

Introductory Guide to the “Take Back the Streets” Play Space Program

Getting Started



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OVERVIEW: WHAT IS “TAKE BACK THE STREETS”?

As part of our Ambassador Program, we have partnered with the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) on a Play Space program called “Take Back the Streets” which is modeled after the Partnership for a Healthier America (PHA) Play Streets program and strives to reach children in communities with limited access to open spaces for physical activity. Play Spaces are any place where children and youth can play safely and be physically active. Play Spaces can include publicly accessible playgrounds, indoor and outdoor recreational facilities, skate parks, parks, fields, trails, and greenways.¹ Play spaces may be inaccessible for a number of reasons including lack of a sufficient number play spaces in a neighborhood, high incidence of crime in available play spaces or environmental hazards in existing play spaces. The “Take Back the Streets” program aims to increase access to safe play spaces in communities across the United States.

SIGNIFICANCE: HOW DOES TAKE BACK THE STREETS HELP FIGHT CHILDHOOD OBESITY?

Over the last few decades, childhood obesity rates in the United States have reached an epidemic level, and today nearly a third of children are overweight or obese.² Most kids do not get the 60 minutes per day of physical activity recommended by the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*.³ Many urban areas lack places to play, and one in five kids does not have access to a playground or park.⁴ Studies have shown that children who live in neighborhoods with fewer parks and playgrounds have 20-45% higher odds of becoming overweight or obese as compared to children with access to these amenities.^{5,6}

Take Back the Streets (TBTS) events provide a low cost solution by taking what is already available in a community and using it to help kids get active. The program provides technical support via toolkits to schools without capacity for indoor gym spaces or those without physical education. It can also support community organizations looking to organize a Play Space for kids. TBTS provides the opportunity for physical activity for children through organized outdoor play that can be conducted during school hours or after school.

In addition to promoting physical activity, TBTS can also build community unity, increase the feeling of neighborhood safety and help support local businesses.⁷

PHA’S PLAY STREET PROGRAM

On July 18, 2012, Partnership for a Healthier America (PHA) Honorary Chair First Lady Michelle Obama announced a new initiative to turn streets into play spaces in communities across the United States in order to bring physical activity back into the lives of children. Between 2012 and 2013, with the support of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association, 47 Play Streets events were held in 10 cities across the United States. These events not only provided nearly 70,000 individuals with a safe place to come together and move, but also spread the word about Play Streets, reaching more than 65 million through traditional and digital media.

In the PHA Play Street program, a specific street or streets is/are closed to traffic and opened as a space for kids to play and be active. The Play Streets initiative offers a high-impact way to encourage more



physical activity, particularly in neighborhoods that often lack open space. The beauty of the Play Streets concept is that it is flexible and allows each locality to mold it to its own needs and resources. Some partner with ongoing farmer's markets to maximize space and others find new areas to convert into play spaces.

PLANNING "TAKE BACK THE STREETS" IN YOUR COMMUNITY

From the outset, consider whether you would like to plan a Play Space-themed TBTS experience that could occur in any safe and appropriate open area without city permits or a TBTS Play Street event that includes street closures that require permits. TBTS is designed to be a scalable, strategic, and sustainable platform. We will provide guidance for planning both of these types of events in the following two sections.

PLANNING A PLAY SPACE-THEMED TAKE BACK THE STREETS EXPERIENCE

A Play Space-themed TBTS experience, which can occur in any safe open area during appropriate hours, does not require city permits, approvals, or significant event planning. This kind of event could occur in a school yard, a classroom, a park, a housing complex open space, or other residential open area (with permission). A Play Space-themed experience can be planned and implemented on any scale; they include a kid's birthday party, before school, after school or during recess in school, or part of an organized fun weekend activity for kids. Play Space-themed TBTS experiences can be of many sizes and shapes, involving a couple of kids or all the children in a school class or grade, especially one without PE or other activity opportunities. You can even plan a "[Street Meet](#)" in a driveway or in a front yard without closing any streets. These experiences can occur on a frequent basis because they require little advanced planning. We recommend regular scheduled Play Space activities to increase participation, its reputation as an activity opportunity, and improve the health of kids.

Once you successfully plan a Play Space-themed experience, you can then encourage all teachers and others in a community to provide Play Space opportunities for kids.

Overview:

- A Play Space-themed TBTS experience can occur anywhere safe and appropriate and with permission, if and as needed.
- The fundamental idea is to designate an area as a Play Space and promote it as place for kids to enjoy the fun and excitement of play and movement.
- The designation of a Play Space-themed TBTS experience could be as easy as between this tree and that tree, from this bush to the sidewalk, in this area of the park, inside this classroom, etc.
- We recommend regular scheduled Play Space activities to increase participation, its reputation as an activity opportunity, and improve the health of kids.
- Recruit others in your community to plan Play Space experiences

Please scroll down to Page 8 to the section titled, "Planning the Programming for a TBTS" for specific activities that can occur in a Play Space experience.



PLANNING A PLAY STREET-THEMED TAKE BACK THE STREETS EVENT

Planning a Play Street-themed TBTS event in your community or school is a lot of fun but also presents many challenges. Planning ahead in a methodical manner will help you achieve your goal. As you begin planning, seek out any existing Play Street/Open Street/Play Space organizers in your community. For example, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and Police Athletic League administer a [PlayStreets program](#) with a clearly delineated application process. Check if your community has already had a Play Street or Open Street Program in the [Open Streets Project Guide](#) and contact the lead organization for advice; these local organizations will have the most insight into planning a Play Street event. If your community already has a Play Street/Open Streets event, you can approach the organizing partners about having the event designated as a TBTS affiliate. You can make a presentation on the added value of being affiliated with a larger movement that is designed to leave the legacy of a community coalition prepared to promote active, safe play spaces for kids. If your community does not have a formal program, start planning as soon as possible since it may take time to build support and obtain the necessary permits. Please be aware that unlike Play Space-themed experiences, an event that temporarily closes city streets may incur expenses.

Follow these basic steps:

1. Establish a Need:

Does your school or community lack safe outdoor play spaces for kids? Have schools or community-based organizations expressed this sentiment? Is there communal interest in finding safe play spaces for kids? To determine the need for a TBTS event, meet with local stakeholders in the neighborhood to gain perspective on the issue and assess the local needs.

2. Build Support

To build support, make a presentation to your local community board or tenant association. Building local support is a key element to success, as TBTS requires strong community support to receive a permit. Prepare talking points that focus on the following key factors:

- TBTS events provide a safe space for kids to interact and play
- TBTS events are a great way to promote physical activity for kids and improve public health, especially in underserved communities with less access to playgrounds and recreational spaces or schools without appropriate physical activity resources.
- Play Streets participants have reported that local Play Streets make their neighborhood feel safer.

If you are not a school or afterschool program, you will need to identify potential community partners, such as schools, after-school programs, libraries, faith-based organizations, or colleges. Consider partnering with your local YMCA or Boys & Girls Club if you are not affiliated with a school. Local businesses and business groups might also be able to donate resources. In some communities, you may need to collect a block petition that demonstrates strong support for a TBTS event. Coalition building is a necessary step in the planning process.



3. Select a TBTS event location

While building support, you should consider the best location for a TBTS event:

- Map out existing playgrounds, indoor and outdoor recreational facilities, community centers, parks, greenways and trails. Encourage community members and partners to consider using free resources such as KaBOOM!'s free mobile [website](#) to report the location of publicly accessible parks or recreational facilities in your community.
- Assess the quality of existing play spaces. Consider the safety of the space, including the proximity of harmful individual, air pollutants, and safety of available equipment. Many neighborhoods that lack play spaces also have high crime rates, so safety should be your number one concern.
- Consider signing a joint or shared use agreement with schools to open school playgrounds or gyms after school hours. A joint use agreement is a formal agreement between two entities, such as a city government and a school district, which outlines the conditions for shared use of public space. See “Learn More” section for more resources on signing a joint use agreement. Important details to consider include liability, security, cost, supervision, maintenance and repairs (see below for insurance liability information).
- Identify an area that has a high level of pedestrian traffic and low level of vehicle traffic.
- Think about locating your TBTS event near a community center or public pool that already attracts a lot of foot traffic.
- Take into account availability of shade, public bathrooms and water fountains when considering a location.

4. Choose a day, time and duration for the event

Research the availability and number of kids and community partners when determining the day, time and duration for the event. Try to plan your event to ensure maximum attendance and exposure. Since planning a TBTS event requires so much planning and work, consider planning a recurring event. For example, consider planning a TBTS event that occurs every Sunday during the summer or on the first Saturday of every month. Also make sure that you take climate into consideration. You should try to plan your TBTS event during the warmer months to boost attendance.

5. Obtain a Permit and Insurance

Permit Process:

Any event that closes a street to vehicular traffic requires a city-issued permit. You will most likely need to apply for a TBTS event permit several months before summer starts. For example, Play Street permits in New York City are awarded by the NYC Department of Transportation (DOT), and the process begins with filing an Expression of Interest application with the NYC Department of Health (DOH). To file for the permit you will need to get the permission of your local community board and police precinct. The process may be similar in your community. Check with your city's Department of Transportation, Public Works or Health for details. No matter where you are located, permits are easier to obtain when there is strong community support.



Additionally, contact your **local police precinct** early in the process to ensure the success and safety of your TBTS event. Local police precincts can help to ensure the safety of participating children, enforce the car-free aspect of TBTS events and provide signage to close of the street.

Insurance Process:

Liability and insurance issues can also pose challenges to establishing a Play Space. You should work out an agreement between community groups and the city early in the process to address these issues. For a NYC Play Street event, the organizing group and the Department of Transportation (DOT) developed an agreement in which the DOT would be liable for overall safety and maintenance while the local neighbors would be responsible for opening and closing the street and for supervising activities throughout the closure.

When applying for your permit, consider if there is an organization that has insurance that can support your event. The NYC DOH application does not require liability insurance, but it can still be valuable.

Strongly consider buying an event liability policy in case of any injuries that may occur at your event. For TBTS events that include expanded access to school property afterhours, you will have to work out the details of an insurance policy with your local school district or city. You can purchase an event liability policy through an agent such as [The Event Helper, Inc.](#) or [Nationwide](#). For example, insurance to cover a single street closure event in Texas for 300 people might cost \$276.

If your event includes vendors, the vendors should be required to provide their own liability insurance.

Please be aware that many cities will require reimbursement for the time of police officers, who will be mandatory at the event and sometimes at different places along the perimeter of the event.

6. Promote the Event

If you are not a school or afterschool program with a captive audience of kids, publicize the event widely in the weeks leading up to your event to promote attendance. Use our program template to develop and post fliers in your neighborhood and send fliers to community organizations and partners. Use our examples provided to utilize social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter. Promote the event in ads in local newspapers and on local radio and TV stations.

7. Post-event: Long-Term Planning

Since a Play Street-themed TBTS can involve a significant amount of work and expense, consider the legacy and lasting impact of such an event. A Play Street-themed event can be used to create an on-going community coalition of schools, not-for-profits, businesses, and others. The idea of sustainable strategies for lasting impacts from Play Street events is an important aspect of the event.

Tips for Success:

- Build community support early
- Make the case for your TBTS event
- Consider partnering with a local farmer's market that already has a street closure permit



- Remember that a Play Streets TBTS event not only provides meaningful activities for kids but also facilitates coalition building and community networks that can be leveraged for other Ambassador-related activities

Important Items to Consider:

- Financial cost: Regulations regarding safety precautions for a TBTS event may require a variety of fees including:
 - Insurance coverage
 - Police officer fees
- Political will requires champions. Developing a “power map” may be a useful way to identify potential political champions. Identify the people and department who need to approve your event. Who do you know that can help facilitate approval from these groups?

PLANNING THE PROGRAMMING FOR TBTS

Play Street organizers like Transportation Alternatives have reported that programming often attracts people to Play Street events and keeps them there. The **TBTS toolkit** (below) provides you with entertaining programming ideas and examples for kids that are low cost or free. Free downloadable resources are also available. Contact your local community association for a list of local service organizations and nonprofits that might be able to provide supporting **activities**. These activities might include yoga classes, relay races, arts and crafts projects and more. See the next section for more ideas.

If you are not a school and do not have school or afterschool staff, recruit **volunteers** to help manage, set up, lead activities, secure the area and clean up. Your local YMCA, college, or other community based organizations may be of help. Teens can serve as great volunteers for TBTS events! Do as much outreach as possible to build a cohort of volunteers.

Make sure that you plan ahead if you plan to use any equipment, including jump ropes, cones, hula hoops, yoga mats, sidewalk chalk and more. Locate partners that might be willing to lend or donate these goods. Also consider renting or borrowing tables and folding chairs for volunteers.

PHA'S PLAY SPACE PROGRAM PARTNERSHIP WITH HHPH AND ACSM

The following toolkit provides ideas for TBTS event activities. These games are intended to encourage cooperative rather than competitive play to ensure that all kids have an enjoyable experience. Cooperative games focus on team building, having fun and oftentimes important life lessons. Please review this short [video](#) for an introduction to cooperative games:

- 1) Street games with balls:
 - [Cooperative Kickball](#)
 - Walls – 2 players. Mark square near wall with chalk. Player A tosses a bouncy ball underhand against the wall. Player B must catch the ball after one bounce and toss it against the wall. The rally continues until the ball bounces twice or lands out of bounds.⁸

- Twosome – 2 players work together and take turns tossing the ball back and forth across a dividing line (underhand tosses only). The ball must land in opponent's area and is only allowed one bounce.⁸
 - Popup – 2 players. Play A kneels down while Player B tosses a ball in the air. Play A must pop up and catch the ball before a second bounce.⁸
 - [Barriers](#)
 - [Triangle Ball](#)
 - [Strike Away](#)
- 2) Games led by a leader:
- [Red Light, Green Light](#)
 - [Follow the Leader](#)
 - [Mother May I?](#)
 - [Simon Says](#)
- 3) Team games:
- [Crossover](#)
 - [Golden Ball](#)
 - [Capture the Cone](#)
 - [Stack 'Em Up](#)
 - [Wellness Tag](#) – can be played without pool noodles if not available
 - [Capture the Flag](#)
 - [Leap Frog](#)
 - [Scavenger hunt](#)
- 4) Chalk games:
- [Hopscotch](#)
 - Tic-Tac-Throw – draw a large tic-tac-toe board and take turns trying to throw a stone in a square on the board. If the stone lands in a square without touching any of the sides, that player gets to draw an "X" or "O" in that square.
 - Shadow Capture – draw the outline of shadows on the street
- 5) Other activities:
- [Yoga classes](#) for kids
 - [Dance classes](#) with Songs for a Healthier America (Download album for free on [iTunes](#))
 - [Arts and crafts activities](#)
 - [Cooking demo](#) – one of our Ambassadors is a kid chef with a YouTube channel
 - [Gardening demo](#)
 - [Composting demo](#)

RESOURCES:

- HHPH/PHA/ACSM will provide FREE street banner artwork and other printable materials to support TBTS. Download here ([HYPERLINK](#))
- TBTS Incentive items for kids can be ordered here (FREE except for package and shipping costs)



LEARN MORE

We look forward to working together as you plan your local TBTS event. For program support, please contact the HHPH Ambassador Program Manager, Mindy Feldman Hecht at mkf2106@columbia.edu or 212-305-4697. You can also contact us via Skype with our username, HHPHOrg.

Visit these sites for more resources:

Planning and Implementing a Play Street or Open Street:

[Play Streets: Best Practices](#) (Play Streets)

[The OpenStreets Guide](#): a comprehensive overview of all open street initiatives. A section on best practices begins on p. 156 (The Open Streets Project)

Activity Guides:

[Play Streets: Program Partner Resource Guide](#). Also includes information on NYC partners (Play Streets)

[Growing Young Movers](#). Includes descriptions of many cooperative games. (Growing Young Movers)

[Growing Young Movers YouTube channel](#). Includes instructions for cooperative games (Growing Young Movers)

[Playworks](#). Download the Game Guide for free for more cooperative games on p. 134. (Playworks)

Joint/Shared Use Agreements

www.jointuse.org (Prevention Institute and Berkeley Media Studies Group)

[What is a Joint Use Agreement Factsheet](#) (ChangeLab Solutions)

[Joint Use Agreement online resources](#), including agreement templates (ChangeLab Solutions)

[Joint Use: School Community Collaboration](#) (Cornell University)

[Finding Space to Play](#) – Legal and Policy Issues Impacting Community Recreational Use of School Property (Public Health Law Center)

[Play Smart: Maximizing the Potential of School and Community Properties through Joint Use Agreements](#) (ChangeLab Solutions, KaBOOM!)

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