



Department of  
Health

Department of  
Transportation

# Playstreets in New York City

## A Guide for Community Groups



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## **Background**

### **Childhood Obesity in New York City**

Childhood obesity is a major health concern in the United States. Nationally, rates of obesity among children six to 11 years of age more than doubled over the past 25 years, from 7% in 1980 to 17% in 2006. In New York City, more than one in five public school students (kindergarten through eighth grade) are obese (21%), and a similar number are overweight (18%).<sup>1</sup> And obesity starts early in life: nearly half of all Head Start preschoolers (42%) in New York City are overweight or obese.<sup>2</sup>

Obese children tend to become obese adults, putting them at risk for many health problems, such as heart disease and some cancers. Obesity also raises the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol in adults and children. In the past decade, the number of New Yorkers diagnosed with diabetes has increased dramatically. Today, more than 700,000 New Yorkers (12.5% of all NYC adults) have diagnosed diabetes.<sup>3</sup>

### **Physical Activity**

Physical activity is critical for weight control and obesity prevention. Studies show that children who are physically active from an early age are more likely to become healthy, physically active adults.<sup>4</sup>

The U.S Department of Health and Human Services recommends that children get at least an hour of physical activity each day. Regular physical activity has many health benefits for children, including helping to build and maintain healthy bones and muscles and fostering healthy social and emotional development.<sup>5</sup> In addition, studies show that children who are physically active tend to perform better academically.<sup>1</sup>

### **New York City: A Lack of Play Space**

Many studies link proximity of parks and other recreational facilities to higher levels of physical activity.<sup>6</sup> Yet, many New York City children don't have access to these spaces. They don't have the fields, backyards and low-traffic streets that kids in less densely populated areas have. In addition, city schools often have gymnasiums and playgrounds that are too small for their large student populations. For example, 97 of 188 New York City neighborhoods exceed the city's recommended maximum of 1,250 children per playground.<sup>7</sup>

### **Playstreets**

To help combat the childhood obesity epidemic in New York City, the New York City Health Department and Department of Transportation have created Playstreets. Playstreets allow communities to open up their streets for play on a recurrent basis. It's a quick and low-cost way to create active play space that directly targets our city's most important at-risk population—children.

## About Playstreets

### What are Playstreets

Playstreets are car-free streets that provide children and others with safe, supervised places to enjoy outdoor activities, like sports, games and dance classes. The program's goal is to help children and families be more active in order to help address the city's childhood obesity epidemic.

### How Do Playstreets Work

A Playstreet is an area of active play managed and supervised by a community group. For more information, see *Managing Your Playstreet* on page 11.

Playstreets operate, under adult supervision, between 8am to 6pm, one day per week. No parking and no through traffic are permitted on the block during Playstreet hours. In addition, the block must be a one-way traffic street and can't cross an intersection. For more information, see *Playstreets Characteristics* on page 5.

### Who Can Apply

Community groups in New York City can apply. Your Playstreets permit is good for one calendar year.

### How to Apply

**Step 1 Choose your Playstreet.**

Complete one Playstreets Eligibility Worksheet for each proposed street. This will help determine prospective locations for your Playstreet.

**Step 2 group Complete the Playstreets Expression of Interest Application** (signed by your administrator).

**Step 3 Mail or fax the completed forms to:**

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene  
Playstreets Coordinator, Built Environment Program  
120 Wall Street, 25th Floor  
New York, NY 10005  
Fax: 212-361-2169

**Step 4 If your group is selected, you'll be invited to a Playstreets Orientation Workshop.**

You'll receive a Playstreets Permit Application at the workshop, as well as other orientation information.

**Step 5**      **Complete the Playstreets Permit Application** (signed by your local community board  
and                      police precinct).

See Community Board Approval Process on page 8.

**Step 6**      **Mail the completed application to:**

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene  
Playstreets Coordinator  
42-09 28th Street, 09-51  
Long Island City, NY 11101-4134

Your application will take about one to three months to process. If your group is approved, you will receive your Playstreets Permit about six weeks after you're approved.

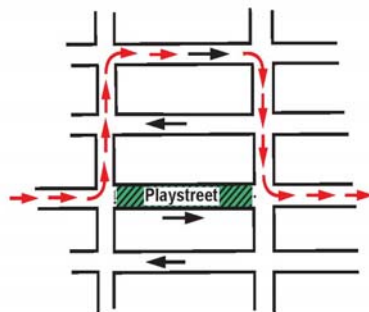
# Playstreet Characteristics

## Required

- **Not a two-way main road**  
Playstreets cannot be a two-way main road since closing a main road would significantly disrupt through-traffic.
- **Little or no traffic**  
Playstreets must have little or no traffic. Since traffic can fluctuate, be sure to observe traffic patterns during the proposed closure hours.
- **Not a designated bus, truck or fire route**  
Make sure there are no bus stops, truck routes or fire routes on the proposed Playstreet. For more information, visit [mta.info](http://mta.info) or [nyc.gov](http://nyc.gov).
- **No steep hills or sharp curves**
- **Cannot be next to a hospital**
- **Businesses not affected adversely**  
Streets with businesses that don't depend on truck or other vehicle deliveries, such as hair salons, wouldn't be affected adversely by a street closure.

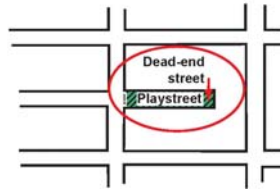
## Optional

- **Convenient alternative routes within three blocks**  
Street closures divert traffic, so it's important to have a convenient alternative route. Playstreets should have a parallel street, or another suitable detour, within three blocks.



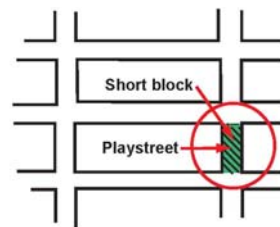
- **Dead-end street**

A dead-end street is ideal for a Playstreet because it wouldn't disrupt traffic if it were closed.



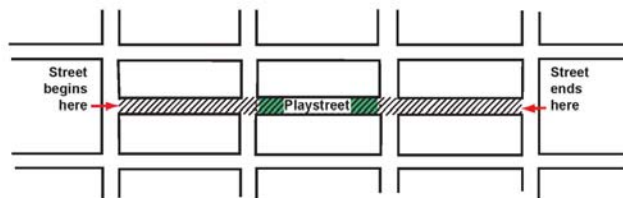
- **Short block**

Short blocks (fewer than 264 feet long), on average, have fewer buildings and activities, which would be less likely to interfere with a Playstreet. It's also easier for vehicles to find alternative routes around a short block.



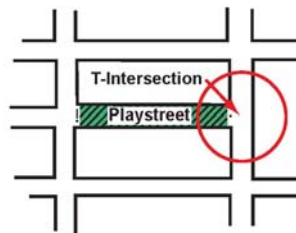
- **Fewer than four blocks**

Streets fewer than four blocks usually have less traffic.

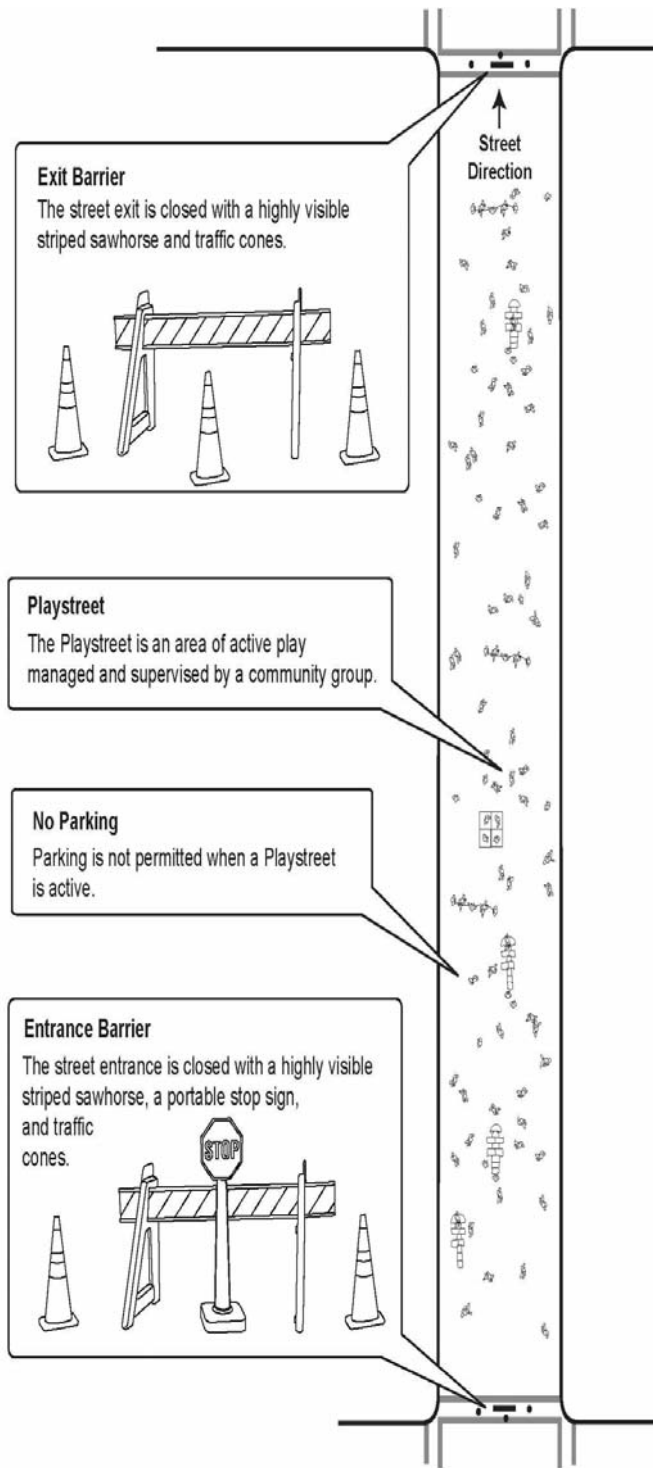


- **T-intersection**

A T-Intersection is where one street meets another and doesn't continue.



# Sample Playstreet





# Community Board Approval Process

1. To find your local community board, visit <http://www.nyc.gov/html/cau/html/cb/directory.shtml>.

2. **Contact your community board.** Let them know you're applying for a Playstreets Permit. Community board procedures may vary, so find out what they need for a Playstreet approval. If they need you to make a presentation, then be sure to get on the next community board meeting agenda.

3. **Contact the Health Department** once you've contacted your local community board. We may be able to help.

4. **Put together a committee** to help with the approval process.

5. **Complete all required documentation.** If necessary, complete the block petition included with your Playstreets Permit Application.

Outcome 1

Outcome 2

Outcome 3

If necessary, present your Playstreet proposal to the community board.

Wait for the community board's decision.

Board approves.

Have the board sign your Permit Application.

Contact your local police precinct to get the Community Affairs Officer's signature.

Mail your completed application to the Health Department.

Wait for the Department of Transportation to approve your application.

The community board doesn't approve your Playstreet.

Notify the Health Department and your committee.

Find out why your Playstreet wasn't approved.

Create an appeal plan.

## **Tips for Working with Community Boards**

Every community board operates slightly differently. Here are some tips for working with your local community board:

- Start early, be persistent and don't go it alone. Put together a small committee to help.
- Get community support. Reach out to residents, organizations and businesses. See if they can speak in favor of your Playstreet at board meetings.
- It's hard to say "no" to kids. Recruit neighborhood children to write letters or join you at community board meetings in support of the Playstreet.
- Enlist the help of elected officials, such as your Borough President (who appoints the board) or City Council member (who nominates some board members).
- Speak with specific committees first, such as Parks and Recreation, Traffic and Transportation, or Health and Social Services. It may be easier to get approval from one or two committees first. Once they've approved, they can then recommend approval to the entire board.

## **Promoting Your Playstreet**

### **Flyers and Other Materials**

- Use large font for key information.
- Include a map or directions (closest subway).
- Try to include photos or graphics of kids being active, like playing ball or jumping rope.
- Acknowledge community partners.
- Hand out to local buildings, stores, businesses, schools, daycare centers and other neighborhood meeting spots. Start distributing at least four weeks before event.
- Make posters or a banner. Hang on your Playstreet or at other community events.
- Consider a mailing to local residents.
- Use chalk on neighborhood sidewalks or sandwich boards to announce and direct people to the Playstreet.

### **Word of Mouth**

- Tell people about your Playstreet.
- Go to neighborhood meetings, such as community board meetings and tenants' association meetings, and make a brief announcement about the Playstreet. Hand out flyers at the meetings.

### **Press**

- Send a press release to local TV, newspapers and radio stations, such as Bronx 12 News, The Staten Island Advance and NY1 Community Bulletin Board.
- Find out if there's anyone on your planning committee who has a relationship with the local press. See if he or she can help pitch your story.

### **Online**

- Send out an e-news alert announcing your Playstreet.
- Post information about your Playstreet on your organization's website. Encourage community partners to post about the Playstreet or to link to your page.
- Create a Facebook Events or Fan page, or use Twitter to promote your Playstreet.
- Post details on neighborhood blogs or chat boards.

# Managing Your Playstreet

## Activities

The main requirement for Playstreet activities is that they get people *moving*. Remember to post a calendar of events so residents know what activities are going on and when.

## Supervision

A Playstreet is an area of active play managed and supervised by a community group. During Playstreet hours, there must be five adult volunteers on hand at all times, one supervisor and four additional volunteers. These volunteers are responsible for coordinating and supervising all Playstreet activities and operations.

## Clean Up

In addition to managing and supervising the Playstreet, your organization is responsible for the street and sidewalk clean up. This includes picking up litter or garbage dropped during the day and putting away equipment. Not only does this help the community, but it will also help build support for your Playstreet.

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<sup>1</sup> Egger JR, Bartley KF, Benson L, Bellino D, Kerker B. *NYC Vital Signs: Childhood Obesity is a Serious Concern in New York City*. New York, NY: New York City Health Department and Department of Education, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Young CR, Peretz P, Jaslow R, Chamany S, Berger D, Brunetti J, Matte T, Van Wye G. *NYC Vital Signs: Obesity in Early Childhood*. New York, NY: New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Kim M, Berger D, Matte T. *Diabetes in New York City: Public Health Burden and Disparities*. New York, NY: New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Waite-Stupainsky, S, & Findlay, M. (2001). The Fourth R: Recess and its Link to Learning. *Education Forum*, 66(1), 16-24.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans. 2008. <http://www.health.gov/PAGuidelines/guidelines/default.aspx>: Accessed February 15, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. How Much Physical Activity Do Children Need? Atlanta, GA: Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Bloomberg, M. *PlaNYC 2030, Report on Open Space*. New York, NY: NYC Mayor's Office, 2007.