Rethinking recess
by Sandra Swanson
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Some of Fran Mainella’s fondest childhood memories are conjured by these words: “Go out and play, and be home in time for dinner.” She knows that many other adults share the same youthful experience. But Mainella, a former director of the U.S. National Park Service whose need to “go out and play” remains deeply ingrained, says that for today’s children, times have changed.

“With the younger generation, they come home from school and meet with their friends – but they’re doing it with Facebook, chat, and text messaging,” she says. “There’s nothing wrong with technology, but there needs to be a balance.” That dearth of outdoor after-school playtime is compounded by another problem: Many schools have eliminated recess, often in hopes that increased classroom time will boost students’ test scores.

Mainella is cochair of the U.S. Play Coalition, one of several nonprofits working to promote the value of playtime. These play advocates aren’t motivated by nostalgia. Their concerns are grounded in a growing body of research that suggests outdoor play – including school recess – can help improve students’ behavior and academic performance.

As part of that effort, the U.S. Play Coalition hosted its first Conference on the Value of Play in February at Clemson University in South Carolina. The event attracted professionals from diverse fields, including teachers, pediatricians, orthopedic surgeons, and landscape designers. Among the academic researchers was Olga Jarrett, an associate professor of early childhood education at Georgia State University who has received a seed grant from the coalition for a research project on recess.
Living in Atlanta

Jarrett’s interest arose from a personal experience she had while living in the Atlanta area during the mid-1990s. “My son came home from school and said, ‘There’s no recess’ – even though they had a nice playground,” she says. “I started looking into the issue.”

Over the years, Jarrett has discovered that official policies at schools don’t tell the whole story. “Just because a state, school system, or individual school decides to have recess, that doesn’t mean all the children are getting it,” she says. Her current research project will collect data on the district where her son attended school to determine how often classes have recess, and teachers’ views about it. For instance, Jarrett wants to learn whether teachers think recess should be more frequent, or if they withhold it as punishment. “The kids who tend to be punished also tend to be among the kids who need recess the most,” she says. “They have attention deficit disorder, or they need to learn social skills.” Jarrett hopes to identify specific classrooms that use recess deprivation as a punishment, then observe whether that punishment is effective or counterproductive.

Existing research underscores the need for recess. A 2009 study of eight- and nine-year-olds in the journal *Pediatrics* suggests that classroom behavior improves when schools have at least one daily recess period of 15 minutes or more. And a 2007 report by the American Academy of Pediatrics that focused on the importance of play for child development noted, “Play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child.”

Outdoor play may also help alleviate symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), according to a 2004 article in the *American Journal of Public Health*. The authors analyzed more than 452 survey responses from parents of children with ADHD in the United States. The article suggested that those children benefited from playing in a green outdoor setting, defined as any “mostly natural area – a park, a farm, or just a green backyard or neighborhood space.” The article concluded: “This line of research has exciting implications for the management of ADHD. If clinical trials and additional research confirm the value of exposure to nature for ameliorating ADHD, daily doses of ‘green time’ might supplement medications and behavioral approaches to ADHD.”
Gallup poll

A 2010 Gallup poll of nearly 2,000 elementary school principals found that most are already convinced that playtime can help children perform better academically and improve their ability to focus during the school day. The survey – sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and Playworks, a nonprofit that promotes recess at low-income schools – found that

- Four out of five principals report that recess has a positive impact on academic achievement.
- Two-thirds of principals report that students listen better after recess and are more focused in class.
- Ninety-six percent of principals believe recess has a positive impact on children’s social development.

Despite educators’ belief in the benefits of play, schools sometimes need a little extra help managing the chaos that recess can generate. That’s where Playworks comes in. The organization, based in Oakland, Calif., sends out adult “play coaches,” who train “junior coaches” – older children at the school who exhibit strong leadership skills. The adult and junior coaches work together to create recess play that’s focused on fairness and respect. “The coaches help create schoolwide norms,” says Jill Vialet, CEO and founder of Playworks. That means the coaches and students could collectively agree, for example, to use the rock-paper-scissors method to resolve conflicts.

Founded in 1996, Playworks provides support for nearly 320 schools and 120,000 children. Last year, the group’s survey of about 2,600 educators in the schools it serves found that nearly 90 percent reported an increase in students’ ability to focus on class activities, and 73 percent reported a positive impact on children’s overall academic success. Says Vialet, “My kids laugh because I’m the only mom they know who says, ‘No, don’t do your homework – go outside!’”

Vialet also knows that Rotarians understand the importance of play. “I was in Vietnam a few years ago, off in the middle of nowhere,” she says, “and there was this incredible playground built by Rotarians.”

Another advocate

Another play advocate who appreciates Rotarians’ involvement is Darell Hammond. In 1996, he read a Washington Post article about two children who suffocated while playing in an abandoned
car; the nearest playground was 3 miles away. Disturbed by the lack of safe places to play, Hammond founded KaBoom, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that organizes the construction of playgrounds. In June, the group completed its 2,000th playground, aided by hundreds of volunteers, including First Lady Michelle Obama and members of the U.S. Congress. The next month, KaBoom released a free app for Apple wireless devices that lets families find and rate playgrounds throughout the United States.

Rotary clubs have served as official community partners on several KaBoom playground projects, raising about 10 percent of playground costs and recruiting about half the volunteers needed for construction. The playgrounds serve hundreds of children daily in places including Madison, W.Va.; Comstock Park, Mich.; Cupertino, Calif.; and Ottawa. As part of a KaBoom initiative to help communities affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Rotary Club of Stennis Space Center, Miss., raised about 90 percent of the funds needed to build a playground in the nearby town of Kiln.

KaBoom’s goal is to eliminate what Hammond calls “playground deserts.” To that end, it provides free online resources, including a step-by-step guide to planning playground construction. This year, at least 10 U.S. Rotary clubs have used the group’s online tools to organize their playground-building projects.

But not everyone shares this belief in the value of play. “There’s a sense that play is a luxury, not an absolute necessity,” Hammond says. For advocates like him, there’s more work ahead to ensure that kids can exercise their fundamental right to play.