



Reading, writing, 'rithmetic...and running

Getting kids moving during school breaks doesn't just burn off their excess energy – it actually helps them to learn better, writes Karen Fontaine

Article contributed by Karen Fontaine

With the children of Australia's 2007 baby boom now gearing up to start Kindergarten, let's take a look at the state of the schools at which they will spend six hours a day, five days a week and 40 weeks a year of the next 13 years.

Across Australia, many public schools are operating at maximum capacity, with hundreds of thousands of children learning their 'three Rs' inside yet more demountable classrooms that were introduced in the 1960s and '70s to accommodate another baby boom – the children of the first wave of post-war baby boomers.

The upshot is that as demountables continue their steady march across school grounds and ovals, an ever-decreasing amount of grassed area – even outdoor space – has meant that our school children have less opportunity to be physically active.

And indeed, new research shows children become less physically active during recess and lunch as they move through primary school, and become even more sedentary in secondary years.

Yet the games and sports they play in breaks contributes more to their total daily energy expenditure than anything they do outside of school, according to researchers at Deakin University.

These disturbing findings are the result of the world's first long-term study into changes in students' physical activity levels at recess and lunchtime.

Moreover, an increasingly crowded curriculum has led some schools to cut back on break times, further limiting play opportunities, the Deakin researchers, led by Dr Nicola Ridgers, point out.

In another study, researchers at the University of Western Australia explored the environmental characteristics of schools that helped boost children's physical activities

Dr Karen Martin offers her five top tips on how parents can keep kids moving and steer them away from other, more sedentary, options:

- ▶ "Set clear boundaries about screen use in discussion with kids, for example, the modem will be turned on for a total of two hours a day, and this will be during set times."
- ▶ "Get kids outside into the garden. Research shows that time spent outside is linked to more physical activity."
- ▶ "Encourage them to get out and about with friends in their neighbourhood – send them to the park!"
- ▶ "Be a good role model, exercise regularly and encourage the kids to come with you – walk the dog, ride a bike, play tennis."
- ▶ "Ensure your home environment supports kids to play outside, which means uncluttering outside areas and checking equipment – do you have a basketball hoop, balls (not flat!), badminton racquets, a cricket bat?"





during recess and lunchtime. A key factor was the amount of space, including grassed area, available.

Associate Professor Karen Martin was the lead author of a paper on the research, published recently in The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health.

Which is not doing children any favours, as those who are involved in rigorous daily activities benefit from better physical and mental health than their less-active peers, agree the researchers at both Deakin and the University of WA.

“The large majority of university-based, internationally published research in this field has found a positive association between children’s physical activity participation and academic achievement,” Dr Martin said.

“Replacing academic learning sessions with physical activity does not have a detrimental impact on school grades; indeed, some intervention research indicates that increased participation in physical activity leads to enhanced learning and better grades.

“Evidence also suggests that achieving a threshold amount of physical activity may be necessary to acquire learning benefits, and that participation in vigorous physical activity may further enhance learning.”

Dr Karen Martin offers her five top tips on how teachers can keep kids moving while at school:

- ▶ “Plan and hold fitness sessions for kids – the beginning of each day is perfect time – and the benefits are evident on students’ behaviour, cognitive processing and mental wellbeing as well as enhancing their physical health.”
- ▶ “Hold outdoor classes. Just getting kids outside increases their physical activity levels.”
- ▶ “Give children some free play time each day – even 10 minutes each day can boost their activity levels.”
- ▶ “Creative strategies to overcome barriers – such as space issues – are needed. ‘Loose parts’ such as recycled materials (eg Pods with recycled paraphernalia such as air-conditioning pipes) reward with hours of fun plus they also support physical activity, social interaction, team building and creativity (see PODs on www.playforlife.org.au and www.playpods.co.uk.”
- ▶ “Work with the school community to ensure the school environment supports sport and physical education, such as the quality and quantity of sporting equipment, and varied equipment such as tennis nets and table tennis.”

Karen Fontaine is a Sydney-based journalist.