

What to Say About Play

A Protector's Advocacy Guide



You don't have to be an expert to speak up.
Use these as a starting point to talk about play.

Play is learning

- Play is not separate from learning - it's a primary way children learn.
- Movement supports attention, memory, and engagement
- Unstructured play builds problem-solving and social skills
- Young children learn best through active, embodied experiences

What to say:

“Play isn't separate from learning, it's a primary way children learn, especially in early grades.”

“When we reduce play, we're not increasing learning, we're removing one of the conditions that makes learning possible.”

Play supports mental health

- Kids need time to regulate—not just perform.
- Only ~58% of LAUSD elementary students report feeling safe
- Mental health needs in schools are increasing
- Play supports emotional regulation and connection

What to say:

“Play is one of the main ways kids regulate. Without it, we're asking them to perform without giving them what they need to cope.”

“If we care about student mental health, we have to protect the part of the day that actually helps kids reset and connect.”

The policy gap

(SB 291 – RIGHTS VS REALITY VS POSSIBILITY)

California now guarantees 30 minutes of daily recess under Senate Bill 291 (SB 291). That's an important step—but:

- The law sets a minimum, not a full model for the school day
- It does not account for lost time (lining up, transitions)
- It does not ensure that play is distributed across the day

In practice, many students receive less than 30 minutes of real, usable, unstructured play time

What to say about SB 291:

“SB 291 is an important step—it establishes a baseline. But in practice, it doesn’t guarantee meaningful play time for students.”

“Right now, we have a minimum requirement, but we don’t yet have a school day that reflects what children actually need to learn and regulate.”

What’s happening with play right now

- The structure of the day limits play.
- One short morning recess (~15 minutes in many schools)
- Limited mandated lunch time to eat, followed by another short recess break
- Long stretches (90 minutes or more) without movement
- Time lost to transitions and lining up

What to say:

“Right now, the way the day is structured doesn’t leave enough real time for play.”

“When you factor in transitions, students are getting far less play time than it looks like on paper.”

Let’s restore play

- Kids today have less time to play than previous generations.
- Free play has dropped significantly over time
- Kids in other countries often have more frequent breaks
- Play is increasingly squeezed out of both school and home

What to say:

“Play has been steadily reduced over time, and kids are feeling the impact.”

“Right now, play is getting squeezed out of both school and home—and that’s not sustainable for kids.”

Play isn’t extra—it’s how kids learn, connect, and regulate. Right now, kids don’t have enough of it. Start the conversation.

