

Research Briefing N° 59

The social value of breaktimes and lunchtimes in schools

A programme of research shows important changes over time in school breaktimes and lunchtimes, offers insights into the views of school staff and children, and shows the social value of children's experiences during these times.

Key words: breaktime; recess; lunchtime; school meals; peer relations; friendships



Key findings

- Break and lunch times are a unique context for social development where children develop friendships and social networks with peers and participate in social and play activities that they initiate and organise themselves.
- The national survey shows evidence of substantial reductions over time in the length of lunchtimes and the virtual abolition of afternoon break at Key Stage 2 (ages 7 to 11) and secondary levels.
- Pupils are overwhelmingly positive about breaktimes, particularly lunch breaks. Most feel that they do not have enough time for playing/ socialising and break times should be lengthened (particularly at secondary level).
- Pupils valued breaktime as free time for them to do what they want and as an opportunity to socialise, get physical exercise and to enjoy eating food while sitting and socialising with particular friends.
- Primary school staff valued breaktime as an opportunity for pupils to get physical exercise and to socialise. Secondary schools saw its value in more functional terms as providing time for eating and drinking and giving teachers a break.
- Schools and pupils were in agreement that a main problem at breaktime is poor behaviour. Pupils also noted insufficient opportunity and space for activities.
- Around a quarter of children reported that they rarely saw friends outside school, highlighting the importance of opportunities to interact freely with friends in school.

What we did

The programme consists of three studies:

1. An observational study of primary children's social and play activities during break and lunchtimes over the course of one year, funded by the Spencer Foundation.
2. A national survey of break and lunchtimes and pupils' social life in and out of primary and secondary school, funded by the Nuffield Foundation. This provided nationally representative information on changes since the last survey in 1995 in main features of breaktime: timing and duration, supervision and facilities provided as well as views on its value, problems arising and behaviour, and information on extended school services. Information was also collected on pupil perspectives on breaktime, social behaviour in and out of school, and travel to and from school.
3. A third study (Ed Baines self-funded) examined pupil's views in London and the South East of England on experiences of primary school mealtimes.

How we did it

The observation study involved 20 weeks of systematic observations of playground behaviour of 129 children from four Year 3 classes (age 7 to 8) in four schools, along with repeated individual interviews and questionnaires at the start and end of the year. The research examined the interconnections between involvement in playground activities and games, peer groups and children's relationships with friends and peers.

The national survey involved a large-scale postal survey of 7% of all primary and 6% of all secondary schools in England and Wales, and covered schools' and pupils' views about breaktime, travel to and from school and social life outside of school. A pupil questionnaire was completed by 1,300 pupils in Year 5 (age 9 to 10), Year 8 (age 12 to 13) and Year 10 (age 14 to 15) in 19 schools in England and Wales.

The mealtime survey was completed by 316 Year 5 pupils in four schools and pairs of 16 pupils were interviewed about their daily meal time experiences.

Implications

The data collected in the national survey are of clear importance since they provide the only available systematic data on breaktimes and school playground facilities. It is of great concern to find further cuts to breaktimes at a time when there is much government attention on overcoming sedentary lifestyles. Despite taking up a fifth of the school day, there is still limited understanding about the importance of breaktime experiences for children's social, mental and educational adjustment. Policymakers and schools should take pupils' views and the social value of breaktime seriously and should stem the trend for cuts to break and lunch times. Further information about these projects is available from our website

www.breaktime.org.uk

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