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Give The Kids A Break

Steve Rushin

FOUR SQUARE and seven years ago we had recess: 20 minutes, twice a day, of Darwinian contests whose very names—king of the hill, capture the flag, keep-away, dodgeball—screamed survival of the fittest. After all, monkey in the middle isn't just a playground game; it describes the chain of human evolution.

Most of these games were passed down like heirlooms. They crossed continents and centuries with only small modifications, surviving into the modern age with names such as duck, duck, goose; Mother, may I; and Miss Mary Mack. Ancient Greeks jumped rope, Caesar's subjects played a form of jacks, and blindman's bluff was played in the court of [Henry VIII](#). Pity, then, that none of these games may survive the decade, and for one deeply depressing reason: Red rover, red rover, recess is over.

Or it is for many children. According to the National PTA, nearly 40% of [U.S.](#) elementary schools "have either eliminated or are considering eliminating recess." Twenty to 30 percent of schools offer 15 or fewer minutes of daily recess. Lifers at Leavenworth get more time in the exercise yard. And the [U.S. Department of Education](#) reports that 7% of all [U.S.](#) first- and second-graders—and 13% of all sixth-graders—get no recess whatsoever.

How ever did this happen to the fabled fourth R? For starters, increased preparation for standardized tests mandated by No Child Left Behind leaves little time for recess. That legislation was passed by Congress, which through Sunday had spent 138 days in recess during this session, safe in the knowledge that eight-year-olds can't vote. In fairness to school administrators, no one should have to choose between childhood ignorance and childhood obesity. But there are lots of other reasons for the recess recession.

One is fear of injury. Willett Elementary School in [Attleboro](#), Mass., has been roundly ridiculed for banning tag and other so-called chase games. But similar bans were imposed long ago by many other schools in places such as [Spokane](#); [Cheyenne, Wyo.](#); and suburban [Charleston, S.C.](#) [Attleboro](#) merely fell in line behind them. Trouble is, life is a chase game. At my elementary school every recess ended like Round 8 of a prizefight: with a bell, the mending of cuts and at least two parties forced to sit in a corner.

That kind of unsupervised play literally left its mark on me. The scar on my forehead? I hit a pipe while playing tag in the basement. My left front tooth? Knocked out by a thrown baseball as I daydreamed in the park. And those were just the accidents, independent of the teenage Torquemadas who intentionally inflicted all manner of torture. There were no junior high Geneva Conventions, and so almost everyone endured noogies, wedgies, swirlies, snuggies, sudsies, melvins, wet willies, pink bellies, Indian burns, Russian haircuts and Hertz doughnuts—and a litany of other poetic means of coercion.

That was then, this is now. Last year a 15-year-old boy in Gold Hill, Ore., was charged with offensive physical touching for giving a 13-year-old boy a purple nurple. And therein lie two other reasons that recess is receding: 1) playground bullies and 2) fear of law suits over injuries incurred on school grounds. In [Maine](#) one school canceled recess for eighth-graders in an effort to end bullying, which is a little like scalping in an effort to end dandruff.

It's a jungle out there, but you'll be hard pressed on most playgrounds to find a jungle gym, or monkey bars, or stainless-steel slides that in the summer months sizzle like a fajita skillet. Many seesaws are built with springs instead of the fulcrums that allowed one kid to jump off at the bottom, causing the other to drop abruptly, as if down an elevator shaft. And every piece of bubble-wrapped playground equipment—excuse me, play scape equipment—is festooned with labels that warn of deadly consequences for the smallest misuse.

If all of this has you saying, "Give me a break," you've just voiced a universal human need. We all need a break. Some Teamsters get two

15-minute breaks per shift, the Supreme Court is in recess from July to October, and the third Thursday of every June is National Recess at Work Day, whose founder, Rich DiGirolamo, suggests that adults drop whatever they're doing next June 21 and "play tag and dodgeball, jump rope and eat watermelon."

Surely seven-year-olds deserve to do the same. And so National Recess Week was observed in September, with Recess Rallies in schools around America. The PTA and the Cartoon Network are sponsoring a Rescuing Recess campaign. Something called the American Association for the Child's Right to Play is also eager to resuscitate recess.

All of them agree with G.K. Chesterton, who wrote, "Earth is a task garden; heaven is a playground."

If you have a comment for Steve Rushin, send it to rushin@sletters.com.

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