

# The Elephant on the Playground

Jill Viallet

Every principal knows that recess can be hell.  
But it doesn't have to be.

**A**sk any elementary school principal what the toughest part of the day is, and most will answer with one word: recess. That's because recess is when most trouble starts. When I asked one principal recently about recess, she promptly rattled off a list of headaches, such as "the teasing, the fights, the bullying, the injuries, the referrals." Bearn Wright Jr., the principal at Clark Elementary School in Washington, D.C., recently told me that when it's recess time, his job is instantly transformed into a cross between a surgeon in a MASH unit and Judge Joe Brown. When Wright isn't treating casualties on the playground or sending injured students to the nurse's office, he is mediating between blacktop brawlers who take on the roles of plaintiff and defendant.

The recess crisis has become the ugly secret that no one talks about but every principal confronts once or twice a day. Call it the elephant on the playground.

## The Lost Art of Playground Play

The schoolyard has changed considerably since we were kids. If you were like me, you grew up playing four square or kickball, tetherball, or freeze tag. These were games that got us running, playing, and generally having a great time. We had no idea at the time that they were actually good for us.

But in the age of the Xbox and PlayStation 3, many children come to school not really knowing how to engage in healthy play. For those who live in rough neighborhoods, playing outdoors actually may be forbidden by their parents for safety reasons. As a result, many kids never learn the basics of

outdoor play. They don't know how to make up and follow rules or how to resolve conflicts.

In an all-too-common scenario, games devolve into conflict and fighting before they even get started. When chaos reigns on the playground, it can spill over into the classroom. And when children don't feel safe in school, it affects their ability to learn.

We shouldn't blame kids for not knowing the ABCs of playground play. It is something that can be taught and kids have an amazing ability to learn when adults make even a modest effort. In fact, recess offers the perfect opportunity to make learning to play a part of every child's school day. This has the dual benefit of eliminating a major behavior management problem while also making a serious contribution to children's emotional, social, and physical development.



### Teaching Kids How to Play

During the past 12 years, I have been conducting an informal experiment at more than 130 schools in six cities to see what happens when you put trained adults on the playground at recess. Through Sports4Kids, we have been putting play experts on school playgrounds to teach classic games like kickball and four square, as well as new games designed to build leadership and foster teamwork.

The results have been astounding. In school after school, the problems that plague recess virtually disappear and the whole school day goes more smoothly as kids bring the confidence, teamwork, and constructive problem-solving skills they've learned on the playground into the classroom—and into their lives.

What we have learned from more than a decade in the playground trenches is that recess does not have to be hell. Not only is it possible to manage the chaos,

but doing so can actually transform the entire school climate. This is because the same qualities that are fundamental to safe and healthy play—teamwork, respect, and encouragement—are also fundamental to safe and healthy schools.

Last year, the Open Society Institute, investigating suspension trends in Baltimore public schools, discovered that suspensions plummeted at schools that actively took steps to rescue recess by teaching kids how to play. A recent case

study by the Harvard Family Research Project saw similar changes in behavior after Sports4Kids took over the playground at Ohrenberger Elementary School in Boston. The study found that over the course of one year, the well-functioning recess fostered supportive relationships among students, created opportunities for meaningful youth involvement, and taught conflict resolution and other life skills.

A growing body of research and the real-life experience of principals led the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to recently declare recess as an undervalued time in schools. The foundation's 2007 report, "Recess Rules," highlights data that makes the case for focusing on recess on behalf of children's health.

The bottom line is that no principal should feel powerless on the playground or feel that eliminating recess is their only choice. It is not only possible but essential to replace the chaos with a positive alternative. And principals who dedicate even modest energy and resources into rescuing recess will be rewarded with happier and healthier schools.

### Resuscitating Recess: A Five-Point Plan

Here are five things you can do to rescue recess at your school:

**Map your schoolyard.** The first step is to take a good look at the assets and liabilities of your play area by observing the current patterns of play:

- What games are the kids playing?
- What parts of the schoolyard are they using?
- How do students make the transitions from cafeteria to schoolyard and back inside?
- Where do kids who aren't participating stand?
- Is structured play being used?
- What are the adults doing?

Once you have a sense of what's going on, imagine what you'd like to see. Take a piece of paper and draw a rough sketch of your schoolyard divided



into five or six different areas. Create an area for the Game of the Week, for kids who don't generally participate. Select a location for checking out equipment as children flow from the cafeteria to the yard. Think about using cones to designate areas where kids can play basketball and soccer. Talk with your custodian or facilities staff about painting lines for four square.

**Teach everyone the rock-paper-scissors game.** Nine times out of 10, playground conflicts are completely inconsequential and with rock-paper-scissors as an agreed-upon tool for problem-solving, you will be amazed by how much more smoothly things can go. One of the key things about making it work is to have everyone use it to solve all types of disagreements. Encourage your teachers to use it in the classroom.

**Work with smaller groups.** Teach group signals and game rules to a classroom or smaller group of students. When you're visiting classrooms, take a few minutes to teach signals like rhythmic clapping to get their attention, and explain that you will be using these signals on the schoolyard at recess. Also, work with small groups to teach rules to games. When kids don't play well together, it's often because they don't know the rules.

Spend some time talking to kids about transitions. Have them come up with rituals for starting and ending recess—perhaps a cheer—to help them

physically acknowledge they are about to change their environment and energy levels.

**Play outside yourself.** Get in a game and encourage other adults to do the same. There is no better way to engage kids who don't usually participate. Children behave better and feel safer when there are grown-ups playing with them.

I know it's obvious, but when you're playing with kids you should model good sporting behavior. Play hard, have fun, be supportive, and win or lose graciously.

**Give kids responsibilities.** We run a recess program called Junior Coaches in which the oldest students distribute and collect equipment, turn ropes for jump-roping, resolve conflicts, and help split kids into teams. The junior coaches also can take on bigger jobs, such as organizing intramural tournaments and running the Game of the Day. You can give similar responsibilities to your existing student leadership groups. In our program, we try to include some children who have a history of negative recess behavior. There's a lot of natural leadership there, and it's much easier if they're on your side.

### Taming the Elephant

Ultimately, we believe that the most effective way to resuscitate recess is to place a *trained* adult on your playground. All of our site coordinators have experience in working with children and are trained in methods they can use to create

a structured, safe, and inclusive playground environment. If you aren't currently in a city where Sports4Kids operates, you can designate existing or new staff to run recess, and we will help you train them.

Recess may pale in importance when held up against the competing demands of boosting test scores and raising students' academic achievement. But after more than a decade of working with principals to replace chaos with cooperation in the schoolyard, and to transform recess into an integral and positive force in each child's development, I am even more convinced that it pays to not only acknowledge the elephant on the playground, but to teach it some new and—in some cases—old tricks. ☐

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#### WEB RESOURCES

"Squeezing in Recess: Easier for Some, No Small Feat for Others," is a September 2006 *Communicator* article that discusses the difficulty some principals face in finding the time to schedule recess for students given the pressures of state and federal requirements associated with adequate yearly progress and the No Child Left Behind Act.

[www.naesp.org](http://www.naesp.org)

The mission of Sports4Kids is to improve the health and well-being of children by increasing opportunities for physical activity and safe, meaningful play. View a 10-minute documentary about a St. Louis elementary school before and after Sports4Kid's program was introduced.

[www.sports4kids.org](http://www.sports4kids.org)

This research brief from Active Living Research offers a summary of peer-reviewed research about the relationship between physical activity and children's academic performance.

[www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=23456](http://www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=23456)



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