



## Playworks: Promoting Positive Youth Development in Low-Income Elementary Schools

*Positive development is not something adults do to young people but rather something that young people do for themselves with help.*

Larson, Eccles, & Gootman (2004)

### Summary

Research has shown that a positive youth development setting is one that provides children with caring relationships, safety and structure, a sense of belonging, opportunities for skill building, and is well integrated with school and family. One of Playworks' core strategies is to have adults play alongside children, building trusting relationships with the goals of making play more accessible and helping children feel safe and connected on the play yard. Results from the Study of Playworks Implementation in Eight Bay Area Schools confirmed that Playworks integrates relationship building into each of its program components through its coaches. The majority of teachers and principals who were part of this study agreed that Playworks coaches built positive relationships with students, increased safety on the play yard, promoted inclusion, and provided students with opportunities to build new skills. Nearly all students also rated these categories positively and said they had a good relationship with their coach. Overall, Playworks is a strong youth development program, but often lacks effective collaboration with schools and families. Increased communication, training, and coordination with Playworks, especially at schools that experienced coach turnover, would facilitate teacher buy-in and understanding of the program as well as quicker integration into the school culture. Intentional collaboration with schools and families and active promotion of youth development principles will build and enhance the strength of the program.

### The Playworks Program

Playworks is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve the health and well-being of children by providing them with increased opportunities for physical activity and safe, meaningful play. To accomplish this, Playworks provides schools with full-time coaches who teach students games with a common set of rules; provide conflict resolution tools; and encourage positive language and inclusive behavior. Coaches integrate these skills by playing alongside students at recess and working closely with upper grade junior coaches who are trained to lead games and act as role models on the play yard. Class game time provides an additional opportunity for students and teachers to get to know the coach, learn new games and practice positive play skills and teamwork in a small group setting.

### Focus of This Brief

This brief is one in a series of final reports from the *Study of Playworks Implementation in Eight Bay Area Schools*. It examines the ways that Playworks promotes positive youth development and reports students', teachers', and principals' views of the program's effects on students and the school environment. This brief builds on earlier study publications, including a literature review, a theory of change model, an interim report, and a final report.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These publications can be found at: <http://www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=63651>.



### **About the Study of Playworks Implementation in Eight Bay Area Schools**

During the 2009-2010 school year, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University to conduct an implementation study of Playworks in San Francisco Bay Area schools. The study used mixed methods – including interviews, observations, focus groups, and surveys – to address four key questions: (1) In what ways does Playworks affect students' recess and classroom experiences? (2) In what ways does Playworks affect school personnel? (3) In what ways does Playworks affect the school climate overall? and (4) In what ways does Playworks implementation vary across the newly implementing schools and what factors contribute to this variation? Data were collected in the fall, winter, and spring at six schools that were implementing Playworks for the first year (“newly implementing schools”), and in the winter at two additional schools where Playworks had been operating for several years (“established schools”).

### **The Value of a Positive Youth Development Environment**

A growing body of youth development research has demonstrated the benefits of working with children not through a problem-focused lens but through a strength-based perspective, emphasizing the need to build core personal and social assets as opposed to simply “fixing” deficits (Lerner, 2004; McLaughlin, 2000). This approach underscores the need for programs to support children and youth in developing a range of physical, intellectual, social, and emotional strengths to promote healthy growth and resilience (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Benard, 1991). The most successful youth development programs provide young people with a positive environment that includes the following core characteristics (Eccles & Gootman, 2002):

- Caring and supportive relationships,
- Developmentally appropriate structure and high expectations for behavior,
- Positive social norms,
- Opportunities for belonging,
- Physical and emotional safety,
- Opportunities to build new skills,
- Support for efficacy and mattering, and
- Integration of family, school, and community.

Programs with more of these features (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) and those that intervene with youth for at least nine months or longer (Catalano, et al., 2004) are the most likely to be effective. A school-based youth development program that meets all of these conditions can be especially powerful by supporting students' feelings of connectedness to school – a critical protective factor for reducing risk behaviors in youth (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Resnick, et al. 1997). In fact, there is a solid research base indicating that high quality youth development programs that are

located on school sites and well-implemented in collaboration with schools and families can positively influence a wide range of social, emotional, health, and academic outcomes for youth (Greenberg et al., 2003; Catalano, 2004).

### **Playworks Builds Positive Relationships**

In the context of youth development programs, research has consistently shown that meaningful relationships with adults provide critical protective factors for young people and reduce risk behaviors (Benard, 1991; McLaughlin, 2000). Meaningful relationships are caring, trusting, supportive, and genuine and provide reinforcement, good modeling, and constructive feedback. Sustained, high quality

relationships with these characteristics can contribute to the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional growth of youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2005). The Playworks model integrates this type of relationship building into each of its primary program components through its coaches. Coaches, in turn, assume primary responsibility for establishing a positive youth development environment at each school site by ensuring safety and inclusion on the play yard and developing student skills and confidence through play (Exhibit 1).

### Exhibit 1: Theory of How the Playworks Model Promotes Positive Youth Development



#### Coaches developed supportive relationships with students

Placement of a full-time coach in each school is arguably one of the most important pieces of the Playworks program. Staff in every school described a strong coach as one who enjoys playing with children, maintains clear expectations of students, moves around the play yard engaging as many children as possible, and teaches teamwork and sportsmanship. They also reported that a “great coach” has enthusiasm and is positive, flexible, and supportive of students. Each of these qualities is consistent with a youth development leader who is available to form high quality relationships with students and positively affect student resilience and growth.

At the six newly implementing schools, most of the Playworks coaches had at least some of these qualities and a few had many. Students in nearly all spring junior coach focus groups agreed that they liked and had a good relationship with their coach. The majority of teachers surveyed in the spring (87%) agreed that students in their schools felt connected to their coach. Most teachers (80%) also said that their coach communicated well and used appropriate techniques when working with the children. Most teachers and principals who were interviewed in the spring concurred.

One of the established schools provided a particularly good example of a strong coach. This coach had been in place for three years, was highly supported by the principal and staff and was very connected to the students. Students were excited to interact with him and he had positive relationships with many of the students. The coach viewed himself as a mentor and reportedly focused extra attention on students he and other staff identified as needing care and support. He maintained high expectations for all students and gave them clear feedback. Staff reported that this led to trusting relationships with students and a desire to do their best and succeed at school. According to one student interviewed in a focus group, “The kids feel like the coach is an idol. He’s our hero. A lot of kids light up when they see him...He’s famous!”

#### Coaches played alongside students

Nearly 85% of teachers surveyed in the spring reported that their coach played alongside students either often or very often. In interviews, school staff thought this was beneficial in a variety of ways, including building relationships with students, providing safety and supervision, and teaching new skills. Playworks trains coaches to encourage school staff to also participate in play with students,

though results here were mixed. While 65% of teachers surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that class game time allowed them more time to play with their students, we observed very few occasions where teachers actually participated. In fact, more than half of teachers (54%) reported that *other* adult staff members at their school rarely or never play alongside students. Playworks may consider arming returning coaches with the skills and techniques needed to encourage other adults at the school to regularly participate in play.

### Students felt connected to adults at school

The majority of fifth grade students reported having an adult staff member on campus who really cared about them. They also reported having an adult who told them when they did a good job, wanted them to do their best, and listened to them when they had something to say. These positive feelings remained largely consistent from fall to spring and pointed to a strong sense of connectedness to adults at their school.

However, students from schools with coach turnover were less likely to report that they had an adult on campus who cared about them than students who attended schools that had the same coach all year (Exhibit 2). This suggests that for some students, the Playworks coach may have provided a significant amount of the care that students reported feeling from adults at school.

### Exhibit 2. Students’ Feelings of Connectedness to Adults in Spring

	Coach Turnover	Same Coach All Year
	<i>Mean Level of Agreement on a 1-5 Scale 1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree</i>	
Student Connectedness to Adults (Scale of 4 Questions)	4.1	4.4
<i>How much do you agree with the following statement? At my school...</i>	<i>Percent of Students Responding “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”</i>	
There is an adult who really cares about me	63.9%	77.7%
There is an adult who tells me when I do a good job	82.9%	85.8%
There is an adult who always wants me to do my best	88.0%	89.4%
There is an adult who listens to me when I have something to say	75.2%	79.7%
<i>Number of fifth grade students</i>	170	247

Source: JGC tabulations from the spring fifth grade surveys.

### Coach turnover disrupted relationships

Two of the six newly implementing schools experienced coach turnover in the second half of the school year. Neither of these schools reported any formal announcement of the transition to students or parents. At one school, there was no opportunity to say good-bye when the first coach left abruptly and neither school formally introduced the new coaches. The new coaches were faced with establishing relationships with students who were surprised and saddened by the departure of the old coach. According to one coach, “the kids were confused.” A teacher reported, “It took the new coach a while to build trust with the kids.” These relationship changes led to uncertainty on the play yard and an increase in negative behavior.

Overall, staff at schools with coach turnover reported limited concern about students' ability to navigate the transition well, perhaps minimizing it. This may partially explain the lack of communication with students about the coach transitions. Staff viewed students as resilient and open to forming relationships with a new coach. A principal from one school summed up the general attitude about the flexibility of children, "Kids gravitate toward any adult who's going to take the time out of their schedule to help them play." However, coach turnover greatly affected the quality of program implementation, especially during the transition, by significantly decreasing recess organization, structure, and students' sense of safety.

With growth of the program nationwide, Playworks may benefit from exploring ways to support coach consistency. Because some coach turnover is to be expected, creating structures to facilitate a positive transition, focused on strong communication and support, would strengthen the program. As the literature points out, strong relationships that persist for at least a school year have the most positive effects on youth development and resilience.

### **Playworks Creates Opportunities for Student Belonging**

Strong youth development programs foster a sense of belonging by creating an environment that is welcoming and inclusive and that emphasizes the development of positive peer relationships (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Providing meaningful opportunities for participation, connection, and contribution to the greater group enhances youth resilience (Benard, 1991; Ginsberg, 2006) and supports positive growth and development (Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Anderson-Butcher & Conroy, 2002). Playworks emphasizes cooperative and inclusive play over competitive play. The coach is trained to model positive language, teamwork, and inclusion of all students, both at recess and during class game time. Junior coaches are also taught these skills in a more systematic and comprehensive way and are expected to model these behaviors with their peers and younger students.

In interviews and focus groups, teachers and students agreed that the Playworks coach contributed to an environment of inclusion by encouraging student participation at recess, teaching a set of games that all students could feel confident playing, and setting a standard of positive social norms on the play yard. One coach at an established school was particularly skilled at inclusion and was reported to engage several hundred students at once in rainy day games. This coach often made announcements over the loudspeaker right before recess about what games were planned and generated excitement among the students about joining in when they arrived on the play yard. While coaches at newly implementing schools tried to make games accessible for all students, most did not yet have this skill level.

Most teachers surveyed in the spring (82%) thought that students' feelings of inclusion in group activities at recess had improved or substantially improved. The majority of teachers (72%) also agreed or strongly agreed that junior coaches took an active role in including others in games and activities at recess. However, only 38% of teachers reported that other students encouraged their peers to join them in play either often or very often. About half said that they observed this "sometimes." Playworks may consider offering coaches suggestions on how to foster peer relationships and inclusion.

Over half of the teachers responding to the spring survey (60%) felt Playworks had also increased students' sense of belonging at school, and 15% felt this was much stronger than before the program was implemented. Students interviewed in focus groups agreed, reporting that being a junior coach gave them a sense of connectedness at school. Other junior coaches described their positive connection with the Playworks coach as contributing to their sense of belonging.

More than half of fifth grade students surveyed (57%) agreed or strongly agreed that students at their school cared about each other and 70% agreed or strongly agreed that another student would try to help them when they were having a problem. This remained consistent from fall to spring. There was no significant change in students' feelings of closeness to their peers, their ability to make friends easily and get along with others, with three-quarters of students agreeing or strongly agreeing.

### **Playworks Contributes to Increased Sense of Safety**

Children need to have a sense of physical and emotional safety in order to freely turn their attention to play and skill building. In a positive youth development environment, this safety is established through trusting relationships with adults who set clear and high expectations for behavior and provide a predictable, structured environment (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000, Benard, 2006). Good self-regulation skills, a sense of control over the environment, and good problem solving skills are all associated with resilient children (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Ginsberg, 2006) and are also likely to contribute to an increased sense of safety on the play yard.

About three-quarters of teachers surveyed in the spring believed that students felt more or much more emotionally (78%) and physically (76%) safe at school as a result of Playworks. Adults identified this increase in students' feelings of safety as one of the largest shifts on their campuses since Playworks was implemented. A principal at one established school commented that an increased sense of safety was a key to student enjoyment of recess. About 80% of fifth grade students at sites where there was no coach turnover agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safe at school throughout the school year. Students at schools that experienced multiple coaches reported a decreased sense of safety from fall to spring, dropping from 80% to 73%.

Our findings show that Playworks contributed to this sense of safety through a significant reduction in physical fights and other serious behavioral incidents at recess and an increase in students' abilities to solve problems and resolve minor conflict more quickly and without escalation.<sup>2</sup> Most teachers surveyed in the spring (75%) reported that staff members were more or much more likely to hold high expectations for student behavior at recess since Playworks was implemented. Coaches also contributed to a sense of safety by promoting positive social norms. They reported modeling positive behavior, establishing clear rules, and holding students to a high standard.

### **Playworks Increases Students' Skills and Confidence**

A sense of competence and confidence are key ingredients to positive youth development and resiliency (Ginsberg, 2006; Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2005). Youth need to be supported with

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<sup>2</sup> This is discussed more fully in the brief *Playworks: Supporting Positive School Climate in Low-Income Elementary Schools*.

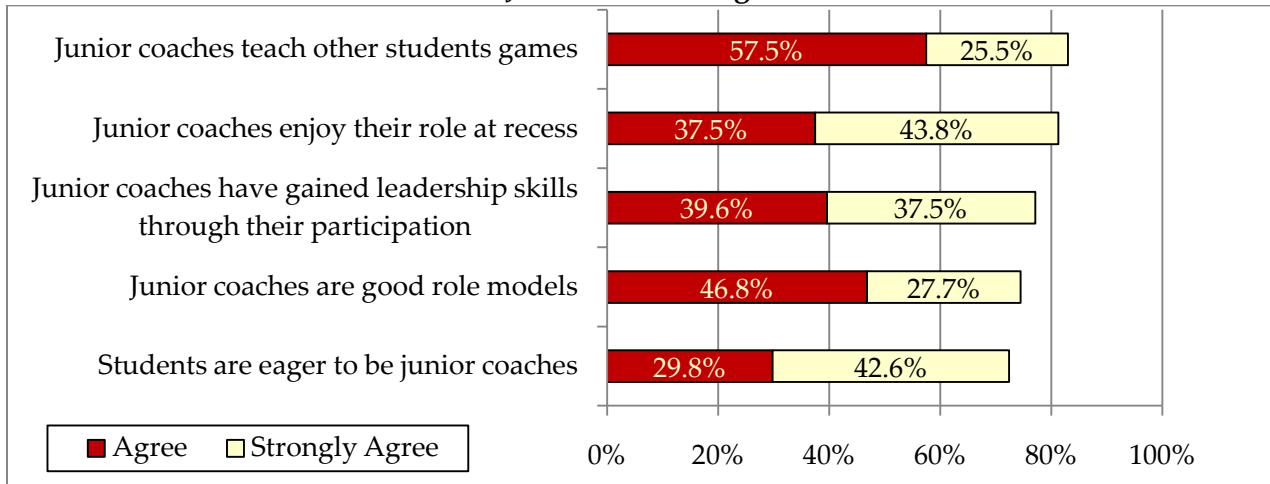
opportunities to develop new skills in multiple arenas. Playworks does this by introducing basic rules and games to make play safe, inclusive, fun, and sustained. This model is designed to encourage students to take increasing responsibility for their play and foster greater independence and leadership.

**Playworks provided opportunities for student leadership and contribution**

The junior coach program is designed to train upper grade students to act in a similar capacity as the Playworks coach, maintaining safety, organization and fun on the play yard. Coaches, teachers, and principals agreed that the junior coach program offered an important leadership opportunity for students and several felt that being a junior coach gave students a sense of pride. As a teacher from one school put it, “The junior coach program is awesome! Students really have an opportunity to shine and be involved in the school!”

As is shown in Exhibit 3, 77% of teachers responding to the spring survey agreed or strongly agreed that junior coaches had gained leadership skills as a result of participation in the program. The remaining respondents felt neutral about it, in part because they taught younger students and were less familiar with the junior coaches. The majority of teachers also agreed or strongly agreed that junior coaches taught other students games, were good role models, enjoyed their role at recess, and provided motivation for other students to become junior coaches.

**Exhibit 3. Teachers’ Views About the Junior Coach Program**



Source: JGC tabulations from the spring teacher survey.

The junior coach program positively affected students through improved self-confidence, both on the play yard and in the classroom. One teacher said, "Our Playworks coach helped to instill in these kids this feeling of 'I can.'" Staff and coaches from nearly every school reported that increased self-confidence helped some junior coaches improve their own behavior. Others reported that an increase in self-confidence was especially beneficial for those who were shy. At one school we learned about a girl who was unable to play most recess games due to a physical disability. Her teacher reported a tremendous positive effect on the girl’s self-confidence after she became a junior coach and learned to run the four-square court.

### **Playworks developed students' play yard skills**

Staff from all schools believed that Playworks helped students in all grade levels learn new skills on the play yard as well as develop independence. Most teachers surveyed in the spring (70%) agreed or strongly agreed that class game time helped students learn recess rules and nearly all (95%) thought it helped students learn new games. In focus groups, fifth graders reported that they learned physical activity or sports skills by participating in new games and watching others. As a result, students were able to expand their repertoire of recess games. Students credited the Playworks coach directly for improving the quality of recess and teaching new skills. A student from one focus group said it simply, "He changed my life; my sports skills. If he wasn't here, we wouldn't be playing any fun games at all."

The majority of teachers surveyed (78%) also saw growing student independence at recess and reported an improvement or substantial improvement in students' abilities to start and sustain games without adult supervision. Students surveyed agreed that they needed adult help with games less often. In the fall 45% reported that adults helped them a lot and in the spring this number fell to 37%.

### **Low skill level led to less participation for some students**

Physical activity and engagement at recess was high for some students, but not all students were engaged at the same level.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, students' low skill levels prevented them from becoming physically active while playing games. A little more than a third of students surveyed also reported being teased about not being good at games or sports at recess. The percentage of students that said this happened to them sometimes or a lot remained consistent from fall to spring. This suggests that while Playworks contributes to increased skills on the play yard, over a third of students may not be being reached effectively. Playworks would benefit from creating new ways to engage these students and model good sportsmanship more successfully during the first year of implementation.

### **Collaboration with Schools and Parents is Key to Promoting Youth Development**

Youth development is facilitated when there is meaningful communication and integration across programs, schools, and families on behalf of children (Larson, Eccles, & Gootman, 2004). In fact, research has shown that combining resources across these domains is important to a successful youth development program (Catalano, 2004). As a program situated on school sites, implemented throughout the school day, and over the school year, Playworks is uniquely poised to work in coordination with schools and families to address physical, social, emotional and intellectual growth of the students it serves.

Effective integration of the Playworks program into the school culture was largely contingent on the coach's capacity to establish strong relationships with school staff. Coach collaboration with principals was critical and often set the tone for the program's reception at the school. Principals and coaches at five out of eight schools reported that an effective working relationship was in place. While three-quarters of teachers reported good communication with their coach, our interviews and observations confirmed that most coaches had challenging or absent relationships with fifth grade teachers who were often reluctant to engage in the class game time and junior coach programs. Late staff training,

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<sup>3</sup> This is discussed in more detail in the brief Playworks: Promoting Play and Physical Activity in Low-Income Elementary Schools.



poor coordination during coach transition, and lack of some coaches' professional experience all contributed to sub-optimal integration of the program into the school culture to some degree at every school. There was no plan for engaging or communicating with the parent community at any of the six newly implementing schools, which was seen as a shortcoming by several principals, particularly those that experienced coach turnover.

One established school offered an excellent example of the Playworks coach integrating the program across the school and parent community. Every staff member interviewed believed that there was genuine cooperation and collaboration between Playworks and the school and that this was fundamental to the success of the program. At this school the coach worked closely with teachers to support all students' academic and behavioral success, not narrowly focused on junior coaches as was seen at most of the newly implementing schools. According to the staff at this school, the parents were all familiar with the coach as well, in part because the coach was included in parent meetings with teachers and the principal when a student needed extra support. At this school, the Playworks coach was seen as an important member of the school and family community, with valuable and meaningful contributions to make. New Playworks coaches were typically not prepared to foster this level of collaboration. Playworks might consider providing coaches with more direct support and guidance so that they can facilitate effective working relationships with schools and families.

## Conclusion

Through the context of play, Playworks provides a positive youth development environment that is positioned to enhance students' physical, social, emotional, and intellectual growth and foster resiliency. Coaches developed positive relationships with students and encouraged inclusion on the play yard. As the literature points out, sustained relationships of this type can have significant positive influence on youth. The program also improved physical and emotional safety on the play yard and increased students' skills and sense of confidence, also important factors in providing an enriched youth development setting. The main implementation factor that affected the quality of the program was coach turnover, which interrupted relationships and students' sense of safety and connection at school. This led to a decrease in recess organization and a reemergence of conflict and behavioral problems on the play yard. As young adults themselves, coaches did not always have the necessary skills to collaborate effectively with schools and engage families. Playworks might consider providing more direct support and guidance in facilitating these relationships in a more intentional way.

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