

The Ultimate Block Party:**Bridging the Science of Learning and the Importance of Play**

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The Play Crisis

We are in the midst of a crisis. A play crisis. Play is a rapidly diminishing commodity for today's children. From 1981 to 1997, children's playtime dropped by a staggering 25% (Hofferth & Sandburg, 2001). A more recent analysis shows that this low-level of play was maintained between 1997 and 2003, but that during this time, children spent more time studying and less time outdoors, playing sports, and involved in passive leisure activities (Hofferth, 2009).

Despite scientific findings that link play and recess to increased levels of attention and increased learning (see Hirsh-Pasek, et al. 2009, for a review; Pellegrini, 2005; Pellegrini & Davis, 1993; Pellegrini, Huberty & Jones 1995), recess has been eliminated in thousands of schools in the United States to allow for more time for academic study (Elkind, 2008). Dr. Edward Zigler, father of the Head Start program, has written that, "play is under siege."

The issue is not simple. Much of the pressure to increase time spent in school and decrease play comes from the fact that in international tests of 14-year-olds (Fleischman, Hopstock, Pelczar, & Shelley, 2010), US students rank 17th among industrialized nations in reading behind Finland, Poland and Japan, 23rd in science, and 30th in math, 13 slots behind Slovenia. While our paltry rankings are not news, what *is* news is that science has made major progress in uncovering how children learn.

The last three decades of *science of learning* research has produced a wealth of empirical data that highlight the power of play on development. Ginsburg (2007), in a "white paper" for the American Academy of Pediatrics, highlights that free and unstructured play is essential for all domains of development – not just physical health. This type of play helps children reach

physical, cognitive, and social milestones. Furthermore, it aids in managing stress and promotes resiliency. Play is imperative if children are to thrive in a 21st century world. As the world has changed, so too have the skill sets needed to succeed—such as creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, confidence, and content—all of which begin in the sandbox during play and take us to the boardroom (“The Six C’s,” Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2010).

Playful learning, encompassing both free- and guided-play activities, provides children the opportunity to actively engage, explore, and discover the world around them and integrate their learning based on principles defined by developmental psychology and learning sciences research (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Newcombe, & Golinkoff, under review; Meltzoff, Kuhl, Movellan, & Sejnowski, 2009). *Free play* activities—those that are fun, voluntary, flexible, have no extrinsic goals, involve active engagement of the child, and often contain an element of make-believe – allow children to practice new skills, test out ideas, and expand their repertoire (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999; Pellegrini, 2009; Sutton-Smith, 2001). From dress-up to stacking blocks, and creating art, research suggests that free play fosters mathematics, language, and early literacy in children from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, children learn and practice how to share, communicate with others, focus attention on a task, test new ideas, and generate novel solutions—all of which are necessary for later academic success.

In *guided play* contexts, adults create flexible, interest-driven, child-centered play experiences that encourage children’s natural curiosity, engagement, and thinking (Fisher et al., under review). Adults are seen as collaborative partners who actively facilitate the learning process in

at least two ways (e.g. Berk, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). First, adults might enrich the environment with objects/toys or games that provide self-driven experiential learning opportunities and focus children on the dimension of interest. To promote spatial thinking, for example, adults may put blocks in a child's free play area. Second, adults may facilitate children's learning by gently scaffolding their discoveries using a variety of techniques, including commenting on children's discoveries, co-playing with the children, asking open-ended questions about what children are finding, suggesting ways to explore and play with the materials in ways that children might not have thought to do, or creating games that help them hone their knowledge and skills (e.g., Cross, Woods, & Schweingruber, 2009). Building on the previous example, an adult may challenge children to "design and build the tallest skyscraper" in the room and, after the activity, ask children to compare skyscrapers and figure out why some toppled over while others did not. Evidence shows education programs that incorporate free and guided play activities, such as *Tools of the Mind* and *Montessori*, promote long-term academic achievement (e.g., math, vocabulary) as well as increased inventiveness, curiosity, social skills, and motivation beyond traditional, structured programs (e.g., Alfieri, Brooks, Aldrich, & Tenenbaum, 2011; Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Bodrova & Leong, 2001; Burts, Hart, Charlesworth, & Kirk, 1990; Burts, Hart, Charlesworth, Fleege, Mosley, & Thomasson, 1992; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Munro, 2007; Golbeck, 2001; Hirsh-Pasek, 1991; Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006; Marcon, 1993; 1999; 2002; Stipek, Feiler, Danies, & Millburn, 1995). The data paint a clear picture: the "active and engaged child" – one who explores, interacts, and engages in the environment - is the child that is best prepared for the future (Chi, 2009).

Despite this, 65% of children aged 4-11 experience more than 2 hours of TV a day while more than one-third (37%) experience fewer than 6 active play sessions a week (Anderson, Economos, & Must, 2008). These same children are exposed to more highly regimented education programs in place of play (Miller & Almon, 2009). For example, the “Baby Einstein” phenomena changed the landscape of many homes in America. Experimental studies show that very young children are unable to learn vocabulary from educational videos (Kromar, Grela, & Lin, 2007; Roseberry, Hirsh-Pasek, Parish-Morris, & Golinkoff, 2009) and in fact, increased television watching amongst 8- to 16-month-old infants was associated with decreased vocabulary compared to little- to no-television watching (Richert, Robb, & Fender, 2010). Furthermore, television watching leads to decreased communication between mother and child compared to book reading or playing with toys (Nathanson & Rasmussen, 2011) across early childhood. Despite these findings, 40% of children aged 3 months and 90% of 24 month-olds are already regularly watching screen media (i.e., television, video, and/or DVD [Zimmerman, Christakis, & Meltzoff, 2007]). Others have found highly structured, adult-directed educational activities in early childhood show limited, short-term gains and, in some cases, negative affects on children’s motivation (Stipek & Byler, 2004) and long-term academic outcomes (Marcon, 2002). Child psychologists also worry that a lack of playtime compromises the next generation’s academic, physical, and social-emotional health (Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2009).

While science shows play is vital for children’s learning and development, the message has been lost in the mass-commercialization of childhood and the misguided belief that only highly structured activities are the best way for young children to learn (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). How might we reverse this trend? Could a group of scientists start a grass-roots effort to change the

culture of childhood today? Our plan was simple – channel the ‘block parties’ of the past where families came together to share knowledge and play. In this case, we hoped to bring together the scientific community of researchers studying play, the professional community of educators, social workers, and librarians, non-profit corporations invested in children like museums, corporations that work with children, and most importantly, today’s families Enter --the “Ultimate Block Party.”

The Ultimate Block Party

On October 2, 2010, over 50,000 people joined the call at our first "Ultimate Block Party" event, held in Central Park in New York City. With the help of a wide range of scientists, community partners, corporate leaders, children’s museums, non-profit groups, volunteers and even celebrities like Sara Jessica Parker and Mariska Hargitay, we hosted the first celebration of the impact of play on development and shared this message first hand - from the mouths of scientists to the ears of today's parents and families. Since then, thousands more families in Baltimore and Toronto have told us the same thing: Today’s families are ready for a culture change.

Translating the Science of Play. The Ultimate Block Party Initiative sought to transform attitudes about the science of how children learn by demonstrating that play can foster important learning skills in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) as well as in literacy, and the arts. Recognizing that the explicit connections between play and learning are not well known

in the general public, the Ultimate Block Party created unique opportunities for families to experience and understand the science of learning in action by: (1) creating playful learning activities that families could engage in, and (2) linking play to learning in a variety of ways, including through an emphasis on how the arts impact children's learning.

Playful Learning Activities and the Playbook. The Ultimate Block Party included 28 activities that spanned 8 play domains: adventure, construction, physical, creative, the arts, make-believe, technology, and language play. Activities were all derived directly from the learning sciences literature and were designed to appeal to a wide demographic audience (e.g., age, interests, learning ability including learning disabilities, and physical ability). The playful learning activities that formed the blueprint for the Ultimate Block Party were based on scientific research. For example, the “Lego Extravaganza” activity at the Ultimate Block Party was based on studies showing block and puzzle play promotes spatial understanding and mathematics achievement (e.g., Ginsburg, 2006; Ginsburg, Lee, & Boyd, 2008; Levine, Ratliff, Huttenlocher, & Cannon, 2012; Newcombe, 2010; Wolfgang, Stannard & Jones, 2001). Other activities, such as “Skyscraper Challenge”, were based on research originating from the Science of Learning Centers (Gentner & Levine, 2009).

A pivotal piece of this outreach was to give parents the knowledge that play is central for children's learning. For each of the 8 play domains, we introduced parents to “The science behind playing around” and also gave suggestions for “More ways to play at home!” in an Ultimate Block Party *Playbook* that was given for free to each family at the event. In addition, the *Playbook* contained descriptions and locations of the Ultimate Block Party activities and a

list of both scientific and popular resources for more information on the science of learning. Below we highlight a few of the events we featured and the messages we gave parents to help highlight the science behind the play. To view the complete *Playbook*, visit <http://www.ultimateblockparty.org>.

1. Where in the World? Adventure Play

How do young children learn to navigate or “get around” in this great big world? Psychologists find that even preschool children have the ability to learn and to use a map. They are born with it. Kids’ ability to think about space has been linked to achievements in science, technology, engineering, and even in math. A great way to improve this skill is through fun practice using maps and thinking in space or “spatially”. The Adventure Play activities will allow you and your child to use a map to find your way around the park, go on a huge scavenger hunt for local ‘treasures,’ and play a big game of hide-and-go seek.

- *Hide-and-Go-Seek* (sponsored by Hali) - You will need a phone with a GPS (like an iPhone or a Droid) to play this game. Players are divided into two teams, Hiders and Seekers. Hiders must work as a team to keep each other safe, while seekers must coordinate to find and tag Hiders. The app provides a map, showing other players’ approximate locations. Seekers are given exact locations of Hiders who are far away, but as they near the hiders they must rely on their eyes to tag them. Hiders must judge when a Seeker is too close and figure out when their location is no longer secure.
- *Mission Play!* - Each group is given a series of questions and must talk to 5 experts, 5 masters, 5 kids in other families and 5 adults in other families who are at the Ultimate

Block Party to complete this mission!

2. Building the Future: Construction Play

How do cars work? What holds up a house? Kids love to know how things are made. But did you know that giving kids the chance to build things (like a block tower) also helps them to learn about shapes, space, patterns, and even mathematics? And if children build with others, they practice working as a team, problem-solving, turn-taking, and perspective taking. Giving children the chance to build (and even destroy!) new structures gives them the opportunity to become child-engineers! Imagine the wonder! How did those small pieces come together to build something so large and wonderful? The activities in this section will allow you and your child to experience this wonder firsthand. You will get the chance to create a CL!CK moment using Lego CL!CKs, build your own tallest skyscraper, race a one-of-a-kind model car, and even create your own playground!

- *Lego Extravaganza* (sponsored by Lego) - Families will have an opportunity to build an original design of their own creation or become part of a team of builders. The foundation of the activity is a blog (www.LEGOclick.com) that serves up daily musings on those daily moments of brilliance – the “lightbulb” or CL!CK moments – when ideas just seem to come together. From innovative activities and experiences to new inventions to everyday fixes, CL!CK moments are the intersection of creativity and problem solving, and often go unnoticed. For a child, a CL!CK moment occurs when they snap the last brick on their LEGO creation and declare that they “have done it!” These moments nurture patience and persistence. The reward is a sense of accomplishment and a self-esteem boost that is the foundation for a lifetime of creativity.
- *Imagination Playground* (sponsored by KaBOOM!) - Imagination Playground is a breakthrough play-space concept conceived and designed by architect David Rockwell

to encourage child-directed, unstructured free play. Imagination Playground offers a changing array of elements that allows children to constantly reconfigure their environment and to design their own course of play. Giant foam blocks, mats, wagons, fabric and crates overflow with creative potential for children to play, dream, build and explore endless possibilities.

- *Skyscraper Challenge* (sponsored by NSF's Science of Learning Centers)- Design your own skyscraper and enhance your understanding of the science, engineering, art, and technology behind what keeps the world's tallest buildings standing!

3. Get Moving! Physical Play

Following rules, learning self-control, even learning to count, these are things that can be learned through play. When we play games we add pleasure to the task of mastering our minds and bodies “Put your hands on your head.” “Simon says, touch your ear.” In this seemingly simple task, if you know to touch your ear but NOT put your hands on your head, you are practicing “executive functions” like regulating and controlling your impulses. Research suggests that having self-control is critical to success in school. And as you might guess, when you pay attention, you will perform better in your class work and will also be better at forming friendships. “Right hand red! Left foot blue!” “Don’t fall over!” these skills can also be taught in a fun playful way! The activities in this section will get your body moving and your brain learning!

- *Sidewalk Games* (sponsored by Playworks) - Come join the fun with a variety of sidewalk games, including four square, jump rope, switch and cone stations and more. These games were chosen for a wide range of ages and skill level. Sidewalk games are

really fun and teach kids how to work together and pay attention and move their bodies in controlled ways. Even adults love Playworks' games!

- *Pop-Up Adventure Playground* (sponsored by the New York Coalition for Play) - Children need to be in charge of their play! At the Pop-Up Adventure Playground, kids have permission to create their own play environments and scenarios. Don't be surprised if kids continually transform this space throughout the day. Children will encounter an assortment of materials such as planks of wood, cardboard boxes, lengths of fabric, mixing bowls, sand, water, leaves, and branches. Stand back and enjoy your kids using this stuff to construct whatever they desire – hideouts, forts, flying ships, or – the sky's the limit! The play may be loud or quiet, silly or serious. One thing will be true: Kids and their imaginations will rule! While your children are busy, share some of your own play memories, create an imaginary world of your own, and learn more about making pop-up adventure playgrounds at home.

4. Just Add Imagination! Creative Play

Kids love to create—new works of art, music and dance! Being creative and exercising their imagination is important for kids becoming better observers and innovative thinkers. Practicing drawing and painting when you are little helps you learn how marks on a page can express your feelings and ideas. Creating art lets children imagine worlds that might be and songs that never existed. In this section, find that art can come from everyday things like cardboard and sidewalk chalk. Create your own brain art using a seven-foot 3-D sculpture, and then design your own kite.

- *Brain at Play* (sponsored by Children's Museum of Manhattan)- Children's Museum of Manhattan asks the question: "How does play make the brain hum with activity?"

Children paint, collage and draw on a huge seven-foot, interactive, three-dimensional sculptural “brain” that sparks the connection between play, creativity and healthy brain development. Pulsing lights flash and portals strategically placed throughout the sculpture inspire children to send “play messages” into the large brain, creating documentation of thousands of children’s favorite play activities. Visit CMOM’s website after the event to read your child’s play message www.cmom.org.

- *Crayola Imagination Zone* (sponsored by Crayola)- Let your imagination run wild with Crayola® 3D chalk, Rainbow Rake and Spira-Chalk Blaster™ and create new twists on classic outdoor games. And when you’re done turning Central Park into a work of art, make your own Model Magic® PrestoDots™ pal.

5. Got Rhythm? Music and Dance Play

Music is a language all its own. Emotions, feelings, movement, thoughts and ideas are all invoked through music. Plus, getting up to dance to the beat helps children to be active and exercise their bodies. The activities in this section enable children to find their rhythm.

- *Sesame Street Sing-a-long* (sponsored by Sesame Street) - Come sing along to some of your favorite classic Sesame Street songs with “Gordon” from the Emmy Award-winning series on PBS created by Sesame Workshop. Music can be a playful and engaging way to help children learn about and explore their world as they strengthen their language and literacy skills, develop academic skills, enhance their social and emotional development, and foster artistic confidence and creativity.
- *Dance Party* (sponsored by Radio Disney) - Let your hair down, cut loose, and BOOGIE! This dance party is for the whole gang! Radio Disney will send a personality from Radio

Disney – a DJ – to introduce and play all popular songs and encourage kids and families alike, to dance, dance, dance.

6. Pretend Worlds: Make-Believe Play

How do kids learn to control their behavior when they feel sad or mad or just plain rotten? They play! Scientists tell us that letting kids engage in make-believe play gives them the chance to work through their feelings and figure out good ways to respond. Playing make-believe helps children to control their thinking and behavior. This “self-regulation” ability is important for kids to learn for future success. Self-regulation goes beyond learning to walk away from the cookie jar when dinner is almost ready. Self-regulation helps kids develop persistence, master tasks, cooperate with you and others, and make good moral choices. Through becoming a restaurateur and consulting with the Muppet’s Swedish Chef and even through practicing ‘clowning around’ kids learn to do the right thing.

- *Let’s Play Café* (sponsored by The Goddard School) - Make a reservation at this special make-believe restaurant! Children can pretend they’re chefs, create their own placemats, cook imaginary meals, wait on tables, dine, make change and much more at the Let’s Play Café. As children play with their friends in this rich learning environment they are rehearsing real life experiences, practicing creativity and sharing, and gaining skills in math, hand-eye coordination and problem-solving. This play and learning destination is sure to delight children and their families. Goddard Schools across the country are playing in their Let’s Play Café too!
- *Clowning Around* (sponsored by Clowns without Borders) - Clowns do more than make people laugh. They can help kids learn to deal with something new they might not have encountered before. Our clowns will be stationed throughout the park to fool around and

engage families in tons of clowning around fun and games. Our clowns will also help families find their way around the Ultimate Block Party.

7. Tech-Time! Technology Play

Children specialize in “why” and “how” questions. “Why did my ice cream melt?” “How does it snow?” Children are natural-born scientists who conduct little experiments each and every day. When children question the meaning of events and why they happen, they are improving their powers of observation, reasoning, and prediction while generating excitement about science. Thinking scientifically also fosters creative thinking and hypothesis testing as children ask themselves, how and why a particular thing occurred. And just like scientists, children learn from their successes AND their failures. In this area, kids create their own science projects such as a lively robot and a video game.

- *Geocaching and Dinosaur Train* (Thirteen/WNET and The Jim Henson Company’s Dinosaur Train)- Join Thirteen/WNET and The Jim Henson Company’s Dinosaur Train on a family friendly outdoor adventure called geocaching! Stop by to learn more about this worldwide treasure hunt and find out what you need to get started on this GPS driven activity. Geocaching and Dinosaur Train encourage kids to get outside, be in nature and make their own discoveries. Learn how you can get started geocaching right here in Central Park!
- *Scratch* (sponsored by Columbia University Teachers College and MIT Media Lab) - Why not make your own video game and share it with other kids? Columbia Teachers College introduces technology by dissecting video games made using Scratch, a programming language developed at the MIT lab. Computers will be made available for kids to use as instructors guide them through different computer programs. Additionally,

kids will get the chance to be creative with technology as they are guided through various mathematics and science examples that help to make each activity unique and fun.

8. Say What? Language Play

Language makes humans special. Spoken and written language allows us to communicate, pass on our traditions and stories, and form relationships with those around us. Research has shown that the amount of language children hear addressed to them —from birth on-- influences not only their vocabulary size but their school achievement. Language lets children interact with others, express their emotions, and learn about the world. Learning more than one language is easy for children if they are immersed in it and is a gift as it lets children participate in an even larger world. For all children', being able to read, opens up the universe!

- *Bilingual, Bicultural, Brilliant!* (sponsored by University of Washington's Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences) –Why is it cool to know more than one language? And why is it so much fun to play language games? The activities here demonstrate the benefits of being bilingual and bicultural through simple games and activities. Children and parents that speak English, Spanish, or a combination of both languages, will really enjoy these games.
- *Story Time: Let it Snow!* (sponsored by Jumpstart)- It's a snowy day! Not really but children will get the chance to become acquainted with the classic book, *The Snowy Day*. Children will enjoy story time and then get to participate in activities related to the book's theme. Children can make a stick puppet of themselves or Peter (the main character in the book) dressed for winter, play with "snow", take a picture behind a life-size cutout of Peter, and leave with a snowflake stamp that won't melt! When children interact play- fully with book themes like this, they increase their comprehension and

learn more vocabulary from the story. Take home additional resources on simple ways to support your early reader at home. We also invite you to read this book with your child again on 10/7 and help set a world record to support early education!

Groups Present at the Ultimate Block Party Help Facilitate the Event

Volunteers. Members of the community ranging from high school and college students, to teachers and parents, a large cadre of volunteers manned each of the 28 activities at the New York Ultimate Block Party. These volunteers were excited to be part of something that brought the word of playful learning to families and were eager to share in this unique opportunity.

Play Doctors. Members from the NSF-funded Science of Learning Centers and others from the scientific community acted as *Play Doctors* who walked around interacting with families and children. Their primary goal was to facilitate the public's understanding of how play relates to children's learning and development based on scientific research. They wore white decorated coats and pins that said, Play Dr., so that families could identify them as targets to ask questions about the activities.

Experts. Professionals from a wide array of backgrounds, including art, music, law, architecture, finance, museum education, media, and toy companies, acted as *experts*. Experts were stationed at activities or moved around the event freely, interacting with families and children. Their primary goal was to highlight the Ultimate Block Party theme of "how you play is who you become." Experts interacted with children and families, sharing stories about how their play

activities promoted interest in their chosen careers.

Design, Make, and Play at the Ultimate Block Party. Critically, the play activities also spanned across the design, make, and play continuum. While some activities predominantly focused on the “play” dimension, such as “Let’s Play Café,” others were heavily driven by the “design” and “make” elements, such as Origami Hat Making and Car Model Building. Across all activities, play was a common element—in which children were actively engaged in fun, interest-driven experiences.

Assessment and Outcomes

Who Did the Ultimate Block Party Reach? The goal of the Ultimate Block Party was to convey the message about the power of play and the science of learning to the community at large. The original Ultimate Block Party event in New York attracted over 50,000 attendees – 82% of whom lived in New York City. Importantly, the event attracted a wide range of attendees of different race/ethnicity: 44% of attendees were non-white. In an area of the city that is frequented by a largely white population. Notably, about half of the Ultimate Block Party participants’ oldest child was 5 years old or under. In addition, our June 2011 Ultimate Block Party in Toronto, Ontario Canada attracted over 5,000 attendees and over 10,000 people attended our October 2011 Ultimate Block Party in Baltimore, Maryland.

Further analysis revealed that the outreach was far greater. By involving community partners, engaging in a press campaign, using social media, and working hard to reach as many people as

possible both before and after the event, our public relations partner estimated an on-air/online reach of millions: print circulation of over 1.8 million and print impressions of more than 4.5 million! Since the event, the Ultimate Block Party has been featured as a full-page story in the *New York Times*, as a cover story in the *Christian Science Monitor* and in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and in countless other media outlets. Media appears to be supportive of this message and engaging with both local and national news organizations can only help to spread the power of play.

Did the Ultimate Block Party work? Assessing Beliefs about Playful Learning

A key goal of the event was to see if the Ultimate Block Party changed parents' belief about the learning value of play. A team of researchers from Sarah Lawrence College and Yale University conducted an external assessment of the Ultimate Block Party to examine the messages conveyed about the Ultimate Block Party to attendees, the organization of the event, and, more generally, people's attitudes about play to be used for future endeavors and outreach. To accomplish these goals, the research team conducted 2 types of interviews – one of parents/caregivers and the other of volunteers. The parent/caregiver survey had two groups, 258 parents/caregivers that were in attendance at the Ultimate Block Party event in New York City and an addition group of 34 parents in Central Park during Fall 2010 but not at the Ultimate Block Party. The evaluation team then examined the attitudes of the non-Ultimate Block Party-attending control group and the families that attended the Ultimate Block Party. This evaluation team found that attendees' attitudes about play changed as they visited increasing number of activities. Among controls and those attendees participating in only 1 activity, only 50% and 51%, respectively reported that 'play always leads to learning'. Among those attendees visiting

2-3 sites, 62% reported this relationship while 83% of those visiting 4 or more sites reported the same. Further, participants made direct connections between certain activities and learning such that they understood the value of spatial learning through block play and a geo hide-and-seek game.

Lessons Learned from the Ultimate Block Party

Since the original Ultimate Block Party in New York City, we hosted two other parties – one at Fort York in Toronto Canada and a third at the Inner Harbor in Baltimore Maryland. After three Ultimate Block Parties, we have learned a number of lessons – ones that can be applied to any design, make, or play activity.

- ***Power from the people.*** The Ultimate Block Party would not have been possible without the contributions of a countless number of individuals. Early on, we employed the guidance of our scientific and business advisory boards. They participated in the formation of this event from the ground up. Our scientific consultants helped us to make sure that all of our activities are based in science and that we were completing our mission of bringing science into the hands and homes of today's families. Because of the scope of the event, we had outside help with public relations and marketing, as well as a production company to help make sure that this massive event went off without a hitch. One of our key partners in the NYC Ultimate Block Party was the Children's Museum of Manhattan. This well-established, trusted, and well-connected partner not only shared our vision, but was instrumental in allowing us to cut through some of the red tape that

inevitably stands in the way of any community endeavor. Our Baltimore Ultimate Block Party was partnered with Baltimore City Public Schools and allowed us to tap directly into a large school district and highlight this event to under-served communities. The Toronto Block Party occurred in partnership with the Ontario school system as it heralded a new play-based curriculum they were wisely installing.

- ***Bring community partners together – from the beginning and lasting beyond our event.***

One surprising but unintended outcome of the Ultimate Block Party was the bringing together of community organizations and partners. Planning committees formed in each of the Ultimate Block Party locations comprised of constituents from a wide array of organizations. Surprisingly, this was often the first time these community organizations had come together around the same table. We often heard these community organizations make additional plans to work together – both in preparation for the Ultimate Block Party but also for future events. The planning committees in all of our locations reported that they weren't aware that there was simply so many people, so close, that shared a passion for learning and play in childhood.

- ***Communicate – early, often, and with more people that you ever expected.*** Each Ultimate Block Party was up to 2 years in the making. Over these two years, innumerable emails, phone calls, and emergency meetings were held to make sure that each event went off without a hitch. Any event, whether an activity in a school or a massive community event, requires that everyone – from the event planners to the security staff to the clean-up crews, and the legions of volunteers – to be on the same page. This means that from the beginning, everyone involved must work on finding a communication style that works and must be willing to change as the project changes.

What started as a few emails and phone calls between 5-10 people very quickly became a 100+ person effort that required constant communication.

- ***Professionalism – a high end product commands respect.*** At every juncture, we made the decision to have a consistent brand that was accessible, high profile and had understated elegance. This was indeed an event about parents and families, but it was also one that preserved scientific integrity offered the finest learning activities. Our producer ensured that each activity was manicured in a way that gave a quality overall appearance. The look went beyond “street fair” to embrace more of a museum-moves-outdoors kind of feel. The *Playbook* too, was published on shiny strong paper and the web site had a clean and very sophisticated feel. Playing, making and designing is serious business and needs to look that way.
- ***Training.*** One core aspect of the Ultimate Block Party was the incorporation of the help of many volunteers. We did not expect everyone to know how best to interact with families in the community. We had two different types of volunteers – professionals (i.e., researchers and scientists) and community members. Any community event will benefit from the help of volunteers only if these volunteers are well-informed and empowered to help make a difference in their community. For the Ultimate Block Party, we equipped volunteers with an extensive handbook that outlined our event, our goals, and their responsibilities. We used YouTube to share our goals and aspirations for our volunteer participation. We also outlined ways to help maximize the impact that our volunteers had by giving them advice on how to interact with a variety of families. The legions of volunteers allowed us to maintain a ‘presence’ throughout all of the events and help parents and families to learn how important play is on their child’s development. Local

researchers/scientists/professionals and interested community members help expand a dedicated staff. From lending scientific expertise to pointing people in the direction of their choice event, volunteers make an event shine.

- ***Social media is your friend.*** One of our main Ultimate Block Party objectives was to maximize the number of people that heard about our event. A key piece of this is to meet people where they are – and many people are online. We utilized both Facebook and Twitter to help communicate with families in the area. We blogged about the event on our blog (in addition to blogging about topical issues). We quickly found out that engaging the online community was a maximally effective way to get the word out about our event and our mission. Parent bloggers, already active in the community had a long list of followers, blogged about us and all of a sudden, thousands of families from all ethnicities knew about our event. We used social media tracking services (free!) and found that Facebook and Twitter were very popular ways for us to quickly communicate with our audiences. Before the event, we engaged our community partners and on the day of the Ultimate Block Party, we posted updates about directions and parking alongside pictures and updates (nothing gets the buzz going more than cyberspace hearing that the US Secretary of Education is at your event with his family!). Social media transformed our ability to communicate directly with today's families and it can do the same for you. Finally, engaging families online allows the lessons about play and learning to continue, long past the end of an event or exhibit. We work to keep our followers updated with the newest research informing our understanding of the science of learning.

- ***Reaching all families.*** The Ultimate Block Party was designed to attract all families – rich and poor, black, white, Asian and Hispanic. To do this we needed outreach that went beyond the traditional blogs. We sought out contacts within specialized communities in Hispanic community centers and in Schools for Deaf children and in each we offered flyers and commentary in the native language so all felt welcome.
- ***Nothing was sold!*** It was also critical to ensure that the families who came felt comfortable at our event. If vendors were selling goods or even giving out advertisements, some families might feel less included than others. To avoid this and to make certain that rich and poor children participated in our activities side by side, we had no vendors and only subtle signage. Sponsors for each activity were duly noted on flagposts at the entrance to their activity, we noted in the playbook and were mentioned in the entre gate to the main event. The more prominent signs were reserved for connections between the science and the play.
- ***Bridge the gap.*** One main focus of the Ultimate Block Party was to bridge the gap that exists between today's families and today's scientists and researchers. We wanted to bring science of play to everyday life. To do this, we charged a scientific advisory board and reached out to local scientists and researchers to serve as volunteers and Play Dr.'s on the day of the event. However, any design, make, or play activity should be informed by the science behind the activity. Local universities (oftentimes in Psychology, Education, or Human Development departments) offer bastions of scientists who want to be involved and who can participate in the playing, the making and the designing. These researchers have dedicated their careers and lives to finding out how children learn about the world and many of them would be thrilled to work closely with their community.

They have access to the latest scientific research and can help distinguish between ‘hype’ and the real science that exists.

Moving Forward: Playing for the Future

The Ultimate Block Party is a societal experiment designed to put the science of learning into the hands of families, practitioners, educators and policy makers. To date, our proof of concept demonstrates that a highly professional approach that allows people to experience learning through activities is attractive to families of all races, ethnicities and income levels. It is a concept that travels well across borders and promises global reach and local flavor. And it emphasizes the value in the lost art of play. In the classic 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*, novice farmer Ray Kinsella is walking through a cornfield in Iowa when he hears the voice command “If you build it, he will come.” Out of the cornfield came the great players of baseball past and the people came to watch and participate. And so it is with the Ultimate Block Party, if you *play*, *make* and *design* – and you do it well with support from museums, educators, families, non-profit organizations, corporation, people will come, participate and learn.

Photo Captions

Photo Caption 1. Executive Committee Members: Roberta Golinkoff (H. Rodney Sharp Professor at University of Delaware), Leslie Bushara (Deputy Director for Education and Guest Services at Children's Museum of Manhattan), and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek (The Debra and Stanley Lefkowitz Faculty Fellow at Temple University) help welcome the guests at the first ever Ultimate Block Party in New York City, NY in October 2010.

Photo Caption 2. NYC Ultimate Block Party attendee shows that designing, making, and playing isn't just important for development, it is fun.

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