

# LET'S PLAY AMERICA

## Play Day Handbook

A Digital Resource In Support of Communities  
**PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING  
 THEIR OWN PLAY DAY EVENTS**

CREATED BY  
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 JULY 2020



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## Foreword from Let's Play America's Executive Director



At Let's Play America (LPA) we believe everyone deserves to play. If you are looking for a handbook to help guide your community—a business, city, organization, place of worship, school or other group—this handbook will help you plan the ideal Play Day. Communities have gathered and played together for centuries. There was a time when these play events were the highlight of the year. Everyone looked forward to gathering, dining and playing together. In the late winter and early spring of 2020, life around the world changed dramatically due to the coronavirus pandemic. This scary time has affected us all. We at LPA want to help you regain your sense of community, and we feel one of the best ways to do this is to plan a Play Day. Our handbook will help you achieve an ideal Play Day suited to your community.

As a former physical educator and coach for over 30 years (1981-2011), I tapped into my graduate work in sports psychology on a daily basis by focusing on positive talk and motivation. My students helped me understand how important it is to play. They often asked, “can't we just play?” Early on in my career I discovered that when you give students choices to play, they are happier and put way more effort into the activity than when they have only one option.

This handbook is a resource for people who not only value play, but wish to help bring play to others. It has been a dream of mine for years, and I'm happy to share it. Our editors Louise Bensen, Roberta Hammond, Mary Hanisco, Jeremy Hoffner, Kerry Richter, and Kerri Schiller helped refine the handbook. Phil Shapiro has shared Play Day videos with us from the beginning. Jen Bryne, our creative graphic designer, put the finishing touches on this valuable resource. Christine Alexander helped every step of the way by taking notes as I shared my ideas, adding the content and organizing the material. I owe all these contributors and the people mentioned throughout this handbook my biggest gratitude for giving their time and talents.

Now it is your turn to bring magic to your community. Read this document with a playful eye, watch the videos, laugh, smile and dream of what you can do to bring play to others. Playing is universal and is something we all should experience often. Let's play!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pat Rumbaugh". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.

Pat Rumbaugh, "The Play Lady"

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## What is a Play Day?

A Play Day is a playful event by and for a specific community. Free and open to all, a Play Day is organized around resources, skills, and interests inherent to the community.

In Takoma Park, MD, Play Days were dreamed up by Pat Rumbaugh with a group of volunteers. Each one may be different, but there is always a welcoming, fun, and exuberant atmosphere. Live music may be playing. Dancing may go on from time to time. A Zumba instructor may invite others to join in on a routine. Handcrafts, board games, and dress-up clothes beckon to passersby, and piles of cardboard boxes invite curiosity. Activities are meant to encourage participation. Keep in mind that participation looks different from everybody; these activities are meant to be FREE for all abilities, ages and backgrounds. A variety of play activities should be offered for children and adults of all ages. Volunteers are a big part of Play Days. They help set up, play with attendees, and clean up. All attendees feel a sense of belonging in their community. Fun is had by all!



Turkish Dancers at the first Play Day in 2009.

**PLAY DAY EXAMPLE:** In 2018 Let's Play America helped to organize a Play Day for local AARP Chapter 2667. The Play Day was hosted at a local gym with a multi-purpose room for AARP members and potential new members. A light lunch was offered while an AARP member spoke about the chapter and its offerings. Attendees were then invited into the gym area to enjoy the play activities provided by LPA.

Schools from preschools to universities would also benefit highly from a play day. The people you spend time with during your transformative educational years are often the people with whom you become lifelong friends. Playing with them gives you a chance to know them better. Staff at a preschool may hold a Play Day for students, families and staff, so families can connect with each other. A university may wish to hold a Play Day for their incoming freshmen, who are transitioning from living at home to being alone or living with a roommate. Many university students experience loneliness, and isolation and are looking for ways to meet new friends. Play can allow students to get to know each other in a non-judgmental way. A Play Day at a university where every department helps to lead an activity and participates in other departments' activities models a great way to reach out to others and meet new friends in a playful way.



Any place of worship can hold a Play Day for its members. We recommend that a Play Committee be formed to help plan the event. The committee could be made up of congregation youth, highly involved members, and established leaders in the community. The Play Day could include a potluck picnic along with playful activities. Consider inviting a performer or two, and facilitating activities for all ages.

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“One of the amazing things about Play Days to me is the diversity of ages from little kids to grands teaching each other. For seniors, the energy of the kids is contagious! For the kids, it is a day away from screens, learning to connect, to one on one and in groups. The dress-up area where everyone changes from regular people to super heroes, princesses, and knights is a big draw. Middle and high schoolers learn to manage different areas, lead games, set up and take down while getting SSL hours.”

JAY KELLER,  
LPA VOLUNTEER

### Who is This Handbook for?

You are a play advocate—whether self-identified or in a professional capacity—in a community, large or small, urban or rural, and you are aware of the decline in free play where children and adults go outside to play

self-selected or spontaneous activities. Perhaps you've noticed a decline of multigenerational interactions or community connectedness.

Maybe you are a schoolteacher, or a university administrator or faculty member. Perhaps you work at a business whose employees have been working from home, or you attend a place of worship whose activities have been restricted to Zoom. Planning a Play Day at this time could be fun and rewarding. Let your imagination take you to what can happen when your community can gather again.

While you begin to plan, think about how local community leadership might become involved. Do you have a mayor, city council representative, state legislator, or director of recreation who might be thrilled to receive this Play Day Handbook as a resource for increasing play opportunities for constituents?

## Identifying Your Community

Think about the people from your community who will attend your Play Day. For example, if this is a Play Day for a preschool, are you holding it just for the children or for

children, families and staff? Who is planning your Play Day? Staff at the preschool, staff and volunteer parents, and/or anyone else? It is good to have a couple of goals for your Play Day along with anticipated numbers of attendees. Do you plan to raise money through this event? If so, how much would you like to raise?



**November 2019: Pat spoke about play and led college students at Indiana University of Pennsylvania through some playful activities. Pat is a 1980 alumna of IUP.**

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"As a college student, a school Play Day would be a unique opportunity to get to know my fellow classmates in a low stress, non-judgmental way. The stresses of schoolwork, extracurriculars, jobs, internships, and volunteer work are often a burden on our mental health and we forget to allow ourselves time to be free and play. A Play Day would allow students to have that opportunity amongst friends and create a space for relaxation and fun. It would be perfect during freshman orientation, so new students could get to know each other better, or during a class day. It would even be a great addition to graduation festivities, as a way to culminate the undergraduate experience in a playful way. I truly believe that Play Days should be integrated into how colleges and universities program their student experience and mental health support events."

JEREMY HOFFNER, LPA INTERN, SUMMER 2020

## History of Let's Play America Play Days

Pat Rumbaugh founded the first Play Committee in Takoma Park, MD in early 2009, after observing that fewer people were playing outside in comparison to when she was young. She created and distributed a flyer to encourage Takoma Park community members to join her at the inaugural Play Meeting.

Prior to that meeting Pat had taken an online workshop on how to plan a Play Day that was put on by the national nonprofit KaBOOM! The year before, KaBOOM started naming cities A Playful City USA if they applied, mapped their playgrounds, and held a Play Day. Pat shared this with the six people who attended that first meeting, including then-Mayor Bruce Williams. The group unanimously voted to apply. In July