

Unstructured play and movement are not breaks from learning—they support how students focus, engage, and retain information.



WHAT RESEARCH SHOWS

Play supports attention and learning

- Students are better able to focus after breaks for movement and play
- Attention and on-task behavior improve following recess
- Long stretches without movement reduce engagement

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005)

Play supports social development

- Play is where students practice cooperation, problem-solving, and communication
- Peer interaction during play builds social and emotional skills

(AAP, 2018; Harvard Center on the Developing Child)

WHAT EDUCATORS CAN DO

- Build in small moments for movement throughout the day
- Protect existing recess time
- Notice how students respond to breaks
- Share what you're seeing with colleagues and leadership

WHAT WE SEE IN PRACTICE

Many elementary schedules include:

- Long instructional blocks (90–120 minutes)
- Limited opportunities for movement throughout the day
- Recess that is shortened or interrupted

In practice, students often receive less than 30 minutes of real, usable play time each day

Play supports emotional regulation

- Unstructured play helps students regulate stress and emotions
- Movement supports nervous system regulation
- Students return to the classroom calmer and ready to learn

(American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018)

Play supports memory and retention

- Breaks during learning improve memory consolidation
- Students retain more information when learning is spaced with movement

(Ratey, 2008; Jensen, 2005)

WHY THIS MATTERS IN THE CLASSROOM

When students have consistent opportunities to move and play:

- Focus improves
- Transitions are smoother
- Behavioral challenges decrease
- Engagement increases
- Play supports the conditions that make learning possible

Play supports the conditions that make learning possible.

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