



Operation Playground: Catalyst for Community Development

Safe and Fun Places for Children to Play Offer Therapeutic Values

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Over the past five years, the residents of the [Gulf coast](#) region have proven their resilience in the face of [Hurricanes Katrina](#) and Rita, but what is often forgotten during the rebuilding of a community is the need for play.

The national nonprofit group KaBOOM! has been a constant presence in the rebuilding efforts since December 2005 when it launched Operation Playground, an initiative to build safe and fun places for [children to play](#) in the neighborhoods affected by the storms.

KaBOOM! believes that play is not a luxury but a catalyst for community development.

On the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, KaBOOM! returns to [New Orleans](#) to build its 135th and 136th playgrounds □ in the Forest Park Apartments and Burke Park to help [revitalize areas in need](#).

"When there has been any disaster, play has been discovered to have deeply therapeutic values," said Roger Hart, director of the Children's Environments Research Group at the City University of New York.

"When children have been in conflict situations, in war, when there have been earthquakes or any natural disasters and children are dislocated, play is an extremely important place because it's the place where you get to work out and to act out dramatically with your friends the problems that you're going through with this new challenge," Hart said. "If you want to make sure that your children are going to have a chance to recover themselves, they need to be given opportunities to recover themselves. And that means free time, free play and time with their peers."

While few question the integrity of KaBOOM!'s intentions, some have criticized the notion of focusing on playgrounds rather than concentrating on more [vital needs such as food and shelter](#).

"Certainly in terms of movement, play is important. Certainly in terms of learning social skills, it's important," said Anthony Pelligrini, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Minnesota. "But, being an expert on play, I can unequivocally say that play does not occur unless kids feel as though they're in a safe environment. So, if they don't have houses and good nutrition, playgrounds are less important."

KaBOOM! acknowledges this fact as undeniable, but it stands behind the belief that providing communities with a permanent place to socialize and play can serve as a first step toward the

reconstruction of a sense of normalcy.

"Those first few playgrounds that we built in the Gulf in 2005 and 2006 were the first permanent structures in those towns," said KaBOOM! Communications Manager Mike Vietti. "It was the only positive thing those folks had in their lives at that time, the only Christmas present some of those kids got that year, and it just reinforced how play and building something together as a community can really bring an entire community together."

Natural disasters have the power to both bring people together and break them apart. KaBOOM!, its sponsor organizations -- Marriott and the Home Depot -- and its many volunteers rally behind the belief that the difference lies in the availability of resources needed for improvement.

Statistics seem to indicate support for that belief.

A study led by the Asset-Based Community Development Institute of Northwestern University found that over 90 percent of respondents "believe that their playground project helped strengthen relationships among neighborhood residents and among community partners," and that "their project increased their collective confidence and transformed skepticism."

The residents of these devastated communities constantly come out in overwhelming numbers to revitalize them.

"The very first build that we did after the hurricanes hit was in Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi," said Vietti. "We were hoping for a couple hundred volunteers and we had over 500 volunteers show up. That speaks to the community development and the importance, certainly in the wake of the hurricanes, of just having folks come together to do something positive."

A KaBOOM! project begins with a call to the area's kids to come to a "Design Day" where they draw their dream playgrounds on large sheets of paper, and KaBOOM! examines the drawings for common themes, common pieces of equipment and common colors to incorporate into the design of the actual playground around 6 to 8 weeks later.

The responsibility then falls on adult volunteers to show up and make the children's dream playgrounds a reality. If successful, the feeling of accomplishment can be priceless.

"We'll start at about 8:30 in the morning and we'll be finished by about 2:30," says Vietti. "So, in 6 or 7 hours, we'll go from an empty lot to a brand new playground that kids can enjoy for years to come. And we'll tell people, 'You did this in 6 or 7 hours. So, if you can do this in 6 or 7 hours, think about what else you can do.'"

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