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Play is universal

No matter where you are or who you are, you start out life playing. Some of us even keep that playful spirit well beyond our childhood years.

The science of learning shows that play contributes to our social, emotional, and cognitive development throughout our lives. What makes play so important?

Play helps us learn

From playing peek-a-boo in infancy to mastering games in grade school, humans are drawn to playful learning. We learn to solve problems and understand systems by playing games. We learn to explore uncharted territory and ask deep questions through imaginary play. We learn to be creative and collaborative by playing with our peers.

Play is essential to healthy brain development and learning.

Play brings us together

Playing is a way of sharing space. Play helps strangers connect, even if they don't speak the same language. This is how we learn to live with one another—to share and take turns, to build empathy and tolerance, to create community. Playing with others helps develop social skills and emotional resilience, from our earliest childhood interactions to the relationships we navigate in adulthood.

Play helps people learn to share, negotiate, and resolve conflicts.

Play keeps us young

Adults whose lives are rich with playful experiences know how to have fun at any age and in any situation. Just when you think you've got it all figured out, a playful experience reminds you how much you have left to learn and how much more you can grow. Older adults play to keep their minds active and bodies healthy, leading to more positive emotional and mental health.

Play reduces stress and stimulates the mind, keeping us healthier as we age. Play takes many forms. Play can enliven our bodies through physical activity. Play can challenge our minds through puzzles and games. Play can be imaginative, like playing make believe. Play can be a creative expression, like making art or creating costumes. Play can be something we do by ourselves or in groups. In this book, we consider any activity that people choose to do simply for the joy it brings them to be a form of play.

Making space for play

Despite these benefits—and not to mention the pure joy it brings into our lives—play is often neglected in modern life. Studies have shown that the time children spend playing has decreased by as much as 25% in recent decades. And us adults are finding even less time for play in our lives. We're missing out on the power of play, both as individuals who thrive through playful interaction and as a society seeking greater harmony.

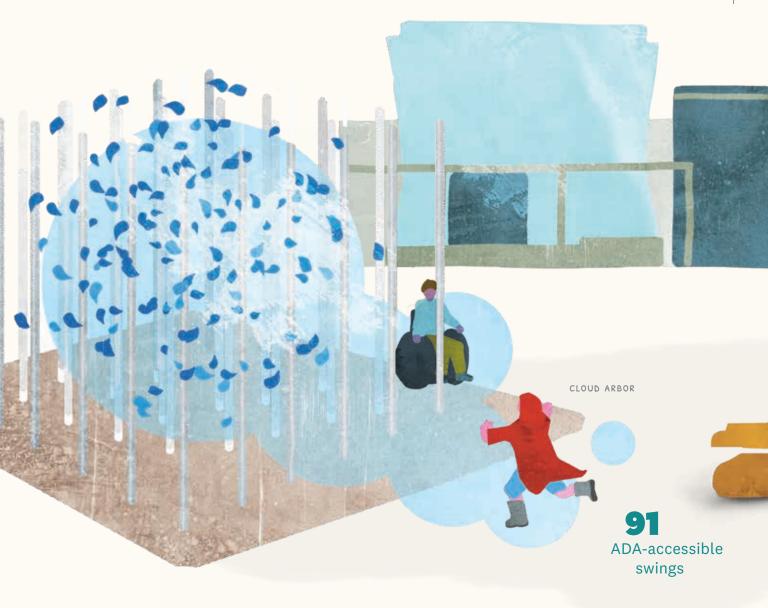
A community that is fun and safe for children is better for everyone: families, older adults, people with disabilities, visitors, longtime residents, and anyone seeking the simple joys of play.

As we reimagine and rebuild our communities to accommodate a rapidly urbanizing world in which a majority of city dwellers will be children, how can we build cities that work for kids? If kids built a city, how would they design it to spark curiosity, wonder, and joy?

You'd never be too far from a park or a playground

and you'd even be able to play in the clouds

What if every bridge in the city was a shake-shake bridge and all the city steps were rainbow-colored? Every big building could have a basketball court, and every footpath would lead to the monkey bars!



Famous Pittsburgh playgrounds:

Blue Slide Park Squirrel Hill

Enright Parklet East Liberty

voluntary

In Pittsburgh's Aspinwall neighborhood, art enthusiasts and little explorers alike can climb right onto Tom **Otterness**' 24-foot tall bronze sculpture of a reclining man.

At Pittsburgh's six **Spray Parks** anyone can sprint through the mist, squish a geyser with their toes, or stand beneath a tipping bucket.

Some neighborhoods don't have playgrounds, but if kids designed the city, that would be against the rules! One Pittsburgh community is coming together to rectify a "play desert" —the **Hazelwood Play Trail** will connect kids to all the places they can play in their neighborhood. **Public Recreation Centers** in Pittsburgh offer kids and adults a place to shoot hoops, learn karate, enjoy a snack, grab a game of checkers, or just connect to the internet.

Play can turn a walk in the park into dance through the clouds, whether you're wearing a swimsuit or a power suit. Just outside the Children's Museum, the **Cloud Arbor** emits a real cloud of fog every few minutes. Kids and adults alike can enjoy the sights (and the refreshing feeling) as a cloud forms and floats through the park or rises on the wind.



The Dinosaur Playground *Oakland*

The whole school day would be as fun as recess

and every lesson would include a chance to play

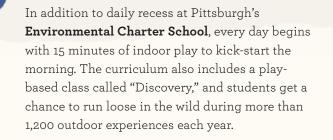
A school day in a kid-designed city wouldn't be complete without time set aside for play. Playbased learning gives children unstructured time to manipulate their bodies, the materials around them, and the natural world.

PLAY MATTERS The Case for Recess

The evidence is clear: play is an essential part of a child's school day. Play allows children to build 21st-century skills like problem solving, cooperation, communication, conflict resolution, and creativity. Research has found that play enables children to access deeper learning, connecting factual knowledge with real-world experiences and grasping abstract implications. Lecce

"Play = Learning. As children move from the sandbox to the boardroom, play should be the cornerstone of their education. The research is clear: playful pedagogy supports social-emotional and academic strengths while instilling a love of learning."

-Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Ph.D. author of Becoming Brilliant



Inspired by the national **Let's Move** campaign, movers and shakers at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens offer funding and education to help schools and families increase their physical activity. IMAGINATION PLAYGROUND

Montour Elementary School is the world's first school building made entirely of LEGOs. Just kidding! But it *is* home to the world's first **LEGO Brick Makerspace**, giving students a place to build structures, test drive vehicles, and try their hand at robotics.

Pittsburgh nonprofit **Trying Together** helps educators get serious about being silly. They loan out **Imagination Playgrounds** to schools without access to a playground. These soft, larger-than-life, blue blocks let children build, create, and imagine, making a playground appear anywhere! And at Trying Together's **Play Academy**, teachers learn the latest developmentally appropriate approaches to learning through play.

independent

Trains would go up and down, not just forward and backward and everyone could draw on the walls

In a playful city, nobody has to sit still, and there are chances to play everywhere you turn, because play can happen anywhere.



MURALS

INCLINES

PLAY MATTERS Building Play into Everybody's Day

Families spend a lot of time running errands and getting from place to place. This is especially true for low-income families, who spend a greater proportion of childcare time watching their kids while getting other tasks done. When it's built into a city's environment, play can turn transit time into fun-filled moments of engaged family time.

The **Word Play** program installed posters packed with word games and other activities in bus shelters throughout Pittsburgh. The Fred Rogers Company created these kid-friendly prompts and games to help parents and children play and learn together.

During the summer, the **Citiparks Roving Art Cart** visits parks across the city, bringing art-making activities to neighborhood kids, from painting and beading to sculpting their own mini-masterpieces.

Why go around a mountain when you can go right up the side? Pittsburgh's two **inclines** (the Duquesne and the Monongahela) glide up and down Mount Washington, providing a very different view of the city to commuters and adventurers alike. The **Grant Street Crossings** feature colorful pylons and green pavement to mark the neighborhood's gateway from tall buildings and busy sidewalks to the rivers and trails at Point State Park.

Getting from here to there is a refreshing adventure at the **Water Steps** in North Shore Riverfront Park. Kids can climb, wade, splash, and take a dip in the water that flows down these sandstone steps.

With close to 400 outdoor **murals** depicting everything from nature scenes to images of the city's steel-making history, Pittsburgh's public art adds a splash of color, fun, and surprise around almost every corner.

GRANT STREET CROSSING

The art in the museums would come to life

and you'd be able to touch the exhibits

Museums blur the lines between reality and imagination and invite you to play along that boundary. What would two portraits say to each other if they could talk? What would it be like to step into history?

In the **MAKESHOP** at the **Children's Museum** of **Pittsburgh**, kids get to make the exhibits, using the same tools, processes, and materials as the grown-ups. This dedicated makerspace invites young visitors to explore how things are made using processes like circuitry, woodworking, sewing, weaving, and stop-motion animation.

At the **Carnegie Science Center**, visitors can ride a roller coaster simulator, board a real submarine, examine the science behind their favorite sports, and even learn why they fart! At the **Andy Warhol Museum**, visitors can bat at helium-filled balloons in Warhol's Silver Clouds installation, or make their own screen prints in the Youth Studio.

At the **Mattress Factory**, you can play *inside* works of art—the museum features three buildings filled with installation art: room-sized artworks that are designed to transform the perception of a space.

At the **Carnegie Museum of Natural History**, going behind the scenes is part of the fun. Visitors can dig up realistic fossil casts using the same chisels and brushes paleontologists used to get the museum's T. rex skeleton out of the ground.

Randyland is proof that a playful spirit can make a city more colorful and a community more connected. Local artist Randy Gilson welcomes visitors to his corner lot filled with a rainbow of tiled mosaics, pink flamingos, mannequins, and countless other wonders.

SILVER CLOUDS AT THE WARHOL

hysical

Every weekend at the **Carnegie Museum of Art**, artist educators create opportunities for kids and their families to explore the museum, practice art making, and discover new ways of playing in their mind and with their hands.

A visit to the **Heinz History Center** is a chance to play through time. Kid-scale replicas of historic businesses let young people immerse themselves in the past. Plus, the museum hosts the largest collection of artifacts from Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, the iconic children's television show originated in Pittsburgh by champion of play Fred Rogers.

MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

Libraries would be a place to get loud

and you could borrow more than books

Instead of shushing patrons, libraries in a playful city make sure everyone has the things they need to explore the world around them.

THE LABS AT CLP EAST LIBERTY

PLAY MATTERS

Linking Literacy and Play

Research provides evidence that literacy and language development are linked to the listening, symbolic representation, and narratives used in dramatic play.

The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh is

transforming the library from a place to go to check out materials to a place to make music, build robots, and learn photography. **The Labs**, a teen-focused learning lab, offers teens a social hub and a place for self-directed learning, experimentation, and play.

What if the library was in your front yard? Little Free Libraries, the take-one-leave-one book exchanges found in neighborhoods across Pittsburgh, offer the chance to read something new every time you wander around the corner. Some libraries come with wheels attached. Through the Allegheny County Library Association's **Bookmobile** program, books come to readers, ensuring that lacking the means to get to a library never comes between kids and reading.

Ever ask your folks for a scooter, but they said you didn't have room to store it? Or ask for some fancy magnet blocks, but they said those were too expensive? What if there were a way you could borrow toys just for awhile? The **Pittsburgh Toy Lending Library** makes that dream come true: members check out three toys at a time for up to three weeks.



The great outdoors would be in your own backyard

Getting play to blossom in the city means regular visits to places where the wild things grow.

14,000

acres of land

14 public parks

712 outdoor stairways within Pittsburgh's city limits, totaling 24,090 vertical feet

PLAY MATTERS Play Happens Outside, Naturally

Recent studies have illuminated the benefit—perhaps even the necessity—of spending time outdoors for both kids and adults. While it's unclear exactly how cognitive functioning and mood improvements occur, it's clear that time in nature builds confidence, promotes creativity and imagination, teaches responsibility, gets kids moving, and reduces stress.

In **Riverview Park**'s extensive trail network, you'll come across adventurers on foot, bike, and horseback just a few miles from downtown Pittsburgh. Stick around past sunset and you'll find stargazers staring into the starry night atop the **Allegheny Observatory**.

Gardens are for digging in the mud, collecting sticks, and hunting for fairies. The **Pittsburgh Botanic Gardens** makes space for just that kind of play. Three miles of trails (some even accessible to people with disabilities) connect a "garden of the five senses" with meadows, natural playgrounds, and even a flock of chickens. Pittsburgh may not be very close to the ocean, but the wave pool at **Boyce Park** lets kids and adults feel like they're bobbing about in a shining sea. Boyce Park also features ski slopes, snow tubing hills, and archery lanes, so anyone can slip into the woods to find an adventure, no matter what the season.

If kids had it their way, you could open a door right into the desert, and another door would lead to the rainforest. **Phipps Conservatory** in Pittsburgh lets you wander through the desert on a rainy day or visit a rainforest in the middle of the winter.

"If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil."

-environmentalist and Pittsburgh native Rachel Carson

Doctor visits would be like play dates

and waiting wouldn't feel like waiting at all Life isn't always fun, but in a playful city, there's a way to beat the blues around every corner. In Pittsburgh, play can be found in lots of unexpected places.

The Well at Kids Plus Pediatrics is a special community space dedicated to play time during and between visits to the doctor, including craft nights, toddler time, and yoga for moms and babies.

What if you didn't have to sit in the cart while your parents searched for bread crumbs and read soup can labels? Many of Pittsburgh's Giant Eagle grocery stores offer the **Eagle's Nest**, a playroom where kids can unwind while their parents shop for groceries.

Having a space to play is important in places where children spend days or weeks recovering from not-so-fun experiences. At the **Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh**, patients can go wild at **Izzie's Playground** without leaving the care of doctors and nurses. Even the MRI and CT machines are fun—**Adventure Rooms** turn imaging procedures into a pirate adventure, an undersea voyage, or a visit to camp. Airports mean long waits in long lines, your parents take away your juice, and you can't even get up close to the planes! At **Pittsburgh International Airport's Kidsport**, young flyers can explore seven interactive installations spread across 2,100 square feet of rubbery mats.

With bright paint, craft tables, and a 3-foot pin wall, **Gwen's Den** at the **Allegheny County Jail** lets kids be kids at an uncomfortable time, and even make something to show the parent they're visiting. According to the Urban Institute, research shows that inmates who have opportunities to play with their children have lower rates of recidivism.

The city would have holidays just for playing

January

Pittsburgh rings in the new year with **First Night**, featuring handson, family-friendly activities, face painting, and kid-friendly performances. **May**

Pittsburgh loves to play in May.

Young athletes really get the lead out at the **Kids Marathon**, a one-mile race that happens alongside the annual Pittsburgh Marathon for adults.

Play takes center stage at the **Children's Theater Festival**, where performers from across the globe present acts ranging from fairy tales to interactive performances where kids build the sets from cardboard.

Tens of thousands of kids and adults get together for the region's largest open house of hands-on learning called **Remake Learning Days**.

Pittsburghers of all ages spend **Ultimate Play Day** hula hooping, crafting, inventing original games from recycled materials, and so much more. The ten-day **Three Rivers Arts Festival** explores the intersection of art, music, and play through free interactive experiences.



Spring

Even in a city where every day has loads of play potential, the calendar needs certain days set aside specifically for playing—days when we drop everything else and just play!

Summer

In the fall, **RADical Days** opens doors to all Pittsburgh has to offer by providing free admission, special performances, and family-friendly fun at dozens of the region's landmarks, institutions, and hidden treasures.

November

All summer, for one Sunday per month, streets are closed to cars for **Open Streets**. Residents of all ages take in the city from a whole new perspective as they bike, walk, dance, and play along a 3+ mile route. Pittsburgh has hosted its very own **Maker Faire** to bring together inventors and tinkerers to share their work and make things together.

October



Light Up Night kicks off the holiday season in Pittsburgh with horsedrawn carriage rides, ice skating, and the lighting of a giant Christmas tree.

Everyone would play!



If kids were in charge, every single day would hold the potential for play, and everybody would be invited, regardless of access, ability, or age. There are so many ways to play in Pittsburgh that we ran out of space in this book!

> In Pittsburgh, people are helping to make the city a playful place for anyone of any age, any time of day, any season of the year.

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The Playful Pittsburgh Collaborative is

dedicated to advancing the importance of play in the lives of children, families, and community members.

> **Kidsburgh** is Pittsburgh parents' go-to resource focused on the people and ideas making Pittsburgh a better place to raise kids.

> > **Remake Learning** is a network of educators igniting engaging, relevant, and equitable learning practices.

"The playing adult steps sideward into another reality; the playing child advances forward to new stages of mastery."

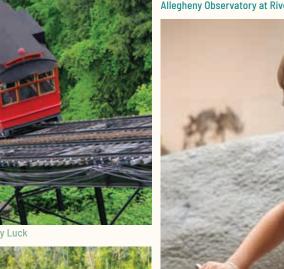
– Erik H. Erikson, developmental psychology pioneer



The Labs at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh Photo: Ben Filio



Allegheny Observatory at Riverview Park Photo: NASA



Incline Photo: Roy Luck



Pittsburgh Botanic Garden Pittsburgh Botanic Garden



Silver Clouds at the Warhol Photo: Sskerchief on Wikimedia Commons



Carnegie Museum of Natural History Photo: Brian Cohen



Randyland



City of Play Photo: Ben Filio



Otterness Sculpture Photo: Play Pittsburgh



Photo: Popscreenshot on Wikimedia Commons



Cloud Arbor Photo: Renee Rosensteel



Water Steps Photo: Wally Gobetz



WordPlay Photo: Sam Boese

This book imagines what urban life would be like if kids designed the city, and presents real-life examples from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania that might be included in those blueprints. People in Pittsburgh could be playing in the Cloud Arbor or checking out a toy from the library while you're reading this very sentence!

Pittsburgh, like many cities, is only at the beginning of its journey to intentionally build a playful city. Every day, Pittsburghers young and old are answering the call to play more and more often. While the places in this book don't represent all of the play happening in Pittsburgh, this glimpse into the city's "playscapes" shows how our city is making space for play.

Our hope is that this short exploration of Pittsburgh becomes more than just a thought experiment and that cities everywhere start to design urban environments that help children thrive. Because doing so isn't just great for kids—it'll make better cities for everyone.





Giant games in downtown Pittsburgh Photo: Renee Rosensteel

"Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood."

- Fred Rogers

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