

Understanding why students turn to toilets for socializing during breaks

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Elementary school children hiding in restrooms to socialize? It's an odd new phenomenon in public education, stirring debate about who's to blame and how such behavior should be addressed.

In what's been dubbed "toilet socializing," children resort to bathrooms to meet up with friends in school environments limiting their movements during breaks. The trend reflects a broader educational issue: striking a balance between ensuring student safety and fostering a healthy, active childhood.

The root causes of "toilet socializing" are twofold: schools' apprehensions about safety and parental anxiety over their children's academic performance.

Schools, fearing potential accidents during recess and the legal ramifications, are increasingly restricting student movements. Even 10-minute breaks can be limited to trips to the restroom.

Concurrently, some parents believe that limiting physical activity at schools can help

their children focus more on studies.

However, tight restrictions not only stifle children's natural urge to play and interact, but also deprive them of necessary time-off for mental and physical well-being.

Minors have short attention spans and benefit from some relaxation after each class. Prolonged sitting in classrooms can lead to health issues, such as obesity and myopia.

Studies show that about 15 percent of Chinese adolescents are at varying levels of risk for depression, a percentage higher than that of adults.

In China, people aged 18 years or younger comprise a third of depression patients. Some recent media reports have highlighted overcrowding problems in the pediatric wards of psychiatric hospitals.

Recesses were a cherished part of my own childhood experience at school. They were an opportunity to stretch my legs, play and bond with friends. I am not aware that these unstructured activities affected academic performance or caused serious injuries.

So what has happened to the



Above: Girls play basketball during a class break at a school in Jiangsu Province.

Left: Students play games during a class break in southwest China's Sichuan Province.



Students engage in arm wrestling matches between classes at a school in Shandong Province.
— Photos / IC



Students do exercises in a classroom in Shandong Province.

traditional 10-minute breaks between classes?

"Toilet socializing" points to broader issues within our educational and societal approach to childhood. It suggests that our education system is more interested in training students to pass exams than in cultivating them to face the future as well-rounded, happy individuals.

Recesses don't have to be periods of anxiety for educators. They can be structured to include safe, creative student activities like group exercises, poetry contests or dancing.

Some countries use class breaks constructively.

Finland's education system integrates multiple 15-minute outdoor breaks aimed at boosting learning, lowering stress and enhancing happiness.

In Japan, despite a rigorous academic climate, schools prioritize unstructured playtime to nurture creativity, teamwork and social skills.

The United States features diverse recess approaches, with initiatives like "Right to Play," which advocates mandatory recesses.

It's essential to guarantee the rights of students to freely engage in healthy recess activities. Penalties should be levied on schools that fail to integrate

supervised break time into their daily schedules. At the same time, further steps need to be taken to strengthen liability insurance for schools. That would help ease the anxiety about financial repercussions that often leads educators to adopt overly restrictive policies.

We all need to remember that education is not just what happens in classrooms. Rather it is a vital component in providing life lessons that children learn through play, friendship and the freedom to express themselves.

Let's give kids the opportunity to be kids.