

# National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

## THE PRACTICAL TEACHER



**This Week's Topic:**

## Creating Safe Playgrounds

### *A Whole-School Approach*

Almost all students love recess. But schools find that behavior and safety problems can often occur on the playground—for reasons that are easy to understand. Adult supervision on playgrounds may be limited. Also, students may not always know what behaviors are expected of them on the playground, be tempted to engage in risky behavior on play equipment or get involved in rough physical horseplay with other children that results in fights or injuries.

The following intervention package (adapted from Lewis et al., 1998 & Heck et al., 2001) teaches children appropriate rules for playground behavior and allows classrooms to earn rewards over time for positive behavior during recess. Playground monitors reinforce students for appropriate behavior, assign students to brief time-out as needed for misbehaving, and provide structure when needed by teaching students rules to games and organizing activities.

## Steps in Implementing This Intervention

**Step 1: Create Staff Guidelines for Defining 'Appropriate' and 'Inappropriate' Playground Behaviors.** As a school staff, agree upon written definitions for acceptable and unacceptable playground behavior. Include specific examples of each. For instance, a school may include "aggression" under its listing of 'Inappropriate Behaviors', and define aggression as "unwanted or hurtful physical contact with another student (such as hitting or pushing); unwanted or hurtful use of language (such as name-calling, verbal threats, or swearing)."

**Step 2: Train Playground Monitors.** The most important role in this intervention is that of the playground monitor. He or she should be trained to:

- Identify when students are behaving appropriately on the playground (according to the school behavior guidelines) and give children specific praise and feedback about their positive behavior (e.g., "Johanna, thank you for retrieving the ball for the group. That was considerate of you!").
- Reward students within a group randomly with tickets or other tokens for showing appropriate behavior.
- Identify when students are misbehaving (according to the school behavior guidelines) and either (a) give the student a verbal warning or (b) place the student in time-out for a short period.
- Organize and teach children the rules of common playground games.

**Step 3: Train Students in Appropriate Playground Behaviors.** Prior to the intervention, teachers in participating classrooms should introduce their students to the behavioral guidelines (created in Step 1) for using the playground. Since students learn best with interactive activities, teachers will want to model the appropriate behaviors and have students practice them as well.

**Here is a teacher tip:** Once students seem to understand how they are expected to behave during recess, take the entire class out to the playground for a supervised practice session. Have students practice their skills and give them immediate feedback (e.g., "Class, watch Travis come down the slide with his feet forward. That's the correct way to do it. Nice job!"). Practicing right on the playground will help children to more quickly generalize their skills (apply them to a new setting).

**Step 4: Start the Intervention.** Once the intervention has begun:

- Playground monitors randomly distribute good-behavior tickets or other tokens to students who are behaving appropriately. At the same time, they give the students specific praise for their good behavior.
- Playground monitors organize and oversee group games (if needed) and remind children of the rules.

- Playground monitors set aside a time-out location (e.g., "wait-circle" marked off with chalk in a supervised corner of the recess yard). Whenever students misbehave, a monitor can optionally choose to deliver a single brief warning (e.g., "Toby, a playground rule is 'Treat others with respect.' That means no hitting. This is a warning"). If the student continues to misbehave, he or she is placed in the time-out location for a short period (e.g., 5 minutes) before being allowed to return to play.

Teachers collect the good-behavior tickets when their students return to the classroom from recess. These tickets are tallied and put into a jar. A running total is kept of the tickets collected. When the class has collected a certain number of tickets (to be determined by the teacher), the class gets a prize or privilege (e.g., watching a movie with popcorn, having a pizza party, being allowed additional recess).

## Troubleshooting

***Children will not obey the playground monitors.*** If children refuse to comply with monitors' requests, your school can give monitors the power to temporarily suspend the playground privileges of any student who willfully disobeys them. (It is important, of course, that monitors use this power judiciously, consistently, and fairly.) If one or more students from a particular classroom are particularly disrespectful, the classroom teacher may want to make surprise visits to the playground to show support for the monitor and assist him or her in dealing with noncompliant students.

***The playground intervention is not very effective.*** If your school discovers that the intervention is not working, be sure that:

- Students fully understand what positive behaviors are expected of them on the playground and what negative behaviors are not permitted.
- Monitors are consistent and fair when enforcing the behavioral expectations on the playground.
- Students receive regular praise and good-behavior tickets for appropriate behavior.
- Teachers follow through in their classrooms in giving students earned rewards for good playground behavior.

## References

Heck, A., Collins, J., & Peterson, L. (2001). Decreasing children's risk taking on the playground. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 34, 349-352.

Lewis, T.J., Sugai, G., & Colvin, Geoff (1998). Reducing problem behavior through a school-wide system of effective behavioral support: Investigation of a school-wide social skills training program and contextual interventions. *School Psychology Review*, 27, 446-459.

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