That member governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

However, in 2017, the Committee on the Rights of the Child—the international body responsible for monitoring governments’ implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child—released General Comment 17, a document that expresses concern about the lack of recognition and action given by member States as to the value and significance of these rights. Specifically, the Committee indicates the following:

Poor recognition of their significance in the lives of children 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. In general, where investment is made, it is in the provision of structured and organized activities, but equally important is the need to create time and space for children to engage in spontaneous play, recreation and creativity, and to promote societal attitudes that support and encourage such activity...

The General Comment 17 report contains considerable detail to provide direction for representatives of the participating states to respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of article 31. The report includes, in a special section, the obligation of schools. Therefore, this position paper on recess in Canadian elementary schools has been carefully aligned with the guidance of the U. N. Convention on the Rights of the Child General Comment 17, which includes, for example,

- legislation to ensure the rights under article 31 for every child, including a timetable for implementation;
- availability of rest and leisure time, as well as space that is free from adult control and management;
- an environment free from stress, social exclusion, prejudice, discrimination, social harm, and violence;
- investments in universal design consistent with the obligations to promote inclusion and protect children with disabilities from discrimination;
- space to play outdoors in diverse and challenging physical environments, with access to supportive adults, when necessary;
- playgrounds with appropriate boundaries, equipment and spaces designed to enable all children, including children with disabilities, to participate equally;
- play areas which afford opportunities for all forms of play;
- opportunities to experience, interact with, and play in natural environments; and
- systematic and ongoing training on the rights embodied in article 31 for all professionals working with children.

The World Health Organization (WHO) further supports our approach, as they have long encouraged nations to view health as a “state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (1986, 2017). Health, according to the WHO definition, is a product of a dynamic influence between people and their environment and is shaped by the settings of everyday life where people “learn, work, play and love” (World Health Organization, 1986). Nations are encouraged to focus on creating supportive environments and routines that promote and optimize physical, mental, and social well-being. In recent years, it has become clear that political, economic, cultural, environmental, behavioural, social, and biological factors dynamically interacted to shape conditions that promote or undermine health throughout an individual’s lifespan.

In the 2017 Global Index of Child and Youth Well-being and Sustainability, published by the United Nations, Canada ranks in the bottom third (25th out of 41 countries) in the world in child well-being (Unicef Canada, 2017). Canada can do better. The hallmark of a healthy country is the investment in its children. Healthy behaviours take root in childhood and follow children throughout their lives. Healthy children are more likely to be successful in school and in life—which, in turn, gives rise to a healthy society.

In Canada, schools and school systems that combine equity with quality produce higher student outcomes. Ensuring that better practices encompass the entire school day—including recess—further wraps around the student and enhances these outcomes. This paper presents policy recommendations for both school and education systems to help scale those better practices to optimize student outcomes. It highlights policies—both “top-down” system level and “bottom-up” school level—to promote equity and quality. It also provides evidence on how to support disadvantaged students and schools, as improving opportunities for them benefits education systems and societies.

The school system is a cornerstone of child development. Moreover, it reaches 99% of children and occupies the most significant portion of a child’s life. In this way, the education system has a significant influence on our children. School failure by not supporting each child throughout the entire school day can negatively affect the healthy development of a child.

For all these reasons, improving equity in education and reducing school failure should be a high priority in all education policy agendas.

The evidence shows that equity works hand in hand with quality and that reducing school failure strengthens the capacity and social well-being of both individuals and societies. This means that investing in high-quality schooling and equal opportunities for all from the early years to at least the end of upper secondary is the most profitable educational policy.

Healthy School Communities

Most Canadian children spend 6–7 hours a day, 5 days a week, for 10 months of the year in a school environment. This environment plays a significant role in a child’s healthy cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. The Healthy School Community approach is grounded in the understanding that a school environment that works to improve health and well-being is the same school environment that best supports effective teaching and learning. The healthy child learns better just as the educated child has a healthier life.

Healthy School Communities take a whole-child approach to health and wellness by addressing the cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development of each child. They provide a positive setting to learn and establish the values, attitudes, and skills to develop into healthy, confident, independent contributors to Canadian society. Healthy School Communities also promote a culture of wellness among all members: students, staff, administration, parents, and community partners. Together, the school community implements plans to create an environment that supports healthy choices among its members (PHE Canada, 2019).

The core components of a Healthy School Community approach are

- Teaching and Learning
- Physical and Social Environments
- Policy
- Community Partnerships and Services

Recess is an important element of a Healthy School Community approach. A whole-child approach requires examining the whole school day to foster healthy environments outside the classroom walls. The core components listed above should be used to examine recess policies and practices within schools and school boards across the country.

Context and Rationale

In the last 20 years, a considerable amount of scholarly work has linked recess to children's well-being, school engagement, overall health, and academic success. To further this body of knowledge and tailor it to the Canadian context, Dr. McNamara and PHE Canada conducted reviews of scientific research 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.

The following is intended to set the stage for national policies that are supportive of quality recess experiences.

Overview

It is now well established that a range of factors contribute to student success. For example, the research on school climate (Wang & Holcombe, 2010), social and emotional competence (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, & Taylor, 2011; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017), belonging (Osterman, 2000), mental health and well-being (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009), and physically-active play (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010) document the relationships to academic success. Each contributes to children's overall health and well-being, consequently influencing their commitment and engagement to school.

Furthermore, each of these factors is influenced by what happens during recess. For many children, recess is one of the most enjoyable parts of the school day. Recess in elementary and middle schools in Canada is generally understood as a time for children and teachers to break from instruction. It allows for time and space in the school day for children to relax, to connect freely with their peers, develop and play their own games, and choose their own levels of physical activity. Moreover, there is a growing appreciation that recess is a critically important social time for children—a time that reflects their fundamental social and emotional needs (McNamara, Lodewyk, & Franklin, 2018; McNamara et al., 2014).

Yet, the pressures of instructional demands and accountability put this important part of the child's day at risk (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2004). Canadian educators and school administrators are challenged by demands to achieve curriculum outcomes in the face of finite and sometimes diminishing resources. As daily 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. As a result, recess is often compromised and the potential social, physical, mental, and academic benefits are left unrealized and even undermined.

Indeed, a growing body of scholarly research on recess in Canada is confirming our suspicions: research consistently highlights recess settings that are characterized by minimal supervision, limited equipment, barren spaces, strict rules, safety concerns, social conflict, and descriptions of a culture where social exclusion and victimization are normal and routine behaviours (Craig & Peplar, 1997; Lodewyk, McNamara, & Sullivan, 2019; Lodewyk, McNamara, & Walker, 2019; McNamara et al., 2015; McNamara, Lodewyk, & Franklin, 2018; McNamara, Lodewyk, and Walker, 2018; McNamara, Vantaaja, Dunseith, & Franklin, 2014; Vaillancourt et al., 2010).

Moreover, recent research supports what many teachers and parents have long expressed concern that children with disabilities are more vulnerable to the negative effects of this setting than their peers without disabilities (Lodewyk, McNamara, Walker, 2019; McNamara, Lakman, Spadafora, Lodewyk, & Walker, 2018). Furthermore, many children note that recess can be one of the most lonely and feared times of the school day (Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 2001; McNamara et al., 2015; Vaillancourt et al., 2010).

Because recess typically occurs multiple times per day across elementary and middle school—from Kindergarten to Grade 8—the cumulative effects have the potential to be substantial. Routine interaction patterns can influence the ways that children relate to each other, the adults they become, and the culture they influence. Unhealthy and maladaptive behaviours can carry through into adulthood, not only compromising overall health and well-being of individuals but also compounding the social costs for the next generation.

Position Statement

Recess Project Canada, PHE Canada, and supporters have developed a [National Position Statement on Recess](#) informed by the evidence and information provided in this paper. The position statement identifies that recess plays an important role in the healthy development of children and summarizes the evidence and calls to action outlined in this paper.

Recess plays a critical role in school 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.

“For many children, particularly those in urban areas, school-based playtime may be the only chance in their day to have access to a recreational setting that allows them free time to play.”

Barros et al., 2009

Summary of Key Evidence from National Position Statement on Recess

Benefits of Recess

- Non-curricular aspects of school unequivocally shape academic success—socially adjusted and healthy children are better learners. (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, 2011; Osterman, 2000; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017; Wang and Holcombe, 2010).
- During recess children have opportunities to interact through play and social engagement. Thus, they learn important social skills such as cooperation, sharing, negotiating, patience, communication, problem-solving, and conflict resolution (Durlak et al., 2011).
- Relationships are a key component of all major theories of children’s development (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011).
- 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 (Ibid. 2011).
- 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 (Gray, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978).
- Physical activity and active play have short- and long-term benefits by increasing energy, promoting feelings of well-being, fostering bone and muscle development, lowering the risk of obesity, strengthening immunity, and preventing disease (ParticipACTION, 2018; Warburton et al., 2010).
- Healthy children are more likely to engage in school and have more successful life trajectories (Blum, 2005; Durlak et al., 2011; Hertzman & Power, 2005). In turn, healthy adults contribute to a healthy society, boosting individual and social economic outcomes (Belli, Bustreo, & Preker, 2005).

Challenges of Recess

- Research on recess in Canada characterizes recess as having minimal supervision, which in turn has cascading affects that affect equipment availability, safety concerns, space design, and social patterns (Craig & Peplar, 1997; McNamara et al., 2015; McNamara, Lodewyk, and Franklin, 2018; McNamara, Lodewyk, and Walker, 2018 Vaillancourt et al., 2010).
- Social exclusion and rejection are normal and routine behaviours during recess (Craig & Peplar, 1997; McNamara et al., 2015; McNamara, Lodewyk, and Franklin, 2018; McNamara, Lodewyk, and Walker, 2018 Vaillancourt et al., 2010).
- Social exclusion and rejection compromise meaningful play and invite social conflict, safety concerns, liability fears, theft, and discipline issues (McNamara et al., 2015).
- 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 (UNESCO, 2017).
- Social exclusion and rejection are directly linked to social and emotional well-being, school engagement, and academic success (McNamara et al., 2015).
- Minimal supervision and resources are systemic issues that must be addressed if changes are to be sustainable (McNamara et al., 2015).

Investing in and ensuring quality recess experiences is critical. Yet, while research has shown that recess plays a critical role in the long-term health and well-being trajectories for children and youth, it remains a low priority within our education system. Indeed, while most education policies highlight well-being as a priority, school systems show little consistency in their policies and practices to support recess as a primary place for promoting and optimizing student outcomes.

Our position is that urgent investment and enabling policies are needed to promote quality recess. To this end, we recommend that recess be prioritized in policy and provincial and territorial legislation that

- acknowledges and protects 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.

We align our position with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and recommend a supportive, enriched, and fully accessible social and physical space for all children to realize the physical, emotional, and social benefits of recess.

The following sections of the paper provide evidence and information on the benefits, challenges, and resulting calls to action to support quality, inclusive recess experiences for all children.

The Benefits of Recess

We offer an empirical basis upon which we can better work to support recess that is characterized by respect for children, inclusion, prosocial play, and compassion. The following findings bring to life what quality recess looks like in support of every child's full and healthy development.

“Attitudes, beliefs and behaviours start in childhood and cascade, cumulatively, throughout the lifespan. The well-being of a population starts with the well-being of children.”

Umberson & Karaz-Montez, 2010

Generally, recess in Canadian schools is an unstructured setting for rest, leisure, and play that should allow all students to freely engage with their peers, develop and play their own games and choose their own activity. According to contemporary research, the health benefits of daily active, healthy play (including risky outdoor play) are substantial (Barros et al., 2009; Brown, 2009; Brussoni et al., 2015; Ginsburg, 2007; ParticipACTION, 2018, Pellegrini, 2009; Ramstetter et al., 2010; Trembay et al., 2015).

Physical and Physiological Development

Although not all children will engage in vigorous play during recess, it does provide a necessary outlet for movement and physical activity. Moving, walking, running, climbing, jumping, and other forms of active play are fundamentally essential for children's physical development. It is well-established that physical activity has both immediate, short- and long-term benefits in that it improves circulation, reduces stress, increases energy, fosters bone and muscle development, helps lower the risk of obesity, strengthens immunity, prevents disease, improves thinking and learning, and promotes feelings of well-being (ParticipACTION, 2018; Warburton et al., 2010).

Cognitive/Academic Influences

Children of all ages need regular breaks from class instruction to be more focused throughout the school day. Whether inside or outside, recess provides an opportunity for children to engage in a range of different types of play—particularly interactive and exploratory play—that foster problem solving, self-regulation, initiative, intrinsic motivation, and strategic thinking. These attributes contribute to improvements in classroom behaviour and academic performance (Dills et al., 2011; Ginsburg, 2007; Holmes & Pellegrini, 2006; Pellegrini, 2005; Ramstetter et al., 2010;).

Social Skills Development

During recess, children have opportunities to interact through play and social engagement. Thus, they learn and refine important interpersonal competencies such as relationship skills (communicating, listening, negotiating), responsible decision making (making constructive choices based on social norms, safety, and ethical standards), social awareness (appreciating diverse perspectives), self-management (regulate emotions and manage impulses), and self-awareness (knowing personal strengths and limitations (CASEL, 2013). These practiced, refined social skills can then be transferred to other social and academic situations, dynamically influencing children's overall well-being and development (Durlak et al., 2011; CASEL, 2013; Frey, Herschstein, & Guzzo, 2000).

Psycho-Social Growth

Scholarly literature indicates evidence that social relationships are intertwined with well-being and mental health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leiberman, 2013). Relationships are a key component of all major theories of children's development (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). Meaningful interactions and supportive friendships promote feelings of enjoyment, acceptance, and social connection that are essential for healthy development. Children's social competence develop through their interactions with peers, and recess can provide a social context for play, belonging, and support. Healthy social interactions influence language development, self-concept, and psychosocial adjustment as well as facilitate the development of social and emotional competencies such as empathy, problem-solving, emotional regulation, perseverance, and coping strategies. These competencies equip children with a fundamental social-emotional toolkit from which to build healthy relationships across their lifespan (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Barros et al., 2009; CASEL, 2013; Pellegrini & Bohn, 2004; Ramstetter et al., 2010). Additionally, the same competencies support academic success and competence (Zins et al., 2007).

Socio-Cultural Patterns

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 social conventions of society (Gray, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978).

Economic Outcomes

Recess can provide opportunities for meaningful play that allow for the positive development of social and emotional competence as well as increased energy, attention, and cooperation—all factors that influence children's physical and psychological health, which, in turn, support a positive developmental path. Healthy children are more likely to engage in school and have more successful life trajectories (Blum, 2005; Durlak et al., 2011; Hertzman & Power, 2005). Healthy adults contribute to a healthy society, boosting individual and social economic outcomes (Belli, Bustreo, & Preker, 2005).

Taken together, the benefits of recess outlined above can be aligned with the challenges detailed on the following pages. The combined benefits and challenges of recess support the recommended calls to support quality, inclusive recess experiences.

The Challenges of Recess

Based on scientific research and anecdotal information, the challenges of recess are evident. Indeed, the current recess setting in most schools appears to undermine children's ability to acquire the potential benefits. In the subsequent sections, we discuss the challenges of recess and how they impede the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of children. By presenting the deficits of recess, we provide evidence to support better investment in quality recess policies and practices. Each challenge outlined below is aligned with the associated call to action.

Lack of Policy and Legislation

Education Acts are critical for providing direction to Canada's educational system. Policies stem from Education Acts and practice generally follows policy. Moreover, collective agreements are designed around the Education Acts and provincial/territorial policies. Although many Education Acts address the health and well-being of all students, at this writing, only two Education Acts mention recess, and only very briefly: Ontario and Quebec. There is no mention or recommendations with respect to the setting. Similarly, we were unable to find any publicly available provincial/territorial policy specifically related to the setting of recess.

For recommendations, refer to Call to Action 1.

Time

We know that non-instructional times—such as recess—are typically given low priority, minimal attention, and few resources in Canada. Consequently, this approach has compromised the potential of recess. Social conflict, exclusion, victimization, fighting, boredom, crowding, and discipline issues are common concerns for both students and school staff (Craig & Pepler, 1998; Lodewyk, McNamara, & Sullivan, 2019; McNamara, Colley, and Franklin, 2015; McNamara, Lodewyk, & Walker, 2018; Vallaincourt et al, 2010). This compromised social environment is difficult for many children to navigate as it undermines their ability to play and interact in ways that allow them to connect positively with one another. When social and emotional needs go unmet, the result is compromised mental and physical health that can influence their overall well-being and school engagement (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Eisenberger & Cole, 2012; Osterman, 2000; Umberson & Karas-Montez, 2010).

For recommendations, refer to Call to Action 7.

“In many parts of the world, play is perceived as “deficit” time spent in frivolous or unproductive activity of no intrinsic worth. Parents, caregivers and public administrators commonly place a higher priority on studying or economic work than on play, which is often considered noisy, dirty, disruptive and intrusive. Moreover, adults often lack the confidence, skill or understanding to support children’s play and to interact with them in a playful way. Both the right of children to engage in play and recreation and the fundamental importance of those activities for children’s well-being, health and development are poorly understood and undervalued.”

UNCRC, General Comment 17

“All professionals working with or for children, or whose work impacts on children (Government officials, educators, health professionals, social workers, early years and care workers, planners and architects, etc.), should receive systematic and ongoing training on the human rights embodied in article 31. Such training should include guidance on how to create and sustain environments in which the rights under article 31 can be most effectively realized by all children.”

UNCRC, General Comment 17

Minimal Supervision and Support

Minimal supervision has been consistently documented as a key challenge during recess (Dubroc, 2007; Jarrett & Waite-Stupiansky, 2009; McNamara, 2013; McNamara et al., 2014; Pytel, 2009; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010; Stanley, Boshoff & Dollman, 2012). Additionally, there is often a lack of clarity about who is responsible and who makes decisions about recess. In Canada, school playgrounds are commonly staffed by a rotation of teachers. Collective agreements ensure that teachers have time allocated for their own breaks, and as a result their supervision hours are limited. This also means that the student-to-adult ratio is quite high on most school playgrounds. In some cases, schools hire part-time yard duty supervisors to fill this gap and supervise the playground during recess. The conventional role of a playground

supervisor is to monitor children’s activities, intervening only when a child is injured, in danger, or has broken a rule. Yet research shows that well-trained, engaging, approachable, and supportive supervisors are linked to pro-social peer relationships, inclusive behaviours, engaging play, and a healthy school climate (Leff, 2003; London et al., 2015; McNamara, Vaantaja, Dunseith, & Franklin, 2014).

For recommendations, refer to Calls to Action 1, 3, 4, and 8.

Minimal Equipment and Space

The scholarly literature indicates that equipment availability during recess influences children’s engagement and activity levels (Krahnstoever Davison & Lawson, 2006). However, school administrators have reported that without proper instruction and monitoring, the students use equipment in ways other than intended, intensifying the risk of injury. Consequently, administrators indicate that they restrict equipment due to concerns of safety and issues of liability (Knowles & Gardner, 2008; McNamara et al., 2014; Stanley et al., 2012).

Additionally, many school playgrounds do not provide quality space for children to engage in active play (D’Haese, Van Dyck, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Cardon, 2013; Huberty, Dinkel, Coleman, Beighle, & Apenteng, 2012; Knowles et al., 2013; Stanley et al., 2012). Such a setting often is a catalyst for sedentary behaviour and social conflict.

For recommendations, refer to Calls to Action 9 and 11.

“Lack of access to facilities, inability to afford the costs of participation, dangerous and neglected neighbourhoods, the necessity to work and a sense of powerlessness and marginalization all serve to exclude the poorest children from realizing the rights provided for in article 31. For many, the risks to their health and safety outside the home are compounded by home environments which provide no or little space or scope for play or recreation.”

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Few Activities

An unstructured environment can be challenging for some children to navigate, particularly when there are few activities, materials, or areas to be alone or with others. As well, many children may not be interested in competitive games and consequently may be marginalized. With few alternatives, they may become sedentary, bored, or isolated (Doll, Murphy, & Song, 2003; Knowles, Parnell, Stratton, & Ridgers, 2013; McNamara, 2013; Stanley et al., 2012).

For recommendations, refer to Call to Action 12.

Limited Outdoor Play

Being outside results in children moving more, sitting less, and playing longer (Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play, 2015). Exposure to sunlight, natural elements, and open air contributes to a range of health benefits, including stronger immune systems, increased physical activity levels, healthy bone development, and well-being (Bento & Gias, 2017). Yet, a substantial shift in societal routines has led to children spending increasingly more time indoors in sedentary activity: the lure of electronics and social media, caregiver concerns of injury and child abduction, reliance on structured activities and prefabricated play structures, and a competitive focus on academics and enrichment activities all play a role in contributing to less time spent playing outdoors in nature than previous generations (Tremblay et al., 2015). As well, this decline in outdoor play is linked to a rise in psychopathology, particularly depression and anxiety, compared to children of previous generations (Gray, 2013).

For recommendations, refer to Call to Action 10.

Sedentary Behaviour

Withholding recess due to behaviour, space, or other conditions is a common practice and leads to increased sedentary behaviour and little physical activity within the school day. In fact, *A Common Vision for Increasing Physical Activity and Reducing Sedentary Living in Canada* report indicates that children are spending approximately 8.4 hours of the waking day sedentary, the majority of which is at school, during the weekday (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018). The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology guidelines for physical activity and sedentary behaviour recommend that children aged 5–17 participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily and spend less than 2 hours per day being sedentary (Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology, 2015). A recent study indicates that only half of Canadian children aged 5–17 are meeting the sedentary behaviour recommendation and only about a third are meeting the physical activity recommendation (Statistics Canada, 2017). In fact, one Canadian study indicates that significant sedentary behaviour in children and youth is linked to a variety of health problems over time. Regular physical activity enhances immune function and reduces the likelihood of such chronic diseases as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity (Janssen & LeBlanc, 2010). Additionally, physical activity supports academic performance and improves cognitive functioning, including attention, memory, reasoning, and problem solving (Mavilidi et al., 2018). Moreover, recent research on the setting of recess indicates that girls tend to be less physically active than boys (Lodewyk, McNamara, & Sullivan, 2019; Mavilidi et al., 2018).

For recommendations, refer to Calls to Action 1, 7, 9, 10, 11, and 12.

Vulnerable Populations

Children from minority populations may experience both social and physical barriers during social interaction and play, which can result in isolation or marginalization during recess. It is well understood that biases, barriers, and power dynamics—whether overt or subtle, conscious or unconscious—can compromise children’s ability to engage with others, learn, develop, and fully contribute to society (UNESCO, 2017). 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, several factors often intersect to create compounding challenges for some children (UNESCO, 2017). As a result, some children may have limited social connections, engage in fewer activities, and have limited close relationships compared to their peers. Indeed, two Canadian studies of recess (Lodewyk, et al., 2019; McNamara et al., 2018) found that children with physical disabilities had significantly higher rates of victimization and negative feelings toward recess than their able-bodied peers. A compromised social environment limits opportunity for physical activity during recess.

“Consideration should be given to the cost of measures required to ensure access for the most marginalized children, including the obligation to provide reasonable accommodation to ensure equality of access for children with disabilities.”

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For recommendations, refer to Call to Action 6.

Social Conflict

Research indicates aggressive behaviours, bullying, and social exclusion as challenging aspects of recess (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Nay, 2003; Doll et al., 2003; McNamara, 2013; McNamara et al., 2014; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). Minimal supervision and lack of organization have been associated with these negative behaviours (McNamara, 2013; McNamara et al., 2014; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). As a consequence, recess can be one of the most lonely and feared times of the school day (Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 2001; McNamara et al., 2014; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). School-based violence is a serious public health concern, and UNESCO (2019) indicates that 1 in 3 students are affected. Research in Canadian schools indicates similar prevalence rates of victimization specifically during recess (Lodewyk, McNamara, & Sullivan, 2019; McNamara, Lodewyk, & Franklin, 2018; McNamara, Lodewyk, & Walker, 2018; McNamara, Lodewyk, & Walker, 2019). These rates are particularly concerning because of the potential cumulative impact on long-term health and well-being (Bukowski, Laursen, & Hoza, 2010; Hoza, Molina, Bukowski, & Sippola, 1995; Umberson & Karaz-Montez, 2010).

“School-related violence in all its forms is an infringement of children’s and adolescents’ rights to education and to health and well-being. No country can achieve inclusive and equitable quality education for all if learners experience violence and bullying in school.”

UNESCO, 2019. Behind the Numbers: Ending School Violence and Bullying.

For recommendations, refer to Calls to Action 2, 3, 5, and 6.

Social Skills

Without appropriate social-emotional learning opportunities, social interactions can be difficult for children to navigate. Social-emotional learning supports children in building strategies for self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal relations, and decision-making (CASEL, 2013). When social interactions are consistently difficult, it can be more challenging for children to engage in respectful, collaborative, and inclusive active play that supports a positive developmental trajectory. Difficult interactions can lead to patterns of ineffective social skills and maladaptive coping strategies. These patterns can result in isolation, exclusion, victimization, and loneliness that can cause children to fall behind in their development of positive relationships and personal coping skills (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003; Doll et al., 2003; Durlak et al 2011).

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (2012) found that nearly 70% of adult mental health disorders are a direct result of early onset mental health problems during childhood. Furthermore, the Canadian Mental Health Association (2013) found that mental disorders in children are one of the leading hospital care expenditures, second only to injuries.

For recommendations, refer to Calls to Action 2, 3, 5, and 6.

Social Connections

It is now well understood that feelings of acceptance and belonging are fundamental to well-being and healthy development (Baumeister, 2005). The ability to connect positively—to develop and maintain relationships—is predictive of children’s mental health as well as outcomes across the lifespan (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998; Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1993; Bukowski, et al., 2010; Doll et al., 2003; Hartup, 1996; Hoza, et al, 1995; Umberson & Karas-Montez, 2010). Conversely, negative social experiences such as marginalization, exclusion, and victimization are associated with self-doubt, poor self-regulation, and feelings of loneliness, sadness, and anger. These negative feelings put children at risk for maladaptive coping strategies that make it more difficult to connect positively with others—resulting in a chronic feedback loop of heightened stress and social disconnection (Baumeister, 2005; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DeWall, Deckman, Pond, Bonser, 2011; McEwen, 2008; Steger & Kashdan, 2009; Umberson & Karaz-Montez, 2010).

“Recognition must also be given to the need to protect children from potential harm that may be imposed by other children in the exercise of their rights under article 31.”

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For recommendations, refer to Calls to Action 2, 3, 5, and 6.

Social Stress

Chronic social stress can trigger a series of physiological responses that alter the activity of healthy neural, endocrine, metabolic, and lymphatic systems by releasing stress hormones (such as cortisol). Prolonged release of stress hormones, in turn, has further mediating influences on other physiological mechanisms in the body—disrupting the proper functioning of cells, not only compromising the immune system, but consequently stimulating the progression of a range of mental illnesses such as anxiety disorders and depression (Eisenberger & Cole, 2012).

For recommendations, refer to Calls to Action 2, 3, 5, and 6.

The following pages describe the calls to action in detail under three main categories: policy and legislation, supportive environments for educators and children, and practice.

Calls to Action: Creating a culture of meaningful play and social connection

When approached proactively, recess can be designed to promote the health and well-being of students and emphasizes the investment in young people’s assets and protective factors rather than focusing solely on specific problems. Current research (London et al., 2015; McNamara, 2013; McNamara, Gibson, Lodewyk, Spadafora, & Lakman, 2018; McNamara, Vantaaja, Dunseith, and Franklin, 2014;) indicates that a well-designed recess provides a variety of opportunities for children to be active, engaged, and free from bullying and exclusion. Children need encouragement and support in initiating inclusive games and participating in playful activities. Therefore, school personnel and volunteers need to have appropriate training to ensure they have the knowledge to effectively balance supporting students and letting them play independently.

“...children reproduce, transform, create and transmit culture through their own imaginative play, songs, dance, animation, stories, painting, games, street theatre, puppetry, festivals, and so on. As they gain understanding of the cultural and artistic life around them from adult and peer relationships, they translate and adapt its meaning through their own generational experience. Through engagement with their peers, children create and transmit their own language, games, secret worlds, fantasies and other cultural knowledge.”

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A prevention model is recommended to encourage meaningful, positive, physically active play. Schools should include recess in their wider school improvement efforts. The overarching goal should be to change the playground culture to one that fosters friendships and positive interaction patterns. To change negative patterns of interactions in a setting, it is important to change the overall setting. We believe the key to the success of improving recess is in the planning and forethought for the entire school year.

The importance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the children’s right to play have been detailed throughout this paper. The Calls to Action below are aligned with this United Nations Convention and use the evidence from the benefits and challenges of recess to present three main categories of recommendations: policy and legislation, supportive environments for educators and children, and practice.

Policy and Legislation

1. Education Acts and Provincial/Territorial Policies

Research indicates that stronger links between each layer of the education system result in children having healthier connections through positive relationships with their human and natural environment, which in turn leads to greater resilience and healthier individual and development outcomes. Conversely, in situations of social and political breakdown in which these supportive and protective mechanisms are eroded or damaged, children’s developmental outcomes will be negatively impacted (International Institute for Child Rights and Development, 2018).

We recommend amendments to the Education Acts in Ontario and Quebec by adding a child-rights, strength-based, and culturally grounded developmental lens that recognizes the physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual and social needs. Secondly, we recommend the addition of recess in the other provinces and territories where recess is not mentioned within the Education Acts.

Our specific recommendation is to align the Education Actions, in as much detail possible, to the U. N. Convention on the Rights of the Child General Comment 17 (2013). The General Comment 17 report contains considerable detail to provide direction for those responsible parties to respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of article 31. They include, in a special section, the obligation of schools. Therefore, we suggest Education Acts and provincial/territorial policies adopt their specific recommendations:

- legislation to ensure the rights under article 31 for every child, including a timetable for implementation;
- availability of rest and play time, as well as space that is free from adult control and management;
- an environment free from stress, social exclusion, prejudice, discrimination, social harm, and violence;
- investments in universal design consistent with the obligations to promote inclusion and protect children with disabilities from discrimination;
- space to play outdoors in diverse and challenging physical environments, with access to supportive adults, when necessary;
- playgrounds with appropriate boundaries, equipment and spaces designed to enable all children, including children with disabilities, to participate equally;
- play areas which afford opportunities for all forms of play;
- opportunities to experience, interact with, and play in natural environments; and
- systematic and ongoing training on the rights embodied in article 31 for all professionals working with children.

2. Youth Engagement Strategies

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child enables children to participate in decisions that affect their lives, and to have their views duly considered, according to their age, maturity, and evolving capacity. Youth engagement recognizes young people's right to participate in decisions that impact them and acknowledges the great skills and strengths they bring to the table. It injects young people as valued stakeholders in creating effective and inclusive policies, programs, and environments (Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health, 2018).

We recommend establishing policies that commit to engaging children and youth directly in planning and decision-making, including for youth, by youth approaches. An example is leveraging leadership opportunities for children in Grades 5–8 through the creation of a Junior Recess Leader program. These students play an important role in reshaping the social landscape. Younger children look to their older peers to adopt appropriate social conventions and routines. Therefore, the Junior Recess Leaders are critical levers for change—when well trained and supervised. They can be taught to oversee play zones, manage equipment, encourage inclusive play, and model effective conflict resolution (Bandura, 1988; London et al., 2015; McNamara, Vantaaja, Dunseith, and Franklin, 2015; Wenger, 1988).

Supportive Environments for Educators and Children

3. Staff Training

Many staff, teachers, and administrators are unaware of the developmental impact that an effective recess environment can have on children. Moreover, many staff, teachers, and administrators are unaware of article 31, and particularly U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child General Comment 17. This lack of understanding and awareness can cascade into actions that undermine children's enjoyment of their article 31 rights. Training of article 31 and specific training in best practices for recess should be a required and accountable part of staff training, formal teacher education programs, and as ongoing professional development requirements. We recommend a consideration of the following topics:

- conflict resolution and restorative justice practices
- social and emotional skills
- how to foster a climate of inclusion, care, and empathy
- universal design
- promoting creative and imaginative play
- risk taking and development
- allowing and supporting children to organize and conduct their own play
- engaging in play while minimizing control over the activity
- emergency protocols
- impact of negative social patterns on development

4. Recess Coordinator and Committee

We recommend designating a staff member as a school Recess Coordinator to act as a “master planner” for recess, to establish and oversee a Recess Committee, and to ensure that recess is part of the overall school-wide improvement efforts (McNamara, 2013; McNamara, Vantaaja, Dunseith, & Franklin, 2015). We also recommend that a school Recess Committee be established to help plan and organize recess. We suggest mapping out the current needs and challenges, then involving members in a conversation about rules, routines, safety, equipment, staff scheduling, activity options, organization, indoor recess, and space availability.

5. Social-Emotional Skills Training

Building from youth engagement strategies, training the entire study body is an essential component of developing appropriate social-emotional skills within a school community. Training further supports a prevention approach and provides children with a set of social tools to help them navigate, more effectively, any social setting (CASEL, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011). We recommend that schools provide culturally appropriate and age-appropriate training to students with a focus on the following topics:

- appreciation and understanding of diverse cultures and vulnerable populations
- cooperation and sharing
- negotiating
- fair play
- self-regulation
- problem solving
- acceptance and belonging

6. Inclusion and Equity

Recess is often overlooked as an important social space. Social connections are an important mediator of overall health, well-being, and school engagement (Osterman, 2000; Umberson & Karas-Montez, 2010). Barriers to healthy play and social inclusion include cultural assumptions, negative stereotypes, social rejection, and physical inaccessibility (UNCRC, 2013). In particular, children from minority and indigenous communities, girls, and children with social or cognitive impairments, health problems, or mobility limitations are notably susceptible to exclusion and victimization in informal social spaces of play and recreation (Lodewyk, McNamara, and Walker, 2019; McNamara, Lodewyk, and Walker, 2018; UNCRC, 2013). Care should be taken to ensure equal opportunities for play and safe and accessible playspaces for all children—protected from the effects of social harm.

7. Time

We recommend a minimum of four blocks of outdoor recess 15 minutes each for children in Kindergarten–Grade 2; and two blocks of 20 minutes of outdoor recess for children in Grades 3–8. This should not include the time it takes for the students to line up or put on their winter clothing (Barros, Silver, & Stein, 2009; Bjorklund, 2004; Bjorklund & Green, 1992; Bjorklund & Harnishfeger, 1990; Council on School Health, 2013; Fagerstrom & Mahoney, 2006; Harnishfeger & Pope, 1996; Lorschach & Reimer, 1997; Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1997; Pellegrini et al., 1995; Piaget, 1983).

8. Ratio

Little research exists as to the ideal supervisor-to-student ratio. We recommend at least one adult supervisor to 12 students in Kindergarten–Grade 2 and one adult supervisor to 30 students in Grades 3–8. We also recommend considering a staggered recess in the case of small playgrounds or a large student body. As part of a leadership or service opportunity, older students can be trained to support recess—though not as a replacement to adult supervisors.

Practice

9. Play Spaces

We recommend that investments be made in universal design principles that consider the diverse needs, abilities, and preferences of children. See, for example, [Rick Hansen: A Guide to Creating Accessible Play Spaces](#). We recommend designating play spaces (or zones) for a wide variety of activities that provide opportunities for children to participate in a range of options that include free play, active play, and quiet enjoyment. For example, play areas on the tarmac might include skipping, dance, chalking, quiet crafts, loose-parts play, and wall-ball. Designated areas on the grass might include running games, free play, loose parts, and soccer. Remember, however, that some traditional games, such as soccer and baseball, may not be the most effective use of space during recess and lunch. They often require most of the field space for only a very small percentage of students. Student leaders can volunteer for shifts to look after the equipment in these spaces. Thoughtfully plan for indoor activities during inclement weather days when children do not have the option to be outside.

10. Outdoor Play

We recommend recess be held outdoors whenever possible, as access to nature and the outdoors is essential for healthy development (Tremblay, Gray, Babcock et al., 2013). Improvements in the natural landscape can be made by adding elements such as logs, sand, trees, hills, moguls, and water—as engagement with nature provides children with opportunities to engage in a range of self-directed play opportunities that promote creativity, problem solving, collaboration, and risk-taking. Consider also building a clothing “library” of rain jackets, boots, and other outdoor wear for students who do not have appropriate outdoor clothing.

11. Equipment

Providing a variety of equipment—and a system to manage it—can boost activity levels, enjoyment, and engagement (McNamara & Walker, 2018; McNamara, Gibson, Lodewyk, Spadafora, & Lakman, 2018). Equipment availability can make a difference in activity levels, relieve boredom, and reduce social conflict. In addition to traditional playground equipment (structures, swings, etc.), we also recommend providing “loose parts” equipment. These are random materials such as crates, cardboard boxes, tires, vacuum hoses, poster tubes, pots & pans, utensils, milk jugs, rocks, tarps, and so on. We also encourage the availability of natural materials to students during recess. We recommend flowers, water, rocks, leaves, sticks, and thoughtful landscaping (Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, & St. Leger, 2006). The idea is to give children a variety of materials that do not have any predefined expectation so as to encourage experimenting, creativity, imagination, and problem solving (see Gibson et al., 2017, for a review).

12. Continuum of Options and Activities

We recommend involving students in discussions about the kinds of spaces that are important to them. The key message here is that children have a choice. We recommend providing 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 (Lodewyk, McNamara, & Sullivan, 2019; McNamara, Colley, & Franklin, 2015; McNamara & Walker, 2018).

“... the age of the child must be taken into account in determining the amount of time afforded; the nature of spaces and environments available; forms of stimulation and diversity; the degree of necessary adult oversight and engagement to ensure safety and security. As children grow older, their needs and wants evolve from settings that afford play opportunities to places offering opportunities to socialize, be with peers or be alone. They will also explore progressively more opportunities involving risk-taking and challenge.”

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