

# Best Practices for Recess Guidance

## Purpose

The intent of this document is to provide elementary schools with best practice guidelines for recess. The recommendations support the Utah State Board of Education's Safe and Healthy Schools goal in their strategic plan. This document contains guidelines compiled by a committee comprised of Utah State Board of Education staff, community stakeholders, state and local health department employees, and district administrators. The Best Practices for Recess Guidance is intended to help eliminate unsound educational practices like administering or withholding physical activity for disciplinary or academic performance.<sup>1</sup>

Recess is a necessary structural component of the elementary school day for all children in Utah public schools. Easy access to best practices will help promote successful recess programs throughout the state.

## Background Information

The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans<sup>2</sup> recommends that children and adolescents ages 6 to 17 participate in 60 minutes or more of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily. Recess is an important component in turning the recommendations into actionable goals. Recess provides an opportunity for youth of all ages to participate in free play or more structured physical activity every day. Additionally, both in and outside of school, recess helps students with social skills such as problem-solving, negotiation, sharing, communication, cooperation and following rules. Thus, creating a healthy environment for a student's academic work, mental capacity, physical wellness, and emotional health.<sup>3</sup>

## Definitions

**Active Recess:** is when students play and are physically active during the scheduled recess breaks. Some example strategies for facilitating students in active recess include providing adequate equipment, painting games on the playground surface, and creating activity stations (e.g., student-invented activities, ball bouncing and wall passing station where wall space is available; jump rope area; field game area for games of soccer, kickball, speedball, flag football, running/walking on playground perimeter).

**Organized Recess:** is when a variety of activities of games are planned and supervised by an adult. Every student is active. Students move about on their own to various areas of play.

**Structured Recess:** is an activity or game that is planned and actively supervised by an adult. Students will participate in structured activities and games with supervision. This is a recommended alternative to withholding recess for students with behavior challenges.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.shapeamerica.org/uploads/pdfs/2019/advocacy/position-statements/pa/Physical-Activity-as-Punishment.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>[https://health.gov/paguidelines/second-edition/pdf/Physical\\_Activity\\_Guidelines\\_2nd\\_edition\\_Presentation.pdf](https://health.gov/paguidelines/second-edition/pdf/Physical_Activity_Guidelines_2nd_edition_Presentation.pdf)

<sup>3</sup><https://www.nap.edu/read/18314/chapter/6#186>

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Q: Why is recess important?**

**A:** Recess serves as a necessary break from the rigors of concentrated, academic learning in the classroom. Recess provides many benefits for students, it:

- Increases students' level of physical activity, such as strength and endurance
- Improves students' academic achievement including memory, attention, and concentration
- Helps students' stay on-task in the classroom
- Reduces disruptive behavior in the classroom
- Improves students' social and emotional development (e.g., learning how to share and negotiate; increases self-esteem; reduces anxiety, stress, and depression).<sup>4</sup>

### **Q: Why is withholding recess as punishment not recommended?**

**A:** Regardless of a student's behavior it is essential that they have time to release energy. Students that are physically active do better in the classroom. A lack of physical activity leads to behaviors requiring punishment. Studies show that students who do not participate in recess are not able to focus and become disruptive in the classroom. The longer a student sits in a classroom the more likely they are to misbehave. If a student is allowed to release energy in P.E. or at recess, they will come back to the classroom more focused and better behaved. For alternative strategies, see the Best Practices section below.

### **Q: How do I fit recess into the school day?**

**A:** Per Board Rule R277-419-4b, "All school day calculations... may include recess periods." Recess is a critical component of the school day when it is provided in an active, organized, or structured way.

### **Q: What if recess is the only flexibility I have in the schedule to give a student time to finish academic work?**

**A:** Withholding recess for students to finish academic work is not recommended as recess has many benefits as listed above. Instead, schools can identify time within the master schedule such as flex time, where students are given the opportunity to complete unfinished or missed work.

### **Q: Why is it important not to use physical activity as a punishment?**

**A:** Physical activity should be a positive, meaningful experience for students. Administering physical activity (things like forcing students to run laps or perform push-ups because of behavioral infractions or disruptive behavior) is an inappropriate disciplinary measure. This can result in students equating healthy behaviors as punishment or other negative associations. According to SHAPE America, "The core issue is that administering or withdrawing physical activity as punishment is inappropriate and constitutes an unsound education practice."

### **Q: What can I do if the students cannot go outside due to weather or bad air quality?**

**A:** Students can participate in a variety of indoor activities that will allow them to release energy and allow for a brain break. Indoor activities ideas can be found below in the resource section.

### **Q: Will resources be made available to schools to adequately train staff and provide equipment for recess?**

**A:** Health and physical activity specialists within local health departments can provide support and

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<sup>4</sup>[https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/health\\_and\\_academics/pdf/pa-pe\\_paper.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/pa-pe_paper.pdf)

technical assistance to administrators and teachers. A list of health and physical activity specialists can be found here: [Local Health Department Health Educator List](#) <sup>5</sup>Equipment grants are available to provide equipment for recess. A comprehensive list can be found at <https://peacefulplaygrounds.com/playground-and-garden-grants/>.

**Q: What do I do if a student is unsafe on the playground?**

**A:** In some circumstances it may be appropriate to remove a student from recess to stop behavior that is harmful to the student or to others. It is also possible to remove a student from just the activity in which they are displaying unsafe behavior. In either case, a restorative practice to help the student return to activity is recommended. An example of this is using a “Structured Recess” format, where the student gradually gains back choice, autonomy, and privileges. This requires assigning an adult to check in and check out with this student at the beginning and ending of recess with a behavior contract.

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Recess serves as a necessary break from the rigors of concentrated, academic challenges in the classroom. But equally important is the fact that safe and well-supervised recess offers cognitive, social, emotional, and physical benefits that may not be fully appreciated when a decision is made to diminish it.

-American Academy of Pediatrics

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**Q: What are the benefits of holding recess before lunch?**

**A:** Recess before lunch is just as it sounds; students go out to recess before they eat lunch. Studies have shown a number of benefits, including increased fruit and vegetable consumption, less food waste, and better behavior on the playground, in the cafeteria, and in class after lunch<sup>6</sup>. To learn more, you can visit <https://www.peacefulplaygrounds.com/download/lunch/benefits-recess-before-lunch-facts.pdf>

**Q: Where can I find safety standards for recess?**

**A:** The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission Public Playground Safety Handbook can be found at <https://www.cpsc.gov/s3fs-public/325.pdf>

## Best Practices

- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE) America, and other national organizations recommend providing elementary school students at least 20 minutes of recess daily.
- Considerations for designing and implementing effective active recess include:

Encouraged	Discouraged
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing schedule time for students to remediate with teacher outside recess.</li> <li>• Providing staff members who lead or supervise recess with ongoing professional development, including how to accommodate students with special needs.</li> <li>• Providing indoor activities and space to accommodate weather and/or air quality restrictions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excluding students from recess for disciplinary reasons.</li> <li>• Excluding students from recess for academic performance in the classroom or remediation.</li> <li>• Replacing of physical education with recess or using recess to meet time requirements for physical education policies</li> <li>• Using physical activity as punishment.</li> </ul>

<sup>5</sup> <https://docs.google.com/document/d/15wtpxITpZj4kNOgkfJVx5PMJamPfgeSc5zJEO9TkIEY/edit?usp=sharing>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.smarterlunchrooms.org/articles/recess-before-lunch-research-tested-parent-approved>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing schools and students with adequate spaces, facilities, equipment, and supplies for recess.</li> <li>• Providing recess before lunch.</li> <li>• Ensuring that spaces and facilities for recess meet or exceed recommended safety standards.</li> <li>• Create environments that support active recess.</li> <li>• Providing necessary accommodations for students with special health care or other needs for participation in recess.</li> </ul>	
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- To support educators in allowing all students to have daily opportunities to engage in physical activity during recess time, [Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports \(PBIS\)](#)<sup>7</sup> are recommended as preventative and responsive approaches for improved student behavior. Alternative strategies to withholding recess may include:
  - Establish, teach, and reinforce expectations and positive behaviors
  - Conference between teacher and student
  - Correct unwanted behavior and teach appropriate behavior
  - Direct student to alternative location to calm down or regroup (e.g., trauma-sensitive room, mindful space, rebound room)

## USBE Model Policy

Recess guidelines are beneficial for informing physical activity and recess components of a local wellness policies. These policies are required to include specific goals for physical activity especially those that promote student wellness. Recess is a key component for a preventive policy. A policy may include:

- 1. At least 20 minutes of daily recess for all elementary school students.**  
**Example:** Schools shall provide at least 20 minutes of active daily recess to all elementary school students.  
**Example:** All schools are required to schedule 20 minutes of recess daily for every class in the school master schedule.
- 2. Prohibiting the withholding of physical activity as a punishment.**  
**Example:** Recess, PE, or other physical activities will not be withheld from students as a punishment for poor behavior, incomplete class work, or remediation purposes.
- 3. Prohibiting the use of physical activity as a punishment.**  
**Example:** Physical activity may not be assigned to students as a consequence of poor behavior or punishment for any reason. (Example: running laps or jogging around a playground).  
**Example:** Students shall not be required to engage in physical activity as punishment. For example, students may not be singled out to run extra laps or perform other physical activities that the entire class is not engaged in, as a behavioral consequence.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.pbis.org/>

**Example:** Staff is encouraged to use physical activity as a reward.

**4. Encouraging recess before lunch.**

**Example:** Schools are to provide recess before lunch when schedules allow.<sup>8</sup>

**5. Encouraging active recess.**

**Example:** Each school site will develop a comprehensive school physical activity program which allows staff to participate in or lead physical activity opportunities throughout the school day. In addition, an employee wellness program will be implemented in each building to meet the unique wellness needs of school staff.

## Exemplar Policies Resources

As a mechanism for ensuring consistency in recess practices, here are a few suggested resources for creating or amending a district/school policy to address the critical policy elements.

- [Daily Recess:](#) Canyon Grove Academy “Recess is offered daily to students in kindergarten through eighth grade to give them the opportunity for unstructured physical activity.”
- [Physical Activity Policy:](#) North Summit School District wellness policy, page 15, recess policy and statement of not using physical activity as punishment.
- [Not Withholding Physical Education:](#) Granite School District, daily recess and physical education policy.
- [Recess Before Lunch:](#) Ogden School District policy on recess and physical education, see page 1.
- [Adaptive Physical Education:](#) Pocket tool for adaptive physical education teachers.
- [WellSAT:](#) A quantitative assessment tool to help you score and improve your local school wellness policy.
- The [Local School Wellness Policy](#) Requirement was established by the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 and further strengthened by Section 204 of [Public Law 108-265](#) of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. It requires each local LEA participating in the National School Lunch Program and/or School Breakfast Program to develop a local school wellness policy. The final rule requires each LEA includes specific goals for nutrition promotion and education, physical activity and other school-based strategies in determining these goals.

## Resources for More Information:

- [School Recess Guidelines - CDC:](#) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recess resource
- [Active Education:](#) Research brief on benefits of physical activity on academic performance
- [American Academy of Pediatrics: The Crucial Role of Recess in Schools:](#) Benefits of recess on the whole child
- [Playworks: Game Library:](#) Explore hundreds of games by group size, available space and equipment, appropriate ages, and developmental skills.
- [Action for Healthy Kids: Active Outdoor Recess:](#) Guidance and activities for outdoor recess
- [Action for Healthy Kids: Active Indoor Recess:](#) Guidance and activities for indoor recess
- [GoNoodle Indoor Recess:](#) Free video resources with a variety of indoor recess activities.
- [Healthy Bodies Healthy Minds Flipbook:](#) Resource providing short activities that can be done in a classroom setting
- [Playworks: 6 Alternatives to Withholding Recess](#)

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.educationworld.com/a\\_admin/admin/admin389.shtml](https://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin389.shtml)

- [SHAPE America: Guide for Recess](#) Policy: SHAPE America's rubric for creating a comprehensive recess policy in schools
- [Strategies for Recess in Schools](#): Strategies, infographics, resources, and more from SHAPE America
- [Recess Before Lunch](#): Downloadable resources and research for the benefits of recess before lunch