

Philadelphia Playstreets: Opportunity and Resilience

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In recent years Philadelphia has emerged as a leading national Playful Learning City. Dozens of Playful Learning Landscapes across the city have transformed public spaces into culturally relevant, playful learning spaces for children, helping them meet rigorous learning goals while having fun. The Playful Learning movement, sparked by the Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network (PLLAN) and the Brookings Institution, infuses the science of learning—specifically, the “what” and the “how” of learning—[into public and private community-led spaces](#). The city of Philadelphia has infused playful learning into its structures and systems, creating in 2022 a new role for a Playful Learning Fellow in the Office of Children and Families. Momentum is building in Philadelphia and internationally, reaching a new threshold for widespread change in the way communities help their youngest members thrive. To understand the opportunity and resilience of Playful Learning, we offer a case study of one enduring program, [Playstreets](#), and argue that cities around the globe should invest resources into similar programming for youth.

Playstreets has a [long history](#)—it was [founded in 1914](#) in New York City by the [Police Athletic League](#) as an attempt to offer children in the city a place to play and a way to ease tension between the police and young folks. Today, during July and August, the city of Philadelphia shuts down up to 350 streets to allow children to play safely and to provide free snacks and lunch. A handful of organizations facilitate activities on the Playstreets. The Free Library of Philadelphia, for instance, trains staff to read to children and engage in a

Highlights

- Playstreets provide a playful learning space for kids to meet learning goals while having fun.
- Playstreet facilitators elicit children’s use of various types of language, crucial for later academic success.
- Children were still using academically-related language even after the facilitators left, a phenomenon we term “facilitation carry-over.”
- It may be the case that play facilitators are inspiring a positive, lasting impact on children’s language use after they have departed.
- We argue that programs like Playstreets are greatly beneficial for the optimal development of our country’s youngest members.

variety of literacy-related activities. [Fab Youth Philly](#), a nonprofit organization, trains teenagers in North and West Philadelphia to be Play Captains. Play Captains learn how to implement various games with young children to foster skills like executive functioning, early math and language knowledge, and social-emotional development.

From 2019 to 2022, the Temple Infant and Child Lab (TICL), in partnership with PLLAN, evaluated the effectiveness of summer Playstreets in Philadelphia. Using a naturalistic observation data collection paradigm, the research team measured a variety of outcomes, including children’s use of specific language and behaviors important for school success. For instance, Playstreet facilitators elicit children’s use of numeric language and spatial language (e.g., “Throw the balls above the line”). Children on the streets might count the number of colors they have made in their chalk rainbow or talk about directionality and size when playing (e.g., “Quick, throw the ball to the *left!*” or “I want the *larger* ball to play with”). [Research shows](#) that this kind of language use is strongly related to later math skills in school.

Additionally, facilitators scaffold children’s use of literacy- and spelling-related language by engaging in shared book reading, encouraging dramatic play, singing songs, and leading activities like an “ABC workout”. TICL’s research assistants documented instances where children produced this type of language—children may have sung the alphabet, talked about the sounds of letters, used new vocabulary words, or engaged in conversations about story narratives. This language use is crucial for children—the scientific literature shows that early vocabulary knowledge is [important for later reading comprehension ability](#) and that early letter knowledge [predicts word recognition skills](#).

Children’s Language Use and Its Relationship to Playstreet Facilitation

One way to examine the impacts of Playstreets is to assess how successfully facilitation encourages children’s use of academic language. Fab Youth Philly’s Play Captains engage children for 45 minutes at a time on various days of the week throughout

July and August. After this 45-minute period, the street continues to stay closed for children to be able to play safely. We call this period “post-facilitation,” and researchers continue to measure children’s language use and behavior after Play Captains have departed. To research the impact that Playstreets had on children’s language use, researchers measured language use both during and after Play Captain facilitation.

Figure 1 shows the total number of instances of children’s language use per 45 minutes of Playstreets (this is a composite variable consisting of all four types of children’s language measured: numeric, spatial, spelling, and literacy language) broken down by year. The data show that during the summers of 2019, 2020, and 2021, children used these kinds of language *significantly more often* when Play Captains were facilitating activity on the Playstreets compared to post-facilitation.

It is important to note that children’s average language use decreased in the summers of 2020 and 2021. This decline could be due to two factors. The first factor is the COVID-19 pandemic: even though Play Captains found creative ways to facilitate safe and socially-distanced activities, the facilitation may not have been as effective compared to the previous non-pandemic summer. Moreover, language use continued to decrease in the summer of 2021. When discussing the impacts of the Play Captains with city officials and stakeholders, the issue of rising gun violence in the summer of 2021 was a consistent talking point. Indeed, according to the Philadelphia [Office of the Controller](#), there were 2,337 shooting victims in the city, the highest compared to the other three years of Playstreets (2019: 1,473 victims; 2020: 2,260 victims, 2022: 2,263 victims). Playstreets leadership cited that rising gun violence may have deterred families and children from coming out to play on the streets.

In the summer of 2022, however, this trend began to reverse—children’s language use bounced back. Interestingly, this was the first year there was *no significant difference* between children’s language use when Play Captains facilitated versus after they departed for the day. This means that even after the

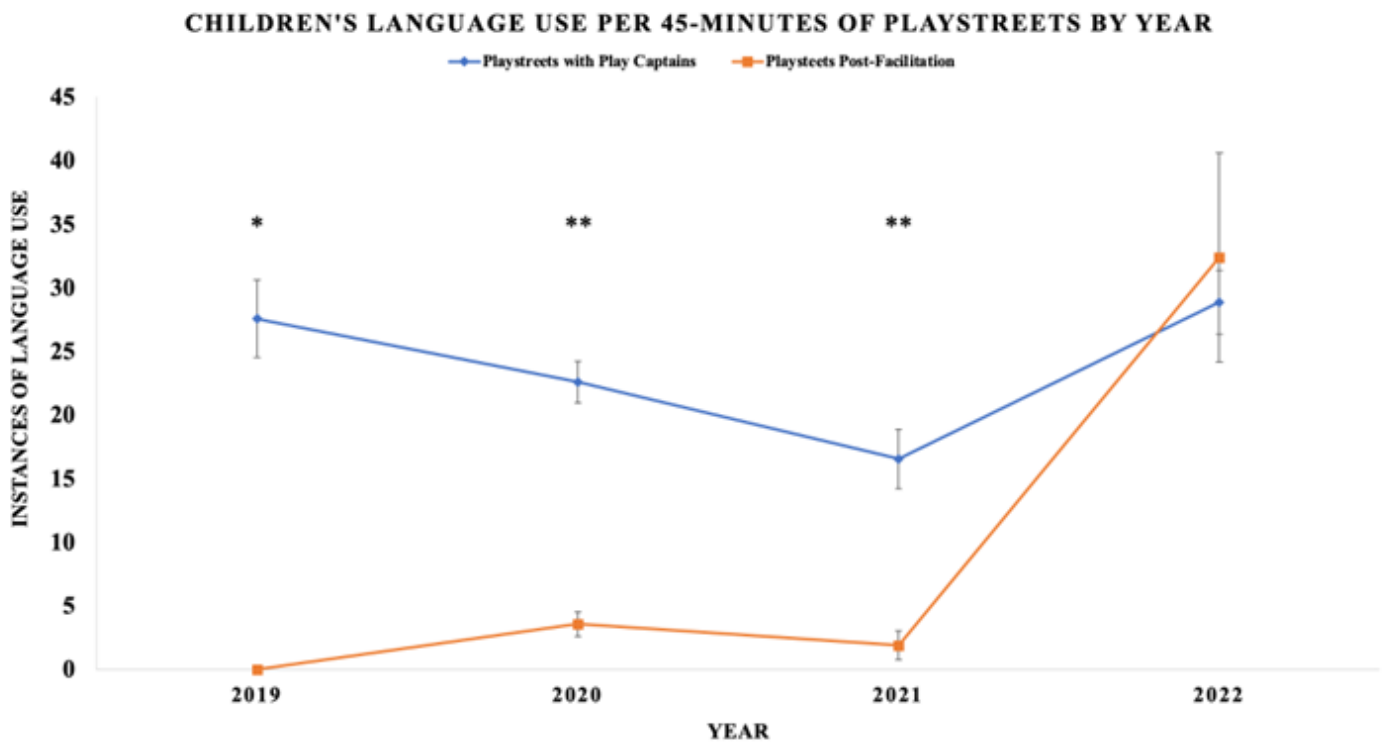


Figure 1. A year-by-year look at the total number of instances of children's language use per 45 minutes of Playstreets when Play Captains facilitated activities. * $p < .005$, ** $p < .001$

Source: Authors

teens left, children were still using academically-related language (i.e., counting, talking about directionality, and producing literacy- and spelling-related language). We term this phenomenon “facilitation carry-over” and it may be the case that Play Captains are inspiring a positive, lasting impact on children’s language use after they have departed.

Looking at the results as a whole, we see that with high quality, community-owned city programming Philadelphia’s youngest citizens have the opportunity to use language that is crucial for academic success. Moreover, during this past summer, we saw that the positive impact of Playstreets continued even after facilitators left for the day. As Philadelphia, and other cities like it, continue to recover from the pandemic, we argue that programs like Playstreets are greatly beneficial for the optimal development of our country’s youngest members. After all, children spend about 80 percent of their waking hours outside school. Children are in need of programs that are robust enough to handle the fluctuating

demands of a macro-context that includes a global pandemic, economic disturbance, and political transformation. Playstreets’ local ownership drives its endurance, providing a foundation for scalability and sustainability. This program serves as a proof-of-concept and should influence other cities to follow in Philadelphia’s footsteps.

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