

Answer Sheet

How schools ruined recess — and four things needed to fix it

By [Valerie Strauss](#) February 4, 2015 [✉ Email the author](#)

A post I published last summer by pediatric occupational therapist Angela Hanscom, titled “[Why so many kids can’t sit still in school today](#),” continues to be popular today, as are two other related posts of hers, “[The right — and surprisingly wrong — ways to get kids to sit still in class](#)” and “[A therapist goes to middle school and tries to sit still. She can’t. Neither can the kids.](#)” Here is the fourth in her occasional series on movement in classrooms. Hanscom is the founder of TimberNook, a nature-based development program designed to foster creativity and independent play outdoors in New England.

By Angela Hanscom

“You are wasting your breath,” a colleague once told me after overhearing my conversation with a parent regarding the importance of free play on that child’s health. “I’ve been telling parents this for years and no one *ever* understands me. I’ve learned to keep quiet. You’ll see. People just don’t get it.” Her faith in people was lost. I, on the other hand, would not give up that easily.

Fast forward five years, and I’m halfway across the world, in the beautiful country of New Zealand. Rolling green hills surround us at every turn. Here in the small patch of woods, the children are at a TimberNook camp enjoying their freshly cooked popcorn in their bare feet, while sheep wander through the trees nearby. A child suddenly spies the sheep and puts away her snack. “Can I have some rope and scissors please?” The child politely asks. With no questions asked, the young girl is given ample rope and a pair of scissors.

This six-year-old child quickly gets to work. She cuts the rope to the size she wants and makes a large loop at the end. She only asks the adult for help with tying the secure knot. “I’m going to lasso some sheep!” she yells. Other children take notice and start to create their own lassos. Before long, the children are running through the woods trying to lasso the sheep. The scene that takes place in front of us is therapeutic on all levels: laughter rings through the woods, as the children quickly learn how to maneuver around the tree stumps with little bare feet softly padding along on the dirt floor. They learn how to work as a team to shepherd the sheep. They also gently stroke the soft wool of the sheep, while talking soothingly to the animals. In other words, through this one child-led play experience, they practiced problem solving, fine motor skills, balance, quick reflexes, empathy, teamwork, endurance, and touch processing skills.

The problem is that most adults would try and prevent this sort of play. Everything would be questioned and controlled from the very beginning. There is often *no* trust when it comes to free play for children, creating a highly regulated and controlled recess atmosphere. A recess that is consistently short and very restrictive allows few opportunities for healthy sensory development – leading to potential difficulties with attention, learning, and behavior.

What if we took a totally different approach to recess instead? A therapeutic approach that values the needs of the whole child and views recess as a form of *prevention* instead of simply time to get “energy out.” What if we let children fully move their bodies during recess time, let them get dirty, and even test out new theories? What would recess look like then?

The closest I found to doing just that was the Swanson School in Auckland, New Zealand. I had heard of its nonconventional, yet successful approach to recess through social media and was instantly intrigued. Since I was already going to be in New Zealand for TimberNook, I decided to meet Swanson’s principal, Bruce McLachlan, in person.

We spent a good hour talking over coffee about his now-famous recess. His recess has gotten international attention, because he did something radical: he got rid of the rules. And guess what? When the rules left, so did their “behavior issues.” He saw more independence, improved creativity, healthy risk-taking, less falling, better coordination, and improved attention in the classroom.

There were four main ways he changed his recess in order to see these improvements. Four things that I happen to successfully use in my program as well to enhance child development and inspire creativity. Think of them as a recipe. A recipe

that will transform a recess session from one that gets children “wired” and hard to transition back to learning – to one that leaves them grounded and inspired. They are:

1. Space

Principal McLachlan said one of the greatest changes he made to his recess sessions was to give them ample space to explore. He started allowing them to bring their scooters and bikes to recess as well. Children were allowed to climb the trees and the boundaries were extended. At TimberNook, we often find that the more space children are given to explore, the more creative and independent they get in their play. They start to have a sense of freedom – especially from the adult world.

2. Trust

Principal Swanson calls this having an “adult-free” recess – as much as possible. The idea here is that adults should try to be less obvious in the environment. I’ve noticed throughout the years that if an adult is standing right next to a group of children playing, that the kids will often pull that adult into their play scheme. Sometimes that adult then becomes the appointed “leader” of their play – changing the dynamics of the group. Children are also more prone to tattle on other children or seek constant reassurance when an adult is standing close by. By having the adults not take “center-stage,” children are more likely to come up with their own ideas and problem solve independently. Both are important life skills.

3. Time

Swanson school has two recess sessions, each for 40 minutes. Children need lengthier recess sessions in order to reap the full benefits from the play session. They need ample time to move their body, to explore, to tinker, to problem-solve, to work through their emotions, and to dive deep into their imaginations. Short fifteen to twenty-minute recess sessions, often interrupt the children just as they are about to figure out who and what they are going to play.

4. Loose Parts

Loose parts are becoming a popular way to inspire creative play. Principal McLachlan added loose parts such as wooden planks, tires, and old hoses to his recess sessions. The children use these items for hours on end, creating their own imaginary worlds. This allows the adults to step back and let the environment inspire the children to try new things.

How do we improve attention in the classroom setting? How do we inspire children to start thinking outside the box?

The answer is very simple: it is time to re-think their recess.

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Valerie Strauss is an education writer who authors The Answer Sheet blog. She came to the Post as an assistant foreign editor for Asia in 1987 and weekend foreign desk editor after working for Reuters as national security editor and a military/foreign affairs reporter on Capitol Hill. She also previously worked at UPI and the LA Times.  Follow @valeriestrauss

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