

School break times and young people's social lives

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www.breaktime.org.uk

Three national surveys of schools covering a period of 27 years (1990-2017) show important changes over time in school break and lunchtimes, in terms of their length, supervision and management and in terms of the views of school staff and of pupils about the value of these times. The findings highlight the important place of breaktimes in school and in children's lives as an opportunity for them to meet and socialise with friends and peers.

Key Findings

Breaktime duration

- Break and lunch times are universal in schools.
- Breaks decline in length with student age. Average total time for breaks was 85 minutes at Key Stage 1 (5-7 years), 76 minutes at Key Stage 2 (7-11 years) and 63 minutes at Key Stage 3 & 4 (11 to 16 years) and made up on average about 22%, 20% and 16% of the school day at KS1, KS2 and Secondary levels (KS3 and 4), respectively.
- There have been marked reductions over time in the total amount of break time, despite the length of school day largely unchanged. Compared to 1995, the youngest children in school (KS1) get an average of 45 minutes less breaktime per week and children in secondary schools (KS3 and 4) get an average of 65 minutes less breaktime per week.
- Pupils are overwhelmingly positive about breaktimes, particularly lunch breaks. Most feel that they do not have enough time for playing/ socialising and that break times should be lengthened (particularly at secondary level).
- The withholding of full breaktimes was a practice found in 60% of schools. This was to manage poor behaviour in classes and individuals and to enable them to catch up with class and/or home work. Four fifths of pupils said they had experienced missing a breaktime.

Breaktime Supervision

- There has been a marked increase in the average numbers of adults supervising at breaktimes in primary and secondary schools in 2017 compared to 2006 and 1995. School breaktimes are now more supervised by adults than they have been in the past 22 years.

Perceived value and challenges of breaktimes

- Staff and pupils valued breaks in different ways. Pupils valued breaktime first and foremost as free time for them to play and socialise with friends and peers but also time to enjoy eating. Primary school staff valued breaktime as an opportunity for pupils to get physical exercise, to socialise and get fresh air. Secondary schools saw its value in more functional terms as providing time for eating and drinking, energy release and physical exercise.

Social life outside of school

- There has been a marked reduction since 2006 in the proportions of pupils that regularly meet (offline) with peers outside of school and a corresponding increase in the proportion of students that rarely meet with peers outside of school (less than once a week). This highlights that school is increasingly the main, and in some cases the only context where young people get to socialise directly with peers and friends of their own age.

What we did

Following on from 2 national surveys undertaken in 1995 and 2006, the BaSiS (Breaktime and Social life in Schools) study surveyed 4,379 state funded and independent primary and secondary schools in England (during 2017). With a 26% response rate, 1,192 schools returned questionnaires. We collected current information on the main features of break and lunch times, including: timing and duration; breaktime organisation and management; supervision arrangements; changes to school grounds; rules for pupil movement during break times; the perceived value and function of these times and views on pupil behaviour at break times.

The study also involved a survey of pupils' views and experience of social life in and out of school, similar to a survey undertaken in 2006, and case studies of schools that characterise a range of approaches to break and lunch times and school provision. Over 1600 young people, in Years 5, 8 and 10, from 37 state run English primary and secondary schools returned questionnaires; a 71% response rate.

Key Recommendations

1. **Policy makers should consider legislating for time for pupils to have breaks.** Working adults, including teachers, have a right to breaks but there is no equivalent policy for pupils. Legislation should convey an average expectation that ensures all pupils have regular and sustained periods of break time every-day to undertake enjoyable activities of their own choosing, with peers and in an outdoor space for the purpose of play, recreation and social development.
2. **Schools should carefully consider the time available for breaks** and work to ensure that pupils in both primary and secondary schools have adequate breaks in the day. This should include a lunch time that allows reasonable time for pupils to meet with friends, collect and eat a meal, and free time for self-chosen activities, to provide a period of respite from the intensity of formal learning in school.
3. **Schools should consult and work with pupils to enable them to have a say on break times**, the activities and clubs on offer and how the outdoor space is set up, resourced and decorated so that playground activities can be interesting, engaging and fun.
4. **Schools should reconsider the practice of withholding break time** as an individual or group sanction or for pupils to complete work, especially if this is routinely used. This is taken for granted as an effective school punishment yet may be counter-productive in the longer term. Positive breaktime experiences can be part of a way to increase positive behaviour at school.
5. **Schools should review their approach to the training of supervisors.** Supervisor training should aim to facilitate positive and constructive breaktime experiences that contribute to children's wellbeing and their social and psychological development. Training should ensure that staff know how to manage every-day challenges that can arise during breaks.
6. **Schools should consider developing a policy on break and lunch times**, as breaks make up 20% of the school day. This could cover the aims and values of these times, intended provision, duration, supervision, expectations and roles of pupils and staff, supervisor training rules and sanctions. It could also cover expectations and provision during meal times.

The executive summary and full report are available from: www.breaktime.org.uk

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