School breaktimes and the well-being of children and young people
Evidence from three national surveys in England

ED BAINES, UCL Institute of Education

What is Breaktime?

Breaktime = playtime = recess – terms used interchangeably

"a break within the school day that typically involves access to outdoor space, when weather and space permit, and is often an unstructured time for recreation, play, and socialization with peers in a setting where adults often supervise at a distance."

(Baines, Blatchford & Golding, 2020)

Background and School breaktimes in the UK

Children's social life out of school in the UK has changed

- Reduced play and socialising, freedoms/ independence (Shaw et al., 2013); Peers - seen as context for anti-social behaviour; Parental anxieties (Layard & Dunn, 2009); More adult structured time; Home entertainment and digital activity (Twenge, 2018).

School priorities in UK

- School improvement/ accountability (rankings, int. rankings); More adult-led 'enrichment' activities (e.g. after school clubs); extended schools (breakfast clubs).

No national policy on breaks; little understanding of their contribution

Generally breaktimes in schools seen negatively or as low priority

Pressures on time available for breaks

21st Century UK: Do we need school breaktimes?

Modern Secondary School in England (opened in 2007).

Norman Foster design. No playground and no morning breaktime

School for the future - treat children like adults and unstructured play activities thing of the past

"We are not intending to have any playtime. Pupils won't need to let off steam, because they will not be bored" Headteacher

"We have taken away an uncontrollable space to prevent bullying and truancy." Project Manager

The 1995, 2006 and 2017 Nuffield Breaktime Surveys

Aims were to:

- provide current, systematic and nationally representative information on a little understood and neglected part of the school day in the UK, and information on changes over the 10 and 20 year periods

- collect current information on main features of breaktime, including timing, duration, supervision and facilities provided and views on its value, problems arising and behaviour

- obtain information on pupil and teacher perspectives on breaktimes and pupil social life in and out of school

Baines & Blatchford (2019;2023)

National surveys of breaktime – main findings

- Break and lunchtimes are *universally* experienced in English schools

- Most schools have 2 breaks, a morning and a lunch time break and some schools have an afternoon break

- Total time for Breaks (including meal-time) make up 22%, 20% and 16% of the school day for lower primary school (5-7yrs), upper primary school (7-11yrs) and secondary school pupils (11-16yrs)

Changes in time for breaks since 1995

- Afternoon break increasingly abolished

- Lunch break now shortened

Average total break time (mins) and changes since 1995

	Primary school		Secondary school
	5-7 Yrs	**7-11 Yrs**	**11-16 Yrs**
1995	94	83	76
2006	91	77	69
2017	85	75	63
Change per week	**-45**	**-40**	**-65**

Note: these times include time to have a meal – usually between 10-25 minutes

Reasons for reductions

To create more learning time

"No afternoon break in KS1 due to curricular pressures"

To address problems of poor behaviour

"Shortened lunch from 1 hour to 40 minutes to lessen the opportunity for poor behaviour"

To allow more time for structured physical exercise e.g. 'daily mile'

"No afternoon break, however all classes go outside for 10 min run around. Walk/Run 1km"

To shorten the school day

"Shorter lunch time has allowed earlier end of day finish time. Afternoon break dropped due to shortened day."

Other findings ….

- The ratios of children to playground Supervisors had reduced such that there is more adult supervision and control of breaktimes.

- 60% of schools reported withholding breaks from children as a consequence for poor behaviour or non-completion of class or home work.

- Staff in schools valued breaks as opportunities for children to get physical exercise, eat and drink, and to have some time to socialise with friends and peers.

Breaktimes and children's well-being

Breaktimes and children's well-being

Ways in which breaktime interactions and activities can contribute to children's well-being and psycho-social development.

1. Breaktimes have an important role to play in children's happiness, physical health and rights

2. They provide an important context for children's social relationships and social development – their social well-being

3. They make an important contribution to school engagement and adjustment and thus future mental health and well-being

Breaktimes and children's happiness

English Pupils' views on lunchtime break (when not eating)

	Great	Like	Not sure	Don't like	Hate it
Total 2017	57%	30%	9%	4%	1%
Total 2006	55%	32%	9%	3%	2%

- Pupil views (9–15 years) about lunchtime breaks are overwhelmingly positive
- Very few say they dislike these times
- Most pupils think lunch break is not long enough or about right
- Little change in these views since 2006
- Similar findings to other studies, Blatchford (1989), McNamara et al., (2018)

Pupils' views on what they like about breaktime

	Primary	Secondary	Total
– **Time to be with friends**	84%	89%	86%
– **Free time**	58%	65%	62%
– **Eat and drink**	30%	62%	48%
– **Choose what to do**	26%	28%	27%
– **Engage in games/ attend clubs**	41%	9%	22%
– **Physical exercise**	30%	7%	16%
– **Get fresh air**	-	25%	

- Vast majority, particularly girls, identified the opportunity it allowed them to be with friends
- Followed by providing free time for them to do what they want
- Primary pupils enjoy games and physical activities
- Secondary pupils like free time, time to relax and to eat and drink

Breaktimes contribute to children's happiness, health and well-being

Breaktimes offer a significant opportunity for physical exercise which can help address concerns about obesity and sedentary activity.

Breaktime activity can contribute 30%-40% of their recommended amount of daily physical activity (Graham et al., 2021; Ridgers et al., 2006)

Breaktimes help countries meet UNCRC requirements - Article 31, "The Right to Play, Rest, and Leisure"

This emphasises that "*every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.*"
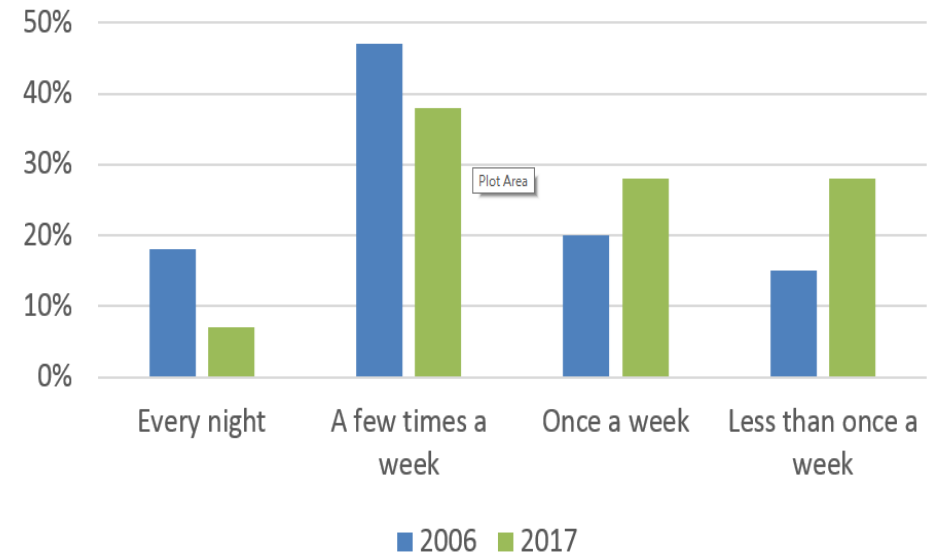

CONVENTION
ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Breaktimes offer important opportunities for children's social well-being

Pupils' social life outside of school

Graph 2: How often Year 5 children spend time with peers outside of school
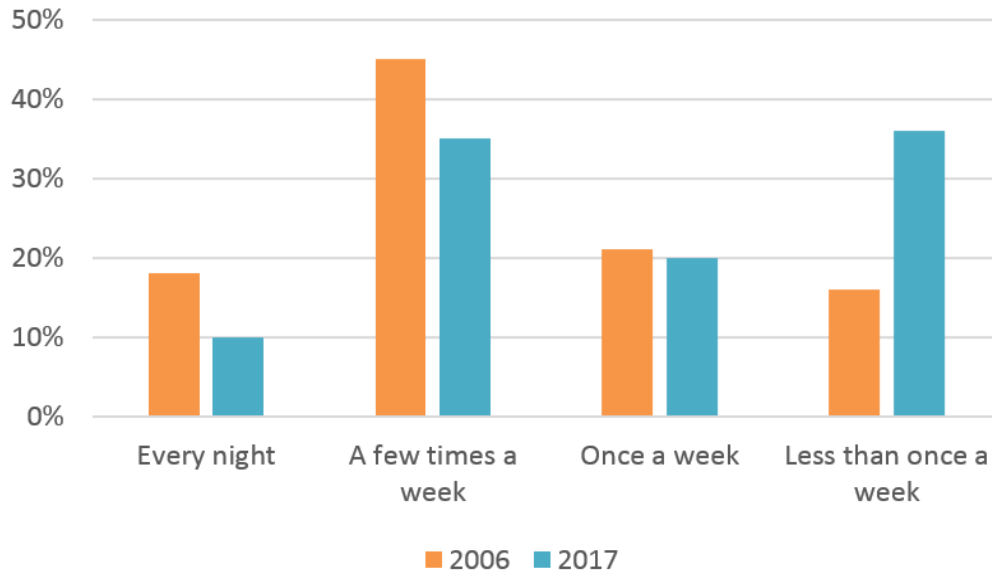
Graph 3: How often Year 8 + 10 students spend time with peers outside of school

Children meet in person with each other less frequently in 2017 than in 2006

In 2006, 15% of children saw friends less than once a week – now it is 31% who do not

Breaktime is a main context for peer relationships and social-emotional skills

- Children who experience difficulties socialising with peers are more likely to suffer from mental health and well-being problems than those with positive relationships (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2016).

- Breaktime is a main setting for social interactions with peers and groups and within which friendships are developed (Blatchford et al., 2015; Pellegrini, 2005).

- Peer group as 'cooperative socialization contexts', supporting cooperation, reciprocity, effective conflict management, intimacy (Bukowski et al., 2018).

  "The peer group provides arguably the most efficient and highly motivating context for the learning and development of social skills which will ultimately enable children to live effectively as a member of adult society." (p171 – Maxwell, 1992)

Important social qualities developed during breaktime

Negotiating entry to games/groups

Making and losing friends

Managing conflicts

Manage loyalty, betrayal and slights

Perspective taking

Trust

Mixing with different groups

Handling bids for leadership

Forming groups for activities

Having fun

Small talk/ Self disclosure

Social sensitivity

Coping with teasing, taunting, peer pressure

Breaktimes and school adjustment

Breaktimes provide opportunity for the development of 'real-world'/life skills

- Lessons in relation to risk and challenge; shared thinking and problem solving

- Opportunities for creativity, imagination, innovation, as well as moral lessons

- Precursors to and opportunities for cooperation and collaboration

Breaktimes have important implications for academic engagement and classroom behaviour (Pellegrini et al., 1995; Jarett et al., 1998; Rhea & Rivchun, 2018)

Engagement at school and a sense of school belonging are important for children's well-being and mental health in the short and longer term (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2018)

How breaktimes are changing in British primary schools

Increased recognition by school staff of need to enhance the *quality* of breaktimes (OPAL; ScrapStore Playpods; Learning through Landscapes)

Increased play resources and opportunities, strategic thinking about the playground space and staff training

Greater focus on '**Loose Parts Play**' associated with increased happiness and cooperative play; [self esteem and confidence, reduced behavioural incidents] (Gibson et al., 2018)

Conclusion

- In the absence of national policy, breaktimes are being shortened and children's access and activity is increasingly controlled in English schools

- Breaktimes are important contexts for children's well-being and health and this needs to be recognised by school staff

- Breaks are increasingly a unique context for sustained in-person interaction with friends and peers and the development of social-emotional skills.

- Breaktime activity has implications for academic engagement and school adjustment

- Good quality breaktime experiences are likely to be beneficial for children's development

Thank you for your attention

ED BAINES