

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Using Behavioral Economics to Create Playable Cities



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Introduction

The wellbeing of society begins with the wellbeing of kids, and balanced and active play every day is critical to the health and happiness of kids. However, kids today are playing less actively than any previous generation. There are structural factors that contribute to this—like reduced access to safe playspaces, diminished recess time, and increasing sedentary entertainment options—and KaBOOM! and others have worked hard to address these. We also need to address the often overlooked psychological and behavioral barriers that keep kids from playing more.

We partnered with ideas42, a non-profit dedicated to achieving social good by applying insights from behavioral science, to answer the question:

How can cities ensure that all kids get the balanced and active play they need to thrive?

ideas42 applied its proprietary “behavioral mapping” method, coupled with research in low-income communities, to identify three major behavioral bottlenecks that can hinder daily balanced and active play and three innovative solutions for cities to explore to overcome these bottlenecks.



The Decision Making Process around Play

At its most basic, the process of “playing” appears simple. The parent or caregiver decides to take the child out to play, and then they do it. In actuality, the process looks slightly more complex:



Behavioral Bottlenecks to Play

Parents and caregivers may not even consider play



From a behavioral perspective, the *consideration* of the option of play—the “moment of choice”—is actually an important step. Parents and kids today have many activities that occur at specific times—school, soccer, TV shows, etc.—but play isn’t usually a planned event, and that means caregivers (and kids) may not even *think* about play. Or, if they do, the timing is wrong—they’re passing a playground on the way to a doctor’s appointment, or coming home for dinner after a long day.

Feedback on different types of activities is unclear



Timely, salient feedback is an important behavioral cue. When we can know the impact of our actions, or how we are doing relative to some standard or norm, we are much more likely to change our behavior. Because the immediate benefits of play are tough to see, it’s hard to know if you’re “doing it right.”

Play can feel unexpectedly hard to do



Getting to play actually requires many small tasks for the parent or caregiver. Bags must be packed, clothes must be changed, transportation must be arranged, snacks have to be provided—and, once they get to the play destination, time and effort must be expended providing supervision, and maybe playing with the child as well. All these tasks add up. This can lead to a disproportionate focus on the small, short-term costs of play, even while parents recognize the larger, long-term benefits.

Behavioral Solutions

PLAY EVERYWHERE

Make play easy by integrating it into dead time in unexpected places



Families spend a lot of extra time doing mundane tasks. This is especially true for low-income families, who spend a greater proportion of childcare time watching their kids while getting other tasks done. This “downtime” is a great opportunity for play. Consider a mom taking her kids to a health clinic. She struggles to get them to the bus stop, to keep them safely away from the busy street while waiting for the bus, and to occupy them while waiting for the doctor. Imagine instead that the kids eagerly go to the bus stop because they enjoy the swings that replaced the benches. They don’t cause trouble at the doctor’s office because they’re busy playing games in the waiting room. If play is inserted into these dead times, play can turn moments of frustration into fun-filled moments of engaged family time.

PROXIMITY MATTERS

Create mini play destinations “around the corner”



Behavioral insights show us that psychological distance is not equal to actual distance. This makes going to the park or a playground seem like a major outing rather than something every day and incidental. Creating closer, and smaller, “play destinations” can help. This is like the difference between supermarkets and corner convenience stores: you stock up on groceries every week or two, but you might stop by the corner convenience store much more. When it comes to play, the equivalent of the supermarket might be a big playground in the nice part of town. For low-income families, visiting that playspace is exciting and useful, but it takes a lot of effort. We need to create a second type of play space that is small and limited, but right around the corner—a “convenience store” for play.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY CITIES

Make play more inclusive and appealing to the whole family



For busy parents and caregivers, play involves their free time, as well as their kids’ time, and options can be limited. Making local play opportunities more fun and social for parents could help. If we focus on creating family-friendly places that appeal to all generations, we will increase the motivation of adults to take their kids to play for longer and more frequent periods of time.

Conclusion

Cities are fiercely competing for residents—not just 20-somethings, but also families of all income-levels who breathe energy and enterprise into neighborhoods. Everyone wants to live in a safe community with ample job opportunities. In addition, families want great schools and abundant places to play. Creating kid-friendly, family-friendly cities filled with play is a competitive advantage for cities. We hope that the ideas we’ve recommended serve as inspiration for city leaders to create solutions that make it easy for **all** kids in their communities to get the balanced and active play they need to thrive. In turn, cities on the vanguard of applying a behavioral lens to create playable communities will inspire other cities to follow their lead.

This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support and acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

There are barriers to play ...



Play can get lost in daily schedules



It's hard to know if you're playing enough



Play can involve hassle factors

The solution is a new standard for cities that puts families first

PLAYABILITY



Foster play everywhere



Make cities family-friendly



Create the corner store of play

#playability

To see how cities are putting families first, follow [@kaboom](#) on Twitter