EVALUATION REPORT:
YMCA Play in the Parks

October 2012

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary .................................................. 7
Description of Program ........................................... 9
Description of Participants ............................... 9
Major Findings ......................................................... 12
Additional Findings ............................................... 21
Recommendations .................................................. 25
How the Evaluation was Conducted ...................... 29
Appendices

A. Program Logic Model ........................................ 33
B. Participant Survey ............................................. 34
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By giving families a designated time and place for “fun,” Play in the Parks succeeds in helping parents enjoy time spent playing with children and vice-versa. This is important to participants, but equally important is the fact that the program helps both children and adults make new friends who also value family time and outdoor activity. In many cases, they said it was their children who drove the family’s decision to attend each week.

Both parents and children appreciated the wide variety of games they learned (or, in the case of the adults, remembered) at Play in the Parks. Participants highly praised the program’s ability to integrate children of many different age groups into the games. Many also placed great value on the ability to play large-scale games that are impossible to play in smaller households.

Participants valued having a place for their families to go that got them away from the distractions of home. Parents indicated that when they are at home they feel torn between taking the time to play with their children and doing household chores like laundry or cooking. This, more than any lack of confidence in their ability to play with their children, seemed to be a barrier to increased family play at home.

It is fairly clear that parents already enjoy and feel confident in their ability to play with their children, but they have other barriers to family play time. The issues that parents said concern them include:

- They lack the time to play with their children;
- Their children lacked friends with whom to play; and
- Their children need practice playing with children of other ages.

Participants had nothing but praise for the Play in the Parks staff and for the basic structure of the program. For many, the staff were the best thing about the program, able to handle a wide age range of children and keep it fun for everyone. Parents liked that the program accommodated children of all ages and also appreciated the drop-in nature of the program.
Survey and focus group results show that the primary reason people choose which parks to attend is convenience. Safety may be another factor, but the key to feeling safe in other parks is familiarity with park itself and knowing other familiar people will be there. Therefore, a program like Play in the Parks, that has compelling activities and links together families in a social grouping, is a good way to get people familiar with the parks.

Play in the Parks served a large number of non-YMCA members, and price of the membership seems to be the main barrier to converting those families into members. Among the program participants are people who believe strongly in the importance of play and physical activity, especially for their children. Many even came to YMCA locations for Passport to Play during the school year, and several had gone to the work of filling out the membership paperwork, but even the sliding scale pricing they were offered was too expensive for their budgets.

Agreement was unanimous among focus group participants that Play in the Parks needed to do more advertising. Several families who had participated the previous summer or during the school year missed the beginning weeks of the 2012 summer session and blamed it on lack of advertising. Many indicated they had taken it upon themselves to personally talk the program up at their children’s schools, on their Facebook pages, or around their neighborhoods.
Description of Program

The Play in the Parks program was designed by the YMCA of Metropolitan Milwaukee to bring the art of play back into the lives of kids and families. The stated goals of the program were to:

- Develop an innovative approach to bring back “play” as a measurable way to address the root causes of obesity and unhealthy lifestyles for children;
- Support the organic development of family play time; and
- Build a sense of community pride in our county parks.

Play in the Parks was developed and first implemented in 2011. That summer at eight county parks on the city’s north and south sides, YMCA staff facilitated family-friendly games such as kickball, red light-green light, soccer, freeze tag, Simon says, sack races, softball, leapfrog, capture the flag, etc. Activities were deliberately chosen to be playable by people of all ages, allowing very young children, older children, teens and adults to have fun together (in fact, children could not participate without an adult). The program was offered free of charge, and sometimes participants could take home incentives such as hula hoops.

Play in the Parks was a part of a year-round program called “Passport to Play” which was offered during the fall, winter and spring months at several YMCA centers around the metropolitan area. As a part of that program, participating families received a passport-like document. This passport contained descriptions of healthy activities, healthy recipes, and empty pages designated for stamps. Every time a family attended a session, they got a stamp in their passport. After receiving four stamps, the family became eligible for a small prize package. Packages were also distributed for eight, twelve, and sixteen stamps. The prizes included such items as Frisbees, beach balls, water bottles and a bicycle bell.

Prior to moving the program back into the parks in the summer of 2012, the YMCA approached the Planning Council for Health and Human Services to assist in the evaluation of the program. The evaluation plan called for the creation of a logic model with outcomes and indicators, the administration of a participant survey, and the facilitation of participant focus groups. The evaluation was carried out in June, July and August of 2012.

Description of Participants

From June 11 – August 20, 2012, 181 adults and 276 children (unduplicated) participated in Play in the Parks. The program ran at six different Milwaukee County Parks during that period, and participants were free to attend any and all sites, as many times per week as they wanted. Attendance was free, but children could not attend unless they came with a responsible adult. Adults could bring as many children as they wanted.
Twenty-eight adult Play in the Parks participants (16% of total adult participants) filled out paper surveys that give a bit more insight into the families that attended in summer 2012:

- The majority (61%) of respondents were between 30 and 39 years of age; 29% were between 40 and 49 years of age and the remainder (7%) were between 18 and 29 years of age.
- Nearly four out of five respondents (79%) were mothers who had brought children to the program that day; the remaining respondents were fathers. No one identified themselves as grandparents or guardians. In the focus groups convened for this report, several participants said they had on occasion brought unrelated children with them to Play in the Parks, or that a grandparent had accompanied their children when the parents were unavailable.

*Last week when I couldn’t make it, my mom brought him. We don’t have very many kids in our neighborhood but where my mom lives she has a neighbor with a little girl...he loves to play with her. We’ve actually brought her here as well.* — Focus group participant

- Just less than half (46%) of respondents said they usually brought one child to Play in the Parks; 40% usually brought two children; 14% usually brought three children.

*I end up bringing everybody. It gets pretty big. I only have an eight year old, but today I got my best friends’ two kids- so they came along.* — Focus group participant

- About one in three (36%) children brought by respondents were 4-6 years old; 26% were 0-3 years old; 26% were 7-9 years old and 13% were 10 years or older.
- Just less than half (46%) of the families reported participating in Play in the Parks during the summer of 2011.
- Survey respondents were likely to report attending Play in the Parks on three or more occasions: 11% came 1-2 times; 29% came 3-4 times; 21% came 5-6 times; 25% came 7–9 times; and 14% came 10 or more times. In this aspect, survey respondents were not representative of overall program participants. According to program records, 39% of all participating families came to Play in the Parks just once.

*We maybe have missed two times; we come every week.* — Focus group participant
Among survey respondents, YMCA members (46%) were slightly outnumbered by non-members (54%). In this trait survey respondents were significantly different from the norm: program records show that just 12% of Play in the Parks participants were YMCA members.

Geographically, respondents came from twelve different ZIP codes (53110, 53172, 53207, 53210, 53213, 53215, 53216, 53219, 53221, 53222, 53225, and 53226).

The average number of Play in the Parks sites respondents had attended was slightly less than two (1.75). Exactly half (50%) had attended one site; 29% had attended two sites; 18% had attended three sites; one family (3%) had attended four sites. These survey respondents were more likely to travel to different sites than the typical program participant. Program records show that just 13% of all summer participants traveled from park to park.
Do parents enjoy time spent playing with children (and vice-versa)?

- **The parents relished the opportunity to play games with their kids**, and reported that their children loved it when their parents played with them. In surveys, 50% of respondents strongly agreed and 46% agreed that their families enjoyed playing together more because of Play in the Parks. Several individuals said playing together as a family was the aspect of the program they liked the best.

  *I LOVE that the parents get to participate.*

  *My kids like it when I get out there to play with them.*

  – Focus group participants

- **An unanticipated benefit of the program was that children found new playmates and parents found new friends.** This aspect of Play in the Parks was particularly appreciated by parents who said their children were shy or had no siblings. Many pointed out that going to Play in the Parks was different from simply going to a playground. They said the atmosphere at Play in the Parks made it more permissible to interact with other children and parents, whereas at the playground, parents and children tend to stay fairly separate from each other.

  *It’s a bonding time. Instead of being in front of the television...to have this easy, close to the house.*

  *Both of our boys were kind of shy. They come here and they just get out there right away. A lot of the games are so much fun.*

  *Otherwise you go to the park, none of the parents talk to each other... [in this program] there are enough other parents to play.*

  *It’s nice to see different kids. They see the same kids in the neighborhood, no offense, they get tired of them. They get like, can I see some different friends, you never know you might get their number eventually, make more friends*

  *It’s nice for parents- we get to see each other, I made a couple friends.*

  – Focus group participants
Do parents know more strategies (games) to play with their children?

- **Both parents and children learn new games at Play in the Parks.** Responses to the participant surveys show that nearly two-thirds (64%) of participants strongly agreed and the remaining one-third (36%) agreed that because of Play in the Parks, “my family learned how to play games we didn’t know before.” When asked in the surveys what was the thing they liked best about Play in the Parks, the fun games and organized activities provided by the program were mentioned frequently.

  It gets you out of . . . always doing the same thing. This is little different every time. I don’t hear, “we’re going to the park again?”

  We do stuff at home, I do stuff outside with them, but it’s not, you know, “park ranger” … all the other games they play [in this program].

  [At Play in the Parks we play] all those games I had forgotten about.

  – Focus group participants

- **The large-group nature of Play in the Parks meant participants had opportunities to play games they couldn’t duplicate at home.** This was particularly true for small families which cannot play games requiring large numbers of people.

  [We like being] able to play with a ton of different kids and parents and play games you can’t play. He’s an only child.

  – Focus group participant
Do parents feel more confident in their ability to play with their children?

- **Parents felt they and their children had all gotten better at playing together because of Play in the Parks.** The majority (57%) of survey respondents agreed and another 32% strongly agreed that they felt more comfortable playing with their kids because of Play in the Parks. In the focus groups this was explored further, with answers circling back to the fact that learning new games made people feel more confident as did knowing that at Play in the Parks they would find other like-minded families.

  You don’t realize the backyard games you actually do know.

  So I think it’s a little more encouraging like, yes my kids can play organized activities and not kill each other.

  – Focus group participants

- **A small subset of parents with physical challenges felt more confident because Play in the Parks showed them some play activities they could do safely with their children.** One parent with back pain, another with an unspecified disability and one older parent all found it difficult to engage in strenuous play with their children but at Play in the Parks they could opt out when necessary and still know their children were having fun.

  We look forward to it, there are some times I don’t feel like going, but I go for him. I’ll pick a game like dodgeball I like, but not always, I have back problems.

  – Focus group participant

- **Increased confidence on the part of the children was also evident; several parents reported their children were teaching friends the new games they had learned at Play in the Parks.**

  He likes to tell his friends about it. That’s kind of funny, to look outside and see them playing the different games.

  – Focus group participant
Did family interaction increase?

- **Play in the Parks participants said the program increased the amount of time their family spent together.** The majority (54%) of respondents to the participant survey strongly agreed that this was the case, and the remaining respondents (43%) agreed. The same percentages of respondents reported that their families would play together more in the future because of Play in the Parks. Several participants said family time was the thing they liked best about the program.

  [What I like best about this program is] spending quality and active time with my little guy.

  It's kind of nice, we don't have to be mom and dad all the time. You're out there, you're playing with them. . . . He knows that we can come here once a week, and it's our time.

  Everyone is busy, busy, busy, these days and this is a great way to spend time together. . . . Here it's like you're on a little vacation.

  – Focus group participants
Do families place greater value on time spent outdoors?

- The parents were nearly unanimous in saying they would not play as much outdoors with their children were it not for Play in the Parks. 63% of respondents to the survey agreed and 33% strongly agreed that because of the program “my family will be more likely to spend time outdoors as a family.” Venturing outdoors to go bicycling, hiking, camping and letting their children play with the neighborhood kids were some of the new family activities they began as a result of the program.

  This is the stuff kids remember is how much you do stuff, playing with them outside.

  [Without Play in the Parks] we would play more board games not outdoors play.

  – Focus group participants

- Having a place to go without the distractions of home was seen as a plus. All expressed that a big draw of the program is simply the fact that they are getting out of their own homes. Play in the Parks gets them away from the responsibilities they would be thinking about if they were at home with their kids.

  Just getting away from the house, the dishes and the laundry. I can relax because I can’t run in the house . . . and say I’ve got to do this, I’ve got to do that.

  [At home] I feel bad, I have to say no. I have to say . . . I’m sorry I have to clean the house or something.

  – Focus group participant
Did participants’ awareness of the parks increase?

- Participants were more likely to attend parks based on the convenience of the location; most lived close to the park they attended most frequently. All were more familiar with this particular park versus other parks. Below is a map showing the park sites (colored squares). The home ZIP codes of Play in the Parks families are color-coded to match the parks they attended. So for instance, a red circle with the number “1” inside means one family from that ZIP code attended Play in the Parks in Hoyt Park (the red square). Families who attended multiple parks are represented by multiple colored circles.

HOME ZIP CODES OF PLAY IN THE PARKS FAMILIES, SUMMER 2012
Many participating families visited other Play in the Parks sites and said they felt comfortable in the other parks. In surveys two-thirds (65%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that because of Play in the Parks “my family went to city parks we would not normally visit.” Several families traveled significant distances to attend in parks across town; however, of the fourteen families who attended more than one site during the summer, just two families (14%) had attended a site on both the north and the south sides of the city. Six families (43%) had attended multiple south side sites and the remaining six families (43%) had attended the lone west side site and either a north or a south side site.

We choose this location because it’s a block from the house, it’s convenient. . . .
I am not familiar some of the other parks and the neighborhoods.

We just can’t unfortunately go to the other park sites; it’s just not convenient with work.

I would go to other [sites], but I don’t get off of work till five and I have to feed them. If they had a picnic in the park every week...

[I choose the parks we go to by] closeness, especially with the gas being $4.

– Focus group participants

It’s kind of nice going to the other ones, cause you meet other people. We went to cool waters or something in that area it was kind of nice.

Coming to the park has allowed me to look at renting a picnic site on my own.

Our family bought a bike and now we bike around the park. I don’t know we would have done that if it weren’t for this program.

One or two times I went up to Lincoln- never been to that park before and so, going up there for this just opened up what was out there. . . . . there’s a whole other part of the park up that way.

– Focus group participants

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1 Evaluators designated McGovern and Lincoln Parks as “North Side” parks; Jackson, Humboldt and Sheridan as South Side” parks; and Hoyt as a “West Side” park.
Did participants’ perception of park safety improve?

- **Participants overwhelmingly feel safe in the parks with which they are familiar.** When asked in surveys if they thought their family was safe in the parks, two-thirds (64%) of respondents strongly agreed and the remaining one-third agreed. But in focus groups, it was clear adults felt safe in parks with which they were already familiar.

  *It’s good, family atmosphere, everyone can gather around, no problems are happening. It’s good that I can go somewhere and know I’ll be safe.
  Safe environment.*

  *Never a problem. I’ve never seen kids get into a fight here [said by a parent who has seen playground fights at other parks].*

  – Focus group participants

- **For some, even a program like Play in the Parks was not a compelling reason to try new parks, and safety was a concern.** In surveys, a significant minority of respondents (35%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that their family went to city parks they would not normally visit because of the program. Some participants had attended Play in the Parks at other sites and felt positive about seeing new parks, but were uncertain about going back. Others said they had thought about going to Play in the Parks in other parks but that a lack of familiarity, or convenience, or not feeling safe in the other parks was a deterrent.

  *I am very familiar with [this park] but I wouldn’t feel safe taking her to that [other] park. . . . If I knew the other parks better, I might go there.*

  *I feel safer ... taking him. Over at [that other park], the park is in the back. We’re not going if there are no other parents. This is a different world we’re living in.*

  – Focus group participants
Was parents’ perception of the value of a Y membership enhanced?

- **The main barrier to becoming a YMCA member was the cost.** The participants who were not members all felt the cost was too high to join.

  I am not a member, it is just too much money and I can’t afford it… I would like to join, it’s close to the house but the cost doesn’t fit.

  I have a lot of student loans. Although they say I have the income, I don’t have access to the income because I pay a mortgage payment and student loans, they don’t look at that. If you look at just my tax return, yes I do have the means but if you looked at where my income goes, I don’t. For me that’s a big difference and I just can’t afford it right now. I’m a single mom, just not possible right now.

  If [Play in the Park] did need a membership I wouldn’t come. The only reason I’d even consider joining is not for myself, it’s for the kids.

  We tried but they’re expensive. For me it’s too much. I applied for low income, $47 a month is too much being a single parent.

  – Focus group participants

- **Another barrier to YMCA membership was the activity schedule.** Several parents said that activities for children in the right age group did not fit their work schedules.

  I just can’t find the [YMCA] programs for him, his age group when I can do it. There are tons of programs when I’m working.

  – Focus group participant
Additional Findings

- **Play in the Parks staff were highly complimented for their ability to manage the program and the participants.** In particular, parents appreciated the staff’s energy, friendliness and how they were able to work with children who were rowdy or uncooperative. Some parents were unaware that the program directors were paid staff, instead referring to them as “volunteers.” For many parents, the YMCA staff were “the best part of the program.”

  The volunteers go out of their way to help the younger kids.

  The volunteers went out of their way and they made sure my little guy has someone more his age to play with. I’ve seen them do that many times.

  I do commend the staff, there are some kids who want to do something that’s not with the group or they are stepping out of line . . . . They don’t single them out, they do something constructive to get them back into the group. It’s not go sit in that corner, time for a timeout.

  – Focus group participants

- **The children often motivated the adults to attend Play in the Parks.** In particular, the Passport has been an effective way to get the kids excited about the program.

  My kids love it and look forward to it every week. . . . The kids say, is it Monday yet?

  I would have said I’m kind of tired, let’s go another time, [but my kid says] Mom, I have to fill up all these things on my Passport.

  [My daughter] looks forward to this most of the week.

  [My son] gets upset when the winter one is closed. We look forward to it, there are some times I don’t feel like going, but I go for him.

  – Focus group participants
• **The program’s mixing of children of different ages is seen as a big plus by parents.** Parents spoke often and passionately about how the mix of ages was a unique and very positive aspect of the program. They mentioned several times that the staff (whom the parents often mistakenly called “volunteers”) were very good at helping the younger and older kids all play together safely and effectively.

*I bring all three of my kids...one is three and the other is six. It’s hard to find activities at home that they both can do. Here they are broken into different age groups.*

*The mix in ages of kids is good. [My daughter] is younger and it gives them an idea of how to stop and listen...teaches younger ones to follow suit.*

*It’s fun for the younger kids to play with the older ones, and it helps the older ones to be a little bit more of a leader. . . . They don’t get that at school. There, they are segregated by age. Here, they’re all together.*

— Focus group participants

• **A few participants mentioned improved health as a positive aspect of Play in the Parks.**

*[After the program] I wind up feeling better than when I came here...it’s energizing.*

*[What I like best about Play in the Parks is that it] encourages fitness.*

— Survey responses and focus group participants
• The “drop-in” nature of the program is an attractive feature for parents. Participants also mentioned that they were glad the program ran the entire summer at certain sites. When the hours and days of the program are convenient, people are more likely to attend.

You can pick up and come and go as you wish.

The timing is good, you have time to go home and get some food, then come here.

Hoyt was only here the last half of last year because they split it up more to different parks, because of that I missed a majority of the season so that was disappointing to me.

Plus it depends on what day it’s by us, he’s got boy scouts, cub scouts.

– Focus group participants
• **Play in the Parks should do more advertising to increase awareness—and harness participants’ enthusiasm to spread the word.** Most of the participants found out about the program accidentally and were unanimous in saying there should be more advertising about the program because not enough people know about it. A frequent suggestion was to send a reminder postcard to previous attendees; many parents who attended last summer were unaware that it had started up again and were disappointed that they missed several sessions this summer. Some participants said direct mail is more effective than social media (Facebook, email) but others used Facebook to spread the word about the program. Many said they found out about the program from other parents. They highly recommended the YMCA promote the fact that the program is free.

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*I just love it - wish I would've gotten mail about it - would have come sooner this year.*

*We found out about the program because my daughter’s daisy scout leader sent out an email and she was here last year and liked it.*

*I found out about it from driving by and said oh what’s that. Once I found out about it I thought this is really neat and came several times last year. . . . [this year] I was on the YMCA site, oh yeah Play in the Parks we did that last year.*

*Promote it more at MPS or other schools, just put it up on the boards. They have so much other stuff up there that doesn’t have to do with kids.*

*On Facebook, you get a gazillion messages, so you miss things. They should advertise in the local schools.*

*I liked them on Facebook, but it would be better if they did a direct mail within a certain radius of the park.*

*Seeing it on Facebook on Milwaukee County Page they do it well. I didn’t have a chance to go, then a friend said we should come and we had a good time.*

*I’d be willing to give my address and email so they could let me know about this program.*

*We did our own advertising, taking pictures, putting them on Facebook saying- hey we’re in the parks.*

*I stuck it up at work, and we’ve been telling everybody.*

*We’re Y members so we knew about it. I did notice they did some advertising. I don’t think everyone knows they can come here for free.*

*I’m like, it’s free. They say, get outta here. Trust me, it’s free.*

—Survey responses and focus group participants
Recommendations

- **Play in the Parks should find ways to extend the relationship-building aspects of the program.** Participants said they were looking for “play dates” with other families they trust. Extending the program into the fall-winter-spring via “Passport to Play” is an excellent way to nurture these newly formed friendships, but consideration should be given to other support mechanisms that could help these families stay connected.
  
  - Encourage these families to “like” the Passport to Play Facebook page (and follow the program’s blog or twitter feed, if these exist).
  - Explore the creation of personalized networking cards like the ones shown below. Such cards could be customized with the Play in the Parks logo and then participating families could upload their own photos and texts. Each family could also customize the landing page for the QR code on their cards. The cards could be produced in runs as small as 20 cards, which Play in the Parks families could exchange to stay in touch with each other. Children might be particularly interested in collecting the cards of the other children they meet at Play in the Parks.

- **The program should consider ways to reinforce the new games learned by participants,** for instance, by giving participants something to take home each session to remind them of the games they learned that day. This could be as simple and inexpensive as handing out a “recipe card” for one or two of the games that were taught that day. More elaborate reinforcement could include giving away game paraphernalia (i.e. balls) but the cost of such giveaways could be prohibitive, especially if the program needs to sustain itself without grant funding. Perhaps the program could partner with a sporting goods store that would donate such items, or coupons for discounted merchandise.
• Collecting stamps for the “Passport” is highly motivating for some youth and therefore offers excellent opportunities to reinforce Play in the Parks’ desired messages. For instance, in addition to earning stamps for attendance, stamps could be earned if families engage in designated activities, such as:
  o Playing a Play in the Parks game at home;
  o Teaching a Play in the Parks game to other families;
  o Coming back to the park as a family at a time when Play in the Parks is not in session;
  o Visiting Play in the Parks sessions at new parks (double stamps);
  o Becoming a “friend” of a Milwaukee County park;
  o Cooking a recipe from the passport; or
  o Getting a YMCA membership.

• Efforts should be made to collect Play in the Parks’ staff wisdom on how they managed to be so successful and also to celebrate their accomplishments.
  o A multi-author blog and/or twitter feed featuring the Play in the Parks staff could feature a one or two posts per week, each by a different staff person. This would probably mean each staff person would only have to post once or twice in the entire summer. Tweets would be best deployed in the hours prior to the program to remind people where the program will take place, and to build excitement for the day’s activities. Blog posts would be a great recap of the week and serve to reinforce key program messages.
  o Paying attention to staff bios on any social media pages might help participants understand these individuals are not volunteers, but rather are trained professionals, further enhancing their appreciation.
  o Play in the Parks staff should be deployed training others who are doing youth and family programming, or present on their techniques at an upcoming all-staff training. Staff could also present to branch volunteer committees/boards about their methods.
  o The Play in the Parks program manager/director could send each Play in the Parks staff person a personal note thanking them for their hard work over the summer and noting some of the comments made by participants lauding their work.
  o Making sure each Play in the Parks staff person gets a copy of this report could further their learning of what worked and didn’t work and improve future program development.
• **Play in the Parks should shift its logic model to concentrate on outcomes that parents said are important to them**, focus on strategies that will address these outcomes, and continue to evaluate program effectiveness by distributing participant surveys more widely next summer. Short-term outcomes that should be added to the logic model include:
  
  o Families will increase the amount of time they spend playing together;
  
  o Children will have more friends with whom to play; and
  
  o Children will increase ability to play with children of other ages.

• **Continue to offer Play in the Parks at a limited number of different parks throughout the summer months.** Given that convenience is a big consideration in families’ decisions about which parks to visit, most will opt to attend the site closest to their homes. Also, the survey findings indicate that safety is not an issue that is keeping people from visiting new parks. Rather, knowing there will be a familiar program and people at the new park was more important. Therefore, although some families complained about their “favorite” Play in the Parks site only being open for half the summer, it is possible that by switching sites halfway through the session, the program was able to entice families to try new sites. By the same logic, the program could seek to drive traffic to new parks next summer by scheduling sessions at parks that have not yet hosted the program.

• **The limited feedback received in the Play in the Parks focus groups indicates that the current YMCA membership price structure is out of reach for certain segments of the population**, for instance single parent families. YMCA management has no doubt spent long hours contemplating the question of how to mitigate the cost of a YMCA membership, and it is beyond the purview of this evaluation to tackle an issue with such wide implications for the organization as a whole. Barring the ability to offer more financial aid to individuals who demonstrate need, one possible way to convert Play in the Parks participants into members could be based on giving a discount to families who complete a certain number of stamps in the Passports.

• **For program planning purposes, future participant surveys should include the question “If this program weren’t free, how much would you be willing to pay to attend?”** This will assist program managers to plan for sustaining the program in the future.
• **Play in the Parks could do more direct advertising to current participants, but should also leverage the goodwill and energy of its loyal followers to generate large amounts of unpaid, viral advertising for the program.** The following are just a few suggestions:
  o Notify past program participants via direct mail *and* email when the program is starting each season.
  o Send post cards to everyone living within a certain radius of each park announcing when the program is taking place.
  o Create an email tree of former participants who will agree to pass along a viral message via their social networks a couple of times a year about the program.
  o Create a volunteer committee of parents to support the continued development of the program.
  o Each week have a different question on the Passport to Play Facebook page asking people to post how they have used what they learned at Play in the Parks at home. Questions could include “Tell us how PitP has increased the amount of time your family spends together,” “Tell us how PitP has increased the amount of physical activity your family is doing this summer,” “Tell us how PitP is getting you to the parks more often,” and “Tell us how PitP helps your family spend more time outdoors.”
  o Offer additional stamps in the passport if a family uploads a video of themselves playing at a Milwaukee County Park to the Parks’ Facebook page.
  o Create posters that volunteer parents can post at their children’s schools.
  o Create a “Play in the Parks” Facebook page (separate from Passport to Play).
  o Send emails once or twice a week reinforcing Play in the Parks program messages.
How the Evaluation was Conducted

The Planning Council was initially approached by the YMCA of Metropolitan Milwaukee in summer 2011 in relation to a YMCA proposal to the Northwestern Mutual Foundation. The Planning Council wrote a letter of support, proposing to partner with the YMCA to enhance the evaluation component of the second year of the Play in the Parks program. The plan was to identify expected outcomes, a logic model and specific strategies which could be used to assess the program’s results.

After being awarded the grant, the YMCA began working closely with the Planning Council in February of 2012. Staff of the two agencies collaborated to design an evaluation that met the YMCA’s needs and the funder’s expectations while at the same time staying within the program’s budget. After an initial meeting, the following evaluation activities and timeline were agreed upon:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify short-term, intermediate- and long-term program outcomes, as well as indicators to measure the outcomes</td>
<td>March 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a logic model identifying strategic activities to accomplish outcomes</td>
<td>April 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design evaluation instruments and protocols</td>
<td>April 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretest and revise evaluation instruments</td>
<td>June 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administer participant surveys onsite (YMCA staff)</td>
<td>Summer 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold two focus groups with frequent participants</td>
<td>Summer 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze data</td>
<td>September 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present findings and recommendations to YMCA and other stakeholders</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

YMCA staff created the outcomes, indicators and logic model in a session facilitated by the Planning Council (a copy of the logic model is included in Appendix A. Staff of the Planning Council then developed a one-page, paper survey to assess Play in the Parks participants on these indicators. To make data entry easier, the participant survey was in a scannable format.

Planning Council staff tested the participant survey with actual Play in the Parks participants at Jackson Park on June 19, 2012. Adults who were participating in the program on that day at that site were offered a small incentive (pack of sidewalk chalk) for testing the survey. Seven adults pre-tested the survey that day. Play in the Parks staff also gave some informal input at that time. The evaluator used these responses and comments to revise the survey, most notably the section on the age ranges of the children who come to Play in the Parks. A copy of the final survey is in Appendix B.
To stay within the project budget YMCA staff, rather than the evaluator, were responsible for administering the surveys. At the halfway point of the summer, some Play in the Parks locations changed, so surveys were scheduled for the end of each session (week of July 16th and week of August 13th) to allow participants the maximum possible number of days in the program before taking the survey and to survey at all sites. However, the surveys were only administered at Hoyt and Humboldt Park. Since these two sites were active all summer, it is possible participants at those two sites could have taken the survey twice. Participants took the surveys anonymously, so there was no way to know if this actually occurred. However, the survey asked how many times the person had participated, so it was possible to differentiate people who came frequently from those who came only a few times. Twenty-eight participant surveys were collected, representing 16% of the 181 adult program participants.

Working with YMCA staff, the evaluators chose two focus group sites. Factors in site selection included steady attendance and geographic diversity. The focus groups took place as follows:

- August 6, 2012 at Hoyt Park – five participants, facilitated by Julie Whelan Capell with notes taken by Dana Wilson; and
- August 16, 2012 at Humboldt Park – six participants, facilitated by Katie Pritchard with notes taken by Carrie Koss Vallejo.

The focus groups ran about one hour, took place during the regularly scheduled Play in the Parks session at each location, and were held out-of-doors within earshot of the Play in the Parks activities. YMCA staff notified participants at each site in advance of the focus group session, but no one was specifically recruited to attend. Rather, the adults who happened to attend the program on the day of the focus group were asked if they would volunteer for the focus group. The only stipulation was that it not be the first time the individual was attending Play in the Parks. Participants received a gift bag put together by the YMCA that included a T-shirt, YMCA paraphernalia, some toys for the children and a certificate for a one-month YMCA membership.

At the beginning of each focus group, Play in the Parks participant surveys were distributed. An analysis of these surveys showed that three-quarters of focus group participants were between 30 and 39 years of age. Two-thirds of the adults in the focus groups were mothers who had brought children to the program that day; the remaining one-third were fathers. Nearly two-thirds said they usually brought one child to Play in the Parks; one parent had brought three children and the rest usually brought two children. The age ranges represented by the children were nearly evenly split between 0-3 year olds, 4-6 year olds and 7-9 year olds. Just less than
half of the families had participated in Play in the Parks during the summer of 2011. About one-quarter of focus group participants said they were YMCA members.

Geographically, focus group members came from eight different ZIP codes (53110, 53172, 53213, 53216, 53219, 53222, 53225, and 53226). These families reported having participated in an average of two Play in the Parks sites.

The facilitator asked focus group participants the following questions that had been developed with YMCA input:

- How often have you been coming to Play in the Parks?
- What makes you choose which park sites you will bring your family to?
- Who comes with you to Play in the Parks?
- Ever since you have been coming to Play in the Parks, has anything been different for your family?
- Why are/aren't you a YMCA member?

Although the questions asked of each group were the same, the conversation was allowed to take a natural course with the facilitator observing, listening and following up on statements made by participants if what was said was not clear. An assistant facilitator captured all comments in written notes. As a backup, tape recordings were made of each focus group. At the end of each focus group, the assistant facilitator offered a summary of key concepts from the discussion, and asked the participants if this summary was accurate.

Analysis of the focus groups was done using a team approach. Immediately after each session, the facilitator and assistant facilitator debriefed together to confirm major impressions and key points from the focus group. Detailed notes for each focus group were typed up and then analyzed through a systematic coding process that identified key themes. The notes for the two groups were compared to reveal patterns and were also matched to the participant survey data to discover trends and overall findings.

**Limitations**

It should be emphasized that the findings in this report represent an assessment of participants’ perceptions and that these perceptions may or may not reflect the actual Play in the Parks program.

**Participant Surveys.** The participant surveys sought to gather demographic data on Play in the Parks participants, along with their assessment of the programs’ effects on themselves and their families. Because the participant surveys were distributed by program staff, not the evaluators, some bias could have entered into the survey responses. Participants could have perceived (correctly or incorrectly) that staff would look at the answers and this perception could have swayed participants’ answers. If the staff only distributed the surveys to participants who were known to be pleased with the program, or at the best-functioning sites, that might also bias the results. Since the evaluation design called for surveys to be distributed only in certain weeks of the summer, if there was poor turnout on the designated survey day (due to rain, etc.) there was no chance to collect additional surveys from that site on another day. That site would then not be represented in the results. Surveys were collected from a small percentage of the
overall Play in the Parks attendance, therefore generalizing the survey results to all Play in the Parks attendees is not appropriate.

**Focus Groups:** Focus group research is not undertaken to precisely measure people’s views but rather to obtain the in-depth perceptions of participants, to find their range of feeling and opinion on the topic of interest. No two focus group conversations are alike, however, by using systematic procedures for data collection, data handling and data analysis the evaluators are confident that the findings are an accurate reflection of how participants felt and thought about the questions they were asked. The results may be transferrable to other environments but are not intended to be generalized. As with all focus group research, the findings represent the opinions of the limited number of focus group participants.
APPENDIX A: Program Logic Model

YMCA of Metropolitan Milwaukee

PLAY IN THE PARKS

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES
- Increased childhood physical activity
- Healthier adults
- Environmentally conscious children and adults
- Stronger Families

MID-TERM OUTCOMES
- Increased levels of physical activity (children & adults)
- Decreased time in sedentary activities (children & adults)
- Enhanced social relationships within families
- Increased activity for families
- Increased attendance
- Increased number of YMCA memberships

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES
1. Parents enjoy more time spent playing with their children
2. Parents feel more confident in their ability to play with their children
3. Parents know more strategies to play with their children
4. Increased levels of family interaction
5. Families place increased value on time spent outdoors
6. Increased park awareness
7. Increased perception of parks as safe
8. Parents perception of value of YMCA membership enhanced

INPUTS/ACTIVITIES
- Parks
- Families
- YMCA staff
- Games
- Equipment
- Instruction on games
- Unstructured time
- Values integration
- Take-home incentives
APPENDIX B: Participant Survey

We need your help! Please fill out ONE per family.

Play in the Parks

Fill in the bubbles like this: ○

Because of Play in the Parks . . .

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. My family enjoys playing together more.

2. My family spent more time together.

3. I feel more comfortable playing with my kids.

4. My family learned how to play games we didn’t know before.

5. My family went to city parks we would not normally visit.

6. My family will be more likely to spend time outdoors as a family.

7. I think my family is safe in the parks.

8. My family will play together more in the future.

9. How many times did your family attend Play in the Parks this summer?
   - 1 - 2 times
   - 3 - 4 times
   - 5 - 6 times
   - 7 - 9 times
   - 10 or more times

   Hoyt Humboldt Jackson Lincoln McGovern Sheridan
   - 18 - 29 yrs
   - 30 - 39 yrs
   - 40 - 49 yrs
   - 50 - 59 yrs
   - 60+ yrs

10. Which Play in the Parks sites did your family attend? (check all that apply)
    - 0 - 3 yr old
    - 4 - 6 yrs
    - 7 - 9 yrs
    - 10 + yrs
    - Age unknown

11. What is your age? (optional).
    - Mother
    - Father
    - Grandparent
    - Guardian
    - Other

12. How are you related to the children who came to Play in the Parks with you?
    - Yes
    - No

13. How many children do you usually bring to Play in the Parks with you?
    - Yes
    - No

14. Did you attend Play in the Parks last summer?
    - Yes
    - No

15. Are you a YMCA member?
    - Yes
    - No

16. What is your home ZIP code?

17. What did you like best about Play in the Parks?

18. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about Play in the Parks?

Thank you! Please return to a Play in the Parks staff person today.