

Kids Need Play and Recess. Their Mental Health May Depend on It.

By Peter DeWitt on August 1, 2018 9:00 AM



Today's guest post is written by Michael J. Hynes, E.D., Superintendent of Schools for the Patchogue-Medford School District (Long Island, NY).

As superintendents, principals and teachers plan for the upcoming school year, one thing is certain: We are serving a generation of children who are more anxious, depressed and suicidal than any generation before. A recent NPR Education Series broadcast states, "Up to one in five kids living in the U.S. shows signs or symptoms of a mental health disorder in a given year."

In fact, Dr. Peter Gray a research professor at Boston College found that, "Rates of depression and anxiety among young people in America have been increasing steadily for the past 50 to 70 years. Today, by at least some estimates, five to eight times as many high school and college students meet the criteria for diagnosis of major depression and/or anxiety disorder as was true half a century or more ago." If that doesn't alarm you as a parent, educator or as a concerned citizen, I'm not sure you have a pulse. The fact is, we have an existential mental health crisis in K-12 education and beyond. The question is, what can schools do about it?

It would be very easy to cite the multitude of reasons why our schools are so incredibly susceptible to the rise of psychopathology in children and adolescents. We can reference the noteworthy increases of screen time with technology, social media, cyber-bullying, diabetes and obesity in children, school shootings, standardized tests and the hyper-focus on academic scores in schools.

However, I believe there is one noteworthy reason that has contributed to this mental health crisis like no other, recess and play are on the endangered species list in our public schools. If school leaders don't act now, they will soon to be extinct. Over the past fifty years in the United States, recess and children's free play with other children has declined significantly.

As Gray pointed out in his research, "Children's freedom to play and explore on their own, independent of direct adult guidance and direction, has declined greatly in recent decades. Free play and exploration are, historically, the means by which children learn to solve their own problems, control their own lives, develop their own interests, and become competent in pursuit of their own interests."

Gray believes the one thing we know about anxiety and depression is that they relate with people's sense of control, or more important, lack of control over their own lives. Simply speaking, people who believe they are in charge of their own destiny, are less likely to become anxious or depressed than those who believe they are victims of situations out of their control.

In our schools, free play and recess has declined, and school and structured activities have taken over most child and family lifestyles. It's hard to conceive that the 2017 Center for Disease Control report on "Strategies on Recess in Schools" identified only eight states that have policies requiring daily recess in schools. In fact, the "United Nations Standards of Human Rights" endorses that federal prisoners have at least an hour of outdoor exercise every day. If a prisoner in jail has this endorsement, why wouldn't we allow the same right to our children in our schools?

I recommend one hour or more of recess and self-directed play every day. My school district offers our children 40 minutes of recess and another 40 minutes for lunch. We also introduced yoga and mindfulness in grades K-8 and high school elective courses in both yoga and mindfulness.

With the guidance of Peter Gray and Lenore Skenazy from the Let Grow Project, our school district has successfully instituted a "before school play club" at all seven of our elementary schools. Each Friday morning, students have the gift of mixed age level and self-directed play opportunities for one full hour. Our school district has close to seven hundred elementary students beginning their day "playing" outside. The adults are instructed to intervene only in an emergency. Teachers and principals have found the students who participate in our "Before School Play Club" to be less anxious and more on task when school begins.

As our children head back to school in a few weeks to focus on this year's challenges of higher standards and more testing, I implore superintendents and principals to focus on the benefits children receive outside of the classroom and on the playground. Indoor/outdoor free play and recess benefits the development of physical, emotional, academic and social skills.

Let's provide more opportunities in school so children learn how to make decisions and develop an *internal locus of control*. This way a child can influence events and outcomes in their own lives and in return, we will have more children who are potentially less anxious and depressed, all which inhibits their true potential as human beings. It's time we rethink the purpose of education and how invaluable free play and recess can be for all children. Their mental health and lives may depend on it.