You're Not It! Tag Out at Recess

By Jesse Leavenworth
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Tag, the hard-running staple of schoolyards everywhere, has been banned from an elementary school in Massachusetts, and several educators and parents in Connecticut say that's a shame and a sad comment on the times.

"How far do we have to legislate?" asked David Larson, executive director of the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents. "To me, that sounds like it's over the top."

The principal of Willett Elementary School in Attleboro said the ban on tag, touch football and other chasing games is not new, but part of a broader standing rule against hitting and inappropriate touching, according to the Boston Herald. The Sun Chronicle, a regional Massachusetts paper, reported this week that the tag ban at Willett was prompted by fear of injuries and liability.

Willett school has had a rule for 10 years that bans tag and other contact games, but it was not enforced until recently, Attleboro school committee Chairwoman Roberta Wuilleumier said Wednesday. Part of the reason for the rule is the nature of the playground, which is mostly asphalt, Wuilleumier said. Wuilleumier said the school board does not have a district-wide policy on tag and other such games, but the issue may be discussed at the board's next meeting. The current principal of Willett, Gaylene Heppe, could not be reached for comment.

"My gut reaction - it's a tough call," said Peg Berry of Canton, mother of two elementary school students. "I coached my son's soccer team and I can tell you, kids can be rough, especially kids in elementary school. You can have one second-grader who's 100 pounds and another who's 40 pounds.

"But I fall on the other side," Berry said. "To ban something as natural as chasing games, it seems like overkill. It's unfortunate that we live in such a litigious society."

Education officials in Connecticut said they had heard little or no discussion of banning tag in state schools, but a few school districts in the country have such policies. In Cheyenne, Wyo., a school principal told a reporter that playing tag "progresses easily into slapping and hitting and pushing instead of just touching." A news report in 2004 quoted a school principal in Santa Monica, Calif., as saying she banned tag because "little kids were coming in and saying, 'I don't like it.' Children weren't feeling good about it."

Tag, however, has not been the prime target of gym class and recess reformers. The main focus for years has been dodge ball, which has been banned or radically changed from its original form in school districts throughout Connecticut and the country. But tag was included in a list called "The Physical Education Hall of Shame," compiled by Neil Williams of the health and physical education department at Eastern Connecticut State University.

"Tag games," Williams wrote in the Journal of Physical Education in 1994, "when structured correctly, can be great additions to a physical education curriculum. ... However, all too often, tag games are organized as classic elimination games (like Musical Chairs) in which students supposedly develop their quickness, thinking skills, and fitness."

"Elimination games like Tag or Simon Says are essentially self-defeating," Williams continued, "because the students who are least skilled and fit are usually the first to be caught, banished, punished, and embarrassed, and then given almost no opportunity to improve."

But several educators contacted Wednesday about the issue said playing tag is a good release for kids, allowing them to get their wiggles out before returning to class. Also, several education organization representatives said supervised games should be encouraged to fight the growing problem of childhood obesity.

"Kids have to be kids. Kids should be playing," Tolland Superintendent William Guzman said. "They should be well supervised at all times, but running around is a good physical activity. At a time when we're talking about wellness and trying to develop good nutritional habits, running and playing games at a young age is a good thing."

"Running is good exercise and we're talking more and more about child obesity and you've got to get kids running more," said Nick Caruso, spokesman for the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education. But Caruso said the issue is complicated. He said he could understand why school officials might want to consider a ban on chasing games if they had concerns about safety and insurance liability. Supervision, he said, should be a priority in all schoolyards.

"There's a big difference between unstructured play and unsupervised play," said Mark Princevalle, acting president of the Connecticut PTA. "What good schools do," said Regina Birdsell, who focuses on elementary education issues for the Connecticut Association of Schools, "is make sure kids understand the rules and the games before they send them out."

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Simon Says = a game in which one participant gives simple commands such as "raise your arms" or "stand on one leg," but each command is prefaced at random with the phrase, "Simon says." If the other participants perform the command and the phrase "Simon says" is not clearly stated, they are eliminated from the competition.

"get their wiggles out" = let the children get rid of excess energy so they can concentrate on school subjects.