

# One Teacher's Take on Recess

A Q&A with Christopher Smith

*For the last five years, Christopher Smith has worked at Thomas Hooker Elementary School in the Meriden Public Schools in Meriden, Connecticut. He currently teaches fifth grade and supervises his students' recess daily. Below, he shares why recess is crucial to student learning.*

—EDITORS

## Editors: How does recess work in your school?

**Christopher Smith:** In my school district, elementary school teachers are responsible for their own classes during recess, which is usually about 20 to 25 minutes daily.\* At Thomas Hooker, we give the fifth-grade classes closer to 25 minutes on most days, and on Fridays, I typically give them 40 minutes whenever possible. As I know from my previous experience at a different school where recess was shorter, this time goes by quickly; we had only 15 minutes for recess, and by the time we walked the kids outside and came back in, recess was over and the students hardly got a chance to exercise.

Most days, it's just our class during recess, but sometimes a fourth-grade class joins us or all three of the fifth-grade classes go out at the same time. What makes recess special to students is being able to choose what they do. Kickball is really big for us in fifth grade, and we also play foursquare. Generally, when it's the three fifth-grade classes together, I handle kickball, another teacher monitors foursquare, and the third teacher walks around the rest of the area to monitor other activities. For instance, a group of my students sometimes practices gymnastics in a field off to the side, and other students prefer to just talk with their friends.

When it's just my class out there, we typically play kickball. The exercise and health benefits are obvious, but I see a huge social aspect to it as well. For example, the students take turns pitching and organize their own batting orders, and they work out any problems that arise among themselves without needing me to intervene, which is a big step developmentally. And the process of coming to a compromise is also important for them to learn.

There's a part of me that likes when recess is just me and the 17 students in my class. Kids who wouldn't normally play

kickball, for instance, will play because they don't feel overwhelmed by a large group of students. I often find that students really try to help their peers who aren't as athletic by giving them positive feedback. They're constantly encouraging them by saying things like "nice try" and "good job," and it's really an opportunity for the more athletic students to take charge and bond with peers who need more help.

I remember one student who was tremendous academically and also very artistic. But in earlier grades, he was always the last person chosen for teams because he wasn't very athletic. At recess, my students really rose to the occasion by encouraging him to participate in kickball and the other games we played. By the end of the year, he really felt like he was a strong part of our teams during recess, and he gained confidence in himself socially and athletically.

While we're often outside for recess, in bad weather we do have to stay in our classroom. Some teachers provide board games for students to play or give them free time to either work on the computers or read independently. With my class, I try to coordinate team-building activities.

## Editors: Tell us about those team-building activities.

**Smith:** I rely on several different games. For example, this year when the weather was bad and we stayed inside, we did one exercise called "stranded," where students must use the rugs and furniture in the classroom to work their way from one side of the room to the other without touching the ground. The catch is they have to figure out ways to do it as a group.

For instance, students might need to push a chair backward so that another person can get on. At first, the students all just want to get to the other side, but they soon realize they must work together to succeed.

There's great value in students working in a group, as opposed to just working independently all the time, and recess is particularly great for team-building activities. I want my class to come together cohesively during recess so that the cohesion spills over into the classroom and makes it a positive environment for all the kids.

Even the way students are seated in my classroom in pods is designed so they can problem solve with each other. I like to ensure that opportunities for teamwork carry over from recess into actual classwork so students can get to know each other and take on leadership roles.

## Editors: Do you ever withhold recess from students?

**Smith:** No. I allow everyone to go outside because I want them all to get the exercise. If a few students haven't completed their work or followed the rules, usually I won't let them take part in the games for the first 10 minutes or so, and that's plenty of time for them to reflect on how they should have done what they were supposed to do.

To me, denying recess completely is detrimental. These students need to be active and play for at least part of recess so they're not totally excluded from their classmates. It's also a time for them to reduce their own stress and learn to get along with their peers in a group.



\*For the district's wellness policy, see [www.bit.ly/2i74Lpr](http://www.bit.ly/2i74Lpr).