

# Playborhoods: How to Create a Safe, Unstructured Play Space

As kids build social skills, you'll build a sense of community


 Joanna Nesbit (@joannesbit)  
 Holiday  
 (November 5, 2015)



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Many of us recall gathering with neighborhood friends for pickup games of baseball and tag after school or on summer evenings. But these days, most kids either aren't allowed to roam through their neighborhoods or are too busy with structured extracurricular activities for free play.

Mike Lanza, author of **"Playborhood: Turn Your Neighborhood Into A Place For Play,"** couldn't imagine bringing up his three boys, ages 11, 8 and 6, without the freedom and sense of community he grew up with. "To contemplate raising them in a way that free play isn't possible just breaks my heart," he says. So, when his boys were very young, he created a "playborhood" **in his front yard** to promote outdoor unstructured play and build community.

Lanza believes it's critical for kids' well-being to create vibrant, healthy, active neighborhoods where they can go to play without constant adult intervention but also feel safe. A supportive, involved neighborhood where parents and kids know each other, he says, fosters kids' independence. Along with his playborhood, Lanza initiated a manifesto, calling for kids to "play outside together daily, decide for themselves what to play, where, and with whom, settle their own disputes, initiate private clubs with secret rules, and laugh, run and think." He urges other communities to get on board.

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Research shows unstructured play is crucial for kids to develop the cognitive, social and emotional skills necessary for life. Play expert Peter Gray, PhD, author of **"Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life,"** argues the **rise in anxiety and depression** in our kids correlates with the decline of freedom and ability to play.

What does it take to create an environment that promotes outdoor free play and spontaneous socializing? Start by brainstorming with neighbors or simply lead by example, as Lanza did. Whichever approach you take, these strategies will help make for a successful neighborhood hangout.

**Make it visible.** Playing out front brings neighbors outdoors where everyone can see each other. Lanza transformed his front yard into a magical hangout where all ages are welcome (he also added features to his **backyard**). But if you don't have a front yard, a big patch of sidewalk, a driveway or a courtyard will do fine, Lanza says.

**Make it accessible.** The playborhood works best if it's right outside the door, not a 10-minute walk to another location. Make your yard or the agreed-upon location accessible by not using fences, gates and other barriers.

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**Include the neighbors.** It's key to get other families involved, either by working together or inviting them to share the space you create. Successful free play depends on a caring community culture. Portland, Oregon's **Share-it-Square** (started for \$65) and South Bronx's **Lyman Place** offer examples of communities coming together on a larger scale. It's as simple as knocking on doors and introducing yourself, Lanza says.

**Provide seating.** Lanza recommends seating and shade so kids and adults can hang out comfortably — and stay longer. His front yard features a picnic table with storage benches under a shade tree.

**Make it fun for all ages.** Lanza's yard includes a sandbox, basketball hoop, water features and concrete driveway for **scootering**, skateboarding and sidewalk chalk, but you don't need to spend a lot of money. Focusing on function over aesthetics keeps costs down (for example, buy things at yard sales). Lanza says if in your neighborhood it's okay to leave projects out overnight, that's best of all.

**Ensure critical mass.** "Kids need to know if they show up, there's likely to be something going on," Lanza says. Multiple features will keep kids returning. Lanza's front yard is busy every day.

**Simplify kids' lives.** To participate in neighborhood play, kids need unscheduled time to do it. **Limit screen time** so they have free time to play, says Lanza. Also, walk and bike whenever you can and greet neighbors as you go. Starting when your kids are young allows them to get to know everyone and feel safe and comfortable.

For more ideas on playborhoods, Lanza's book features profiles on communities around the country that are working to make free play a priority and offers many more ideas for how to get started.

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*Joanna Nesbit is a freelance writer specializing in education, parenting, lifestyle and family travel.*



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