

# THE LEAP PAD

Community Outreach & the Pursuit of Play

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### **Executive Summary**

Kosciusko County fully embraces the "Play" in our motto, "Live, Work, and Play" during the warm summer months. We take full advantage of the dozens of beaches, parks, and trails scattering the county, making our summers highly active and playful. However, when it comes to the cold, winter months, our community suddenly becomes quiet, as very few winter amenities exist in the county. Kosciusko County has two indoor playgrounds, and while other indoor playgrounds exist in Northern Indiana they are often an hour or more away; which to drive in the winter, may not be favorable.

#### Benefits of Play/Risks of Play Deprivation

Scientific research continues to show that increased play within early childhood, and adolescence has a multitude of benefits in a child's growth including cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and psychological development. Play increases connections made in the brain that forms the fundamental base of learning in children. Playtime is how a child learns various aspects of life, and learns how to navigate through various social, emotional, and physical boundaries. Without play, or being exposed to long periods of time where play is limited, there are increased risks for children to develop various different set-backs. These inhibitions could include cognitive delays, increased risk for obesity, risk for anxiety and depression as well as an increased risk of criminal behavior.

#### **Our Mission**

The children in our county are the next generations of leaders, and every child has the right to play, and experience the freedom of childhood. We are proposing The Leap Pad: a Play Café. This concept is an indoor playground, with the potential for an attached café, and/or quiet space for adults to network and socialize, while their child has a safe place to play, socialize, and exercise. We are passionate about making this space all-inclusive, where no child is left out of the opportunity to play because of a cost, their age, or if they have special needs. Our vision is to create a space that benefits all ages of children (o-12), all incomes, as well as having a space that could cater to children with sensory sensitivities. Because of this, we are seeking out an entity that is just as passionate as we are about creating opportunities to serve all people in our community.

#### Conclusion

We believe this concept would bridge large gaps within our community. Not only would this concept provide a space for children to be active during colder months, it also allows parents and guardians respite of childhood energies that are often repressed in winter. In addition, it allows financially struggling families the same opportunities as prosperous families, which those opportunities tend to be limited in colder months. Furthermore, this is an amenity that may cater to new families, or to families who are considering relocation for their careers, which only improves the talent retention of our county. Regardless of all of these benefits, our passion lies with the fact that it gives our children the same opportunities to grow, learn, and better themselves in the way children do best: play.

#### Introduction:

Kosciusko County is a growing, thriving community, which endlessly works to fulfill every aspect of its motto: "Live, Work, and Play." As the warm summer months role around, Kosciusko County fully lives out this mission, as the dozens of parks, beaches, trails and campgrounds are practically filled to the brim with people; especially families with young children. Our young families thrive in the summer time, as the warm months of the year provide ample sunshine, multiple outdoor-based community events, and most importantly, a wide variety of playgrounds for young children to play. At almost any park within Kosciusko County during the summer time, you're bound to see at the very least one or two children climbing on the play equipment, running in the open grassy areas, and soaking up the sunshine. However, once the cold, winter months reach Kosciusko County, this highly-active, bustling community, reaches a full, and sudden, stop.

Looking at community calendars during the winter, most events are indoor-based events that include either reading time, or involve electronic media, which adds to screen time in young children and teens. Very few, if any, free play activities take place during the winter months, in Kosciusko County, and if these spaces are available, they are not free to everyone in the community. Engaging in free-play during the summer-time is easy and free for everyone to enjoy, making it an all-inclusive season. However, in the wintertime, Kosciusko County has exactly one, free, indoor playground. If you were to include after-school programs such as the Baker Youth Club, or Boys and Girls Clubs, we would have three available spaces. Unfortunately, these spaces are not open to all, as there is an application process, and fees that could incur if using the facilities during certain hours. (Baker Youth Club Warsaw After School Program) Other indoor facilities that are available in the winter time either cost to use, require a membership, or are only available to employees/congregations. These facilities are entities such as the YMCA, private play spaces within churches that are only available to the congregation, private daycare spaces within business, as well as play spaces that are attached to fast food restaurants. For such an active, health-conscious community in the summer time, our winter months appear as a total contradiction to our community standards and priorities.

With almost 5,000 children in Kosciusko County under the age of 5, and approximately 13,500 school age children (5-17), we need to do better to ensure the success of our future generations. As we will discuss later in this project, there is significant evidence that free-play provides great benefits within early childhood development, and ultimately, can shape who our children become. However, we cannot ignore the gap in free-play during the winter months, nor can we ignore the possible detriment that it may serve to our community for generations to come.

# Benefits of Play:

For several decades, a significant amount of research has been conducted surrounding early childhood and early adolescent development, which has allowed for researchers to further detail significant benchmarks in cognitive, social, emotional and physical branches for children. Not surprisingly, play serves a vital role in many of these benchmarks, and could also contribute to long-term wellness, education, emotional and social well-being of an individual, as play is often the largest source of learning for children. (Bailey and Anderson-McNamee) Where play is absent or limited, play deprivation can increase a child's risk for an abundance of health, psychological, emotional and social issues, which we will discuss later.

In early childhood development, there are several play-related benchmarks, as 75% of a child's brain is developed between birth and early adulthood, and play encourages brain development through stimulating the creation of connections between nerve cells, which aid in the development of gross and fine motor skills. (Hartwell-Walker) For children aged three to six, physical benchmarks include running, jumping, throwing, kicking, hopping, skipping and balancing. Cognitive and language benchmarks for this age group also include counting to 10, asking questions and developing short sentences. (Kaneshiro, Zieve, MD and Conaway, Preschooler Development) These activities are largely practiced in settings such as hide and seek, or pretend play. Furthermore, physical benchmarks for school-aged children include fine motor skills including hand-eye coordination, physical endurance and balance. Researchers also state that this age group is highly active and require physical activity regularly, as well as to limit organized sport/play settings to reduce the feeling of pressure to perform. At this age, children are beginning to become more aware of success and failure, so free play is still important to decrease the effects of new stressors in their environment. (Kaneshiro, Zieve, MD and Conaway, School-age Children Development) Although free play is integrated into basic benchmarks, there is also a tremendous amount of research detailing further cognitive, social, and emotional benefits that play can cause through childhood, and even, adulthood.

As the brain rapidly develops and creates connections within the first five years of life, the foundation for brain development is built. By the age of three, a child has 1000 trillion connections that are critical to support future learning spaces. (Timeline: Brain Development from Birth) In addition, neuroscientists have found that play time begins to alter brain chemistry, particularly within the cerebral cortex; the part of the brain associated with higher cognitive functioning. A study from the University of Arkansas, in 1975 actually supports this evidence as their data proved an infant who was regularly offered toys to play with, registered a higher IQ by the age of 3. Not only does play increase cognition, but also stimulates creativity and imagination, both of which are linked to abstract problem solving - the process of exploring multiple solutions to an issue or problem. (Importance of Play - 9 Amazing Benefits & Infographic) As stated in an article by Jona Anderson-McNamee and Sandra Bailey

at the University of Montana, "Children gain knowledge through their play. They learn to think, remember and solve problems." (Bailey and Anderson-McNamee)

Along with cognitive development, social and emotional benefits have been proven to occur through play within childhood. When children play in social settings, where they interact with others children, they begin to learn varying social skills and cues, where they learn to share, cooperate with others, and where they begin to develop morals in order to reason and negotiate with others. (Bailey and Anderson-McNamee) This development of morals also correlates to the understanding of empathy. Often times in social pretend-play, a child must understand their peers thoughts and emotions. In addition, as they play with others, they begin to understand how different social experiences make them feel, thus being able to put themselves in another person's shoes. On occasion, in times of social play, a child will experience negative emotions, such as not getting their way, or not being included. Although this is not ideal, it is critical for developing self-control, regulation of emotions and coping skills. From a study in New Zealand, psychologist found that children who experienced more free-play typically handled negative emotions and situations better than their peers who did not experience pretend play. This control of emotions was shown to better prepare children for school, and also increased their social likeability and well-being. (Hartwell-Walker)

Lastly, there are critical, over-arching life lessons that can be gained through experience in children's play. Throughout all types of play, children have to make decisions, whether they decide who to play with, what toys they want most, the decision to share, etc. (Entin) In addition, studies have shown that children who engaged in play as a child, are generally more resilient to hardships they experience as an adult, and are more adaptive to change. This is because play often times causes children to "rehearse" actions and behaviors that they may experience as an adult, but without the same consequences we may experience as adults. This allows children to be more resilient, and better equipped with a psychological foundation for handling and managing changes and difficult situations. (Lester and Russell)

From all of this compounding evidence, there is no doubt that play time in a child's life is critical to their development in countless areas of life, including mental, behavioral, emotional and social facets. We cannot deny that play-enriched environments greatly benefit a child's overall growth and well-being from birth, all the way to early adolescence. As a whole, Kosciusko County has always sought out ways to enhance the lives of youth in our community, and this is research that must be taken into consideration, and pursued. Because, although there is substantial research showing the endless benefits of play, there is an equal amount of research that warns against the risks associated with limited play time, or what scientists call, play deprivation. We believe that if an entity like the Play Café is not implemented, our next generations of leaders are being robbed of opportunity to gain the most out of their childhood.

# Risks of Play Deprivation:

In one generation alone, the amount of playtime that children are exposed to has reduced by 71% within the United States. Studies have shown that if play is deprived, or limited within a child's first 10 years of life, there are strong links to developmental delays, increased risk for anxiety and depression later in life, trouble adapting to changes, less meaningful relationships, less self and emotional control, and a higher risk of criminal tendencies. (Brown) In addition, a study conducted in 1997 already cited that children were only spending an average of 11 hours a week engaged in play, due to increased school-work, and more time spent on the computer. (Entin) With an additional 23 years of technological advancement, the introduction of smart phones, laptops, TV streaming services, the integration of electronics into our school-systems, as well as reduced recess in preschool, kindergarten, and elementary schools, there is no doubt that children are playing even less than in 1997, and now, we are seeing the repercussions.

We have discussed the cognitive benefits of play in young children, and that when a child plays, their brain grows and develops, but on the contrary, a study conducted in 1977 showed that children who are not regularly engaged in play, developed brains that were 20-30% smaller than their peers, due to a loss of stimulating brain activity. In fact, a professor of Education Psychology at the University of Minnesota, Anthony Pellegrini, conducted a study in 2005 where he discovered that children performed better academically after recess as compared to before recess. (Lauer) In addition to academia, when a child is deprived or limited to play, they have a harder time developing the connections within the brain that account for decision making, adapting to changes, understanding social cues, and language adaptation. These delays could cause children to become more isolated, less socially adapted, and become less resilient to difficulties of adulthood. (Brown)

Play deprivation also is a precursor to risk for mental illnesses later in life, such as anxiety and depression. From 1950 to 2011, anxiety and depression has been clinically diagnosed in five to eight times more children and adolescents than in 1950, and suicide rates in children under the age of 15 quadrupled from 1950 to 2005. (Entin) The less exposure a child has to free and social play, the more they experience suppression of playful activity, and motivation to play and thus have a harder time maintaining positive emotions, ultimately increasing depression and sorrow. This is because children often seek out play as a source of happiness as a way to cope with stress or adverse life-situations. However, for children who are deprived of play, their ability to seek out sources of joy and happiness in times of stress or difficulty is absent, thus causing a decrease in optimism and hopefulness. (Lester and Russell)

Not only does play deprivation have significant cognitive and emotional effects, there is also a direct correlation between play deprivation and risk of committing violent crimes. Stuart Brown, a psychiatrist and founder of the Institute for Play in California, has conducted

research surrounding play since 1968, in which over 6,000 individuals have been researched regarding play time. His research has correlated play deprivation to a risk of committing felonious, violent activity, as many incarcerated individuals who were examined in his studies could not recall normal playground settings. (Brown) Studies have also shown that children who do not experience quality play, regardless of their demographics, can become violent, aggressive, and anti-social. (Lauer) In addition to a lack of play, increased television exposure only compounds this issue. A study from the University of Michigan in 2010 showed that children are exposed to 200,000 violent crimes and 16,000 murders through television by the age of 18. Furthermore, a 15 year study from the University showed a direct link between watching childhood TV violence and violent behavior as an adult. This study showed that even just having a television on in a home, regardless of the show, is linked to aggressive tendencies in toddlers. (Boyse)

Lastly, play deprivation has a fairly obvious risk, which is obesity, and weight-related illnesses. It is recommended to parents that school-age children must engage in play activities to combat sedentary behaviors, because an inactive child has an increased risk of lifetime obesity. (Kaneshiro, Zieve, MD and Conaway, School-age Children Development) In addition, the same study from the University of Michigan that was discussed earlier, also studied the effects of television and obesity. On average, children between the ages of 2-5 will spend 32 hours a week watching TV, and children ages 6-11 spend 28 hours a week in front of a television. It also found that television was a larger factor of lifetime obesity than diet, as children who regularly watch TV are creating sedentary habits for long-term behavior. (Boyse) Looking to Kosciusko County, 18.6% of low-income preschoolers are already obese. (Healthy Lifestyles in Kosciusko County, Indiana)

When we envision the future of our community, we must account for our children, as they are our next leaders. To give them all every opportunity to become the best versions of themselves, we cannot turn a blind eye to these risks associated to play deprivation, nor can we ignore the vast number of benefits that free play has on the growth and development of a child. With only one indoor playground available to children, especially to children under the age of 5, we must do better. As a team, we fully believe that an additional Play Café can only benefit this county, as there are several gaps, outside of childhood development, that can be met with this initiative.

# Closing Gaps within Our Community:

Kosciusko County is a growing community, with large orthopedic companies, an increasing presence of manufacturing, unique entrepreneurial opportunities, and numerous private corporations, no wonder it draws new talent and families to the area every week. However, with all of the growth in the corporate sector, there are still areas of the community that have yet to catchup. One area in particular, are opportunities that cater to young families

with children, especially children under the age of 5 during the colder, winter months. There are several options available during the summer with countless parks and beaches in the county, but as the year goes on, families are forced to spend more time indoors, and for the little ones in our county, it stifles their ability to expend their energy.

As we discussed at the beginning of this paper, there are very few options for young children and families to utilize in the winter time that are affordable and safe. Most of the options that are available either have an associated cost, require a membership, or are associated with after-school programs. Although after-school programs appear to be a great option, these programs often still require payments to use, are under-staffed, and depend heavily on screen-time to entertain children. In addition, many of these programs are also geared to aid children in homework and school studies, not necessarily allowing the freedom to play. The vision of the Play Café is that it is free to the public, where parents are still supervising their children, but there is no set structure to the time spent, nor is there a cost burden that would deter families who are in financial stress from using the space. In addition, if the Play Café is free to use, it could be considered a 'park' which would qualify the Play Café within the state of Indiana to receive free lunches during the summer time, just as the outdoor parks do. This would additional help relieve some financial stress from parents who may struggle to feed their children during the year, and will provide a free meal to children who may not receive a full meal elsewhere in their lives. This is just another reason why we desire for the Play Café to be a free space for all children in the community.

Not only does the Play Café bridge a financial gap, it also reaches to the more rural areas of our county. If we look at the perimeter towns and cities in the county, such as Claypool, Silver Lake, and Mentone; their drive to the one play café in our county is well over 30-45 minutes. To create a secondary play café in a more centralized part of the county, it reduces travel time by40-50% for some towns. This is a great asset, as these smaller towns are usually struggling for child-care, and although the Play Café is not a day-care center, it is still a place where families can alleviate stress by letting their children play, while they have a mental and physical break. Also, when you consider traveling with young children under the age of 12 for longer than 45 minutes, that is also an increase of stress on parents. If families were to travel out of the county to larger play centers, their travel time is easily over an hour. Not only do some of the families in our county not have the luxury of traveling for that time, if you consider traveling in winter months, it only increases stress and burden.

Furthermore, a Play Café would be an almost essential amenity for talent retention in our community. The large companies in our county do a great job of attracting talent from all over the globe, however, Kosciusko County is not the best at retaining this talent pool. From 2016, we saw a loss of almost 8,000 workers who commuted outside the county for work. In addition, we also saw about 8,000 people who commuted from other counties to work in Kosciusko County. (Annual Commuting Trents Profile Kosciusko County) That's roughly

16,000 people who could be more easily retained through furthering our county's amenities. Many times, commuting workers do not move their families into our county because they have a spouse who has not yet found a job in the county. If they have young children, a Play Café would be the perfect spot for a trailing spouse to network with other professionals in the county, and it also creates an opportunity for a spouse to work from home, while also allowing their children a space to play and not be cooped-up inside all day. Not only this, but for workers that commute outside of the county, this is also a great space to network to find opportunities within the county, and thus limiting a commuting schedule.

# Design of Play Cafe: Vision and Sustainability

As we create the vision of our Play Café, our first priority is securing a non-profit organization that has the same vision and passion for our community. In efforts to find an heir of this vision, our team has met with both WCC as well as the Winona Lakes Parks Department, where both entities have expressed interest in this concept. We believe that both a church or parks department would be the best type of candidate due to their non-profit status already established, and both entities would have some kind of liability insurance already established. In addition, a church or parks department would have a similar vision of the park being 'for all' people.

Regardless of the organization that takes this on, we have a vision for a space that caters to children ages 0-12, with a main space for pre-school and school-age children, and a separate space for toddlers and infants. Our dream for the structure is roughly 10,000 square feet, with roughly a 25ft. ceiling. This space could be part of an existing structure, an addition to a building, or a new project completely. A building this size, would cost roughly \$675,000. (BuildingJournal.com) This playground will hold up to 312 children, and the cost of equipment will be approximately \$100,000. (Indoor Playground Designs) Of course, an indoor playground comes with challenges, especially in the winter months when illnesses are rampant. This is why cleaning and sanitation is a must. Although the details of cleaning will be established by the inheriting non-profit, a large 55 gallon drum of sanitization and disinfectant cleaners run at approximately \$1,000.00, and accessory cleaning equipment is an additional \$500.00 or more. (Grainger) With these costs in mind, funding will be a priority, however, we will discuss that later in our paper.

As we have discussed previously, our vision is for the Play Café to be open and free to the public with no cost to use. We anticipate the main play ground to be used from ages of potty trained children up to children who are roughly 5 feet tall. This limits the wear and tear on the equipment, as there will be reduced biologic accidents from excluding non-potty trained children, and less wear on structures if the height limit is 5 feet tall. In addition, by requiring children to be potty trained, there is a reduced risk of young children getting accidentally hurt or injured by entering a play space that is not suited for them. However, we

also envision a safe place for children ages o-3, who are smaller, and may not be potty trained where they can still play safely. We also understand that there are some associate maintenance costs, as there will be wear on the equipment regardless of age and height, which is why we would strongly suggest having a rentable space associated with the Play Café to be leased for birthday parties. This extra income will be an asset to aiding with maintenance costs for the playground.

In the discussion around funding, the inheriting non-profit would be eligible to apply for a grant from the K21 Health Foundation, as the Play Café fully aligns with their mission to make our community happier and healthier. Not only the K21 Health Foundation, but we have also met with the Warsaw Optimist Club, who has also expressed interest in giving supporting funding as it also aligns with their mission to serve the community and make it a better space. In addition, if the non-profit does not already hold liability insurance, they will be required to obtain it. Most organizations like parks departments and churches already hold liability insurance that will most likely cover a building like the Play Café, which is why it would be perfect for an organization like WCC or the Winona Lake Parks Department to take on this project.

Of course, the Play Café's top priority will be child safety, which is why even though parents are responsible to watch their child at the Play Café, there should still be workers available to monitor the space and help keep the children safe. One way this could be done is to request volunteer staff. Our community is very service-driven and have a deep desire to volunteer in areas that benefit the community. However, an advantage we see from the Play Café is also to provide an opportunity students in surrounding schools and universities who are passionate about Early Childhood Education to gain Co-Op or Internship hours through working at the Play Café. Not only does this allow for the children to be in a safe, supervised space, but it also gives opportunity to others in our community who are either entering, or getting ready to enter the workforce, and it could be an additional means in retaining talent in the area.

The sustainability of the Play Café should take into consideration the cost of maintaining or repairing equipment, cost of cleaning and sanitation, as well as utility costs like wastewater, gas and electricity. Because of these costs, we believe a great option would be to include a space within the Play Café that could be rented for birthday parties, or special events, to allow for a private event to occur, while also having access to the public playground. Potential income from the rental space could be an opportunity for many of the sustainability costs to be covered. This is an additional reason why a parks department would be ideal, as parks often have a space available for rent, and also may receive some state funding which would help sustain this idea. For a church, including a rental space would also be applicable to help cover maintenance fees, and with most churches, there are tithes from the congregation that are could be allocated to help cover utility and maintenance costs. Not only this, but the

"Café" part of our vision is also an option for a coffee cart or food-service space attached to the playground, where proceeds from the coffee/food space could help supplement some of the costs.

### After KLA: Our Hope For The Future:

As we currently have not found a non-profit to pass on our passion and mission to, we are hoping this concept piece will still have a positive outcome. We are hoping that members who hear our presentation for KLA will see the potential for a Play Café space in Kosciusko County, and will pick-it up to use. However, if this is not the case, we hope that our preceding KLA members will see the value of this space and bring it back to life, just as they did for "Ice-Ice Baby." Regardless, we do wish that the organization that takes this on would already be, or plan to become a non-profit organization and that they see the value of the 'free for all' space in the community. As we mentioned earlier, if this organization is a non-profit, funding through the K21 Health Foundation, the Optimist Club, as well as sponsorships from other organizations in the community are readily available.

Overall, we live in a gracious and giving community, who has already seen the Splash Pad and Limitless Park to fruition, so we have no doubt that they would rally behind a cause such as the Play Café. However, the non-profit organization who take son this project would be eligible to submit for a grant from the K21 Health Foundation. In addition, if a parks department takes this project on, there is a strong possibility that they could incorporate this proposal into planned or future renovations of parks buildings, or they may be able to incorporate it into an existing building. We fully believe that our community would rally behind this proposal and see it come to light as it has with numerous projects in the past.

#### Conclusion:

In conclusion, we have a vision of creating a free, playful space for the children – our future leaders - in our community. We believe all children have a right to play, learn, develop and socialize to give them the opportunity to become the best version of their future selves. As Kay Redfield Jamison says, "Children need the freedom and time of play, Play is not a luxury. Play is a necessity." With the limited availability for play spaces in the winter months, we wholly believe that this would be exceedingly successful in our community, as it bridges large gaps in the community. The Play Café would mean a safe space for play, respite, networking, and socialization, for both children, families and parents. As our county strives to expand and urbanize, seeks ways to retain top talent, advocates to bring families into our area, and fosters the development of children, an opportunity such as the Play Café is now no longer a luxury. Play, for Kosciusko County, has become a necessity.

# **Appendix**

## **Costing Estimates:**

#### **Equipment:**

-Size of Equipment: 36' Long x 36' Wide x 11' Tall

Final: 72' Long x 72' Wide x 22' Tall

-Capacity: 312 children (Ages 3-12)

-Costing: \$68,000 - \$116,000



#### **Cleaning Equipment:**

- Disinfectant and Sanitizer, 55 gal. Drum, Simple Green Step 3: Final Wipe <a href="https://www.grainger.com/ec/pdf/423M62">https://www.grainger.com/ec/pdf/423M62</a> 1.pdf
- 4 Gallon Handheld Spray Nozzle
  https://www.grainger.com/search/outdoor-equipment/sprayers-and-spreaders/compressed-air-sprayers?attrs=Sprayer+Type%7CBackpack%7CCart&filters=attrs&searchQuery=sprayer&sst=1&ts optout=true'

#### Cost of cleaning equipment:

- -Simple Green Drum \$1,036.00
- -Spray Equipment: Handheld 4 gallon sprayer: \$445.90

#### **Building Cost:**

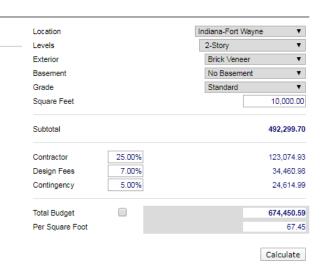
- -Approximately 10,000 square feet
- -Cost: \$675,000 Approximately

https://buildingjournal.com/residential-estimating.html



"Online construction estimating. Quickly estimate the cost of residential and commercial projects in over 160 US. Cities"

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