

USA

ipaa



# National Day of Play Handbook

How to Plan, Organize and Implement a Day of Play  
Updated: 7/2025

Prepared by:  
International Play Association USA

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IPA/USA is the national affiliate of the International Play Association (IPA) World: Promoting the Child's Right to Play. The purpose of this organization is to protect, preserve, and promote play as a fundamental right for all humans. Membership is open to any individual, group, or organization which endorses the right of children to play. This is stated in the United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), and highlighted in Article 7, paragraph 3, which states: "The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation which should be directed to the same purposes as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavor to promote the enjoyment of this right..." And in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Article 31, which asserts:

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational, and leisure activity.

IPA/USA holds a national conference every three years as well as consultations, special seminars, symposium, and workshops on current issues, both national and international. A quarterly newsletter is available on-line that features articles on play environments, safety, toys and materials, play leadership, and the role of play in child development. IPA World publishes an international journal called PlayRights two times a year and hosts a World Conference triennially around the globe.

## **IF YOU BELIEVE THAT:**

- Play, along with the basic needs of nutrition, health, shelter, and education, is vital for the development of the potential of all children,
- Family participation needs to be strengthened by support systems such as play leadership,
- Environments and programs to meet children's needs should be created,
- Advocacy for play and playful learning needs to be a top priority, and

## **IF YOU ARE CONCERNED THAT:**

- Society is indifferent to the importance of play,
- Schools are indifferent to the importance of play,
- Children are increasingly living with inadequate provision for survival and development,
- Recess is disappearing in schools,
- Children are increasingly living with inappropriate housing settings with fewer play spaces,
- Children are neglected in environmental planning,
- Children are increasingly exploited commercially,
- Children are constantly exposed to war, violence, and destruction,
- The use of technology is replacing childhood outdoor play,
- A climate of fear is restricting play experiences,
- Children are increasingly being scheduled into prescriptive days of sports and academics,
- "Winning at all costs" dominates children's sports and play, and
- Play deprivation is a growing factor in negative societal changes,

## **THEN PLEASE CONSIDER BECOMING A MEMBER OF IPA/USA!**

Become part of an international, interdisciplinary organization that supports and advocates for the child's right to play. Scan the QR code to join!



# What and When is the National Day of Play?

In between Niagara Falls and Buffalo, New York is a small 3 mile-wide city called City of Tonawnda. There, six community members got together and wanted to make a difference through their grass-root group, COT Neighbors United. Each one of them had their own passion, and luckily for us, one of them believed in kid's playing. They began monthly Pop-Up Playgrounds that focused on child-led free play outside with loose parts. A few years later they started their Day of Play, one of their members then became involved with IPAUSA and pitched the idea for the first ever National Day of Play to be held annually on the 3rd Saturday of September (or anytime that week). The National Day of Play which began in 2023, is all about promoting the simplicity and basics of play through loose parts, messy play, risky play and more! It's about how important it is to play for the sake of playing!

The Day of Play can encompass anything from large park events for thousands of children and adults to small picnics for little ones. It is an opportunity for children, schools, childcare facilities, individuals, families, and/or communities to share in physical and mental challenges without the pressure of winning or losing.

Adults and many children have had the simple pleasure of play replaced with team and competitive sports. The Day of Play is to remind everyone, how much fun we had when we played as children while providing opportunities to exercise both the mind and the body.

The Day of Play should cross generations! As Play Advocates we need to remind everyone how important play is and that means involving grandparents, great-grandparents and more. Bringing different elements of play to the day helps us accomplish this.

We also want to educate the adults on the importance of play. So how do we do this? Through posters, quotes, phrases and more placed in specific locations.

For example, the giant sewer drain that kids can roll around in may have a poster about the benefits of Risky Play. So while parents watch their children, they are also drawn to the poster and in many ways, ease their concerns for risk! Or maybe it's a poster near the paint station that talks about the benefits of messy play!



# Who Is Involved?

The Day of Play partners are individuals, agencies, programs, schools, museums, or organizations that collaborate as partners in planning, hosting, and implementing a Day of Play

These may include but are not limited to:

- Children and families
- Schools, teachers, child care providers, caregivers
- PTA's (national or local)
- Public officials, corporations, and businesses
- Media (newspapers, magazines, television, radio)
- Organizations (community, student, local, national)
- Colleges, universities, students, and faculty
- Cities, regions, localities
- Recreation centers and departments
- Designers and design agencies
- City planners
- Agencies (United Way, etc.)
- Early childhood education programs (Head Start, lab schools, etc.)
- Zoos and museums
- Partnerships, consortium, or collaboratives with surrounding communities

# General Considerations

## Location Considerations

- Outside is always ideal because it brings the nature element into play, however indoors or both indoor and outdoors work!
- The size of the location will help determine the amount of loose parts and activities to provide. We like parks and fields!
- If hosting the Day of Play outdoors, include a covered area for protection from the sun or elements in inclement weather.
- Choose a site that is readily accessible for participants with free parking and areas for groups to gather.
- Main roads or “hot spots” are great to attract participants who normally would not have visited.
- Consider bathrooms and running water! This is huge, people need to leave early if they do not have access to these two things. Don't forget to reach out to your local Fire Department to come and join in and spray the kids!
- Consider food sources... Are there food trucks that can join in? Ice cream trucks? Other organizations that provide food? The more “needs” we can serve the participants the longer they stay!
- When COTNU started their Day of Play, they hosted over 150 kids. They did this with six core members and 4 highschool aged volunteers. You can do this even if your numbers are small.

Most importantly understand that the kids will have fun no matter what.

The materials and space bring them joy. Don't over think things. Don't be afraid to ask a company or business for their “trash”. And don't worry about the mess.

# Play Leaders and Volunteers

- Play Leaders/Volunteers are one of the most important components of a Day of Play. Anyone can be a Play Leader! They can be teachers, administrators, child care providers, parents, students, or community volunteers.
- The Play Leaders' role is to facilitate play without being directly involved in or controlling play. Play leaders promote safety and creativity while allowing the games and activities to be child-led.
- Play Leaders can add new games or make accommodations to current games to alleviate lulls in play due to the abilities and attitudes of the players.
- Volunteers are vital for setting up and clean up. Consider reaching out to schools for service learning hours, or other organizations like Boy Scouts or youth groups.

## Partners

- Consider your local organizations that also support the idea of play and childhood! Local Boys and Girls Clubs, local afterschool programs, Kiwanis International, Lions Club, Rotary Clubs, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, youth groups, your local veteran organizations and of course your local Recreation and Parks Department. Sometimes by partnering with other organizations you can bypass some of the red tape that may appear later on in the process.

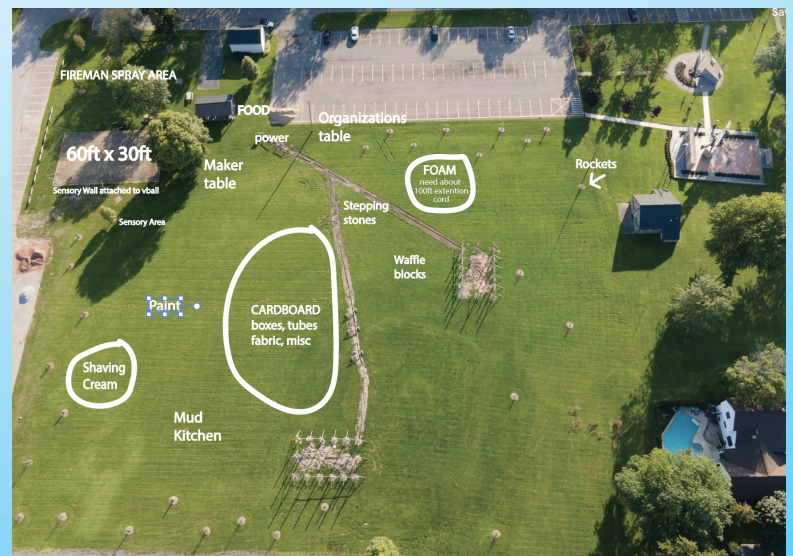
## Participants

- The Day of Play is for ALL AGES. We love the generational play that takes place! But it takes a little creativity on our part. How can we engage parents? What play elements can we bring in that will remind them of their childhood? (ex: model rocket launches) How can we engage teens? (ex: gaga-ball pits)
- Keep in mind that varying age groups play differently; infants and toddlers will likely be more interested in solitary play and one-on-one play while youth and older will likely choose to participate in group games and activities.
- Also be mindful for kids with special needs. How can we engage all kids to play? Is there a sensory area? A music station? A quiet area?

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## Loose Parts and Games

- Games and organized activities are fine. We would love to see everything be child-led with the loose parts but we get it... Sometimes we need to help guide the play a little. Consider the popular games local schools are playing (gaga ball, capture the flag, what time is it Mr. Fox...). You don't need an entire day of planned activities and games. We want the kids to explore and play and use the loose parts!
- Stations can be set up to help with the flow of the play space. Perhaps there is a cardboard box area, a makers station, a messy station, a rocket station etc... Here's an example of a map:
- Allow free rotation and movement from activity to activity. We like to set areas up so participants get ideas for each area but we know 1000% that the areas will all merge and get thrown together as they play! That's what we want!



- When it comes to loose parts, we want to think of the basics (the cheap stuff). Of course some larger purchases and items are also a lot of fun and needed, but remember there is a ton of stuff we can gather through donations, social media shout outs and asking around.

## Here is a list of some loose parts you can collect:

- Carpet and toilet paper tubes
- Cardboard boxes
- Drainage tubes of all sizes (“hamster wheel”)
- Blocks
- String
- Bed sheets
- Tape
- Clips
- Crates
- Sensory blocks
- Bird Food
- Plastic pools
- Spray bottles
- Washable paint
- Shaving cream
- Paint brushes
- Big logs
- Hay bales
- Sensory table
- Noodles (cooked or dried)
- Beach balls
- Ball pit
- Flowers
- Pots & Pans
- Pool Noodles
- Chalk



### Fun items to purchase:

- Foam machine
- Bubble machines (the one that plugs into outlets)
- Giant Connect 4
- Giant Jenga
- Large rainbow parachute
- Inflatable dart board
- Waffle blocks
- X-large beach balls
- PVC Dunk Tank
- Kites

# Finding Loose Parts:

When COT Neighbors United (COTNU) in City of Tonawanda NY started their pop-up playgrounds in 2018, they had no money, no storage and no transportation. Their first pop-up they spent under \$100 and still were able to fulfill the play needs of around 40 kids! You CAN do this with little to no funding. Creativity, and willingness to ask people for things is key! COTNU once asked a man who was replacing a billboard advertisement and they gladly said “sure we were going to toss it anyways!” You never know unless you ask!

- Sewer Drains aka Hamster Wheels - Contact your local DPW or construction crews at active sites - see if they have and left over pieces that you can take off their hands.
- Grocery Stores - Great for “egg” or “banana” boxes. These are durable boxes!
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- Big Box Stores and Recreation Stores- Great for appliance boxes, grill boxes and more!
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- Florist - Florists always have waste - reach out to local florists and ask if they can collect any of the flowers that they are not using in arrangements that week. They typically last for 2 days if you can store in a fridge. Take these flowers, rip the petals off and fill a plastic kiddie pool!
- Garbage Pick - This is HUGE. Take some time each week and drive around your neighborhood. Plastic kiddie pools are always being tossed out. Sand tables, or other outdoor kid toys are often tossed too. Think CREATIVELY TOO! Maybe someone threw out an old sink - and another person threw out some plywood - GRAB THEM - and make a mud kitchen! Just add some buckets of water and some mud or peatmoss or the flowers from the florist and you have a great option here.
- Tire shops - They will gladly give away used tires. Just make sure no wire is poking through (not bald). Then grab some spray paint and spray them fun colors!
- Social media always has people giving away swing sets - grab those swings and get a hook and wrap the chain around a strong branch and create a swing! Also consider the slides! Kids can always create their own “hill”.
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- Electricians - they have amazing huge and small wooden dowels they always get rid of! Just give them a call and ask!
- Pro tip - dollar store spray bottles don't last even an hour. Ask local mechanics for heavy duty ones!

# Ordinances, Insurance and Waivers

- Depending on your organization or group hosting the Day of Play, you may need to consider purchasing insurance for the event. Most policies can be purchased for around \$250 and cover for the year.
- Depending on your location, if it is public property you may need to look into the City/town ordinances and may be required to submit for a permit. These are typically easily to obtain but may have a small filing fee attached.
- Here is where you want to consider the organizations you partner with. Some already carry insurance and simply by sponsoring or partnering, can then have the event covered under their insurance just in case something comes up.
- This is again a great reason to approach local recreation, youth and parks groups to see if they want to host this even together.
- IPA USA will provide you with a photo release and a safety waiver should you choose to use it.

# Participants

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- Keep in mind that varying age groups play differently; infants and toddlers will likely be more interested in solitary play and one-on-one play while youth and older will likely choose to participate in group games and activities.
- Also be mindful for kids with special needs. How can we engage all kids to play? Is there a sensory area? A music station? A quiet area?

## Clean Up

- If you are using a public space, make sure you communicate with the City/town as to where to put your garbage/recyclables.
- Of course we want to leave the space cleaner than when we got there! Make sure to bring garbage bags and gloves.
- But clean up isn't just about the location... What about the people? Reach out to your local Fire Station about stopping by 30 minutes before the end of your event to "wash" everyone off with their hose! It's a great way to end the day and no one gets in their parents cars with shaving cream and paint on their body then!
- Get creative with the clean up! Grab some blocks and turn it into a "Floor is lava" clean up game! Don't fall in the lava with the garbage!



## Storage and Transportation

- Storage is always tricky unless you have space. Consider asking local businesses or your City to help with storage. Worst case, we know from personal experiences - you can fit an entire Day of Play in a one car garage! It's only a short time period - find your volunteers and other playful peers and see if they can share storage space with you. Sometimes city or country DPW's or Recreation departments will offer space to hold materials as you collect.
- Consider short term storage unit rental if you have funding.
- Transporting the supplies also takes time. Consider renting a U-haul to bring in all of your supplies. Boxes can take up a lot of space! Our experience has even involved a parade of cars that would meet at the supply location, fill up their cars and then head to the event.

## Fundraising

- Most of the supplies needed for a day of play can be collected through donations, community posts on social media, and driving around on garbage days! You really can achieve a successful Day of Play just through donations, buy nothing groups, garbage picking and asking on social media. Don't be afraid to ask!
- Consider fun names for donation tiers. Example: Instead of "Gold Tier", maybe it is the "Playful Professional"

## Marketing

- Create a logo for your event and incorporate IPA USA's logo in it as well!
- Get shirts made with your Day of Play logo for all your volunteers
- Start promoting the event NOW on social media even if you do not have all the details, you can always add to the event.
- Reach out to local sports teams and see if their players or mascots can join in on the fun!



## Resources:

Global School Play Day How to Host a Play Day Kid's Games

<http://www.globalschoolplayday.com/> [https://kaboom.org/resources/play\\_day\\_toolkit](https://kaboom.org/resources/play_day_toolkit) <http://www.funology.com/games>

Alliance for Childhood

Association of Children's Museums

Dr. Toy

International Play Association International Play Association (USA) International Toy Library Association KaBOOM!

Let's Play America

National Institute for Play

National Recreation & Park Association National Toy Hall of Fame

Play for Peace

Playworks

The Association for the Study of Play The Genius of Play

The Strong National Museum of Play

US Play Coalition

Voice of Play

<http://www.allianceforchildhood.org> <http://www.childrensmuseums.org> <http://www.drtoy.com> <http://www.ipaworld.org> <http://www.ipausa.org> <http://www.itla-toylibraries.org> <http://www.kaboom.org> <http://www.letsplayamerica.org> <http://www.nifplay.org> <http://www.nrpa.org> <http://www.toyhalloffame.org> <http://www.playforpeace.org> <http://www.playworks.org> <http://www.tasplay.org> <http://www.thegeniusofplay.org> <http://www.museumofplay.org> <http://www.usplaycoalition.org> <http://www.voiceofplay.org>

# Other Play Opportunities!

## **Global Cardboard Challenge**

The Cardboard Challenge is an annual event put on by the Imagination Foundation. Each fall, children all over the world participate in building anything they can imagine using cardboard and recycled materials. This event celebrates creativity and community. Check out <http://cardboardchallenge.com> for more details.

## **International Mud Day**

This is a day in June that is designed to celebrate getting dirty! All you need is dirt, water, and clothes that can get muddy. Children of all ages can and should participate to encourage community, relationships, imagination, and unstructured play. Visit <http://www.kodokids.org/history-international-mud-day> for more information.

## **Screen-Free Week**

Children, families, and communities spend one week in May disconnected from digital entertainment. They will explore, discover, think, and most of all, play! More information can be found at <http://www.screenfree.org>.

## **National Drawing Day**

National Drawing Day is dedicated to artistic creativity and expression. This day usually takes place in the summer months and can occur indoors, outdoors, or both. Drawing is a great open-ended activity for children of all ages and encourages originality, innovation, and imagination. There is no right or wrong way to create. Visit <https://www.daysoftheyear.com/days/drawing-day>.

## **National Play Outside Day**

The first Saturday of every month is National Play Outside Day. With no scheduled activities, children, families, friends, and communities are encouraged to spend quality time outside playing games and having fun. <http://playoutsideday.org> has more information about National Play Outside Day.