



IMPROVING THE QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF OUTDOOR TIME AND PLAY FOR CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF CHILDREN SPENDING TIME PLAYING OUTDOORS?

Research shows that unstructured outdoor play benefits children in school in many ways:¹



IMPROVED ACADEMIC OUTCOMES –

Unstructured breaks in learning foster optimal cognitive performance, while play and time spent outdoors promote literacy, critical thinking skills, and other learning. ^{2, 16, 18-20, 22, 25}



BETTER SOCIAL SKILLS –

Unstructured play promotes social and emotional learning and provides an opportunity for children to learn skills such as negotiation, cooperation, sharing, problem-solving, perseverance, and self-control. ^{3, 15-18, 20, 21, 23}



IMPROVED BEHAVIOR –

Playing outdoors boosts happiness, reduces stress, and decreases anger and aggression. It also strengthens a child's vestibular system, which integrates the senses and supports attention, engagement, and self-regulation, leading to improved classroom behavior. ^{4-6, 24}



ENHANCED PHYSICAL HEALTH –

Outdoor play has been linked to enhanced health, increased physical activity, decreased obesity, improved eye-sight, increased vitamin D levels, and improved immune system. ⁷⁻¹²

HOW CAN THE QUANTITY OF UNSTRUCTURED OUTDOOR TIME FOR CHILDREN BE INCREASED IN SCHOOLS?



INCORPORATING "FOREST DAYS" –

Children spend their school day outdoors, with teacher-led activities purposefully combined with periods of unstructured play and exploration. FFS recommends providing at least 60 uninterrupted minutes of unstructured play.



LENGTHENING RECESS –

School administrators revise the school's daily schedule to provide increased time for unstructured outdoor play, either through lengthening a single recess or adding a second recess.



REVIEWING WEATHER RESTRICTIONS FOR RECESS –

School administrators review the temperature and weather conditions required for recess and consider permitting children to play outdoors in all weather. In many climates, this will require work to ensure all children have access to necessary outdoor gear such as rain suits or winter outerwear.



INTEGRATING OUTDOOR LEARNING WITH CURRICULAR COMPONENTS –

Teachers bring their students into the natural environment as part of the curriculum that is already in place; lessons may be multidisciplinary.



INCLUDING PHENOLOGY IN THE CURRICULUM –

Schools allocate time to studying the recurring life cycles of plants and animals and their relationships to the environment, which involves exploration and instruction that occurs primarily outdoors.

*Click item headings to read supporting articles or see links listed below.

HOW CAN THE QUALITY OF UNSTRUCTURED OUTDOOR TIME FOR CHILDREN BE IMPROVED IN SCHOOLS?



GREENING OF SCHOOLYARDS / NATURALIZING OF SCHOOLYARDS -

Schools re-naturalize their outdoor space to include more vegetation and natural elements for children to explore.



REASSESSING THE RULES OF RECESS -

School administrators use research about the importance of unstructured and risky play to develop new rules and protocols for recess behavior.



ADDING UNSTRUCTURED SPACE TO SCHOOL YARDS -

Schools reflect on the outdoor space available to children and include areas that are free of structures in order to enhance unstructured nature play.



PROVIDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS -

Schools invest resources in educating teachers about the benefits of nature experiences for children and how to integrate these experiences into their teaching time.

For more resources in support of increasing the quantity and quality of outdoor time and play for children in schools, visit www.freeforestschool.org/public-school-outreach/

*Click item headings to read supporting articles or see links listed below.



LINKS TO EXAMPLES

Incorporating "Forest Days":

<https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/05/26/407762253/out-of-the-classroom-and-into-the-woods>

Lengthening Recess:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/09/13/recess-four-times-a-day-why-some-schools-are-now-letting-kids-play-an-hour-a-day/>

Reviewing Weather Restrictions for Recess:

<https://www.fix.com/blog/keep-kids-playing-outdoors-in-winter/>

Integrating Outdoor Learning with Curricular Components:

<https://greenschoolsnationalnetwork.org/moving-learning-outdoors-embracing-schoolyards-21st-century-classrooms/>

Including Phenology in the Curriculum:

<https://earthpartnership.wisc.edu/curriculum/#phenology-wheels>

Greening of Schoolyards / Naturalizing of Schoolyards:

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED547276.pdf>

Reassessing the Rules of Recess:

<https://nationalpost.com/news/when-one-new-zealand-school-tossed-its-playground-rules-and-let-students-risk-injury-the-results-surprised>

Adding Unstructured Space to School Yards:

<https://www.life.ca/childsplay/1502/unstructured-play-environment.htm>

Providing Professional Development for Teachers:

<https://childhoodbynature.com/nature-based-educator-trainings/>

CITATIONS

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