

Action For Healthy Kids Indiana State Team  
**Position Paper**  
September 2003

**The Action For Healthy Kids Indiana State Team takes the position that Hoosier elementary school children should have daily recess that provides periods of active, free play appropriate to their age. This recreation time should occur in bouts of 10-15 minutes, should not replace physical education, should not be used as punishment or reward, and should be supervised to ensure safety. A partnership among teachers, parents/guardians, principals, school board members, healthcare professionals, and community leaders is needed to ensure successful implementation.**

*Recess and Related Terms Defined*

**Accumulated Physical Activity:** The total number of minutes of physical activity done during the waking hours.<sup>1</sup>

**Age or Developmentally Appropriate Physical Activity:** Activity of a frequency, intensity, duration and type that leads to optimal child growth and development and contributes to the development of future physically active lifestyles.<sup>1</sup>

**Bout:** A period of time of several minutes or more, set aside specifically for physical activity. A 15 minute bout could include bursts of activity alternated with rest periods.<sup>1</sup>

**Intermittent Physical Activity:** Relatively shorts bursts of movement (several seconds or minutes) interspersed with rest periods. Both moderate and vigorous intermittent physical activity is considered to be age and developmentally appropriate for preadolescent children.<sup>1</sup>

**Motor Skills:** Movement abilities that improve with practice (learning) and relate to one's ability to perform specific sports and other motor tasks such as walking, running, striking, and throwing.<sup>1</sup>

**Physical Activity:** Bodily movement that is produced by the contraction of skeletal muscle and that substantially increases energy expenditure. Physical activity is a broad term that includes exercise, sport, dance, as well as other movement forms.<sup>1</sup>

**Recess:** A break during the day set aside to allow children the time for active, free play. Typically recess occurs outdoors and in a designated play area. During inclement weather, schools may have recess periods in a game room, gymnasium, or inside the classroom.<sup>2</sup>

*The Rationale for Promoting Recess*

“An alarming trend toward the elimination of recess during the school day is affecting many school districts throughout the United States. This policy is being implemented with the advent of increased school accountability and student testing procedures, and the

belief that time could be better spent on academics. This disturbing phenomenon has no serious research to back it up, and is actually counterproductive to increasing the academic achievements of students.”<sup>2</sup>

“The International Association For The Child’s Right To Play is deeply concerned by a number of alarming trends and their negative impact on children’s development.”<sup>3</sup> Some of these are as follows:

- Society’s indifference to the importance of play.
- Over-emphasis on theoretical and academic studies in schools.
- Increasing numbers of children living with inadequate provisions for survival and development.
- Inadequate preparation of children to cope with life in a rapidly changing society.
- Increasing segregation of children in the community.
- Constant exposure of children to war, violence, exploitation, and destruction.
- Over-emphasis on unhealthy competition and “winning at all costs” in children’s sports.

The Healthy Schools Summit 2002 released their “Commitment to Change” from the October 7-8, 2002 session in Washington, D.C. “Healthy schools, those that support good nutrition and physical activity as part of a total learning environment, produce healthy students. Healthy students are better able to develop and learn. Healthy students who achieve their educational potential form healthy communities. Healthy communities build a healthy America.”<sup>4</sup>

The Action For Healthy Kids Indiana Team formed in October 2002. It selected as one its goals “Action 10: Provide daily recess periods for elementary school students, featuring time for unstructured but supervised active play.”<sup>4</sup>

The AFHK Indiana Team supports The United Nations’ Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) Principle 7 states that “The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation, which should be directed to the same purposes as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavour to promote the enjoyment of this right.”<sup>5</sup> In 1989 The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 31 “States Parties recognize the right of the child ...to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child...”<sup>6</sup>

#### *Current Condition of Recess in the United States*

“In a 1989 survey by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, 90% of the school districts reporting had some form of recess. Most of the responses indicated that type of recess occurred once or twice per day and lasted fifteen to twenty minutes. Since that date and with the increase pressure from a number of sources to improve achievement, increase test scores, and cover an increasingly demanding curriculum,

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nearly forty percent of the nation's 16,000 school districts have either modified, deleted, or are considering deleting recess from the daily elementary school schedule.

“In addition to academic concerns, schools cite injuries, a heightened awareness of safety, and a lack of supervision as justifications for abolishing recess, specifically outdoor recess. Claiming that possibility of lawsuits if children are injured on school property, or of children coming into contact with menacing or potentially dangerous strangers, and the increasing curriculum demands, many administrators have determined recess is the easiest part of the daily schedule to eliminate.”<sup>2</sup>

#### *Current Condition of Recess In Indiana*

In Indiana, schools are not required, nor is it recommended to have regularly scheduled recess. “Physical education is mandated at all educational levels only in that it is a part of a balance of learning experiences in certain subject areas of which physical education is one. It is estimated that 85% of the elementary schools meet the mandate. At the elementary level, there is no time requirement except that the curriculum shall be consistent with the physical education standards. It is recommended the grade K-3 students receive a minimum of 105 minutes per week and grade 4-6 students about 75 minutes per week.”<sup>7</sup>

This means that a K-3 student would get an average of 21 total minutes per day and grades 4-6 students would get an average of 15 total minutes per day. These numbers contrast recommendations from The Council on Physical Education for Children (COPEC) which discourages extended periods (periods of two or more hours) of inactivity, especially during the daytime hours and that children should participate in several bouts of physical activity lasting 15 minutes or more each day.

#### *Benefits of Recess to Children*

“Recess, while separate and distinct from physical education, is an essential component of the total educational experience for elementary aged children. Recess provides children with discretionary time and opportunities to engage in physical activity that helps to develop healthy bodies and enjoyment of movement. It also allows elementary children to practice life skills such as conflict resolution, cooperation, respect for rules, taking turns, sharing, using language to communicate, and problem solving in real situations that are real. Furthermore, it may facilitate improved attention and focus on learning in the academic program.

“Children need a variety of movement experiences to develop a healthy mind and body that is capable of learning. Inactivity is considered a major risk factor for heart disease and patterns of inactivity may begin at early ages. As a result of parents working outside the home, neighborhood safety issues, and a lack of community support, a growing number of children have limited time to participate in unstructured play in their neighborhoods. They spend more time watching TV, playing computer games or other sedentary activities. The result of this inactivity, coupled with poor nutritional habits, is

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more children are overweight and obese, showing early signs of heart disease, diabetes and other serious health problems. The involvement of young children in daily physical activity during school hours therefore is critical for their current and future health.

“Studies have found that students who do not participate in recess may have difficulty concentrating on specific tasks in the classroom, are restless and may be easily distracted. In addition, recess serves as a developmentally appropriate strategy for reducing stress. Contemporary society introduces significant pressure and stress for many students because of academic demands, family issues and peer pressures.”<sup>2</sup>

The American Association for the Child’s Right to Play makes the case for elementary school recess. The following reasons are given to support the need for recess.

“Recess responds to the child’s social and emotional needs...

- If we eliminate recess, we are ignoring the fact that for many children the opportunity to play with friends is an important reason for coming to school.
- Recess can serve as an outlet for reducing or lowering the child’s anxiety....The elementary school age child has very few coping strategies, .. Recess provides a means for the child to manage stress.
- A vital aspect of play is the non threatening way children of different cultures learn from each other.
- Recess provides the opportunity for solitary play. Some children need...to break away from their classmates to collect their thoughts.

“Recess contributes to the child’s cognitive and intellectual needs...

- Students who do not get a break are much more fidgety in the classroom, and are deprived from interacting with different peers and watching and learning from other children. Eliminating recess is counter productive.
- Unstructured play gives the child an opportunity to exercise a sense of wonder, which leads to exploration, which leads to creativity.
- When children are deprived of vigorous recess activities the body’s heat isn’t given the opportunity to pump fresh oxygen into the blood to nourish a sluggish brain.

“Recess addresses the child’s physical needs...

- Physical activity is essential for the healthy growth and development of children.
- Recess provides opportunities for children to explore many types of active play regardless of the stereotypical expectations associated with gender.
- Through active and even rough and tumble play, young children learn about their bodies’ capabilities, and how to control themselves in their environment.”<sup>3</sup>

It is also imperative to consider important concepts about physical activity for children when teachers, principals, and school boards make school program decisions. In “Guidelines for Appropriate Physical Activity for Elementary School Children” the Council for Physical Education for Children (COPEC) of the National Association for

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Sport and Physical Education, an association of the American Alliance for Health Physical Education and Recreation (AAHPERD) included the following typical characteristics of children:

1. “Young animals, including humans, are inherently active.
2. “Children usually have a relatively short attention span for tasks compared to adults.
3. “Children are typically active intermittently and need frequent periods of recovery.
4. “Physical activity is a significant medium for learning for children and youth.
5. “Many, if not most, of the skills used in adult recreation and leisure are learned during the school years.
6. “Inactive children and youth are more likely to become sedentary as adults than children and youth who are active.
7. “Self-efficacy (a feeling that you can be successful) in physical activity is one of the factors that is strongly associated with lifetime physical activity adherence.
8. “Just a children and youth can learn the habit of regular activity involvement; they can learn to be inactive.”<sup>8</sup>

#### *Calling Hoosiers to Action*

Based on the CDC’s “Guidelines for School and Community Programs to Promote Lifelong Physical Activity Among Young People,” The Action For Healthy Kids Indiana Team calls Hoosiers to take action on the following:

1. “Adult supervisors should be aware of the potential for physical activity-related injuries and illnesses among you people so that the risks for and consequences of these injuries be minimized.
2. “During the school day, opportunities for physical activity exist ...during recess... School personnel should encourage students to be physically active during these times. The use of time during the school day for unstructured physical activity should complement rather than substitute for the physical activity and instructions children receive in physical education classes.
3. “Teachers, coaches, and other school and community personnel should not force participation in or withhold opportunities for physical activity as punishment. Using physical activity as a punishment risks creating negative associations with physical activity in the minds of young people. Withholding physical activity deprives students of health benefits important to their well-being.
4. “Parents may be able to influence the quality and quantity of physical activity available to their children by advocating for safe spaces and facilities that provide their children opportunities to engage in a range of physical activities.
5. “Provide training for education,...and community personnel that imparts the knowledge and skills needed to effectively promote enjoyable, lifelong physical activity among young people.
6. “...healthcare providers should advocate for ...recreation programs that emphasize lifetime physical activities and that enable participation in safe, enjoyable physical activities.

7. "Evaluate the implementation and quality of physical activity policies, curricula, instruction, programs, and personnel training.
8. "Measure students' attainment of physical activity knowledge, achievement of motor skills and behavioral skills, and adoption of healthy behaviors."<sup>7</sup>
9. That recess is scheduled before lunch to offer an opportunity to increase appetites and to decrease focus on rushing through lunch to play.
10. To encourage participation in the Recess Advocate program.<sup>3</sup>

## References

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