

Kentville Plays - Community Playboxes

Kentville, Nova Scotia

AIM:

- The aim of the Kentville Plays Community Playbox program is to protect children's right to be free and explore the physical and social world around them on their own terms, without formal structure.

PLACE:

- Boxes are in 3 parks and one school within Kentville
 - Memorial Park, Oakdene Park, and Burgher Hill (sledding hill)
 - The elementary school has also installed a playbox, as well as a shed filled with play equipment
- Locations were decided based on popularity and distribution throughout geographic regions
- There is also a mobile playbox which can be transported to community events

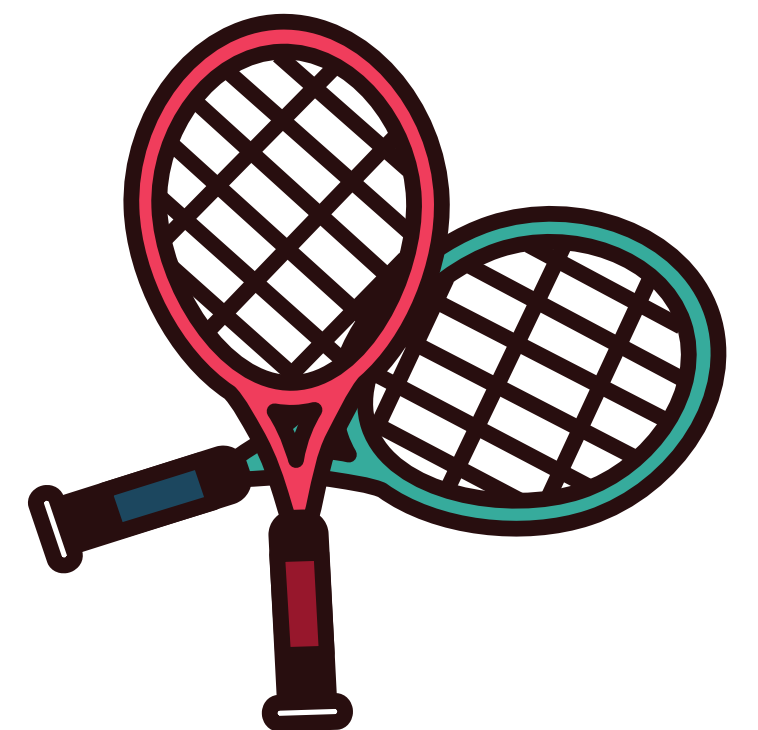


PROJECT COMPONENTS:

- Playboxes are durable metal boxes with a safe shutting mechanism so that they close softly and can be opened from the inside – they are filled with all kinds of equipment to support unstructured play
- Boxes are brightly coloured and branded with 'Kentville Plays!' logos
- There are guidelines for use printed on each box:
 - After playing with the equipment, be sure to return it to the playbox.
 - Don't forget to close the lid when returning equipment!
 - Help keep this program running by donating new or gently used

equipment.

- Let us know if a box needs attention
- Use the playbox and its contents is at your own risk.
- Have fun!
- Boxes do not lock and are consistently available to the community
- Boxes are cemented to the ground so they cannot tip over or be removed
- Playboxes are filled with various items to support outdoor play in the locations that they are in
 - Contents of the boxes range from sports equipment, lawn games and skipping ropes to sleds and dress up clothes
 - The town makes an effort to ensure that seasonally appropriate equipment is available
- There was community buy-in for this project and much of the equipment in the boxes is donated by community members
- Ongoing outreach to the community and promotion of playboxes is an essential part of this project



RATIONALE FOR INITIATIVE:

- Idea was informed by a presentation at the International PLAY Conference
 - Recreation planners in Kentville had a desire to use play to help develop a sense of community and improve quality of life for community members while also encouraging physical literacy
- Playboxes were implemented to support free play within Kentville by providing free equipment for unstructured play
 - More significantly, the aim for this initiative is to build community and help members interact through unstructured play while instilling positivity and hope
- Playboxes serve as a branding tool for the community to make it known that Kentville encourages play within the community

COMMUNITY AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT:

- Playboxes were developed collaboratively between The Town of Kentville and Kings County Family Resource Centre
 - Families were consulted on what they thought would make for successful and fun playboxes in terms of what would make them attractive to the community and what they would like to see the boxes contain

POPULATION SERVED:

- The playbox program was intended to be mainly family and youth oriented but has been embraced and used by community members of all ages
- There is no registration process to use equipment from these boxes, so it has not been possible to precisely track the demographics of people using the boxes

WHO USES IT:

- Primarily children and youth are observed using the playboxes, but families and older adults have also been seen participating as well
- Parents and other community members will donate items to restock playboxes when equipment goes missing or when the Town puts out a call for donations
- The Town has found that the portable playbox has been useful in cases of crisis intervention where reconciliation is necessary
 - It promotes gathering and conversation with those who are also engaging with the play equipment
 - There was an apartment complex in Kentville which was having increasing tensions with the police and the town was able to speak to members of this building by incentivising interaction through the portable playbox, constructive discussions came from this

FINANCES:

- This initial implementation of the playboxes was funded through a grant from the Active Communities Fund
- Replacement of equipment in the boxes is mainly facilitated through community donations

EVALUATION:

- A formal evaluation for this program was planned for 2020, but this was not possible due to COVID
- There is an evaluation plan that will be completed when possible, utilizing a holistic approach



SUCCESS FACTORS:

- Community buy-in and ownership of the playboxes has been very helpful in terms of community-motivated reporting on when boxes are low on equipment
- The community wants these boxes to be stocked so that they can enjoy them and are very willing to donate items to the boxes when needed. If the town puts out a call for equipment donations, boxes are usually refilled within a couple of days with community donations
 - Donation boxes for playboxes are often displayed at community events
- Playboxes are often promoted on Kentville's social media accounts
- The Town is very open to community needs and always welcomes feedback on the contents of the boxes
- Equipment is rotated from box to box to keep things fresh and exciting for community members
- The lens of community building through play has been very helpful in developing community relationships in Kentville

CHALLENGES:

- Equipment gets damaged with use and goes missing
- Boxes get vandalized and need repairs
- Playbox program had to be temporarily closed during the height of COVID to prevent spread of disease



WHATS NEXT:

- Kentville will be continuing promotion through various avenues
- The town is looking at purchasing more portable playboxes for community events, as well as rentals
- Kentville would like to support 'playbourhoods' where community members could apply to have playboxes on people's lawn for local play
- The town would like to continue to help the community recognize the importance of play in relationship building and community development

ADVICE FOR OTHERS:

- It is straightforward to install playboxes, but it is important that the initiative does not end with installation
 - Intentional work (promotion, creating community connections) must be done at all times to keep community engaged and open to the relationship building side of unstructured play
 - It is helpful to partner with local organizations and groups to gain an understanding of community need and for help with promotion

ACCESSIBILITY:

- A conscious effort was made by the town to ensure that playboxes were easily accessible throughout the community in areas that already encouraged play such as parks, playgrounds, splashpads and sledding hills
- These boxes open easily and are simple to access
- Because the playboxes are so frequently used, use has been normalized and community members are comfortable accessing the boxes and trying out equipment and games that they have never used before
 - Oftentimes, youth and other members of the community are teaching each other how to use new equipment

YOUTUBE VIDEO:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxGhn9xcCH8&ab_channel=TownofKentville

PHOTOS:



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