

THE POWER OF URBAN PLAY

Unleashing the Role of Play Environments as Community Assets

Executive Summary



Urban areas face barriers and disparities for play. Urban areas face unique trends and challenges to play as they manage growing urban densities, diversity, and urban integration.

Play enriches life. The benefits of play are well documented for fighting obesity and promoting physical activity, reducing stress and violence, promoting academic achievement, fostering social and emotional development, engaging in nature, and supporting community development. Tragically, many children

“A worldwide demographic shift to urbanization is making urban parks the sole connection to the natural world for an increasing majority of children and adults.”

—Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy

The Power of Urban Play: Unleashing the Role of Play Environments as Community Assets is a national initiative, sponsored by PlayCore, to identify the importance of play for urban communities, define the trends and unique characteristics of urban communities, and discuss best practice strategies for developing and maintaining

healthy play environments that are critical for the wellbeing of children, families, and communities. Data was collected and summarized through a series

of interviews, surveys, and roundtable discussions with over 40 urban parks and recreation leaders from across our country.

National Report Development

Urban park and recreation leaders from across the nation participated in the development of this report, including directors and staff from the park and recreation departments of major American cities and non-profit groups with expertise in urban play. Knowledge, opinions, experiences, and case studies were gathered in three primary ways as well as through secondary research and communications with various experts.

1. An in-depth interview process with six targeted cities explored the unique needs and trends of their cities and shaped what later became the five best practice themes of this report.
2. An online survey completed by park and recreation leaders from across the country validated the themes identified



3. A group of urban play leaders, who served as critical advisors due to their experience of developing park and recreation programs in urban communities, participated in an Urban Play Roundtable to analyze survey results, share information about play in their cities, and discuss the facets and implications of each best practice theme for urban cities, which informed the final recommendations of this report.



Members of the Roundtable Advisory Council included:

Joseph Wynns, Project Leader and Former Director
Indianapolis Parks and Recreation Department

Marilyn Boyd Drew, Former Director
DeKalb County, GA, Parks and Recreation

Norm Merrifield, Director
Cincinnati Recreation Commission

Joe Turner, Director
Houston Parks and Recreation Department

Jon Kirk Mukri, General Manager
City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks

Sue Black, Director
Milwaukee Cty. Department of Parks, Recreation & Culture

Nancy Barthold, Asst. Commissioner
New York City Department of Parks & Recreation

Catherine Nagel, Executive Director
City Parks Alliance

Peter Harnik, Director
Center for City Park Excellence, The Trust for Public Land

Ashley Futrell, Senior Manager, Public Policy
National Recreation and Park Association

Rose Harvey, Former Senior Vice President
The Trust for Public Land

Robin Moore, Facilitator and Director
Natural Learning Initiative

The Problem

Urban park and recreation leaders across the country identified the following current challenges and obstacles for healthy play in their communities:

- A Vast Disparity in Play Environments for Urban Communities
- Increasing Levels of Childhood Obesity
- Limited Opportunities for Promoting Healthy Development and Wellness
- Concerns about Crime on Playgrounds that Prevent Families from Playing There
- Insufficient Access to Resources for Development and Sustainability of Playspaces



Play is critical for children, yet not all children have equal access to quality outdoor play environments.

Best Practice Recommendations

Together, we must boldly promote our collective and collaborative voices by advocating for and implementing urban play best practices at the local, regional, national, and international levels. Play is critical for the future of our youth, and we must act accordingly to reverse current trends. Through the report development process, five major reoccurring themes emerged that shaped the following recommendations. These recommendations demonstrate that there are multiple opportunities to bring about lasting change.



1: DESIGN for Compelling Play Environments

Agencies should design play environments that are compelling and meet the unique needs of diverse urban users. Engaging a variety of stakeholders, through participatory design, is critical for ensuring best practices for multi-generational inclusion, integration of natural elements, increased physical activity, safety, and equitable access to the space.



2: Create Playgrounds as CRIME PREVENTION Programs

Communities should view playgrounds as crime prevention assets by considering visibility in the design, establishing proactive partnerships with local law enforcement and neighborhood crime watch groups, and by keeping the playspace active and well maintained.



3: Offer PROGRAMS on the Urban Playground

Public play environments should market free play and supervised play programs that promote high levels of physical activity and learning while maximizing joint use opportunities, providing playleaders for supervision and play facilitation, and utilizing mobile play programs for additional reach and interest.



4: Execute PARTNERSHIPS for Play

Partnerships should be established to strengthen the variety and reach of play opportunities for a broader reach of play resources, facilities, and programs while also increasing usership and ensuring sustainability over time. Public/public, public/private, public/non-profit, and faith-based partnerships should be considered for potential sources of play funding, programming, and community development.



5: Develop an Urban Playground MASTER PLAN

A comprehensive and collaborative master plan should be developed for play and playgrounds that includes a current asset management plan; provides guidance for the overall goals, objectives, and strategies for strengthening play; specifies funding cycles; monitors implementation; and ensures continuous improvement.

For more information or to request a copy of the full report, visit www.playcore.com/urbanplay.