IN SUPPORT OF unicef USA

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PLAY:

A GUIDE FOR U.S. MUNICIPAL LEADERS

Because childhood can't be put on hold.
Play can't wait.



www.InternationalDayofPlay.org

International Day of Play offers cities an opportunity to strengthen community connection, elevate child well-being and make play visible in everyday life.

Play is essential to healthy childhood development and well-being.[1] It supports children in building social and emotional skills, strengthening creativity and problem-solving, developing resilience and forming meaningful connections.

However, children today are experiencing a growing play deficit. Across communities in the United States, time and access to play are shrinking due to increased scheduling pressures, reduced access to safe spaces and welcoming public spaces, economic strain on families and evolving social and digital environments.

At a time when many communities are working to support youth mental health and strengthen social connection, access to play is more important than ever.

Despite its importance, many of our public environments are not designed to support free and unstructured play. This limits opportunities for children to explore, connect and grow in ways that shape lifelong well-being.

For children, play cannot be viewed as optional or secondary. It is fundamental to healthy development, learning, well-being and connection. Because childhood can't be put on hold. Play can't wait.

[1] LEGO Foundation, Learning through Play report, 2020 https://cms.learningthroughplay.com/media/wmtlmbe0/learning-through-play_web.pdf.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PLAY

In response to this growing challenge, the United Nations established International Day of Play, celebrated annually on June 11.[2]



This global observance recognizes the critical role of play in supporting children's health, learning and development, and calls on governments, institutions and communities to prioritize play in everyday life.

The International Day of Play is more than a moment of recognition. It is a platform for civic leadership that places children and families at the center of community life.

It offers a unifying opportunity each year to bring communities together — across local government, community organizations, schools, businesses, cultural and sports partners, children and families — to celebrate play and take practical steps to make it more accessible in everyday life. While June 11 serves as a shared moment, the actions and partnerships it inspires can continue year-round.

As communities across North America engage around the FIFA World Cup 2026, many will already be activating around sport, public gathering spaces, youth engagement and neighborhood celebration. International Day of Play presents an opportunity to help connect these existing efforts to broader conversations about play, child well-being and community connection.

WHY CITIES MATTER

Local governments are uniquely positioned to create environments where children can thrive. Communities shape the spaces, policies and programs that influence how families live, gather and play every day.



The way communities design and use public spaces shapes whether children have the opportunity to play. Factors such as traffic safety concerns, access to safe and welcoming public spaces and how shared spaces are used to influence children's ability to engage in free, unstructured play.

Municipal leadership has the power to:

- Strengthen family-centered community design
- Expand access to safe and inclusive play spaces

[2] United Nations General Assembly resolution on International Day of Play https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4043249

- Support holistic child well-being
- Engage children and youth as partners in shaping play and community initiatives
- Elevate play as a shared community value

By embracing play as a civic priority, communities demonstrate a commitment to healthier, more connected, and more resilient places where children and families can thrive.

Many cities are already investing in play through parks, playgrounds, early childhood programs and public space design. The International Day of Play offers an opportunity to build on, connect and elevate these existing efforts, and to make them more visible.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PLAY 2026

To support children's well-being and development, cities are encouraged to celebrate the International Day of Play and champion playful experiences as central to community well-being.



The global 2026 theme, **"Protect play, protect childhood"** is a reminder for all of us – local leaders, community organizations, schools and families – that happy and healthy childhoods are built on play. Because childhood can't be put on hold. Play can't wait.

WAYS YOUR CITY CAN PARTICIPATE

Cities are encouraged to celebrate International Day of Play in ways that reflect local priorities, assets and capacity. Activities can range from large public events to smaller, neighborhood-based initiatives that make play visible and accessible.

1. Citywide Celebrations and Community Commitments

Host a central public event that brings together families, community organizations and local partners to celebrate play. Examples include temporarily closing a main street or public square for children's play, turning a park or central plaza into a Play Zone, or hosting a high-profile "International Day of Play" event with officials joining children in play activities.

Cities may also choose to integrate International Day of Play into existing public events, open streets initiatives, neighborhood festivals, youth sports programming, World Cup 2026-related community activations, watch parties, park activations or family-centered community gatherings already taking place across the city.

Cities may also choose to recognize the International Day of Play through mayoral proclamations, council resolutions or other public commitments that elevate the importance of play and child well-being across the community.

2. Micro-Activations Across Neighborhoods

Support smaller-scale play activities across parks, libraries, community centers and public spaces. Cities can encourage and make it easier for community-based organizations, local partners and residents to organize activities such as **"Play Streets"** -- temporarily closing a neighborhood street to create a safe place for children to play.

These activations are low-cost, highly visible and foster community connection through play.

Many cities already have permitting systems or existing frameworks – such as block parties, neighborhood events or public space use policies – that can be adapted to support Play Streets. Cities can identify and leverage these approaches and existing mechanisms to reduce barriers for local organizers.

Cities can also encourage smaller-scale neighborhood participation through libraries, schools, summer camp and recreation programs, cultural organizations, youth programs and resident-led community activities that make play more visible and accessible in everyday life.

3. Youth and Community Engagement

Partner with schools and other youth-serving institutions to integrate play-based learning and celebration into classrooms, summer programs and community-based youth activities. Where possible, communities are encouraged to engage children and young people in shaping and leading these activities.

Communities are encouraged to create meaningful opportunities for children and young people to help shape local ideas, priorities and activities connected to play, recreation, sport and community well-being.

This may include engaging youth councils, student groups, youth sports leaders or other young people in helping inform local planning, public activations, storytelling efforts or longer-term community goals related to play and child well-being.

4. Public Awareness and Storytelling

Cities can help elevate the importance of play by sharing local activities and stories through their communications channels, including social media. Public awareness efforts can help reinforce that play supports children's development, well-being, resilience and connection to community — and that access to play matters in every neighborhood.

Highlighting how communities are celebrating can also help build momentum and inspire others.
Public awareness efforts can include sharing stories or photos from existing community activities, highlighting local organizations supporting children and families, elevating youth voices on the importance of play or encouraging residents to participate in playful activities throughout the day.

Cities may also choose to incorporate International Day of Play messaging into existing city communications, newsletters, public signage, digital campaigns or social media content tied to broader family, health, parks, youth or community well-being initiatives.

Where appropriate, cities may use **#InternationalDayofPlay** to connect with broader efforts and amplify local impact. Cities may also choose to incorporate **#PlayCantWait** and tag partners such as **@unicefusa** and to help amplify their efforts.

BUILDING MOMENTUM YEAR-ROUND

More broadly, the International Day of Play is an opportunity to connect and spotlight existing play initiatives across the city, building public awareness and strengthening efforts related to child well-being, youth engagement, parks and public space activation and family-centered community planning.

For many communities, it can also serve as an entry point for broader conversations about public space, social connection, equitable access to play and recreation, youth engagement and how children and families experience belonging in everyday community life.

For communities engaging around the FIFA World Cup 2026 and other major sporting events, International Day of Play offers an additional opportunity to connect sport and public celebration to broader efforts supporting child development, belonging and access to opportunities for children and youth.

Cities are encouraged to build on this momentum throughout the year by connecting play initiatives to local plans, community events and ongoing efforts that support children and families.

WHAT CITIES GAIN

By participating in the International Day of Play, cities can:

- Demonstrate visible leadership in child well-being and community health
- Join a growing national and global community of cities and municipalities championing children's right to play
- Strengthen community connection and civic pride
- Elevate their city as a model for joyful and resilient communities

Spotlight: International Day of Play in Action

Boston, United States: The city marked the inaugural International Day of Play in 2024 with a citywide celebration, engaging thousands of children through cross-sector partnerships. The day was filled with sports, biking, board games, bubbles, face painting, arts and crafts, dance and music and many other play experiences. In 2025, neighborhood-based activations expanded access to play across communities.

The Netherlands: In 2025, cities across the country joined the celebration. In Gooise Meren, the mayor joined children for outdoor play. In Diemen, children played street football. In Eemsdelta, young children explored chalk-drawing and outdoor games in a rural courtyard. In Hellendoorn, a play kit was handed over to a local school. In Den Haag, groups of children headed out with balls and backpacks. On the island of Sint Eustatius, an outdoor play station was set up. On the island of Saba, children gathered outside kindergartens for scavenger hunts and games.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Cities interested in celebrating the International Day of Play can begin by identifying opportunities to activate play across public spaces, programs and community partnerships — building on existing efforts and local priorities.

Local governments are encouraged to collaborate with community organizations, schools, local businesses, sports and cultural partners, and residents to design and help amplify activities that reflect the needs, strengths, and priorities of their communities.

Cities that are interested in continuing to advance play beyond June 11 may also connect with UNICEF USA to learn more about opportunities to center the voices and well-being of children in local decision-making and community initiatives.

STAY CONNECTED

For more information, resources and examples of how cities are advancing child-centered community efforts, please visit UNICEF USA's Community Alliance for Child Rights page. Cities interested in continuing to learn from and connect with peers advancing play and child well-being initiatives may also sign up to receive updates and opportunities from UNICEF USA.

For more information or to connect with UNICEF USA's municipal partnerships team, please contact: cfci@unicefusa.org.

This guide was developed by the LEGO Group and UNICEF, 2026, and adapted by UNICEF USA for a U.S. audience, in collaboration with the LEGO Group.

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