



Effect of Having Outside Playtime Before Lunch

A recent survey of some Minnesota schools reveals no clear consensus.



A survey of more than 25 schools in Minnesota in September 2012 revealed that six have lunch before playtime, six have lunch after playtime and 13 have lunch both before and after.

Research findings on recess before lunch programs

A research study called the School Health Policies and Programs Study documented that less than five percent of elementary schools scheduled recess before lunch prior to 2001. However, recent research shows the number of schools implementing recess before lunch is rapidly growing.

Schools that schedule recess before lunch report that students eat more fruits and vegetables, drink more milk and waste less food. Further, it is suggested that they are better behaved on the playground, in the lunchroom, and in the classroom.

(See Journal of Child Nutrition and Management. Some schools also note a decrease in visits to the school nurse and more instruction time as benefits of the schedule switch. See link below)

Possible benefits of recess before lunch

- Improved cafeteria behavior.
- Students returning to classroom calmer and ready to learn.
- Drink more milk.
- Students throw away less food.
- Students eat more.
- Fewer discipline problems.
- Fewer visits to the school nurse
- Eliminates rush to get outside to play

Proponents argue that eating first and then exercising can result in numerous nurse visits for headaches and stomachaches. Students excited about the opportunity to play outside rush through or entirely skip their lunch, leaving them hungry later in the day and creating more cafeteria waste.

What are some drawbacks?

Changing the recess and lunch schedule, however, raises some practical concerns. For example, critics question when, in the rush from playground to cafeteria, can students wash their hands, as well as what to do with coats, gloves, and boots after playing. Delaying lunch also puts additional strain on students from low-income families who often do not eat breakfast. Schools address these problems in various ways. Some schools allow students more time to return coats to their lockers with less clothing ending up in the lost and found, and hand sanitizers can help with the hand-washing problem, although many adopters of recess before lunch recommend building in hand-washing time before students enter the cafeteria. (NEA, Recess Before Lunch)

Some schools already have recess before lunch. Many observe that kids aren't rushing through lunch to get to recess and actually have built up hunger so they are more likely to sit down and eat more. One study found that overall food waste decreased from 40.1% to 27.2% when recess was scheduled before lunch. (Star Tribune 04-2011)

Resources

Play, Then Eat: Shift May Bring Gains at School
(New York Times)

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/26/health/26well.html?_r=0

NEA, Recess Before Lunch

<http://www.nea.org/home/43158.htm>

Peaceful Playground - Recess Before Lunch

<http://www.peacefulplaygrounds.com/recess-before-lunch.htm>

“Recess Placement Prior to Lunch in Elementary Schools: What Are the Barriers?”
(Journal of Child Nutrition and Management)

<http://docs.schoolnutrition.org/newsroom/jcnm/06fall/rainville/index.asp>

See WRAP Information Library - video

“Recess Before Lunch Guide”