



Recess Physical Activity Packs in Elementary Schools

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Purpose of Study

A school district in North Carolina identified recess time as part of the state mandated 150 minutes of physical activity (PA) per week and purchased fitness equipment (recess packs) for the children to use. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of the impact of the recess packs initiative through interviews with children, teachers, and principals.

Methodology

The participants were; (a) four principals, (b) four teachers, and (c) four students from schools that had received the recess packs. Information was collected through interviewing each participant separately for an average of 60 minutes each.

The constant comparative method of analysis was applied to the individual transcripts as a method of coding and categorizing the data and in summarizing the findings in meaningful ways. The analysis of the interview data began with an individual case analysis of each of the principals, followed by a within-group case analysis of all of the principals. This involved inducing categories from the answers of one principal and comparing them to the answers from the other principals. Themes and patterns drawn from the four individual cases were compared and contrasted for similarities and differences. The same process was repeated for the four teachers in the study and finally for the four students in the study.

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Results & Discussion

Qualitative data analysis procedures were used to explore participants' views on how the recess packs had impacted PA levels during recess. Several themes emerged during the interviews including:

1. There were Gender Differences in the types of activities performed by the students. Prior to the intervention the boys made up their own games that required little or no equipment while the girls were physically inactive. After the intervention the boys played traditional team sports while the girls engaged in activities such as jumping rope. The participants revealed that the recess packs had resulted in both sexes being more physically active but just performing different activities.
2. Continued presence of "Hall of Shame" type activities during recess. Several participants discussed the prevalence of inappropriate games before and after the introduction of the recess packs. These games have been identified as being developmentally inappropriate (Williams, 1992). All of the principals revealed that they considered dodgeball and kickball appropriate games for increasing student activity levels. The introduction of the recess packs did not result in the disappearance of these inappropriate games.
3. Role change of teachers during recess. All four of the principals had instructed their teachers to provide more PA opportunities for their students during recess. Some of the principals were requiring their teachers to build recess activities into their lessons plans while other principals simply asked them to encourage physical activity. This inconsistent approach between principals was also evident amongst the interviewed teachers with some taking the mandate much more seriously than others.
4. The School Cafeteria / Addressing Nutritional Concerns. The principals and the teachers thought that a poor diet was as much to blame for current childhood obesity levels as a lack of PA. All four principals discussed their awareness of the unhealthy foods students eat in the cafeteria. One principal was taking steps to help students make better choices in the cafeteria by setting up programs to educate parents about good nutrition for their child, stating, "parents need to take responsibility, but if they are not educated themselves...we could offer parents nights."
5. Principal / teacher preparation for implementing recess pack programs. The reactions to recess packs training workshop were mixed. All of the principals and three of the teachers commented on the need for further training and the provision of more resources. One teacher stated that "I want ready-to-use activities demonstrated to me and I don't want to have to look through a folder to figure things out." Another teacher proposed asking physical education faculty from a local university to share some pedagogical tips and ideas for activities to promote PA.

Recommendations

1. Structured recess interventions are needed to provide girls with adequate levels of PA (Sarkin, McKinzie, & Sallis, 1997).
2. The prevalence of inappropriate activities and their support from Principals suggest a need for a training program about what types of activities are considered appropriate by experts in physical education.
3. Arguably, planning to teach "active recess" is the key ingredient to engaging students in MVPA. Merely arranging 30 minutes of recess per day does not guarantee suitable levels of PA. Martin et al (2001) identified that teachers must have planned, specific objectives.
4. Classroom teachers need workshops that focus on teaching strategies such as: (a) how to increase MVPA minutes, (b) how to individualize activities so that every child can experience success, and (c) how to design activities that focus on the components of health related physical fitness.
5. If schools are going to help address childhood obesity they also need to offer healthier foods in their cafeteria and look at innovative ways at encouraging students to choose healthier options.
6. The use of recess time to meet the state mandate seems like a quick fix to a serious problem. More resources should be made available so that schools can provide students with more physical education classes a week from a trained professional.