It's important for physical educators to contradict the myth that children do no more than just “wander aimlessly” or “hang-out” during recess. They should remind parents and school administrators that physical education classes act only as a spring board for a physically active lifestyle. They should also encourage children to follow through and continue to practice newly learned movement and motor skills during recess, after-school programs, and at home.

One pro-active way to further counter the myth is to provide both structured and unstructured activities during recess periods. A cognitive recess curriculum strengthens the need for physical education and benefits the learning process throughout the school.

The concept of a cognitive recess curriculum is based on three research studies conducted by the author. The largest study involved over 1,564 educators (superintendents, principals, teachers K-12). It sought to determine the subjects’ perceptions of recess (Jones, 2001, 2004). A similar investigation compared pre-service and in-service teachers’ views of recess (Jones, 2003). The third investigation studied parents of children in first grade to learn of their perceptions of recess (Jones, 2004). The results of the three studies were used to create components of a Cognitive Recess Curriculum.

What Does a Cognitive Recess Curriculum Look Like?

A Cognitive Recess Curriculum designed by the author offers four learning centers, with an additional free play area. The learning centers consist of a Math Center, Science Center, Language Development Center, and Music/Art Center. Classroom teachers would provide prepared descriptions of several cognitive games (e.g., Playing School, Math Bingo, etc.) that children would likely enjoy playing during their recess period. The Language Development Center includes a variety of traditional recess games and activities (see below), as well as information reflecting each activity’s historical significance. Also included are early versions or variations that can still be played today to improve communication and interaction.

For example, when introducing Long Rope Games children learn that “Chase the Fox” challenges each player’s creativity as well as jumping ability. This favorite game of the early 1800s encourages children to select a leader, or Fox, who jumps in and performs an advanced jump, or some jump rope stunt like slapping the ground before exiting. The next player is obliged to imitate the stunt, followed by the next player, and so on.

Sample traditional recess games to include in the curriculum.
The 1800s game "Baking Bread" requires a player to enter the long jump rope carrying a stone or small rock in the hand. While jumping the rope, the player bends down and places the bread in the oven (i.e., on the ground). The player continues to jump while the turners count to ten to cook the bread. At the end of the count, the player snatches the bread from the oven and pretends to eat the cooked treat.

"Double Dutch," or "Double Dodge," is most often described as having the same action as the loops of a rotary egg whisk. It is believed that this game originated in London in the early 1800s. When the ropes are turned inwardly, it is called "Double Dutch." If the ropes are turned outwardly, the turn is called "French Ropes." In the late 1800s, swinging the rope from side to side in a pendulum motion while a jumper completed five to ten jumps was referred to as "Rocking the Baby" or "Rock the Cradle."

The following are sample curriculum objectives:

- To improve children’s health through increased physical activity
- To make use of safety practices recognized by the National Program for Playground Safety
- To create Learning Centers, distributed throughout the outdoor playground area, that cover at least four academic learning areas and one free play area
- To provide access and games for children with special needs (examples: children in wheel chairs, the hearing and visually impaired)
- To utilize musical tapes/CDs in the Music Center for the purpose of teaching traditional song games such as "Hokey Pokey," "Farmer-in-the-Dell," "Nursery Rhymes" (enactment of rhymes), "Follow-the-Leader," and "London Bridge" or taking part in age-appropriate, one-act plays as part of a Language Development Learning Area
- To offer a variety of traditional recess games described in the book, Elementary School Recess: Selected readings, games, and activities for teachers and parents (Clements, 2000)
- To provide contemporary jump rope games and chants for elementary children as part of the Language Development/Language Arts Learning Center
- To provide a variety of science experiments, math games, and social studies games

Obviously, the success of the curriculum is based on the physical education teacher’s enthusiasm to introduce a variety of traditional games to children during regularly scheduled physical education and the school administration’s willingness to train play leaders or recess specialists to implement games and activities stemming from the classroom and selected resources. Research has shown that play enhances cognitive, social-emotional, and motor skills (Bergen & Coscia, 2001; Tyler, 2000) and that play can help develop many of the skills necessary to function successfully in the older grades. It is in the school’s best interest to continue to support recess and use play as a means to enhance children’s love for learning and physical activity.

References