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Play Everywhere: An Evaluation of the Wide Ambitions of KaBOOM! and Some Barriers to Access and Equity in Programs

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KaBOOM!, the national non-profit dedicated to play, hosts a diverse menu of grant programs to reach children, especially those in disadvantaged communities, across the country. One of the newest and most innovative of these is Play Everywhere, a design competition in which communities develop ways to make play more accessible in their underutilized public spaces. By emphasizing the construction of social capital among communities, Play Everywhere builds values of civic engagement and collective responsibility in neighborhoods lacking shared connection and identity (Collins, Neal, & Neal, 2014). Since 2015, Play Everywhere has proven successful at increasing play, unleashing creative potential, and intensifying community accountability (Hammond, 2011). To increase open and equal access to grant awards, KaBOOM! should enhance and create inclusive outreach efforts, diversify its funding partner relationships, and focus on the mission to make play a reality for all kids.

Program Context and Background

KaBOOM! is a fast-moving non-profit organization with a unique, yet simple goal: Make play accessible to all kids in all communities. Established in 1996 in Washington D.C., KaBOOM! works to bring play to children of diverse backgrounds, neighborhoods, and cultures. Play is critical to the development of healthy and active children, as they build problem solving and creative association skills through imagination and unstructured activities (Milteer, Ginsburg, and the Council on Communications and Media and Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2012). While hard to come by for all children, play is especially inaccessible to those in lower-income communities (Alexander, Barnett, & Fitzpatrick, 2016). One in four children do not get the recommended daily amount of physical activity (Janssen, 2014). For the more than 15 million children living in poverty in the United States, this statistic is magnified (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

This piece will explain KaBOOM! grants for creating non-traditional play spaces and offer suggestions for how the organization's current programming can be adjusted for greater growth/improved outcomes. I will do this through an exploration of Play Everywhere's results and benefits, informed by my independent research in community psychology and related fields, and my time as an employee of KaBOOM!. During the summer of 2018, I served as the Community Outreach Intern at KaBOOM! in Washington, DC. Through this internship, I assisted with the management of a Play Everywhere grant program, and I worked closely with both community members and KaBOOM! staff during the outreach, application, and design phases of the process. My hands-on experience with the program gave me unique insight into the ways it can unlock community leadership and build relationships in organic ways. For example, while on the phone with a passionate community leader from Pittsburgh, PA, I asked her where her motivation came from for her Play Everywhere idea. She spoke without pause for 30 minutes about the problems facing her neighborhood, and had hardly realized I was on the other end, when I thanked her for her candor. My proximity to the project gave me a window into the lives of those who want more for their children and neighborhoods. This led me to think critically about the structures and procedures KaBOOM! could improve upon to bring their unique model and resources to a broader population.

Play, a seemingly intuitive and simple concept, is actually a complex issue of equity, accessibility, and opportunity. Play is intrinsically motivated, results in joyful discovery, and involves active engagement (Yogman et al., 2018). Hart (2013) found that outdoor play, especially in natural environments, fosters social-emotional and cognitive development through problem-solving activities and opportunities for imaginative group play. These opportunities for growth outside of the home and the classroom are invaluable during childhood. Despite these

proven benefits, children are engaging in unstructured indoor and outdoor play significantly less than recommended. Open recreation time is consumed with technology and social media. Recess time is shrinking as schools reallocate time in the school day to standardized testing preparation and high achievement standards (Ramstetter, Murray, and Garner, 2010). In a study by Gallup (Melissa & Doug and Gallup, 2017), over 53% of parents reported a preference for outdoor play for their children's free time, but they note barriers such as a lack of neighborhood peers to engage with, child preference for screen time, unsafe or inaccessible play environments, and busy schedules. Over one-half of parents reported that they did not know how much time their child actually spent playing outside (Jayasuriya, Williams, Edwards, & Tandon, 2016). Among the many barriers to outside play that parents cited, there are two Play Everywhere addresses directly.

KaBOOM! has historically offered grant opportunities to build traditional playgrounds in high-need communities: 2500 square feet, swings, slides, monkey bars—the classic elements. However, these playgrounds are often located behind or connected with schools, community centers, and stand-alone buildings. For busy parents, especially in low-income communities, there are not enough hours in the day to provide supervised outside play time for their kids. Transit times to and from school, work, doctor appointments, and other daily errands are regularly the only times children and parents or guardians in working-class areas are together in public spaces (Tantia, Welch, & Lin, 2015). In an ideal world, each neighborhood, elementary school, community center, and park would have a safe, multi-component playground that is accessible to people of all abilities. For many communities, however, this is not a reality. A new playground can cost upwards of \$80,000, including but not limited to site preparation, permitting fees, and labor costs (KaBOOM! Community-Built Playground Grant Application Guide, 2018). Furthermore, in

communities without stand-alone playgrounds, play options consist of empty lots, streets, and sidewalks, which present a number of safety concerns.

Play Everywhere addresses these significant barriers of schedule and access by implanting play into highly trafficked public areas. Instead of creating a playground for a specific school or rec center, KaBOOM! encourages the creation of playspace that is easily accessible, free, and safe. Potential play spaces include anything from vacant lots and under-utilized walking trails to waiting room lobbies in hospitals and grocery stores. Communities are encouraged to imagine sidewalks into racetracks, vacant lots into street game centers, and entire cities into kid-friendly spaces. Play Everywhere requires the applicant to evaluate community needs and strengths and the places where potential is waiting to be harnessed. By bringing play to communities without the square footage or funding or support a traditional playground build, Play Everywhere expands KaBOOM!'s reach. Operating under the philosophy that play can happen anywhere and at any time, the program targets highly trafficked and accessible public spaces to implement community-designed projects. By encouraging residents to think beyond convention, KaBOOM! affects change in both physical environments and the minds of communities.

Program Development and Implementation

The nonprofit's work includes projects in all fifty U.S. states and Mexico. Over the last twenty-two years, KaBOOM! has enhanced play opportunities in more than 16,000 community spaces, and more than 3,000 of these are now full-service playgrounds (Tantia, Welch, & Lin, 2015).. Play Everywhere demonstrates the flexible and creative relationships that exist between corporate funding partners, KaBOOM!, and the high-needs communities being served.

Since 2015, KaBOOM! has hosted six different Play Everywhere challenges across the United States (Feldman & Gehl, 2017). While each challenge has differed in funder and region,

the foundational logic and purpose is the same: All kids need to play in order to grow and thrive, but not all kids have access to spaces where they can engage in creative and fun activity. Densely populated urban neighborhoods have limited space, and working parents have limited time. KaBOOM! challenges the notion that play should be isolated to parks and playgrounds. The Play Everywhere model solidifies play as a way of life in everyday and unexpected places. Play should be visible and fully integrated into neighborhood infrastructure, not compartmentalized into traditional places.

When communities apply for a Play Everywhere grant, they are asked to provide information about community demographics, assessment of need, compelling stories, site information, and photos. Based on my personal experience as an employee of the organization, members of the Community Outreach and Grants teams at KaBOOM! synthesize this information into recommendations and assessments of success. Each application, by my own estimate, is subjected to weeks of phone calls, email correspondence, and coaching from assigned staff members by the time it reaches the assessment stage.

The first Play Everywhere challenge kicked off in September 2015 with “Play 60, Play ON.” In honor of Super Bowl 50, KaBOOM! partnered with the NFL Foundation and the 50 Fund to open applications to groups in the San Francisco Bay Area. This demonstrates how KaBOOM! harnesses high profile partners to increase engagement and public awareness of their grant programs. Participating in the well-known NFL Play 60 movement elevated the visibility of the grant opportunity, which led to the award of twenty-one grants totaling \$500,000 to reach more than 60,000 kids. This successful program set the stage for five similar campaigns over the next two years.

After the success of NFL Play Everywhere challenge, the organization launched a number of similar grant challenges between 2016-2019, with numerous public and private funders including the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Keurig Dr. Pepper, and Playworld. A total of \$2,120,000 has been awarded to kids in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Miami, Southeast Michigan, Western New York, and Allegheny County, Pa (KaBOOM!, n.d.).

Program Results and Limitations

The Play Everywhere program taps into existing community assets and passion to create play in meaningful and long-lasting ways. Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is the foundation of Play Everywhere, and all of KaBOOM!’s grant programs. In its simplest terms, ABCD identifies existing community strengths and builds upon them to create sustainable change. As communities “invest in identifying community assets, framing and documenting the issues communities face and taking action to advance quality of life” (Johnson Butterfield, Yeneabat, & Moxley, 2016), they learn to drive their own development process. Rather than focusing on weaknesses to be changed, ABCD celebrates strengths. For the creation of a successful project, the residents of a neighborhood are best equipped to understand which street corners and grocery stores are highly trafficked areas, and those residents are well positioned to help communicate that to funders. For example, a 2016 Los Angeles Let’s Play grant awarded funding to a “Little Tokyo Open” in one of the country’s only remaining “Japantowns.” The community’s rich history created a meaningful and culturally significant playspace for people of all generations. This ABCD-based grant program not only gives the recipient community tools to construct the play space of their children’s imaginations, but KaBOOM! also provides the support and confidence the communities need to continue improving and growing long after the play space comes to fruition.

Play Everywhere ensures significant community investment by encouraging the community to share ownership in the success of their project from start to finish. This commitment can begin as one passionate individual submitting an application, and it grows throughout the design process to groups of volunteers, financial contributions, marketing, and more. Grillo, Teixara, and Wilson (2010) hypothesized that the more satisfaction an individual has with their community, the more likely it is that they will be civically engaged. Collins, Neal, and Neal's (2014) research regarding collective efficacy and social capital would suggest that Play Everywhere's positive outcomes are supported by existing social ties and the potential for further growth.

The program's impact on collective efficacy in socially-fractured neighborhoods is invaluable for sustainable change. Collins, Neal, and Neal (2014) defined collective efficacy as "residents' perceived collective capacity to take coordinated and interdependent action on issues that affect their lives" (p. 328). A locally constructed play space both gratifies the involved community members *and* reminds them of their ability to affect change. A Play Everywhere project can serve as the jumping off point for future projects to solve problems beyond play.

In a world with decreasing social capital (Putnam, 2000), Play Everywhere creates new community hubs that forge vital relationships. If social capital is defined as "the glue that hold[s] society together" (Boyd, Hayes, Wilson, & Beardley-Smith, 2008, p. 190), then Play Everywhere is a multi-faceted bonding agent uniting local businesses, community stakeholders, and families under a common goal.

Not only does Play Everywhere create community bonds during the design process, it increases neighborhood connections after installation (Collins & Guidry, 2018). Two-thirds of respondents to a KaBOOM!—sponsored survey said they met someone new at a Play Everywhere

project, and they were more likely to stay longer when they did (Feldman & Gehl, n.d.). Communities are encouraged to create relationships with other local organizations. For example, a recent project in Allegheny County, PA, included a nonprofit, a local artist, and a commercial land developer. Each member of the team brings a different asset to the table, weaving together different industries living in close proximity.

Analysis of Factors Contributing to Program Outcomes

In a 2017 comprehensive analysis of Play Everywhere conducted by the urban design firm Gehl, four key findings were presented about factors contributing to Play Everywhere's success and replication (Feldman & Gehl, n.d.). They collected data from each winning project through spatial assessments and interviews, and they conducted on-site observations at nine individual sites. The findings were as follows:

First, the best projects are located near existing kid hubs, walking routes, or near schools. Doing so yields more spontaneous use. Second, bringing kids into the process early produces the most buy-in and neighborhood pride in the project. Third, interactive designs are best for engagement and child development; when possible, projects should move beyond static murals and art. Finally, projects should reinforce the message that play is okay, even in unconventional spaces. Furthermore, signage and clear marketing are important to ensure kids feel welcome in their own spaces (Feldman & Gehl, n.d.). These findings were integrated into KaBOOM!'s newest publication — the Playbook. A toolkit for championing and creating kid-friendly cities, the Playbook contains data, project examples, design guides, and case studies. This easily digestible webpage makes it possible for groups to create their own Play Everywhere initiatives, even without official KaBOOM! guidance or funding. The research shows that Play Everywhere meets its goals — it increases play at all levels. Seventy percent of survey respondents reported that kids were

playing more since the installation of the project, and 82% of respondents felt their kids were learning and experiencing new things (Feldman & Gehl, n.d.).

The shortcomings of Play Everywhere lie in the capacity to scale the project to actual needs. No matter how many grants are awarded, reaching all play-deficient kids is impossible. The highest-need communities are not often recipients of grant funding and community building support. This is due in part to the extensive application process created to attenuate high demand for KaBOOM! playgrounds and projects. The applying organization must have personnel to complete the multi-component application, internet access to submit online, an email or phone number to be contacted for follow-up information, and applicants must speak a language understood by someone at KaBOOM!.

Benefits of Play Everywhere include lower community financial input, flexible timelines, a design process around community needs, and opportunities for further neighborhood integration. On the other hand, a successful Play Everywhere application and project requires organized community leadership, established communication channels within the community, substantial volunteer presence, and the paring down of lofty dreams for realistic implementation. The value of Play Everywhere lies not just in its creation of playful sidewalks and interactive cities, but in the establishment of free public spaces with a potential for community improvement. More than just playgrounds, this asset-based community development practice can be utilized in other aspects of life. For example, Meek (2012) writes about the potential held by public libraries in increasing community relationships and civic engagements. Just as a public library serves a community as a host to educational, social, and recreational programming, playgrounds and unconventional play spaces can do the same for parents, caregivers, and children.

To improve accessibility and equity in grant awarding, KaBOOM! should target rural areas with less immediate access to high-speed internet and social media channels. This could be achieved through in-person outreach and tapping into existing non-profit and municipal networks. Organizations like the Salvation Army, United Way, YMCA, and Boys & Girls Clubs have locations all over the country, not just in highly populated urban centers. Also, KaBOOM! should continue to diversify funding partner relationships. By pursuing corporate partners who operate in various geographic regions, KaBOOM! solidifies a well-rounded representation of interests. To address the challenge of scale, resources and research about the benefits and implementations of Play Everywhere should be made available to the general public. The online publication of Play Everywhere Playbook is an appropriate first step, but this does not have a wide enough reach. Lessons from the Playbook must be shared intentionally with community leaders, municipalities, and nonprofit networks across the country. By placing this information directly in the hands of community advocates, especially in rural areas, KaBOOM! ensures it reaches those who may not have the means to seek it out.

Reflections

When communities are encouraged to reflect on their own strengths, community members become the solution to their own challenges. KaBOOM! employees and local stakeholders work together to harness available and untapped potential into an active pursuit of improvement. These positive assets can be individuals, associations and institutions, or physical spaces. The Play Everywhere grant program sets KaBOOM! apart in its pursuit of both product and process. By building both physical spaces and interpersonal relationships along the way, Play Everywhere ensures a strong sense of collective responsibility that will endure with the continued involvement

of stakeholders. Not only does Play Everywhere create more places to play, the primary goal of the organization, but it also helps high-needs communities find strength in their own story.

The community-driven design portion of Play Everywhere allows early adopters to step forward and lead their peers into a successful project with high levels of community buy-in. Play spaces mean more to a community when they are produced in tandem with a strong, values-driven process. KaBOOM! projects are successful when communities embrace the model and carry the philosophy through after the project is concluded. Play Everywhere is an adaptable way to implement the organization's community engagement goals with a reduced financial and spatial burden on the community to create play spaces independently. To achieve its mission, KaBOOM! must continue seeking ways to make play accessible for all – not just the most fortunate among us.

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