



## KaBOOM! Creates Safe Playspaces for Children Across America



When Darell Hammond, then 24 years old, read a *Washington Post* article about two children who suffocated playing in an abandoned car because they didn't have anywhere else to play, he knew had to act. [Raise money](#) for his idea and other ideas.

"It was something that just struck my justice nerve," he says. "These two little kids were punished by society based on where they lived. I didn't want to read in another six months that nobody did anything about it, just like I hope that when other people find injustices, they'll say, 'it's up to me.'"

One study found that the number of play areas outside the home where parents feel comfortable allowing their children to play unsupervised has shrunk by 90% since the 1970s.

A lack of safe playspaces was troubling to Hammond because it also prevents children from being active and getting outside. Research shows that children in low-income households spend an estimated 50% more time watching television than their more affluent peers. According to several studies, active children are less likely to be overweight and more likely to learn problem-solving and social skills. As Hammond says, "play is not a luxury, it's an absolute necessity. All it takes is getting outside, getting some fresh air ..."

In October of 1995, Hammond teamed up with his friend Dawn Hutchinson to build a playground in southeast Washington, D.C. They enlisted over 500 volunteers and received funding from The Home Depot and Minkoff Company Inc. According to Hammond, that first playground was "about organizing from the inside out, door to door, person to person. When they started to recruit other volunteers, the inertia took off in and of itself. It led to their own success rate. It became about them, not me as the organizer."

Once the project was complete, Hammond says, "they had a tremendous amount of pride. A lot of people said it couldn't be done. But this was about starting to reverse a cycle and break from bad habits."

[KaBOOM!](#) incorporated as a non-profit organization in April 1996. The following year, KaBOOM! launched its LET US PLAY campaign with the help of General Colin Powell and Vice President Al Gore.

As KaBOOM! expanded, building over fifty playgrounds per year by 1999, Hammond knew that "the need for play was always greater than what we could fulfill." Rather than creating chapters or affiliates as many organizations do, they created the [KaBOOM! toolkit](#), which is available on the website and give communities the resources to plan and create their own playspaces. The website also gives users a place to share tips, photos, and make connections in their communities and beyond.

"We were an early adapter of how technology would help people to self-organize," explains Hammond. "If somebody's interested in the notion of play, they can essentially go to [KaBOOM.org](#), ask people on forums, post news articles, and it starts to become the central depository of all things play. It's not about KaBOOM! being the expert, it's about the wisdom of the crowd. It's enabled specific community organizations to get their local leaders to pay attention."

Since KaBOOM! was founded fourteen years ago, the organization has served over 3 million children and raised \$128 million to help communities build playspaces. It has also expanded out into skateparks, ice rinks, and athletic field renovations to give children of all ages a safe place to skate, bike, or play. Through the KaBOOM! National Campaign for Play, advocates for play have the opportunity to exchange ideas on play and innovation and receive recognition for creating a city-wide agenda on play.

"I think that the goodness of people come out when we're doing good work," says Hammond. "It's really is the story of stone soup, because everybody has something to give. We've been better because of everybody."

Earlier this spring, KaBOOM! announced a partnership with Julianne Hough, a two-time Dancing with the Stars champion, that will grow the KaBOOM!'s user-generated map of playspaces around the country.

As part of the 100-day, \$100K challenge, Hough will donate \$1 to select non-profits (KaBOOM! teamed up with [YMCA of the USA](#), [National Wildlife Federation](#), [Shaping America's Health](#), [Jumpstart](#), [America's Promise Alliance](#) and [First Book](#)) every time a user adds a photo and rating for a playspace. The challenges runs March 23 to June 30 and will help communities evaluate where they need to add more playspaces.

"I think that this is about harnessing the wisdom of the crowd," says Hammond. "It's about saying your opinion matters. This is an important way to understand what the state of play is across the country."

Hammond says that KaBOOM! also has exciting plans for the fall. "In September, we'll be doing Play Days in 1,000 communities across the country," he explains. "They'll be cleanup projects and celebratory projects. We're looking for 1,000 communities to self-organize these Play Days, and we'll be launching a more robust online social network."

In the coming months and years, Hammond predicts that "you're going to see a lot more audacious goals and better tools that will make it easier for people to express interest, get involved, and stay involved."

*By Susan Johnston*

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