A Guide for Book Clubs

_kaBOOM! How One Man Built a Movement to Save Play_ not only provides a glimpse of one man’s journey, it also provides an opportunity for each of us to reflect on our own childhoods, value systems, and everyday experiences that shape the person we are to become.

At some point in life, each of us has been an eyewitness to injustice, whether small or large. At the same time, it is common for people to grumble over the current state of affairs—the economy, health care, or education reform, to name a few. Yet despite the many conversations, these grievances usually fail to make it beyond the dinner table. There are a few remarkable citizens who decide to take a stand on behalf of an issue. What turns these individuals from passive bystanders into everyday heroes? How do the simple actions of children, parents, and community members catapult us into movement?

Throughout this guide, you will find questions designed to engage you in self-reflection and larger group conversations. Much as it only takes a spark to get a fire going, we hope that these reflections will spark a passion for play within you.
Dear Readers,

Did you know there are seven kinds of play, as identified by Dr. Stuart Brown? How many can you think of? Leading an entire organization based on play, as I do, people often ask me my opinion of what kind of play is best, and I always respond that all play is good.

In our modern creative economy, play is the best natural resource we have. To ensure future growth, we should encourage American kids to have as much and as varied a play life as possible. Yes, even video games!

However, the reality is that unstructured, outdoor play is both endangered and critical to children’s development. Freely chosen by the child, personally directed and motivated, active and engaging, and exploratory-unstructured play provides opportunities for kid to learn how to organize themselves, make up rules, change those rules, and resolve disputes. All are valuable skills in school and life.

I know that unstructured play allowed me to succeed and build the extraordinary organization that I chronicle in this journey. Despite coming from a family that struggled from one generation to the next, access to playspaces made me curious and creative, fostered the social skills I have today, and inspired me to achieve and do better. Unstructured play allows kids to use their imagination, to invent and tinker, to develop the skills necessary to succeed in our rapidly changing society.

As you’ll learn from my story, I didn’t always know that play was my calling. In August 1995, shortly after moving to Washington, D.C., I read a story in the Washington Post that changed the course of my life, and by extension thousands of communities throughout North America.

Two local children, Iesha and Clendon, had suffocated in an abandoned car, after being accidentally locked in on a brutal summer day. The public housing development they lived in didn’t offer anywhere to play, so they—as children will—played where they could. I believed in my heart that tragedy could have been prevented by a simple thing that most people take for granted: a playground.

Thankfully, stories such as this are rare, but the loss of playspace and playtime is not. Few new playgrounds are being built, and older ones are decaying or being removed. Schools are reducing or eliminating recess in a pressured rush to meet testing standards. Parents are surrounded by sometimes exaggerated messages of fear, and many choose to avoid risk by keeping their kids inside, plugged in to video games, a computer, or the television.

Too many kids are missing out on one of the most important childhood experiences, one that can help kids grow up healthy, happy and successful. This play deficit—the slow but seemingly relentless disappearance of that phase in kids’ lives—is real, and it is an emergency.
Lack of play is associated with childhood obesity, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity, anxiety disorders, depression, violence and other behavioral problems. Failing schools and fragmented communities can also be attributed to reduced physical activity and use of public spaces.

KaBOOM! fights this national crisis through three central strategies:

• Constructing innovative, kid-inspired playspaces, using a community-build model that improves the well-being of the children we serve as well as the neighborhoods in which they live.
• Sharing the knowledge and tools needed for anyone to find, improve, and/or build playgrounds on their own.
• Building a broad movement driven by research, analysis, policy, and community engagement.

We are creating not only healthier, happier, and smarter children, but also greener cities, better schools, and stronger neighborhoods across all 50 states, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Canada.

KaBOOM! is built on the belief that small groups of concerned citizens can make great changes for the good in their communities, and book clubs are a perfect example of an untapped resource. You may not know it, but together you can spark a play revolution in your neighborhood.

With that hope in mind, we’ve created this guide for book clubs, with discussion questions, a community action guide, and extras, such as my book recommendations, a timeline, map, and links to online resources.

I’ve dedicated this book to the people who work to ensure that every child has the time and space to play, and I hope you will become one of them. When you do, connect with me and the great network of playmakers across the country. We are only successful if we act in concert. So as you change your family’s behaviors, get recess reinstated in your local schools, and restore playspaces that have been neglected—tell us about it! By sharing your successes, you amplify their effects, supporting others as they too make changes for the betterment of their families and communities.

You can start by ‘liking’ our Facebook page at facebook.com/kaboom and posting photos of your book club reading and discussing KaBOOM!.

Playfully yours,

Darell Hammond

* The seven patterns of play identified by the National Institute for Play are: Attunement Play; Body Play and Movement; Object Play; Social Play; Imaginative and Pretend Play; Storytelling-Narrative Play; and Transformative-Integrative and Creative Play.
General Questions

- How did you play as a child? Has that influenced your life and career?
- How have mentors influenced your life? Personally and professionally?
- How do relationships between children and adults reflect the strengths and weaknesses of our community?
- Why is play so important to children’s development? How do different kinds of play develop different strengths?
- Why are playgrounds such an appealing cause for corporations and service organizations?
- What “mistakes” have you made in your life—and how did you learn from them?
- How is risk a necessary part of childhood play? How do these experiences lay the groundwork for business success?
- How is play an integral part of the KaBOOM! organization?
- What is the status of play in your community?

Chapter 1 — Looking Out for Other People

“Growth comes from making yourself a little uncomfortable and spurring yourself beyond what you’ve always done in the past. Especially when it’s done in service to others.”

- How does family dysfunction continue from generation to generation? What options do struggling parents have for their children in our society?
- What elements of the Mooseheart program help its charges learn to succeed? And which perpetuate a cycle of helplessness?
- How do organized sports help children learn leadership abilities? What special opportunities do they afford for children in disadvantaged situations?

Chapter 2 — Half-Full Not Half-Empty

“This approach didn’t end hunger or homelessness in the neighborhood, of course. But it gave people in the community a chance to organize around the strengths—their assets—instead of being beaten down by constant reminders of everything that was missing from their community.”

- How does looking at the “glass half-full” change your perspective on your life and work? How can it benefit downtrodden communities to take this view?
- Why is it so important to treat all people with respect? What have been your experiences using this approach?
- How did a service-learning opportunity like Darell’s Chicago internship shape his direction in life? Did you have a formative experience that affected your career path?
Chapter 3 — The Process Is as Important as the Product

“The planning and organizing—all the advance work, as well as the things that happened during the comparatively short construction period—were just as crucial as the end result.”

- Is it possible to succeed without completing college? Have you known people who followed a nontraditional path, and what happened to them?
- How did the domestic service movement reflect the values of the time? How has it grown and developed over the years?
- What is the most important lesson of the first playground build in Columbus? What would you have taken from that experience?

Chapter 4 — A 7-Year-Old’s Grin

“At first Ashley wondered why I was in her neighborhood. Then she said, ‘Have you come to build the playground?’ She ran back inside and emerged with two pages pulled from her refrigerator—crayon drawings she’d made of the playground she’d been dreaming of.”

- What social and economic factors contribute to a tragedy like Iesha and Clendon’s deaths? How do playgrounds remedy some of the disadvantages of poverty?
- How did the first Washington D.C. playground build help plant the seeds of KaBOOM!? How did KaBOOM! learn from this experience?
- How much difference can one person make in their community? Who are the play activists, and “rainmakers” more generally, in your area?

Chapter 5 — We’ve Got a Problem

“I made every management mistake in the book, stuff that really makes me cringe when I think back on it. In fact, I think I invented some management mistakes as well.”

- What similarities can you see among the personal and professional mentors described in the book? What makes a successful mentoring relationship?
- What factors contributed to the difficulties of growing KaBOOM!? What character traits are required to recognize and address mistakes?
- How does the cause of play relate to the larger social issues facing U.S. children? What problems can a playground help solve?

Chapter 6 — You Can Do Routine Tasks Without Doing Them Routinely

“We keep trying to get better and improve the way we do things. Today, execution is probably the thing KaBOOM! is best known for in the nonprofit world, and we never take that for granted.”

- How does a playful attitude help you learn from challenges in life? How have you learned from mistakes in your career?
• How far can a great idea go without effective business practices to support it? Why are nonprofits especially challenged to develop these systems?
• Do you think it is Darell’s charisma or the cause of play that attracts people to KaBOOM!?

Chapter 7 — Audacious Dreams

“If I’d had any doubts about the timing of the project, they were gone—it was absolutely the right thing to do. This was an opportunity to rebuild something, and people in the neighborhood told me they were relieved to come out and get dirty and do something physical for a good cause.”

• Why does the public-private partnership model work so well for KaBOOM!? Do you think it would work as well with a different leader and staff?
• If you were running KaBOOM!, would you have gone ahead with a New York City playground build one week after 9/11? How does a playground offer healing to a community after such a traumatic experience?
• Why is KaBerry KaBOOM! ice cream such a triumph? How does it represent years of hard work and smart strategy?

Chapter 8 — Transactions versus Transformations

“We can do a lot at KaBOOM!, but only if we have people from local neighborhoods working shoulder to shoulder to reach their goal. Without that deeper level of engagement, it’s not going to work.”

• Why do you think community involvement is so important to the work of KaBOOM!? How would the process be different if it didn’t require local commitment?
• Is community maintenance of a playground a valuable measure for success? What other measures might you use and how would they change the work of KaBOOM!?
• Were you convinced that international growth wasn’t a sustainable approach for KaBOOM!? How might the KaBOOM! approach be adjusted to work in other cultures and locations?

Chapter 9 — Play Matters

“As I looked around the campus that morning, I noticed all the physical changes that had occurred. Once-vacant spaces were now full, and other buildings looked completely different than they had during my time there.”

• Why is play so important to children’s development? How do successful adults continue to incorporate the principles of play in their lives?
• Why is an organization like KaBOOM! necessary? Why can’t local, state, or federal agencies raise funds themselves?
• What do you think the experience of returning to Mooseheart meant to Darell? Have you ever returned to a place and experienced it differently?
Chapter 10 — It Only Takes a Single Spark to Start a Fire

“The psychologists in our area have reported seeing things like thoughts about suicide, murder, and other types of violence—truly terrible things. But they didn’t see those things in the kids at North Central Elementary and they attribute a lot of that to the playground—having a safe place to play, something new to look forward to and really just the opportunity to be a kid.”

- What motivated KaBOOM! to bring playgrounds to the Gulf coast after Hurricane Katrina? How did answering that call boost the organization’s growth?
- Why did the process of building a playground make a difference in the devastated communities? Why did community members respond so enthusiastically?
- How do you think a playground can help children heal from a traumatic experience? Is this different for community-wide disasters and private experiences?

Chapter 11 — It Starts with a Playground

“I know that individuals and organizations and communities can and will rise to challenges, as long as the challenge is presented in a way that asks them for their very best.”

- How does making concrete illustrate the trademark collaborative process of a KaBOOM! build? Why is teambuilding so important to a project’s success?
- How does KaBOOM! promote a belief in the capacity for change? In people and communities?
- What wider social causes intersect in the cause of play? How do they shape the priorities for KaBOOM!?

Chapter 12 — A Better Us

“The more that people use these tools to put up a playground in their own neighborhood or advocate with their local parks department, politicians, and schools for better play opportunities, the better for everyone.”

- How do playgrounds become the focus for a community’s desires for healing? For change?
- Why did KaBOOM! pursue the strategy of Mass Action? How do online technologies make this operational shift possible?
- Why did KaBOOM! develop the Playful City USA program? What would your criteria be for a Playful City USA community?
**Chapter 13 — Imagination and Innovation**

“We don’t want to just build more playgrounds, we want to build better playgrounds so that kids will play longer, play harder, and want to come back and play more frequently.”

- Can you imagine children you know playing with the Imagination Playground in a Box? Where might it bring play to your community?
- How does environmental awareness mesh with the mission of KaBOOM!? As the largest single buyer of playground equipment in the U.S., what impact can KaBOOM! make by changing its processes?
- What lessons did KaBOOM! learn from the foray into skateparks? How can it apply that knowledge to future ventures?

**Chapter 14 — The Blurry Line between For-Profits and Nonprofits**

“If our ultimate goal is to improve the lives of children, we need to walk the walk and see the world through their eyes sometimes. Amid all the hard work and busy days in the office, we need to make room for laughter, fun, and joy. In short, we need to make room for play.”

- How does KaBOOM! embody an ethos of “doing good by doing well?” How do you think the overlap of nonprofit and for-profit mentalities benefit or hinder the organization? How does it reflect a larger national conversation about social good?
- What would be your hiring criteria if you led KaBOOM!? How do the five key criteria—Can Do, Will Do, Team Fit, Damn Smart and Damn Quick—influence the organizational culture at KaBOOM!?

**Chapter 15 — What We’re Up Against**

“There’s no way to remove all danger from playgrounds, and even if you could, the end result would be so dull and tame that kids would probably walk past it to play on their own in the grass nearby. And they’d likely play something dangerous, like tackle football, dodgeball, tumbling, jumping...”

- What social pressures are threatening U.S. children’s unstructured playtime? Do you think these are “eternal struggles” or do they reflect current trends in American culture?
- What is the role of imagination in children’s development? Why are the simplest toys the best to promote imagination?
- How is risk an important element of play? What experiences have you had with risk and how have they affected your growth?
Chapter 16 — When Better Is Expected, Good Is Not Enough

“The best way to generate change is for a coalition of people with various types of expertise and insights to come together and persuade more individuals and communities to move interest to action and to move from individual efforts to coordinated community approaches that can be sustained over the long haul.”

- Why do you think Darell regrets not completing his college degree, when it hasn’t prevented him from being successful? Do you have any regrets that you have been able to release?
- Why are reunions so important in life? How do they show you how far you have come and what is truly important?

Book Themes At-A-Glance

Child Development: Everyone knows that children need love, support, and stimulation to grow and thrive. Research also shows that they need play of all different kinds.

Community-Building: Technology, mobility, and fear have isolated Americans from their neighbors, but this trend can be reversed. With the right tools, concerned citizens can work together and create change.

Imagination and Creativity: As the economy relies more and more on intellectual capital, our ability to nurture creativity will shape our country’s future. Imagination brings fun into our lives, while helping find new solutions for entrenched problems.

Mentoring: Adults need stable role models as they go through life, just as much as children do. Guidance from a mentor helps with school achievement, as well as career success.

Nonprofit Leadership: Organizations with a social mission can be even more complicated to lead than businesses. They require a range of skills, from financial acumen to charisma, but most importantly, leadership depends on the ability to learn.

Organizational Culture: Organizational practices—from staff meetings to hiring priorities—affect its culture, and culture shapes what the organization is able to achieve. Volunteer recruitment and funder commitment can be influenced by the attitudes of staff.

Play/Playgrounds: Most adults take play for granted, underestimating its critical importance to children’s cognitive, emotional, and social development. This bias against play is endangering our children’s health and wellbeing.

Public-Private Partnerships: The American economic landscape is a patchwork of government, business, and charitable institutions. The most successful social efforts build bridges between entities, bringing the strengths of each to the work.

Recess: Current research shows that children’s academic achievement is improved by recess, yet schools across the country are cutting it short or eliminating it altogether.
**Social Entrepreneurship:** The combination of charitable mission and business practices is an innovative new way to address America’s social issues.

**Volunteerism:** The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that almost 63 million people volunteered in the year between September 2009 and September 2010. Harnessing this great force for social good will continue to shape our society.

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**Online Resources**

- Active Kids Club (activekidsclub.com)
- Alliance for Childhood (allianceforchildhood.org)
- Boundless Playgrounds (boundlessplaygrounds.org)
- Children & Nature Network (childrenandnature.org)
- For Play: Krista Tippett, Stuart Brown, and Paul Holdengräber at the New York Public Library (nypl.org/audiovideo/play-krista-tippett-stuart-brown-conversation-paul-holdengräber)
- Free-Range Kids (freerangekids.wordpress.com)
- Healthy Schools Campaign Online Guide to Achieving School Wellness (healthyschoolscampaign.org/programs/foodandfit/)
- International Play Association (ipausa.org)
- Let’s Move (letsmove.gov)
- National Institute for Play (nifplay.org)
- Peaceful Playgrounds, Inc. “Right to Recess” Campaign (peacefulplaygrounds.com/right-to-recess.htm)
- Play Matters (Full Report with Extended Case Studies) (kaboom.org/docs/documents/pdf/playmatters/Play_Matters_Case_Summaries.pdf)
- Playworks (playworks.org)
- Project for Public Spaces (pps.org)
- Stuart Brown Says Play is More Than Fun at TED (ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_says_play_is_more_than_fun_it_s_vital.html)
- Timelapse Video of a KaBOOM! Build (kaboom.org/about_kaboom/videos/timelapse_build_video)

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**What You Can Do in Your Community**

**Make Time For Play:** Modern parents and schools can be under so much pressure that play gets pushed to the bottom of the priority list. Most families are too stretched to develop play opportunities for themselves, so if you organize a Play Day or Traveling Play Group, they will likely jump at the chance to try something new. A more sustained effect could be achieved by lengthening recess—or reinstating it if it has been eliminated.

**Teach Kids How To Play Unplugged:** Children and youth benefit from all kinds of play, but they need guidance to learn. Often, their peers provide this education, but it may be skewed toward “screen time.” You can shift the balance toward unstructured, outdoor play in your community in a number of ways. Start a neighborhood summer camp. Become a Play Associate or recess coach. Find opportunities to facilitate interaction with the natural environment.
Improve Community Health & Safety: One of the key goals of a playful community is health, and there are a variety of ways to extend your activism work into this area. Working with your local school on a wellness plan, including a “walking school bus,” can make a big difference. You can also become an official Pace Car, setting the example for safe speeds in your neighborhood.

Become a Play Advocate: Letters to the editor and op-eds in your local paper are a great way to start a public conversation about how to improve the state of play in your community. Whether you’re concerned about the lack of recess in local schools, childhood obesity, or closed or ill-maintained playgrounds and parks, you can take the lead when it comes to rallying your community around the cause of play.

Create More Playspaces: Turn your front lawn into a neighborhood playspace—open up your yard to the neighbors, throw together some loose and found parts, let the kids have a ball! Another option is to organize a play street: Work with your neighborhood and your city to close a city street on a regular basis and open it up for play! Or, use our online project planner to build a community playground from the ground up.

Improve Existing Playspaces: A playground needs care and attention to thrive—an ill-maintained park becomes vulnerable to vandalism and crime. Organize a playground clean-up and consider other done-in-a-day improvement projects, such as planting flowers, painting a mural, or building a bench.

To learn more about how to put these ideas into action, visit kaboom.org/take_action

Facts About Play

Today’s children are playing less than any previous generation, and this lack of play is causing them profound physical, intellectual, social, and emotional harm. The Play Deficit is an important problem, and it is imperative that we solve it to ensure our children have long, healthy, and happy lives.

The Dimensions of the Play Deficit

The Stanford University School of Medicine reports that children today spend less time playing outdoors than any previous generation. There are two major factors contributing to this situation: there are far too few places to play and children are not given enough time to play.

In April 2010, the Centers for Disease Control reported that only one out of five children in the United States lives within a half-mile of a park or playground, and the availability of places to play looms far worse in low-income neighborhoods. This alone should be a wake-up call to everyone who cares about the health and well-being of children.

When not in school, children engage in 7 hours and 38 minutes of recreational media usage each day. Higher media usage is directly correlated with both lower grades and a decreased sense of personal contentment. It is also directly linked to higher levels of childhood obesity. Even more disturbingly, children in low-income households are estimated to spend 50% more.
time watching television than their affluent peers!

More and more parents everywhere keep their children indoors out of concern for their safety. Even well-meaning parents, looking to give their children the best of everything drive their kids from adult-supervised lessons to adult-coached games. The result is a radical loss of time spent playing.

**How the Play Deficit is Harming Our Children**

The Play Deficit is causing physical, intellectual, social, and emotional harm to our children.

**Physical harm:** According to researchers from the Department of Health and Human Services, there is a stark correlation between the Play Deficit and childhood obesity: In neighborhoods without a park or playground, the incidence of childhood obesity increases 29%. In fact, children with a park or playground within half-a-mile are almost five times more likely to be a healthy weight than children without playgrounds or parks nearby.

**Intellectual harm:** Without ample play, we will continue to see a decrease in creativity and imagination, as well as vital skills including curiosity, social skills, resiliency, and the ability to assess risk. Children in China, Korea, Finland, Singapore, and Japan are provided with playful schooling opportunities prior to second grade and have among the highest scores on international PISA exam for 15-year-olds, ranked (1, 2, 3, 5, 8) respectively. The U.S. was ranked at #13. The decline in creativity associated with the Play Deficit has already had an impact on our competitiveness in the world.

**Social harm:** Children who don’t play don’t learn how to work in groups, share, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and advocate for themselves. The lack of these skills has dramatic long-term effects. A long-term longitudinal study examined two groups of pre-schoolers in the U.S. In one group, play was an important part of the curriculum. In the other, there was no play as part of their school day. Both groups were tracked through age 23. The children deprived of play showed increased problems with social integration, including greater likelihood of felony arrests by young adulthood.

**Emotional harm:** Studies have shown that schools without recess face increased incidence in classroom behavioral problems, including violence, emotional outbursts, and their students show a lack of ability to interact with peers and authority figures. Outside the school, play deprivation can have serious long-term consequences. Physician, psychiatrist, and clinical researcher Stuart Brown, studied more than 6,000 felons and found that 90% of convicted murderers lacked “play features” in their childhoods. Brown finds that “depression, over-control, driven ambition, envy, and often ecological havoc accompany the play-deprived life.”

For more information about the play deficit, visit kaboom.org/play_deficit.
About Darell Hammond

Darell grew up with seven brothers and sisters at Mooseheart, a group home outside of Chicago. The Mooseheart community instilled in Darell the power of volunteerism and the importance of helping those less fortunate get a head start. There he excelled at football and became an Eagle Scout.

After attending community college and Ripon College, but not attaining a degree, he helped lead the start-up of City Year Chicago. In 1996, Darell founded KaBOOM!, a national nonprofit that envisions a great place to play within walking distance of every child. Under Darell’s leadership as Chief Executive Officer, KaBOOM! has raised $200 million and built more than 2,000 playgrounds, skateparks, sports fields and ice rinks. It has sustained $20 million a year in revenue for six years running and become the single largest purchaser of playground equipment in the country. Most importantly, KaBOOM! has saved play for 3.5 million children.

Darell has won numerous national service and leadership awards and has been profiled in People, Washingtonian, Fortune, Fast Company and Worth magazines, Non-Profit Times, Chronicle of Philanthropy and Crain’s Chicago Business. He has also received the President’s Volunteer Service Award, the Jefferson Award for the Greatest Public Service Benefiting the Disadvantaged and NYU Stern’s Satter Social Entrepreneur of the Year Award.

In addition to his work with KaBOOM!, Darell has served on the Board of Directors of Independent Sector and Hands on Network and in 2003 was elected as an Ashoka Fellow for being a leader in social entrepreneurship. Darell and his wife, Kate Becker, live in Washington, D.C.

Darell’s Recommend Reading List

- **Crisis in the Kindergarten**: Why Children Need to Play in School by Edward Miller and Joan Almon, Alliance for Children, 2009.
- **Free-Range Kids**: Giving Our Children the Freedom We Had Without Going Nuts with Worry by Lenore Skenazy, Jossey/Bass, 2009.
- **Good to Great**: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... And Others Don’t (and accompanying monograph, Good to Great and the Social Sectors) by Jim Collins, William Collins, 2001.
- **Last Child in the Woods**: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder by Richard Louv, Algonquin, 2008.
- **Play**: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul by Stuart Brown, Penguin, 2009.
Timeline of Darell’s Life

1971: Born in Jerome, Idaho
1975: Entered Mooseheart, outside of Chicago, with his seven siblings
1989: Graduated high school
1991: Started at Ripon College
1993: Participated in Northwestern University’s Urban Studies Fellowship at the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute
1994: Hired as original staff of City Year’s Chicago office and built first two playgrounds
1995: Moved to Washington, D.C.
1996: Incorporated KaBOOM! with Dawn Hutchison
1998: Met Kate Becker
1999: Married Kate Becker
2001: KaBOOM! became first nonprofit to have an ice cream flavor: Ben & Jerry’s KaBerry KaBOOM!
2002: Returned to Mooseheart for 200th playground build
2004: Unveiled Mass Action technical assistance resources
2006: KaBOOM! reached $20 million in annual funding
2007: Partnered with Rockwell Group to develop Imagination Playground in a Box
2008: Received honorary doctoral degree from Ripon College
2010: KaBOOM! named one of inaugural 50 Best Nonprofits to Work For by NonProfit Times
About KaBOOM!

KaBOOM! is saving play by ensuring there is a great place to play within walking distance of every child. The focus of all our work is to end the woeful lack of engaging places to play in America. We support the work of others who focus their efforts on the equally profound issues surrounding the lack of time for children to play, including the campaign to reinstitute recess. Our campaign to save play is driven by three strategies.

Mapping the State of Play

Although the Play Deficit is well documented on the macro level, no one really knows which kids have a place to play and which kids don’t, at the neighborhood level. The KaBOOM! Playspace Finder is designed to ultimately answer that question for the entire country. It is a user-generated map of playspaces—playgrounds, fields, courts, parks—with photos, ratings, and the ability to become a fan of a particular playspace. This tool allows parents both to use and support the playspaces that already exist. It will also produce a Play Deserts map, documenting the communities where children have nowhere to play. Once we know where the Play Deserts are, public policy makers and nonprofits, including KaBOOM!, can address the Play Deficit rationally and effectively. After mapping their own Play Deserts, Mayors in St. Petersburg, Florida, Tucson, Arizona, and New York City have already implemented successful play policies. Our effort to map Play Deserts has the enthusiastic support of the White House and the Let’s Move! initiative.

Building and Improving Playgrounds

KaBOOM! built its first playground almost 15 years ago in the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington D.C. Not only did we create a great place for kids to play, we pioneered a new way to build playgrounds, allowing children to design the space and working with members of the community to build it. Soon, we’ll be building our 2000th playground, using the same focus on community engagement as we did on that first build. The power of the KaBOOM! process is that it authentically engages residents in some of the lowest income communities around the country in the planning and construction of the playground. For ten weeks, KaBOOM! works with community members and funding partners to plan a successful done-in-a-day playground build. Not only do kids get a great place to play at the end of it all, but communities forge new relationships and build social capital that they can rely on for years to come. We love these builds—they are the heart and soul of our organization and we do about 200 of them every year.

But five years ago, we asked ourselves a hard question—could we solve the problem of the Play Deficit by building a couple hundred playgrounds each year? The answer was no, so we then asked ourselves how could we radically increase the number of playspaces being created in the U.S. each year. Rather than turn to the-tried-and-true approach of creating chapters or affiliates, we chose an approach that would have been unworkable even a few years earlier. We decided to go to scale using the Internet, open-sourcing everything we learned, putting it on the web, and creating an online planning tool that empowers and guides play advocates through the process of planning, funding, and building playgrounds. The Monitor Institute
recently published a study of our effort: *Breaking New Ground: Using the Internet to Scale: A Case History of KaBOOM!*. In 2009, our online outreach efforts helped people build more than 1,600 do-it-yourself (DIY) playgrounds in communities around the U.S.—almost as many as we directly built over the past 14 years.

Mere quantity of playspaces won’t solve the Play Deficit. We want children to have engaging playgrounds where they play longer and want to come back more often. That’s why we involve children in the design of every playground we build. Our commitment to innovative play design is also expressed in a project we’re working on called Imagination Playground. Conceived by architect David Rockwell, Imagination Playground combines loose parts, a manipulable environment, and Play Associates. Every gleeful child that encounters it constructs their own play structure every time they play, in combinations that give full reign to their creativity.

**Advocating for Local Policies**

KaBOOM! sees the impact of our work and the work of our DIY playground builders every day, but to help solve the Play Deficit, we also work with local governments that want to ensure that their cities are full of great places to play. We focus our efforts on local policy because it is our cities and towns where the decisions to fund, not fund, or de-fund playspaces are most frequently made. It is clear to us that every school, every park, every public housing complex, and all new housing developments should have places to play. This can only happen if mayors, city councils, school superintendents, and the heads of parks and recreation departments fund, plan, build and maintain the playspaces necessary for children’s health and well-being.

The good news is that an increasing number of these local policy makers recognize the importance of play in their communities and are doing something about it. In return, KaBOOM! honors and celebrates these play pioneers with our Playful City USA program. In 2010, 118 cities earned this designation, including New York City, Atlanta, Orlando, San Antonio, San Francisco, Phoenix, St. Paul, and Indianapolis. We are also gathering, evaluating, and disseminating best practices in play, so we can accelerate the adoption of the most effective and replicable play policies.

By defining the scale of the Play Deficit through mapping, by building playgrounds ourselves and helping other to do so as well, and by championing local policies and policy-makers who are increasing opportunities for play, KaBOOM! has its sights set on the day when our vision will be reality: all children in America will be able to walk to a playground. Once they get there and start playing, they will be fitter, smarter, happier, and healthier. So too will our entire nation.