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recess: a whole new game

By Bonnie Rothman Morris

Forget the free-for-all period from your school days. Today, kids are busy—engaged in planned activities designed to prevent bullying and promote good social skills.



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oday the average elementary school recess lasts 15 minutes. So how much trouble could kids possibly get into? A lot, it seems. Recess is one of the most popular times of the day for bullies to do their devastating damage to victims, say experts who study the problem. That's because

playgrounds are crowded, equipment and resources are scarce, and in many school settings supervision is lax.

Then, of course, there's that recess mystique. "The very name 'recess' implies that this is a stepping away from the rules of culture and civilization and the educational mission of the school," says anti-bullying expert Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ, and author of *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting*.

Part of the problem is that although kids are expected to instinctively know how to play nice on the playground, many don't. Even in the youngest grades, bullying, from teasing and gossip to outright fistfights, is common. In one recent Canadian study, researchers from York University and Queen's University, who spent hundreds of hours filming children on the playground, observed bullying behavior every 7½ minutes.

Rethinking Recess

While programs vary, many schools are now using recess time to teach children cooperation. Generally, kids participate in structured games that are led by other children and that provide outlets for would-be bullies and victims. School officials are also coaching kids who witness bullying at recess to step in and speak up.

"Children spend more time in recess-related activities than in any academic subject," says Stephen Leff, Ph.D., a psychologist at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and an assistant professor of clinical psychology in pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. The carefree feeling recess evokes can work only if it's set up appropriately, says Dr. Leff, who runs Playground Lunchroom and Youth Success (PLAYS), a program that's been used in nine Philadelphia schools to date. PLAYs trains playground and lunchroom supervisors to offer positive reinforcement when

they, as Dr. Leff describes it, "catch kids being good," as opposed to punishing bullies. Another component is teaching cooperative games such as relay racing instead of tag.

Recess-based anti-bullying programs center on planned playground activities with a consistent set of rules for each game. All include the basics, such as waiting your turn, listening to instructions, and refraining from pushing and shoving. These help kids who might otherwise be teased feel safe joining games, give bullies some structure to help tame their aggressive impulses, and teach all the children—victims, bullies, and bystanders—how to resolve their conflicts positively.

Programs range in size from the single-school Riverside Rangers at the Riverside School in Greenwich, CT, to Peaceful Playgrounds, a curriculum used by 7,000 schools across the country. Some, like PLAYs, are led by teams of academic researchers in partnership with school personnel, while another program, Canada's Playground Leadership Program, began as a way to help schools promote after-school intramural sports by showcasing

different sports during recess. There are no hard numbers on how many schools are using these types of programs, but the schools that are have seen a marked decrease in playground accidents and bullying behavior, say school and program administrators.

80% of school-age kids are neither bullies nor victims, but they are exposed to them.



The Great Debate

Some critics contend that using recess to implement anti-bullying programs will only make kids feel burdened with yet more directives. "Recess has to be protected," says William Crain, Ph.D., professor of psychology at The City College of New York and author of *Reclaiming Childhood*. "Kids already have tons of homework and long schooldays." Dr. Crain argues that recess is a time when children get a much-needed release from their overstructured, competitive lives. "However well intended you are, don't bring more instruction into one of the few chances kids have to play freely and spontaneously," says Dr. Crain.

But others say it's that very spontaneity that may lead to mishaps. "Many kids don't have the initiative to come up with their

own ideas for how to stay focused and keep out of trouble,” says Diane Smallwood, Ph.D., president of the National Association of School Psychologists in Washington, DC.

Teaching Kids to Intervene

Researchers are now beginning to understand that the bystander plays a crucial role in how much bullying takes place at school. Experts say that about 80% of school-age children fit the bystander role—they're neither bullies nor victims, but they are exposed to them. If bystanders are taught to intervene by applying what might be thought of as positive peer pressure, the number of bullying incidents goes down, says Susan M. Swearer, Ph.D., assistant educational psychology professor at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

Peer-to-peer modeling is crucial in bully prevention because children naturally trust other children who are brave, experts say. Typically, kids volunteer to be trained as group leaders to officiate at games. Adult playground supervisors know the rules, too, but it's the kid



**Schools that use recess
to teach kids about
cooperation see a
marked drop in bullying.**


leaders who are the first line of defense against transgressions.

Last year, the Antelope Trails Elementary School, located in Colorado Springs, adopted Peaceful Playgrounds, the brainchild of Melinda Bossenmeyer, Ph.D., a Canyon Lake, CA-based playground safety inspector with a doctorate in educational leadership. The program entails painting the blacktop and fields with colorful grids and circles that can be used for more than 100 games. The goal: to encourage kids to interact more appropriately with one another during recess. With games like four square and hopscotch, each with clear rules, kids are on the same playing field, so to speak, says Dr. Bossenmeyer. Perhaps the most useful game, she says, is the old-fashioned “rock, paper, scissors,” which kids use to quash

squabbles. Children count to three and simultaneously flash hand signals: rock (fist), paper (flat hand), or scissors (pointer and third finger spread apart). Rock wins against scissors, paper wins against rock, and scissors wins against paper.

“It’s awesome. It teaches the students how to handle conflict resolution without resorting to violence or mean behavior,” says Kim Peters, a graduate student who implemented Peaceful Playgrounds at Antelope Trails last year.

The effectiveness of these programs, however, is limited if the philosophy isn’t carried over to school hallways, cafeterias, classrooms, and eventually at home. “It’s important to have buy-in from all levels: administrators, parents, children, community, teachers,” says Caroline Clauss-Ehlers, Ph.D., an assistant professor of counseling psychology at Rutgers University in New Jersey. “If you have that commitment, you see change more quickly.”

And then there’s that bystander. Dr. Smallwood says schools should create a culture that empowers bystanders to speak up without fear of reprisals. Experts suggest that kids be encouraged to intervene with seemingly benign but ultimately powerful phrases like, “We don’t do that here” and “That’s not how we treat one another.” The more kids there are who can say that, the fewer incidences of bullying there will be. 

 To learn more about why bullying occurs and how to protect your child from it, go to www.child.com/web_links.

BONNIE ROTHMAN MORRIS, a journalist in Dobbs Ferry, NY, last wrote “A Day in the Life of an Ob-Gyn” for *Child*.

the new playground enforcers

It’s recess at the Riverside School in Connecticut and about 20 third-graders are at the mercy of five fourth-graders. Hannah Broadhurst, 10, a “big kid,” shouts, “Giants! Elves! Wizards!” The children split in half and charge across a small field. Squealing, screaming, and giggling ensue.

The fourth-graders are the Riverside Rangers, one of three teams who have been specially trained to help make recess more cooperative and less threatening at this K-5 elementary school of 450 students. They were trained by Project Adventure, a Beverly, MA-based organization with programs to help kids build leadership skills while preventing violence and bullying.

Funded by a grant written by the town’s physical education administrator, the program aims to “create a situation that prevents children from being picked on,” according to its founder and school parent, Margaret Moore Harris. She says that the kickball field can be chaotic, with the more athletic children hogging the ball and ruling the game, leaving other kids behind. A team of parent volunteers attends recess each day to monitor the program.

In addition to running cooperative games, the Rangers are responsible for dispensing discipline. And it turns out that the big kid–little kid dynamic works like magic. In fact, to many young children, the Rangers are school heroes. “We have unearthed potential leaders,” says principal John Grasso. The first-graders say they want to be Rangers when they grow up.