PARENTS WANT KIDS TO BE HEALTHY.

KIDS JUST HAVE FUN.

IT’S EASIER TO HAVE BOTH IF YOU LIVE IN THE RIGHT TOWN.

AN EXCLUSIVE LOOK AT AMERICA’S MOST PLAYFUL CITIES.
Play in earnest business. Children need it. Daily. Study after study shows that playtime makes them happier, smarter and more social.

But in America, children are suffering from a play deficit. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that only one in five kids live within a half mile of a park or playground. And today’s kids spend less time playing outdoors than any previous generation, according to the Stanford University School of Medicine.

Why? Far too few places to play, and not enough time in a child’s day, experts say.

Even in these challenging economic times, citizens, neighborhood groups, schools and organizations all over the country are mobilizing to reduce America’s play deficit. More than 100 cities large and small are leading the way.

Here, and online, we announce America’s most playful cities.

Playgrounds make the grade

San Francisco (pop. 803,331)
Number of public play spaces: 144
Why it made the list: San Francisco uses a unique Playground Report Card. Every two years, the city grades playgrounds and rates the quality of each location. The report identifies playgrounds in need of maintenance and renovation, a concept KaBOOM! CEO Darell Hammond says “every city across the country should implement.”
You can play in the street! In 2005, PARK(ing) Day began in San Francisco. Every year on the third Friday of September, people across the city transform metered spots into temporary parks.

Columbus, Ohio (pop. 737,932)
Number of public play spaces: 140
Why it made the list: Columbus is playing the long game. In the past 10 years, more than $2 million in grants, capital investments, sponsorships and private donations have come in through the city’s Safe Playgrounds Initiative.
You can get there from here: Fifty miles of Columbus.

Hartford, Conn. (pop. 124,512)
Number of public play spaces: 30
Why it made the list: Last spring, Hartford held a six-week celebration of parks and recreation facilities.

Abern, Wash. (pop. 70,180)
Number of public play spaces: 83
Why it made the list: Auburn is already committed to diversity of play. The city is home to a water park, a climbing wall, bocce courts and a disc golf course. The Game Farm annually hosts Petpalooza, a pet festival that included improvements to the city’s recreational facilities.
Young town: Nearly 45% of the city’s population is under age 24, so play areas are a priority.
A history of play: Hartford’s Bushnell Park is the oldest publicly funded park in the USA.

When school’s out, play’s in

Orlando (pop. 238,300)
Number of public play spaces: 83
Why it made the list: The city has 14 joint-use agreements with Orange County Public Schools to open up playgrounds for public use during after-school hours. Mayor Buddy Dyer is a huge fan. “Play allows parents to interact with their children and makes them happy, simple as that. A happy child having fun is a good thing.”
Play for kids big and small is big business: Seven of the nation’s top 10 theme parks are located in Orlando.

Fun for everyone

Auburn, Wash. (pop. 70,180)
Number of public play spaces: 90
Why it made the list: The community rallied and raised $310,000 to help build a 32,000-square-foot Discovery Playground, which opened last June. It is designed especially to accommodate disabled as well as able-bodied children.

Committed to diversity of play: The city is home to a water park, a climbing wall, bocce courts and a disc golf course. The Game Farm Park annually hosts Petpalooza, a pet festival attended by more than 10,000 people and their four-legged friends.

Is your city included, too? See the complete list at usaweekend.com.

From our pediatrician: Of course, not everyone has a playground in the neighborhood. For families who don’t, we asked our in-house pediatrician, Dr. Jim Sears, USA WEEKEND contributor and one of TV’s The Doctors, his prescription for other ways to build exercise and play into your child’s day. Sears’ suggestions:

· WALK to and from school with your child. Or find a buddy she can pair up with.
· TEACH some fun outdoor games your child can play in the front yard or your driveway, such as Four Square or Red Light, Green Light.
· EXPLORE the neighborhood with friends by forming a weekly nature-watch group.
· START a family tradition. Regardless of the weather, take a walk around the block after a big meal — even Thanksgiving.
· BRING the kids when you run errands.
· HEAD OUT to your local mall and window-shop together.

Did your town make the list of America’s most playful cities? It could matter — for the health of your child.

WHERE THE PLAYGROUNDS ARE