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# KaBOOM! creates playgrounds, promotes fun

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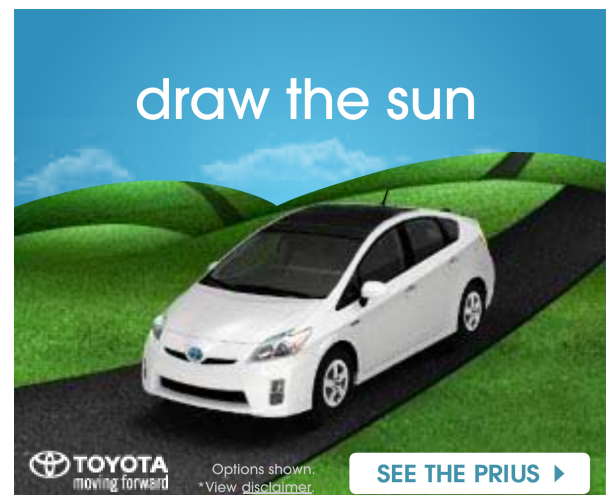
Some of the most important lessons of childhood come at the playground - waiting your turn, imagining the jungle gym is a spaceship and learning that physical movement can be more fun than moving a video-game joystick.

KaBOOM! a District-based nonprofit, is working to make sure all children have access to the fun and learning playgrounds provide. The 14-year-old group has helped communities organize both funds and volunteers to build safe places for children to play.

Many of the nearly 1,600 playgrounds KaBOOM! has helped build are located in underserved areas, but a lack of outdoor play cuts across all socioeconomic levels in this age of electronics, says Darell Hammond, founder and chief executive officer of KaBOOM!

"Kids need unstructured play," Mr. Hammond says. "For a kid, free play is developing balance, muscle development and cognitive and social skills. We've created sedentary lifestyles; now we need to do something. We have to understand that free play is not a luxury. It is as important for kids under 5 as sports are for older children."

Mr. Hammond, 38, was inspired to start KaBOOM! when he heard a news story about



two District youngsters who suffocated while playing in the trunk of a car. He thought back to his own childhood, part of which was spent in a children's home in Illinois after his mother became incapable of taking care of him and his seven siblings.

"Those kids [who suffocated] didn't have a place to play within two miles," he says. "I grew up in a group home where people supported me, and I had great memories of the playground there. I spent a lot of time on the swings. I felt I had an obligation to support others."

In the years since its founding in 1995, KaBOOM! has attracted sponsorship from large corporations such as Home Depot Inc., Kool-Aid and Mutual of Omaha Insurance Co. However, the nonprofit's system means that corporate sponsors and community residents are both active participants in projects. Communities come to KaBOOM! with ideas about design and location as well as a pledge to raise 10 percent of the estimated \$70,000 to \$150,000 cost of building a playground.

Corporate sponsors pick up the rest of the tab and organize employees to volunteer to help build the playground. About 400,000 corporate volunteers have worked alongside community members to build the playgrounds, most of which are completed in a day.

"It is a terrific partnership," says the Rev. John Adams, president of So Others Might Eat (SOME), a District nonprofit. KaBOOM! has worked with SOME to build three playgrounds at SOME-sponsored affordable-housing complexes.

"KaBOOM! has a great deal of expertise," Father Adams says. "There is an enormous amount of planning that goes on ahead of time. We try to have some community space near all of our apartments for families. Playgrounds are a pretty important part of that. Every kid needs a safe place to play. This way, parents are engaged and making sure children are in a safe and enclosed space."

In addition to building playgrounds, KaBOOM! is building an online database of places to play, including skate parks, outdoor basketball courts, recreation centers, dog parks and, of course, playgrounds. KaBOOM! recently kicked off 100,000 Playgrounds in 100 days, which calls on the public to enter and rate the play spaces they frequent. Mr. Hammond envisions the project as sort of a Tripadvisor.com for the swing-set set.

The group has enlisted two-time "Dancing With the Stars" champion Julianne Hough, who has pledged \$1 to select charities (including the National Wildlife Federation and YMCA of

the USA) every time someone uploads a new place to play (up to \$100,000). The challenge runs through June 30, or until Miss Hough gives away \$100,000.

To participate, users can access the KaBOOM! Playspace Finder(<http://kaboom.org/play-spacefinder>), pick a charity, then post a picture the user took of a place to play and rate it.

"In the U.S., childhood obesity numbers have tripled since I was little," Miss Hough says. "I want to help parents know where all the great places are to play in their neighborhood."

Once the 100,000 play spaces are mapped, KaBOOM! can then review and see which areas need additional places to play, Mr. Hammond says.

"We can use that from an advocacy perspective and lobby city and parks and rec departments to improve facilities," he says.

From a personal perspective, it can guide a family toward a walk in the park.

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