

PROJECT PLAY ROUNDTABLE

From Digital to Physical Play: Can Tech Make It Happen?

MARCH 2014

INTRODUCTION

Physical inactivity and childhood obesity are major problems in California where, according to the California Department of Education, an estimated 40 percent of high school freshmen are overweight. These are also national problems. Participation rates in sports—the most attractive form of physical activity for many—are declining, with a leading national survey reporting that only 50 percent of children ages 6 to 17 played sports in any form, organized or casual, even once, which is down from 54 percent in 2012. Moreover, only 3 in 10 kids play regularly, with the lowest rates among low-income youth. These statistics are the focus of the Aspen Institute’s Project Play, a thought exercise to help stakeholders reimagine youth sports in America in a manner that serves all children and all communities.

Technology is often blamed for the growing sedentary behavior among children, who now spend 7 to 10 hours each day on screens. But technology isn’t going away. Rather, it will become even more pervasive—and screen time will likely increase. The challenge, therefore, is how to use technology as an asset and reduce the barriers to an early positive sports experience.

On February 26th, 2014, the Aspen Institute’s Sports & Society Program invited 50 leaders and pioneers from the realms of technology, media, business innovation, and academia to participate in a cross-sector brainstorming event, “From Digital to Physical Play: Can Tech Make It Happen?” Underwritten by the David & Lucille Packard Foundation and hosted in Mountain View, Calif., at Google headquarters, attendees were asked to help change the game for kids and youth sports, one of the few industries whose model has yet to be disrupted—for the better—by technology. The goals of the event were to:

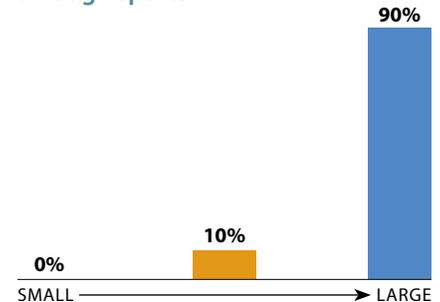
- Develop thought around four cutting-edge ideas that can get more kids—ages 14 and under—engaged in sports
- Lay the groundwork for partnerships that can turn those ideas into action
- Inform the recommendations to be made in the Aspen Institute Project Play report on youth sports, due at the end of 2014

In advance of the event, attendees were asked to watch a video conversation from the April 2013 Project Play launch summit between Sports & Society director Tom Farrey and Google senior vice president David Drummond, who encouraged leaders to be “audacious” in reimaging youth sports.

Then, at the event, Gopi Kallayil, Chief Evangelist for Brand Marketing at Google, challenged participants to action using Google’s “Nine Principles of Innovation,” which the company has used to change and invigorate many industries. He encouraged attendees to apply these principles to their work and drew connections to the tableau provided by Project Play which he described as having a mission that matters (one of the key principles).

The following report summarizes the results of the group’s work, as well as its responses to a variety of questions posed by Farrey using an instant polling system provided by the American College of Sports Medicine.

How much of an impact can tech have on getting more kids active through sports?



Google’s Nine Principles of Innovation

- **Innovation comes from anywhere**
Embrace great ideas from employees/contributors at all levels
- **Focus on the user**
Predictive search collectively saved Google users 5,000 years
- **Think 10X**
Unleash creativity by aiming for exponential change, not 10% improvement
- **Bet on technical insights**
Use every group’s unique insights to build unique products
- **Ship and iterate**
Don’t wait to perfect the model; let users make it better
- **Fail well**
For every successful product, there are 100 failures; integrate the best elements
- **20% time**
Google lets employees spend 1/5th of their work time on projects unrelated to core products
- **Default to open**
Allow people and groups outside of the circle to build on the product
- **Have a mission that matters**
Aim to improve lives of millions of others

BREAKOUT SESSION SUMMARIES

As a framework for the breakout sessions, the attendees focused on what it takes to get a kid off the couch and into healthy sport activity. The ideas presented below follow that chronological progression: inspire, connect, teach, and measure.

Tech to Inspire: The Passive-Active Video Game

Working Group Lead: Hans Anderson, Sr. Concept Developer, ESPN Emerging Technology

Kids love passive sports video games, such as Madden and FIFA Soccer. While active video games designed to promote physical activity have entered the market, they have not been nearly as successful as the passive games. The group decided to meet kids where they are, which is to say where their interests lie. In the Passive-Active Video Game conceptualized by this group, new, innovative features and functionality would be built into passive video games that would inspire and encourage kids to get up and run and play on their own—or even sign up for organized sports.

Children playing a video game often wall off and ignore the adults around them. This led the breakout group to decide that the key to reaching kids with the ‘active’ message is through the game, e.g., if the child invests time or participates in sport or physical activity, he or she is rewarded in the video game with some increased or improved attribute in their on-screen character. A player could also unlock a new or hidden level in the game or aggregate rewards for in-game purchasing power.

What’s more, kids could collect or exchange the currency-for-activity—called “FitCoin”—with other children in the real world, providing additional motivation for those already playing the Passive-Active Video Game and getting new kids involved as well. Gyms, PE teachers, and even coaches could also issue FitCoins to kids after measuring and verifying physical activity through passive sensor technology. They could then import the information into an application using the standard FitCoin interface, thereby creating a FitCoin ecosystem and a generation of kids who are more fit because they love video games. Aaron Ferns, a teenager who sat in on the working sessions, played a critical role in the formation of the FitCoin concept, underscoring the notion that innovation can come from anywhere.

When presented to the larger group, this idea garnered considerable enthusiasm.

OBJECTIVE: Take the Game Outside

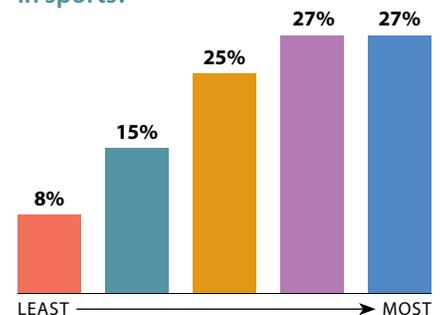
STRATEGIES:

- Promote activity as currency
- Encourage community as currency
- Show in-game progress for out-of-game activity
- Build players based on activities, enhance character capability, enable level-up
- Provide an accomplishment platform that promotes social posting

CHALLENGES:

- Promoting industry evangelism
- Developing FitCoin standard and exchange rate
- Generating enthusiasm for FitCoin among kids
- Building key business partnerships

How effective could the Passive-Active Video Game idea be in getting kids more active by participating in sports?



Tech to Connect: Supply Meets Demand

Working Group Lead: Jeremy Goldberg, President, LeagueApps

Many kids want to play sports but lack access to or fall out of the system—they are then locked or shut out—and never find the best sport option for them. Parents are also not equipped to discover appropriate sports experiences for their children. On the other hand, many sport programs beyond the traditional basketball/soccer/baseball/football scope exist, all of which need kids to populate their rosters but don't know how to identify prospects or reach them. The goal of the Supply Meets Demand working group was to connect kids with the right sports experiences—both organized and pickup—that they may enjoy and at which they can find success, thereby improving confidence and instilling a lifelong love of sports and fitness.

The Supply Meets Demand tool conceptualized by the group would live online and in the form of an app. It would enable parents to discover and find the right local sports experiences (organized, unorganized, aftercare, and school-sponsored) for their children, based on specific criteria important to the parent and child. For example, does the child need transportation to and from the activity? Are the coaches certified? Does the league/organization offer grants or scholarships? Are any other neighborhood children participating? Can those parents vouch for the activity and sponsoring organization? The Supply Meets Demand tool puts the power to provide great sports experiences for their kids into the hands of parents. The tool itself could be a mobile optimized website, as well as distributed widgets that could reside on other partner sites.

We were also cognizant to make sure the tool doesn't simply service those who already have access to sports experiences. At a minimum, the tool would be able to highlight under-served areas or specific missing sports opportunities in key locations. What's more, if a number of parents were searching for a specific activity or sport, thereby expressing a demand, and not finding it available in their area, the Supply Meets Demand tool could share that information with the closest activity provider, thereby encouraging them to meet the demand to get more kids active in that sport.

The larger group expressed solid support for the Supply Meets Demand tool.

OBJECTIVE: Enable Discovery of the Right Sports Experiences

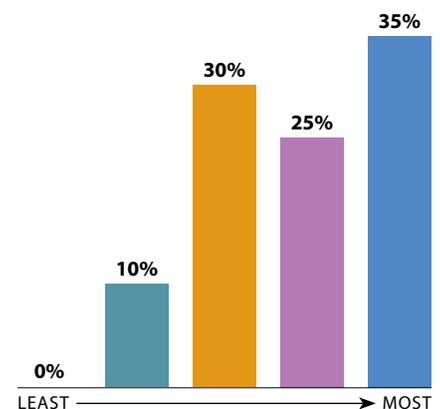
STRATEGIES:

- Enable discoverability
 - Provide a broad definition of 'sports opportunities'
 - Deliver filtering capabilities
 - Ensure trust/verification of vendors/providers
 - Assessment/education (future)
 - Aggregation/organization (future)
 - Reporting/gap analysis (future)
- Gather registration data and APIs
 - Source users:
 - Healthcare providers, employers, schools, military, non-profit/community organizations, faith-based organizations, government
 - Define measurements
 - New participants
 - Number of different sports experiences
 - Frequency of participation

CHALLENGES:

- Source information/partner organizations
- Provide access to activities for low-income and high-risk youth

How effective could the Supply Meets Demand idea be in getting kids more active by participating in sports?



Tech to Teach: The Killer App for Healthy Sport/Living

Working Group Leads: Jayne Greenberg, President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition member; and Chris Snyder, U.S. Olympic Committee director of coaching education

In today's mobile-first world, a simple, accessible app that offers a consistent architecture and interface across all sports and allows the easy teaching of skills and other abilities by PE teachers and parent coaches who are not expert in given sports can help provide early positive experiences for children. Sport-specific content must be verified as coming from trusted, knowledgeable sources and the app itself must be widely and freely available. The killer app conceptualized will educate, motivate, and help kids enjoy learning a sport so they can stay active into adulthood. It builds upon the work in this space that has already begun under the U.S. Olympic Committee, which is creating a standardized app that can be used by coaches within many of its affiliated 47 national sport governing bodies.

At its most basic, the app conceived by the group would give PE teachers a valuable tool to teach a wider variety of sports and physical activities—about which many currently have little or no knowledge. This tool would broaden children's choice of sports and fitness options, promoting multi-sport play and "physical literacy" or fluency in basic movement skills. If connected with each child's results in national standardized fitness test scores, the app could also assist in providing teachers and parents with a list of the most appropriate and confidence-building sports for each child, encouraging them to be more active.

The video clips on sport skills and other topics presented in the app would be rated by a trusted source and organized in a manner that reflects age-appropriate play. The app would integrate non-sport specific content, such as nutrition, sleep, and strength and conditioning guidelines, which are part of any athlete's comprehensive training program and support the development of healthy habits. Additionally, in-person instruction could be enhanced with the videotaping of players, to be annotated and shared directly on the field as a tool to improve a child's technique. Finally, the app would also provide suggestions for coaches in areas in which he or she needs more guidance, based on the user's self-reported strengths and weaknesses.

The large group reacted positively to the potential of the Killer App for Healthy Sport/Living, with some skepticism related to its ability to grow participation rates.

OBJECTIVE: Allow Universal Awareness of Quality Coaching/Teaching Techniques

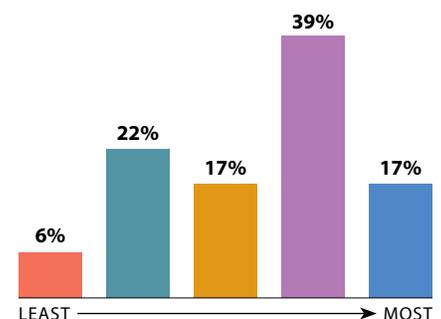
STRATEGIES:

- Deliver trusted content through valued brands
- Support skills/sports resources
- Provide assessment tools
- Enable mentorship and networking
- Teach and communicate skills to encourage education

CHALLENGES:

- Industry evangelism
- Affordable widespread implementation (single sport app vs. subscription)
- Cost of development for all 47 NGBs
- Development for sports not part of the Olympic movement

How effective could the Killer App for Healthy Sport/Living idea be in getting kids more active by participating in sports?



So conceptually, now kids are off the couch—they're inspired, connected, and growing confidence in their skills. But what about policy-makers? How to inspire, connect and empower them to drive progress at scale?

Tech to Measure: Mapping for Play

Working Group Lead: Nathan Plowman, Partnerships Director, Nike Access to Sport

"You cannot manage what you cannot measure" was the guidance of Nathan Plowman, who led the working group that brought together mapping experts from several key organizations, including Kaboom!, Kaiser-Permanente, and the National Recreation and Parks Association. The group recognized that one of the great barriers to sport and physical activity is a lack of access to or awareness of nearby playgrounds and parks. An enormous amount of public and private data exists about parks and other recreational facilities, but it is scattered and has not yet been harnessed. Once aggregated, this data can be used to both inform public investments in infrastructure as well as enable parents and children to find safe places to play. Maps can tell powerful, revealing stories.

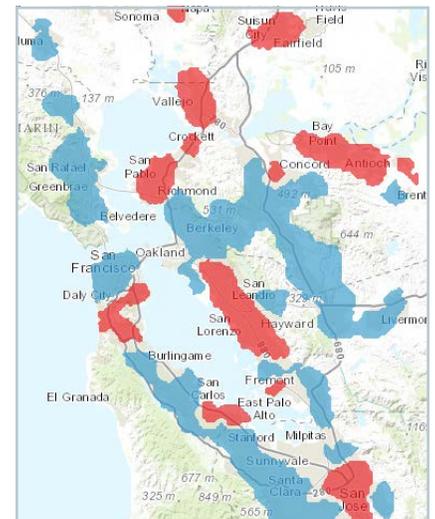
The group was introduced to Kaiser-Permanente's compelling "heat maps," which show great disparities in obesity rates by community through data tied to zip codes. The group then proposed the additional use of census, sport industry, and other data to map and visualize where demand for playgrounds and other recreational facilities outstrip supply. A Mapping for Play tool would enable governments and other interested parties to focus investments on under-served areas.

But there's a need for other maps as well, with a different audience. Participants noted that while data might indicate that a park exists in a certain location, it does not tell us about the quality of that play space, which games are often played there, or which children are playing there. Not only do kids want to go where their friends are, they also know better than adults about fun places to play—and it may not be where adults think.

So, in an effort to energize and drive behavior change among youth, the group conceptualized a second mapping tool: an app to enable kids to have their voices heard, effectively crowdsourcing play spaces to create serendipitous, free play opportunities. By allowing kids to see where their friends are congregating at any given time, in a Foursquare-like fashion, the conceptualized app would engage and motivate more children to discover and engage in opportunities for safe, unstructured play.

More than half of the conference attendees expressed solid support for the second Mapping for Play app.

Child obesity "heat map"



- Significantly higher than regional average
- Significantly lower than regional average

Source: Kaiser-Permanente

OBJECTIVE: Create a Baseline, then Engage and Energize Youth

STRATEGIES:

Stage I: Create a baseline

- Mobilize resources/quantify demand
- Focus investments in infrastructure and programming
- “Name and Blame” blighted parks, shared-use facilities
- Drive policy change
- Coordinate multi-stakeholder resources

Stage II: Engage and energize youth

- Crowd-source to fill data gaps

- Engage youth advocacy to improve facilities
- Recreate serendipitous play

CHALLENGES:

- Access to non-public or proprietary data
- Need to pilot in smaller geography before taking to scale
- Cost of design and implementation
- Dynamic mapping requires plan for ongoing maintenance and sustainability

ADDITIONAL PRESENTATIONS

Beyond the four breakout sessions, attendees participated in two other sessions as a full group with each designed to stimulate thought about ways to engage more children through age 14 in healthy sport activity.

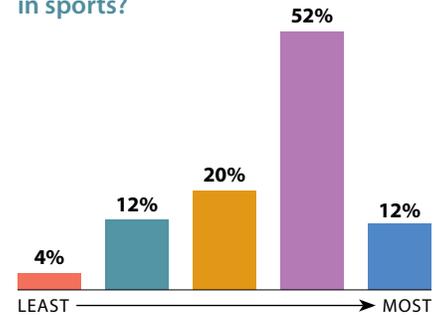
Summer Break

Discussion Leaders: James Sallis, Program Director, Active Living Research, and Distinguished Professor at University of California-San Diego, Jody Breckenridge, retired Vice Admiral, U.S. Coast Guard; and Jake Ferreira, California State Director, Mission: Readiness

Statistics show kids gain more weight in the summer than during the school year, and a major contributing factor is a more sedentary lifestyle. Counter-intuitively, many parks across the country shutter their programs over the summer, due to low participation. With a goal of changing this dangerous trend, this session focused on how to get more kids active over the summer months.

An organization focused on military recruiting, Mission: Readiness counters that summer should be a dynamic time that also provides opportunities for change and new ideas. Breckenridge and Ferreira said that kids can explore and try out new sports and activities to which they wouldn't otherwise be exposed. Some of the suggestions from event participants included a variation of the mapping app described above—a tool that lets kids tell their friends where, when, and what they are playing to encourage greater participation. Another idea builds on the notion of incentives as described in the Passive-Active Video Game, in which kids receive in-game rewards for trying different sports and activities during the summer months.

How effective could the second Mapping for Play idea (tool to mobilize youth via crowdsourcing good play sites) be in getting kids more active by participating in sports?



Interval Training

Panelists: Mikki and Jeff Martin, founders of CrossFit Kids

Often when we say “fitness” and “activity,” we mean cardiovascular exercise. But that definition should be expanded, argue Mikki and Jeff Martin, San Diego-based founders of CrossFit Kids, an open-source, non-franchised model of training that has grown rapidly over the past decade and now has nearly 2,000 registered programs and 7,000 trained instructors worldwide.

The Martins say that interval training—intense bursts of exercise interspersed with periods of rest—can help kids develop a lifelong love of fitness and health because it provides two key elements that kids crave: variety and fun. It can deliver more physical activity than jogging around a track while also helping kids increase strength to protect against injury during sport-specific training sessions. Over the past 10 years, say the Martins, they have observed no injuries among children and only eight injuries—none serious—among teenagers in more than 70,000 participant hours.

Using age-appropriate work-to-rest ratios, CrossFit Kids gets kids moving and fit without the kids feeling like the activity is “work.” For example, young children will complete one minute of jumping jacks and then spin for another minute. Older children might do three minutes of box jumps or burpees followed by three minutes of sand play or a balloon throw. By combining fitness and fun in short bursts of high-intensity activities, they have found that kids don’t even realize they are working hard while getting fit. The group atmosphere also lends itself to increased motivation—which can come from anywhere.

Pushing the technology envelope, CrossFit Kids has created a digital venue allowing teens to post and compare their scores with teens in gyms halfway across the world.



NEXT STEPS

With tremendous optimism and energy around the four main ideas they explored, the roundtable attendees expressed the desire to turn talk into action, hoping to find foundations, sport organizations, and other entities to support the further development, and perhaps prototyping, of these concepts. Next steps in the development of these concepts include convening stakeholders around specific ideas and hosting hack-a-thons.

The Sports & Society Program has already begun to push the dialogue forward, creating a Project Play community on Google, with support from Google staff, which will serve as a gathering place to share ideas and materials as well as to host multi-party video meetings. In the spirit of “default to open,” the community has been added to the Project Play website (www.AspenProjectPlay.org) on the front page as well as the “Ideas” and “Join” sections, inviting additional parties to make intellectual contributions.

To incent development, Farrey, the event moderator and Sports & Society director, told attendees at the end of the all-day meeting that the most polished and ready-to-market ideas could be celebrated at an event in early 2015, shortly after the Project Play report is released. The Aspen Institute will not own any of the ideas but simply encourage their development.

We are taking a Silicon Valley approach, in that the only failure is the failure to think big. If just one of these ideas gets introduced into the lives of children—and it may take years—the promise of huge health and sport returns await communities everywhere.

About the Aspen Institute

The Aspen Institute is an educational and policy studies organization based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to foster leadership based on enduring values and to provide a nonpartisan venue for dealing with critical issues. More: www.aspeninstitute.org/about/mission

About Project Play

The Aspen Institute Project Play is a thought leadership exercise that will lay the groundwork for the nation to get and keep more children involved in sports, with a focus on addressing the epidemic of physical inactivity. The Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program convenes sport, policy and other leaders in a series of roundtables and other events, and at the end of 2014 will publish a framework for action that can help stakeholders create “Sport for All, Play for Life” communities. More: www.AspenProjectPlay.org

The Sports & Society Program would like to thank everyone who helped make this catalytic meeting a success, including the Packard Foundation (Linda Baker and Katy Orr), Google (David Drummond, Ward Bullard, Claude Ruibal, Marisa Brutoco, Julia Zasyatkina, and Gopi Kallayil), and the working group members (Hans Anderson, Jeremy Goldberg, Nathan Plowman, Jayne Greenberg and Andrea Cernich, led by Carol Pandiscia), who met for six months to identify the most promising ideas in this space. Additional thanks to Emily Cohen for helping author this report.

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The David and Lucile Packard Foundation



PARTICIPANTS

Hans Anderson
Sr. Concept Developer, Emerging Technology
ESPN

John Geary
Partner
New Start Mobile, LLC

Todd Roby
Director of Marketing and Communications
US Youth Soccer

Linda Baker
Program Officer
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation

Jeremy Goldberg
President
LeagueApps

Claude Ruibal
Global Head of Sports Content
Google/YouTube

Jody Breckenridge
Vice Admiral, U.S. Coast Guard (Retired)
Mission: Readiness - Military Leaders for Kids

Jayne Greenberg
President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition
District Director, Miami-Dade County Public Schools

Jim Sallis, Ph.D.
Program Director, Active Living Research
Distinguished Professor, University of California,
San Diego

Marisa Brutoco
Corporate Counsel
Google/YouTube

Lance Henderson
CEO
Zamzee

James Siegal
Executive Vice President and COO
KaBOOM!

Jon Butler
Executive Director
Pop Warner Little Scholars

David Jacobsen
Senior Marketing Communications and
Content Manager
Positive Coaching Alliance

Fred Slone
Director, Global Literacy Operations

Tim Calvert
Chief Operating Officer/Business Development
American College of Sports Medicine

Sally Johnson
Executive Director
National Council of Youth Sports

Benetech
Travis Smith
Director of Research
National Recreation and Park Association

Janet Carter
Executive Director
Coaching Corps

Michael Johnson
Executive Director, Utility for Care Data Analysis
Kaiser Permanente

Chris Snyder
Director of Coaching Education
United States Olympic Committee

Andrea Cernich
Sports & Society Program
Aspen Institute

Mikki Lee Martin
Director of Youth Programs
CrossFit / CrossFit Kids

J.O. Spengler
Professor and Director
University of Florida Sport Policy and Research
Collaborative

Emily Cohen
Freelance Journalist
Cohen Communications

Jeff Martin
Director of Youth Programs
CrossFit/CrossFit Kids

Kevin Weickel
Manager, Sports Development

Ginny Ehrlich
CEO
Clinton Health Matters Initiative

Dara Meinerth
Specialist, Sports and Recreation
YMCA

John West
Founder and CEO
The Whistle

Tom Farrey
Director, Sports & Society Program
Aspen Institute

Patricia O'Brien
Executive Director
Playworks, Silicon Valley

Jim Whitehead
Executive Vice President/CEO
American College of Sports Medicine

Aaron Ferns

Carol Pandiscia
Consultant

Julia Zasyatkina
Marketing Associate
Google

Jake Ferreira
California Deputy State Director
Mission: Readiness - Military Leaders for Kids

Mike Pell
Senior Designer
Microsoft

Anne Fifield
President
Human Strategies

Nathan Plowman
Director of Partnerships, Access to Sport
Nike, Inc.