

Why we shouldn't keep children in at break and lunchtime

Rationale

Whilst many countries now consider the practice of taking away a child's break or lunchtime as an outdated and potentially damaging practice, a significant number of UK schools still use the loss of play as a deterrent or punishment. Consequently, many children spend a significant amount of time indoors being restricted from play. This document sets out numerous reasons why this practice should be stopped.

1) Academic achievement is improved if children have a break¹

Studies show that a quality break (or recess) improves executive functioning, resilience, emotional self-control and adaptive classroom behaviours which are all vital aspects of successful learning. There are also several studies showing that increased physical activity before and after academic learning can enhance retention and comprehension. This means that even if we are prioritising achievement rather than the well-being of our children, the practice of taking away a break or lunchtime is counter intuitive because it goes against what we now know about how children learn.

Anxiety fundamentally impairs learning, affecting not just cognitive processing but short- and long-term memory retention and problem solving. A child who is experiencing anxiety, fear or humiliation is essentially learning at a slower rate. Break and lunchtime offer unique opportunities for children to emotionally reset through play. This better prepares them for education by mitigating symptoms of anxiety and will enhance the child's ability to learn.

2) Physical activity levels need to be increased in children not decreased

Physical Activity Levels are critically low in children. UK Government guidance is very clear about recommended daily physical activity levels and equally clear that a significant number of children are not achieving these levels. Any practice that lessens a child's opportunities for physical activity is directly in opposition to these guidelines and potentially catastrophic for a child's health.

In addition, a significant number of children do not respond to the rigours of an organised sport session. For some children, the break or lunchtime is therefore a vital (and sometimes the only) time for increasing physical activity levels, which is profoundly important for their health. Current UK Government guidance was recently amended to include the words "*more is better*" when detailing daily recommended physical activity levels. Any practice that deliberately decreases opportunities for physical activity should therefore be discontinued.

¹ Recess Quality and Social and Behavioral Health in Elementary School Students (2021)
William V. Massey PhD, Janelle Thalken MS, Alexandra Szarabajko MS, Laura Neilson MPH, John Geldhof PhD

3) Brain Growth – Play is a key criterion for healthy brain growth

Play is extremely neurologically rich, helping build the infrastructure in the brain for all other aspects of learning and development. Brain growth is experiential and as play gives a broad range of experiences, it creates a huge amount of activity in the brain. Break and Lunchtime offer a unique opportunity for children to experience this and is especially important when the increasing amount of screen time in the home is considered.

3) Emotional Well-being – Children need to emotionally reset to enable them to thrive

Play is a key therapeutic discipline helping children to recover from anxiety. Children who have experienced trauma, anxiety or other adverse childhood experiences need play to emotionally reset and to support emotional well-being. Any school wishing to support vulnerable children should prioritise play rather than restricting it because of the unique role it plays in mental health. Vulnerability in children can often manifest as negative behaviour and so a policy that takes away vital play time as a punishment is particularly damaging as it targets the very children who may need play the most.

It is also worth noting the biochemical impact of play. Whilst playing children will potentially produce vital biochemicals for emotional well-being, for example, oxytocin and benzodiazepines. These are similar to the biochemicals we produce when we eat. It would be considered immoral to deprive a child of food for punitive reasons but depriving a child of play is the biochemical equivalent.

4) Ineffective as a Behaviour Strategy

Any short-term deterrent is negated by the fact that children who do not have time to emotionally reset and “let off steam” are more likely to exhibit negative behaviour in subsequent lessons. Taking away a child’s break or lunch as punishment is therefore counterproductive. If children’s behaviour has deteriorated, they need to emotionally reset and experience pro-social emotions to enable positive choices and positive behaviour. If these vital social experiences are absent, because the child has been deprived of play as a punishment, the child is much more likely to exhibit additional anti-social behaviour in subsequent sessions.

6) Divergent Thinking and Creative Problem Solving

According to J Nina Leiberan, Play and Playfulness are key components in children developing the ability to creatively problem solve. Break and Lunchtimes where children direct their own play are particularly effective at giving children physical, cognitive and social spontaneity which are key components of a divergent thinking mindset which is intrinsically important to life-long learning and resilience.

7) The Myopia Epidemic

We are currently experiencing a huge increase in short-sightedness (Myopia) in children. A key reason cited for this is a decrease in outdoor experiences with several studies now showing that outdoor experiences are intrinsically important for children’s eye development. Outdoor break or lunchtime is therefore essential not just for children’s emotional and physical health but is also crucial for supporting the

development of healthy eyes. If the current trend is not reversed it is expected that half of the world population will be short sighted by the year 2050.

8) Creates confusing perceptions about education

If being kept in a classroom is used as a punishment, we are acknowledging that classroom time is fundamentally unpleasant, otherwise it could not be used as a deterrent. This is reinforcing negative perceptions about learning that could actually undermine a child's ability to thrive in the classroom environment. Modern education theory tells us that the classroom environment should be stimulating and nurturing. Therefore, taking away a child's break is potentially creating a mindset of equating the classroom environment to negative experiences which is in direct opposition to current education theory.

9) For some children the practice can be fundamentally cruel

Some children, struggle in school, finding classroom work to be challenging, unstimulating or emotionally draining. The break and lunchtime are an emotional life-line to these children. During parent consultations, a significant number of parents have told us that their children find the experience of losing break to be a traumatic one. They often say that on days where the child has lost break or lunchtime their behaviour deteriorates in the home and their mood becomes critically low. Taking away the break or lunchtime is particularly cruel for neurodiverse children who may already be in a heightened state of anxiety. Knowing the break or lunchtime is approaching can be the one thing that will help a child stay on track and focus. Taking this vital experience away from children can be deeply upsetting and a level of stress that children should not under any circumstances be experiencing in a school environment regardless of their behaviour.

10) Children's experiences of education.

All schools want their children to succeed. We should also want our children to have a positive experience of school. The break and lunchtime are a vital part of the school day that can give joy, excitement and fun to children. Every child needs these moments in their lives and, in light of the pandemic and with the huge increase in mental health interventions for children, we need to maximise any and all opportunities for positive experiences in a child's life. This is simply not possible if a child's break or lunchtime is taken away from them. Even if the practice works as a short-term deterrent, the emotional cost for some children is too high. An overwhelming concordance of evidence shows us that, if we value children, we should be increasing opportunities for play and outdoor experiences rather than restricting them.

Precedents and Legal requirements

- Article 31 of the UN Convention for the Rights of a Child clearly states that all children have a "right to play" and any practice that denies a child's rights should be opposed.
- Punishing children with break time detentions is a violation of their rights, according to the British Psychological Society.

- Starting with Florida, six states in the USA have now banned the practice of taking away a child's recess making it mandatory; citing increased well-being and better academic performance as reasons.
- Workplace law in the UK states that Adults have a right to breaks if they work. Whilst there is no such legislation protecting children, it should be a moral imperative that children have the same (if not more) rights than adults in any progressive and caring society.
- Prisoners in UK prisons have numerous rights to outdoor leisure time. Perhaps, more surprising is that the rules on keeping free-range chickens have been updated to increase opportunities for outdoor experiences because this is directly linked to chicken welfare and life-expectancy. In a society that protects the rights of prisoners and even chickens it makes sense that we also uphold those same rights for children.
- In response to the global myopia epidemic the World health organisation recommends "Preventative lifestyle changes among children, including a combination of increased time spent outdoors and decreased near-work activities." The World Council of Optometry (WCO) states that "it is now incumbent upon our country members to make fighting this global epidemic their top priority."
- Inspired Children is a national organisation working with vulnerable children across the UK. We are fundamentally opposed to the practice of taking away a child's break or lunchtime because we see first-hand the damage this practice does to some of our more vulnerable children. The organisation also takes part in numerous consultation exercises with parents and have been overwhelmed with personal experiences of just how detrimental the practice is for our children. We believe the practice to be cruel, unnecessary and utterly without benefit.

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Ben Kingston-Hughes is an international keynote speaker, author and multi award-winning trainer. He is also the Managing Director of Inspired Children and has worked with vulnerable children across the UK for over 30 years. He has appeared on television several times working on a variety of children's projects and his distinctive blend of humour, neuroscience and real-life practical experiences have made his training invaluable for anyone working with children. His new book, "A Very Unusual Journey into Play." is now available.

