

# KaBOOM!

## PLAYGROUNDS THAT BUILD COMMUNITIES A KNIGHT FOUNDATION EVALUATION



KaBOOM! is well-known for helping communities build playgrounds.



Just as importantly, however, the process of creating a KaBOOM! playground helps to build community.

That dual mission is an integral element of the KaBOOM! approach and one of its strongest results: A KaBOOM! playground project develops long-lasting community capacities, including organizational skills, leadership, and a belief that residents can transform their neighborhoods. Along the way, the projects promote children's physical health and creativity, providing more opportunities for play, enhancing relationships among community members, and improving the physical environment.



An evaluation of KaBOOM! in 13 places funded by the **John S. and James L. Knight Foundation**, conducted by **Public/Private Ventures** (P/PV) in 2010, focused on the community engagement dimension of KaBOOM!. Evaluators found that the KaBOOM! experience gives local participants skills, motivation, and confidence they can use to solve other problems. This suggests that a short-term, intensive, structured effort like that provided by a KaBOOM! project can yield effects that increase community change.

### THIS BRIEF SUMMARIZES

- KaBOOM! rationale, theory and approach
- Main evaluation findings
- Key ingredients of KaBOOM! that evaluators credit with producing results

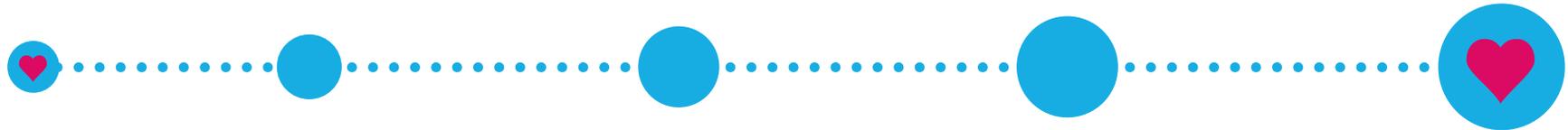
# RATIONALE, THEORY, AND APPROACH

KaBOOM! recognizes that having space and time for children’s play can have a positive effect on school achievement, interpersonal skills and physical health. However, many low-income communities lack safe play spaces. By mobilizing residents and organizations in these communities to create better play areas, KaBOOM! fills the gap while also helping community members act on their own behalf.

The KaBOOM! theory of change holds that a group of diverse community members mobilized around a common cause (play and the well-being of children) can, with appropriate coaching and support, produce achievable wins (culminating in a safe, fun and engaging play space) which—in combination with the volunteers’ new skills, motivation, and confidence—leads to a sense of empowerment and the desire to stay involved in the community. The newly empowered community members then presumably take on other transformative projects in what KaBOOM! calls:

## CASCADING STEPS OF COURAGE

THUS A SERIES OF SMALL, CIVIC-MINDED STEPS CAN LEAD OVER TIME TO MUCH GREATER PUBLIC BENEFITS.



WITH KaBOOM!, THE PROCESS OF ORGANIZING A COMMUNITY-BUILT PLAY SPACE IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE PLAYGROUND ITSELF.

### IN EACH COMMUNITY...



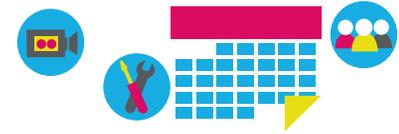
KaBOOM! partners with a local nonprofit organization, such as a school, day care center, or community or neighborhood association.



A project manager from KaBOOM! helps the organization convene a diverse group of volunteers who constitute a planning committee.



Planning kicks off with local children coming together to design the new playground.



Then, for 8 to 12 weeks, the committee meets weekly to develop plans, recruit volunteers, solicit donations, gather necessary tools, organize activities, and work with local media.

### TO PREPARE FOR A ONE-DAY “BUILD.”

The planning culminates when about **200 community and funding partner volunteers** arrive to build the playground. Some, who receive training in playground construction, serve as Build Captains and oversee groups of volunteers working on specific tasks.

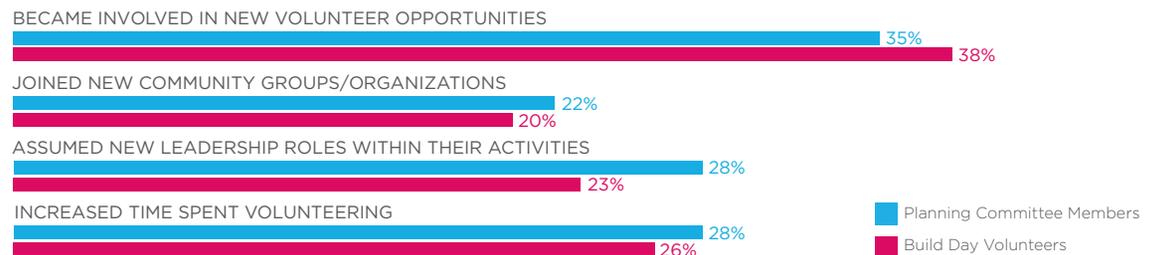
# EVALUATION FINDINGS

P/PV conducted interviews, three site visits and online surveys of participants in 13 community builds funded by the Knight Foundation. The KaBOOM! projects in those communities involved 678 community members who volunteered on Build Day, 167 planning committee members, and 13 local organizations that served as community partners. The surveys, which were taken six months after each build, targeted four types of participants (project managers, planning committee members, Build Day volunteers, and staff of partnering community agencies) in order to gauge how the experience affected stakeholders differently, depending on their level of involvement.

## THE EVALUATORS MEASURED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN FOUR WAYS:

### 1. INCREASED LEVELS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AFTER PARTICIPATING IN A KaBOOM! PROJECT

The KaBOOM! experience motivates volunteers to get more involved in their communities. Planning committee participants and Build Day volunteers report that they have volunteered on other projects, joined other community organizations or groups, assumed new leadership roles, and increased the hours they spend volunteering (e.g., working at a food bank, tutoring children, or building another playground).



These findings suggest that the KaBOOM! approach, although relatively short-term, imparts some long-term community capacities with far-reaching outcomes. As evaluators of the Knight-funded sites found:

*“If the individuals involved in the planning committee and Build Day volunteers go on to engage in further community activism and volunteerism, the communities in which they live should experience benefits on a larger scale—such as additional beautification projects near the playground and greater community cohesion.”*

## 2. INCREASED CONFIDENCE THAT COMMUNITY ACTIVISM IS AN EFFECTIVE VEHICLE FOR CHANGE

The KaBOOM! experience left participants feeling more hopeful that they can improve their community. This sense of self-efficacy is important because people have to believe they can use their skills and have an impact on their neighborhood in order to be motivated to take action and to stay involved in their communities.

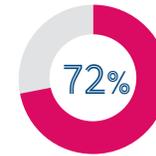
### AMONG PLANNING COMMITTEE MEMBERS WHO ALSO WERE STAFF OF PARTNERING ORGANIZATIONS:



developed a stronger belief that they can make a difference in their community.



have a stronger belief in their ability to make things better by working with others.



said they feel more trust toward others in their community.

Gains on the same measures of self-efficacy were slightly lower but still significant for planning committee members who were not staff of the local organizations and for Build Day volunteers, who spent much less time working on the KaBOOM! project (56%, 60%, and 55%, respectively). These findings suggest that the KaBOOM! model works for a variety of stakeholders and has positive community engagement effects even on people who are only briefly involved in the experience.

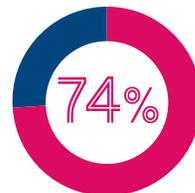
## 3. DEVELOPED COMMUNITY MEMBERS' SKILLS AND ABILITIES

More than 60% of people who participated on local planning committees said that KaBOOM! helped them **develop or improve skills related to organizing, leading, and executing community change efforts**. Participants on the planning committees have the longest involvement with the KaBOOM! project and receive the greatest “touch,” so they are likely to reap the greatest benefits.

### ACROSS THE KNIGHT SITES



of the planning committee participants were staff or board members of the partnering organization, and the rest were parents or other local residents.



of planning committee members were affiliated with local schools.

\*school volunteers may draw from a geographic area broader than the playground's immediate surroundings, and therefore the skills imparted by the experience may be more widely disseminated.

By working with KaBOOM!, planning committee members learned to manage and delegate tasks, run meetings, raise funds, and recruit volunteers. For planning committee chairs, who were most deeply involved of all planning committee members, the areas of greatest skill development involved:

- Creating a plan;
- Identifying individuals or groups that can help solve a problem; and
- Organizing logistics for large events.



THESE SKILLS REPRESENT SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE POTENTIAL FOR ONGOING **COMMUNITY CHANGE**.

#### 4. GROWTH IN PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS' CAPACITIES AND INVOLVEMENT

The local nonprofit organizations in the study that partnered with KaBOOM! gained credibility and capacity to organize neighborhood residents around a community project. The community partners in the Knight sample included: two public elementary schools, two charter schools, and three specialized schools serving children with disabilities; two child care or after-school centers; two full-service community centers; a civil and human rights organization; and a community development organization.

##### SKILLS CULTIVATED BY KaBOOM! INCLUDE THE ABILITY TO:

- Identify community needs, assets, and individuals and groups that can address a problem
- Create an action plan and raise funds to implement it
- Take initiative, motivate others, and delegate tasks
- Organize and run a productive meeting
- Design and schedule future events based at the playground
- Attract volunteers and in-kind donations from businesses



**80%** of planning committee members who work for community organizations that partnered with KaBOOM! and..



nearly **70%** of committee members who are community volunteers...

feel confident that the organizations can now carry out similar projects. The fact that people both inside and outside the partner organizations recognized new capacities suggests that the improvements are significant enough to foster other community projects.

These findings are important, because complex community problems cannot be solved by individuals alone. Rather, research on community change suggests, organizations can be a valuable catalyst for change and can help build the social capital needed to facilitate collaboration and a sense of “collective efficacy” among residents. The findings of **POSITIVE EFFECTS ON THE LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS’ SOCIAL CAPITAL, LEADERSHIP, AND SELF-EFFICACY** also are valuable because these effects were not well-documented before P/PV’s evaluation.



The partner organizations are putting their new skills to work by: developing new partnerships with other community organizations, encouraging residents to stay involved in activities sponsored by the organization, forging new partnerships with local businesses, writing grant proposals independently, using the KaBOOM! planning committee to plan other projects, and engaging with other organizations around a complex community initiative or other effort to increase community participation.

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## FOR EXAMPLE:

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*After serving as the local partner for a KaBOOM! project, Starlight Community Revitalization Group in Detroit began to hear that residents wanted other enhancements at their new playground. Using the skills they learned in planning the playground, they are now raising money to install in basketball court—something that once seemed impossible.*



*A KaBOOM! playground project dramatically increased community engagement for St. Jude Family Childcare Center in Detroit. Small groups of parents took responsibility for other projects around the Center—landscaping, painting, and making minor repairs—and they worked with staff to host a Play Day at the playground. Community members have assumed so much ownership of the playground that on days when the Center is closed, a resident volunteer comes to open and close the playground.*



*After building a playground, Grace Neighborhood Development Corporation/St. Stephen’s Day Care and Afterschool Program in Philadelphia encouraged residents to stay involved. Many kept volunteering, and teachers and parents began collaborating with local business owners to address mutual concerns.*

**Partner organizations also report a marked improvement in their ability to recruit volunteers for a large event, identify individuals or groups that can solve a problem, gather in-kind donations from local businesses, and attract more monetary donations.**

# KEY INGREDIENTS

The dual-outcome strategy that KaBOOM! promotes works because of three factors, according to evaluators:

## 1. THE APPROACH IS GROUNDED IN RESEARCH ON HOW PEOPLE ACQUIRE SKILLS AND USE THEM TO ADDRESS COMMUNITY ISSUES.

KaBOOM! combines coaching, action, and short-term achievement to give participants not only new skills but also a perception of personal success, confidence, and capability. **THIS IS KNOWN TO PRODUCE SELF-EFFICACY—THE BELIEF THAT A PERSON CAN USE HIS OR HER SKILLS TO ACHIEVE GOALS AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE.** Research shows that self-efficacy is a crucial ingredient, along with skills, in motivating a person to pursue a meaningful goal and giving him or her the capacity to act on it successfully. “KaBOOM! is on the right track in many ways by attending to all of the major elements of self-efficacy” outlined in research, the evaluators concluded.

## 2. THE PROCESS IS HIGHLY STRUCTURED AND GIVES PARTICIPANTS AMPLE SUPPORT.

KaBOOM! trains local representatives in person, through workshops held around the country and through webinars. KaBOOM! also maintains a website, [www.kaboom.org](http://www.kaboom.org), with planning tools, fundraising ideas, and discussion forums that enable people to ask questions and share tips with their counterparts in other communities.

For example, one tool lets users find and rate play spaces in their communities; another provides comments on vendors of play equipment around the country. A toolkit contains a complete set of manuals for mapping assets and resources, raising funds, planning and executing the community build, and maintaining the new play space. An interactive “map” guides users through key steps in creating a high-quality playground.

## PARTICIPANTS IN THE KNIGHT SITES WERE HIGHLY ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT THE STRUCTURE AND SUPPORT THEY RECEIVED:



Nearly all planning committee members (90% to 100%) were satisfied or **extremely satisfied** with the KaBOOM! process, including: the overall experience; the project manager's accessibility, responsiveness, knowledge, and professionalism; and the planning meetings.

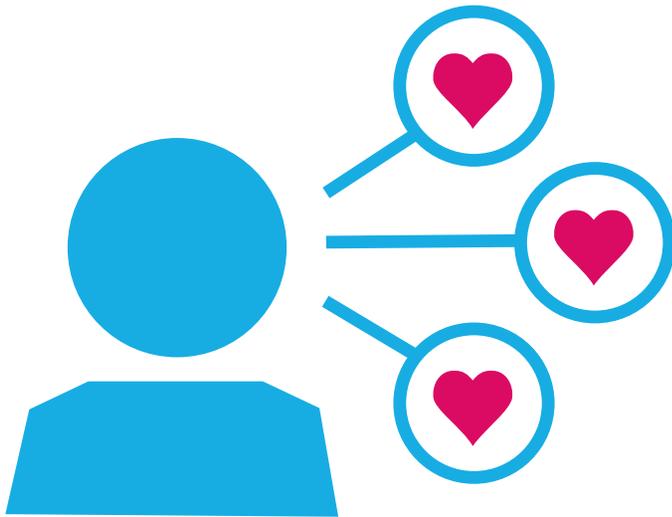


Participants described the process as one that **"ran like clockwork,"** was "very effective and accommodating," "productive," and "organized and calm even under extreme circumstances."



Although participants in the Knight-funded sites did not rely heavily on KaBOOM! online resources, nearly all of those who did **(95% to 98%)** found them helpful or extremely helpful.

### 3. QUICKLY ACHIEVABLE 'WINS' LEAVE PARTICIPANTS WANTING TO DO MORE.



People can get frustrated and lose momentum during long-term community-change efforts that target complex goals. The achievable, short-term win that KaBOOM! offers is therefore attractive, especially in low-income communities where repeated failures to enact change may have left residents discouraged and apathetic.

The fact that the engagement focuses on something people care deeply about also may make a difference. More than 40% of planning committee members who were community volunteers, and almost 20% of planners who were staff of partner organizations, said they volunteered because their child would be using the playground.

Moreover, the playgrounds are tangible results that serve as a constant reminder of the participants' success and therefore reaffirm and reinforce the value of engaging in their community.

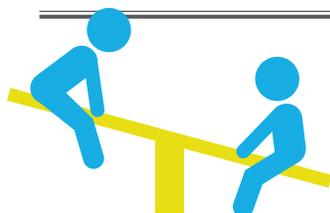
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## THIS POINT IS UNDERSCORED BY THE EVALUATORS' FINDINGS THAT:

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The playgrounds have become **places for socialization and interaction with other adults and children** in the community, which research suggests is a key factor in a community's safety, trust, and ability to rally for change. More than 80% of planning committee members said they now talk to others sometimes, often, or every time they visit the playground.

THESE EVALUATION FINDINGS SUGGEST THAT KABOOM! HAS A ROLE TO PLAY AS THE **SPARK** THAT IGNITES MUCH BIGGER COMMUNITY-CHANGE EFFORTS.

Two decades' worth of interventions have shown that the best plans in the world won't take root, flourish, or endure over time if the people who live, work, and play in communities aren't also changed in some way. By serving as a catalyst for engaging residents and organizations around results, as a vehicle for collectively achieving results, and as a learning ground for developing new skills, KaBOOM! could fill an important niche in the community change field—especially for efforts that seek to achieve collective impact.

KaBOOM! also may serve as a useful complement to long-term individual engagement initiatives. Participation in the KaBOOM! build resulted in skills and efficacy benefits for individuals involved in planning committees and the community partners that were still apparent several months after Build Day. A short term, intensive, structured effort like the KaBOOM! community build model can yield effects that can result in increased community change efforts and positive outcomes for these communities, which extend well beyond the playground itself.



# TESTIMONIALS

*“ KaBOOM! gives communities the opportunity to reinvest in themselves. I think we know that people will invest in us if we invest in ourselves. ”*

**—Planning committee member**

*“ Once you experience feeling what a good thing you’re doing, it’s addictive. ”*

**—Build Day volunteer**

*“ KaBOOM! has made a big difference in the lives of not only the children in this community but the adults, too. ”*

**—Planning committee member**

