Fun Comes First Playbook

A guide for parents, coaches, and teachers on centering youth voice as a means of improving participation in youth sports

Developed in partnership between:

GoGoSqueez

Laureus

SPORT FOR GOOD

USA

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Executive summary

The purpose of this playbook is to provide parents, guardians, teachers, and coaches practical information and actionable recommendations to help center youth voices and experiences in sport and play activities as a means of improving participation and retention, and in turn, fostering positive youth development. The document includes background and research on the importance of youth-centered play and certain challenges stakeholders face that detract from fun, positive experiences. The playbook provides recommendations for how coaches, parents, guardians, and teachers can create inclusive play environments that keep kids engaged and receptive to the various developmental benefits of sport and play. Laureus Sport for Good USA partnered with GoGo squeeZ to develop and disseminate this playbook with the intent to inspire more kids, regardless of their location or background, to participate in sport and play activities by promoting a model for youth programming that better integrates their primary motivating factor: FUN.
Definition of youth-centered play
Youth-centered programs offer kids a voice across all levels of an organization, offering space for mutual learning and respect. Kids help design, initiate, evaluate, and/or facilitate programming to allow for physical, social, and emotional growth that will create a lasting impact on their lives.

Sport-based youth development (SBYD) programs incorporate youth voices through different means, including peer-to-peer mentoring or coaching, youth-led groups or activities, meaningful reflection activities, and involvement in the curriculum planning process. The 2019 Laureus USA State of Sport for Good Report found that 73 percent of SBYD organizations involve kids in decision-making, much higher than the national average for youth sports programs overall.

Moving toward youth-centered play
When young people are engaged in their programs, they are empowered to make decisions and take action and are more likely to report having fun. As parents, guardians, coaches, and/or teachers, adults must play an active role in nurturing a sense of autonomy and agency among their youth athletes while understanding that effective tactics can differ across age groups. While a seven-year-old may only have rudimentary tools for asserting agency, adults can play a crucial role in guiding them as they learn to make decisions. As kids grow older and gain more agency, they’re capable of handling greater and greater responsibilities.

stopped at the ten and a half

The average child only plays a sport for three years and quits regularly playing by the time they are 10½.

This guide provides recommendations and tips for establishing guardrails for youth—offering a template for coaches, parents, guardians, and teachers to develop structures and schedules that kids can help populate. To successfully incorporate youth voices and agency, adults need to be flexible, schedule extra time for activities, understand mistakes will happen, and be prepared to problem solve when they arise. It can be difficult to balance the flexibility needed to create youth-centered play environments while still maintaining the integrity of a program or a busy schedule. This playbook will serve as a handy guide for adults to ensure fun comes first in sport and play activities on the playing field, at home, or at school.

Process of Playbook creation
The initial step for creating this playbook was a formative literature review of research in positive youth development, SBYD, and youth-centered play, in addition to a review of case studies and grant reports from Laureus USA network partners. Focus groups were then organized to collect current information from experts in the field. Youth coaches, teachers, and parents met for a semistructured conversation discussing how they are currently applying youth-centered practices in their field and to inform recommendations. Focus groups were also held with youths themselves to ensure their voices and feedback were reflected and incorporated in the content and recommendations. Finally, a full review of content, learnings, and recommendations was conducted by Laureus USA. This process aided Laureus USA in creating a holistic playbook that offers best practices for youth-centered play.
Needs for proactive and new solutions

Sport attrition
In the United States, the average child plays organized sports for only three years and quits playing regularly by the time they are 10 and a half. The percentage of children between the ages of six and 12 who regularly play organized sports has steadily dropped since 2008, with socioeconomic and educational factors playing a significant role in physical activity rates. Currently only 45 percent of kids from households with less than a high school degree participate in organized sports, compared to 73 percent from households with a college degree or higher. In 2020, the American Heart Association found that only 40 percent of children had adequate levels of physical activity each week, putting American children at a higher risk of developing chronic disease. Creating proactive and new solutions to increase sport retention is a critical need in preserving the health of our young people.

Pandemic effect on youth
Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, physical activity rates have dropped to disturbing lows, as the needs of children have not been prioritized by many communities. A survey reported 78.8 percent of physical educators and school and district administrators noticed their students were receiving "significantly or somewhat less" physical activity throughout the pandemic in comparison to a typical school day. The pandemic has caused many schools to reduce their requirements for physical education, and the number of schools with no PE requirements at all has increased by 53 percent.

The pandemic affected youth organizations in much the same way it affected the rest of the country. In spring of 2020, despite 71 percent of SBYD programs adapting to provide virtual programming for kids, most programs saw a dramatic decrease in participation. By June 2020, only 16 percent of kids registered in March were regularly participating in virtual programming. Many organizations cited lack of youth engagement as one of the top challenges they faced with the pandemic. Obtaining new funding sources and making meaningful connections with kids were two of the other top challenges programs were facing. Of these programs, 81 percent expressed concern for the health and well-being of kids without in-person programming. Thankfully, with proper protections in place—including vaccines—a return to play is possible for many programs, but most have a long way to go to reach the participation rates prior to March 2020.

While sports were temporarily halted for youth across the country, the ability and speed of return were greatly affected by income level. Children from families whose joint income is over $100K play on average 14.8 hours per week, whereas children from families whose joint income is less than $50K play only 11.5 hours per week, factoring in both recreational and team sport–related play. Kids from higher–income households are playing more hours per week and have returned to play faster than their less–affluent friends.
The No. 1 answer is always “fun” or “to have fun”

The value of fun

Play activities promote resilience and foster independence and help kids mitigate stress, build imagination and creativity, grow cognitive skills, and develop social relationships, all while increasing physical fitness. The US school system does not emphasize the importance of play for kids, as it typically takes a backseat to more formal learning around pre-K or kindergarten. Play is important for increased concentration and should continue to be a staple in children’s lives as they enter elementary school.2,7

Presently, after-school youth sports and other physical activity programs are often relied upon as structured outlets for kids to experience play once they’ve entered the school system. When kids are asked what they find important about sports or recreation, their top answers are “fun” or “to have fun,” and absence of fun is the primary reason kids cite for quitting organized sports. Stakeholders can improve participation and retention by encouraging kids to have more fun in their programming, surveying a team’s strengths in fostering fun, and identifying the barriers to fun. Fun Maps or Fun Integration Theory (FIT) are possible frameworks to use for building programming aimed at fostering a more fun environment. These tools break down 81 determinants of fun in multiple categories such as positive team dynamics, learning and improving, trying hard, positive coaching, team friendships, and team rituals.8

“The pandemic exacerbated deeply entrenched dynamics that impact our fighters at The Bloc. While some communities had the resources to immediately shift to small-group training, implement social distancing within their facilities, and supply the necessary PPE to quickly resume programming, many sports programs in historically disenfranchised communities were forced to close. The result was an unprecedented isolation from social contact and vital resources and relationships for many young people who were already pushed to the fringes of society. In this sense, providing free access to high-quality sports programming is an issue of justice and equality made more urgent by the pandemic.”

—Jamyle Cannon, coach and executive director, The Bloc in Chicago
Coaching

Many programs undervalue the need for properly trained coaches who can effectively work and communicate with youth, as illustrated by the fact that untrained volunteers represent the largest percentage of youth sports coaches in the US. Currently only one in five youth sport coaches in the US have any youth coach training and there are currently no federally mandated accreditations for youth coaching. When kids participate in a sport with a trained coach, only 5 percent choose not to reenroll in their sport. However, the attrition rate is much higher, at 26 percent, when a coach is untrained. With no mandatory coach training in the US, there is a high degree of variability in coaching experience among youth sports programs.

Intentionally developing and maintaining relationships is an important theme of SBYD programs. Coaches and adults who create caring relationships are providing psychological safety and connection that are needed to fully develop youths’ strengths. The Search Institute offers a five-step framework for building youth-adult relationships: express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities. The COVID-19 pandemic has created more barriers to creating and fostering these relationships, but overcoming them can allow teachers, practitioners, and parents to help students through life transitions and help them process traumatic experiences.

The National Standards for Sport Coaches (NSSC) has outlined seven core values of youth: 1) set vision, goals, and standards for the sports program, 2) engage in and support ethical practices, 3) build relationships, 4) develop a safe sports environment, 5) create a positive and inclusive sports environment, 6) conduct practices and prepare for competition, and 7) strive for continuous improvement. The National Committee for Accreditation of Coaching Education (NCACE) is the sole accrediting body for coaching education programs within the US, whose curricula lead students to master the NSSC standards in three performance levels of coaching: Basic, Intermediate, and Master Coach. Research shows that the millions of kids who annually drop out of sports could be minimized significantly with trained youth sports coaches, especially coaches who participate in research-based coach training.
Pandemic effect on youth

78% of schools noticed students were receiving significantly less physical activity.

The percentage of schools with **NO PE reqs.** increased by **53%**.

Average play hours per week based on joint income:
- **> USD 100K**: 14.8 hrs.
- **< USD 50K**: 11.5 hrs.

Youths regularly participating in virtual programming: **16%**

Pandemic effect on youth

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Case studies

STEM From Dance – Girls Rise Up summer program

STEM From Dance gives girls of color access to a STEM education by using dance to empower, educate, and encourage them as our next generation of engineers, scientists, and doctors. STEM From Dance has reached hundreds of girls through customized school and community programs and a summer camp program called Girls Rise Up.

In summer 2020, Girls Rise Up was offered both as a 100 percent virtual program as well as a hybrid program, with girls gathering in person in Atlanta, Georgia, as well as at Governors Island in New York City. In both programs, girls were immersed in the foundations of dance and technology, where they dreamed up their wildest ideas of dance-tech integrations, then choreographed an original dance for a performance showcase. Each performance was enhanced with a technological component that they learned to code throughout the program. Some girls used code to create their own songs, others to direct drone flight patterns. The program culminated in a showcase performance where audiences watched in person or virtually. By offering remote participation and centering the programming on youth voice and creativity, STEM From Dance ensured that fun accompanied skill building while being accessible to all.

More information at stemfromdance.org.
Excite All Stars

Excite All Stars is a New Orleans sports-based youth development organization focused on developing leadership skills for lifelong success. Over the course of the program year, kids train to become coaches and are offered an opportunity to participate in the annual youth-led summer camp program. Participants are given the option to engage in many different sporting activities—golfing, lacrosse, tennis, soccer, etc.—to increase their physical literacy. By placing power in the hands of youth participants and offering a variety of sports, the program creates a fun and inclusive environment that sees strong year-over-year retention.

In 2020, their program manager, a former participant and coach, designed the summer camp programming and worked with youth coaches to facilitate the camp. They also hosted the Wacky Olympics, a fun and inclusive event for young people with varied physical, mental, and emotional abilities.

More information at exciteallstars.org.
Girls in the Game

Girls in the Game is a national program that provides after-school programs for elementary and middle school girls to give them a safe and positive space where they can gain confidence, friendships, and the life skills they need to develop into strong women. Girls get to be a vital part of the planning processes for their after-school program and are offered the opportunity to coach the younger participants under the supervision of a Girls in the Game staff member as well as help build curriculum for future programs.

As part of their work with the Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (JTDC), Girls in the Game offers a fitness- and sports-based program for young girls. With the JTDC population changing on a weekly basis, programming is constantly adapting to the new group dynamics while preserving a consistent focus on building leadership and providing coaching opportunities. Each session two girls get to volunteer as coaches and lead the games and activities. The girls get to choose what sport is played the first hour of program time and help lead the activities that correspond to the sport. This provides the girls with an opportunity to make choices that will affect themselves and others, something they are not necessarily given in their daily lives. After participating in at least five sessions of programming, more than 90 percent of JTDC participants indicated that they feel more confident and view themselves as leaders. One hundred percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that after the program their ability to work in a team improved.

More information at girlsinthegame.org.
Recommendations

Coach/program leader recommendations

Develop youth leadership councils

- Provide space for youth representation in organizational structures. By narrowing the gap between youth and senior leadership, an organization can provide opportunities for kids to provide feedback, take leadership in designing activities, and experience responsibility as members in the power structure of an organization.

  - Ages seven to nine: Youth should be invited into meetings and discussion groups.
  - Ages 10 to 13: Youth should be offered a seat at the table where policy changes take place.

Create a commitment agreement

- Develop a contract to help develop rules and norms that give kids ownership over their program. Kids are more likely to be engaged when they are empowered to make decisions.

Fill the female coach pipeline

- Young girls are less likely to stay in sports programs. Kids with a marginalized identity (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) need to see themselves represented in coaches and mentors. Increasing the number of female coaches will help increase female youth participation.11

- Coaches can improve participation by highlighting female athletes and coaches in their sport, bringing up female athletes who are highlighted in the media, and reaching out to women in the community to assist with programming.

Provide structure

- Coaches need to provide structure to their programs while understanding that different age groups require different approaches. At the same time, coaches need to create flexibility with program time and have a plan for when mistakes happen in order to successfully let kids take the lead.

  - Ages seven to nine: At this age, youth agency is not yet fully formed, and they need supportive structure from adults.12 Allow kids to choose what activity they want to do from a list of options a coach provides.

  - Ages 10 to 13: Offer kids a framework—with options. A coach can provide the structured outline for practice will go (e.g., warm-up, then skill activity, game, cooldown) and allow kids to make the choice of what activities to do.
Recommendations

Coach/program leader recommendations, cont.

Train coaches and program leaders

• While universal national coach training does not currently exist in the US, there are increased resources available specifically for training in positive youth development that help ensure coaches are creating fun, inclusive environments for youth. Coaches should seek out and participate in these types of trainings.

• Program leaders need to ensure coach feedback is built into the process and trainings are adjusted accordingly.

Encourage organizational buy-in

• A youth-centered approach needs to start at the top by creating a work atmosphere that supports people-centered approaches. Building an internal culture that appreciates a variety of differences, offers choices to employees, and gives them specific outlets to express themselves will help them model those same behaviors and techniques for the kids.

Offer opportunities to lead

• Ages seven to nine: Kids can be chosen to help lead activities or warm-ups. This provides them the opportunity to lead within a supportive environment.

• Ages 10 to 13: Each program session, a new captain or leader can be chosen. The group can decide what the captain gets to do. Maybe they choose and lead warm-ups.

Conduct weekly reflections and evaluations

• Provide space each week to debrief program time. Allow kids to reflect on activities that went well, activities they didn’t like, and what activities they would like to do next week.

• Evaluations that incorporate social emotional learning and positive youth development competencies empower kids to be a part of the evaluation systems, rather than just subject to them.

Make use of alumni

• Bring alumni in on all levels of the organization (board members, employees, coaches, and mentors). These alumni are directly able to give back to their programs and have a unique voice in helping structure programs.

“Our alums are a crucial part of our CitySquash community. Not only do they provide inspiration and support to our younger participants who are following in their footsteps, but they also provide invaluable insight on our organizational goals and culture. Just in the past year, our Alumni Board has played a leading role in helping to create more forums for important issues, guiding the organization in making the CitySquash experience as inclusive and equitable as possible.”

—Terence Li, executive director, CitySquash
Recommendations

Parent/guardian recommendations

Be active
• Research shows that the most active kids have the most active parents/guardians. When parents try more sports, so will their kids.
• Kids often learn exciting games at school they would love to play at home. Parents should try asking their kids to show or teach them games they have learned at school or in practice.

Join the community
• Kids really enjoy playing sports with friends. Parents can enroll kids in a group or community that plays sports together.
• Parents can sign up to sit on the board of the local rec league or school system to ensure they are aware of upcoming sports and play opportunities and have a chance to offer feedback.

Diversify sports and activities
• Not all kids have the same interests or abilities. A kid may not want to play the sport that their parents did. Adults should try exposing them to different activities and diversify the sports they play.
• If kids are not naturally drawn to sports, look for sports programs that incorporate cultural and artistic programming as well.

Define success and set small goals
• Ask kids about their goals and sports preferences and sign them up for the appropriate activities. Ask what success in their sport looks like, noting it doesn’t only have to be about winning but also could be about learning, improving, or having fun.
• Even small goals matter. Each week or month, parents can ask their kid what their goals are and help them create specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, timely (SMART) goals (e.g., “Next Saturday I want to make five passes to my teammates during our soccer game!”).

Take it one session at a time
• Kids can get overwhelmed if their parents sign them up to try three sports at once. Instead, parents can ask which sport their kid would like to try first. Parents should check in to ensure they are having fun and confirm whether they want to reenroll or try a different sport.

"Neither I nor my husband had much experience playing baseball growing up, but our son’s passion for baseball inspired us to get involved. My husband coaches, and I sit on the organization’s board and assist with fundraising. We have given our son a voice in deciding how we can be active and benefit from the lessons that team sports provide.”

—Jody Portnoff Braunig, mother of 2
Recommendations

Parent/guardian recommendations, cont.

Find the right level of competition
• Not all kids want to compete at the highest level. Some kids just want to have fun with friends and would enjoy playing in the community recreation league instead of a travel team. If kids are expressing that they want to be pushed more, parents can look for a more competitive team.

Encourage your kids to problem solve
• Parents should let kids problem solve before stepping in. When kids are faced with a problem, parents should offer them steps to take and encourage them to try to resolve the issue before coming to the adult in the room. Kids often will still need the help of an adult, but by building these skills, they are learning to be independent thinkers.

Offer choices and opportunities to use their voice
• Kids might not be old enough to make decisions by themselves yet, but parents can guide them in the process by offering choices. A parent can provide options for sports or play that would be acceptable, allowing kids to safely make choices of their own. Parents can slowly enable kids to make their own choices by first guiding them through the process.

Listen when they speak up
• Enable kids to express when they don’t want to participate in a certain sport or team and ask them why. Adults should be open and responsive to kids when they’re expressing themselves and be ready to adjust if needed.
• When parents have to step in to say no to a course of action, or when they are making a plan or schedule for kids, they should be sure to take the time to explain why they made their decisions.
Recommendations

Teacher recommendations

Create a commitment agreement
• Teachers and students should work together to develop a contract around playtime and free time, PE, or recess. Letting students help develop rules and norms of a play setting provides them with ownership and responsibility over their actions and encourages them to be active during those times.

Ensure student representation
• Is there a space for youth representation in the school via student council? Providing a space for youth representation in the school structure can offer a place for young people to provide feedback, take leadership in designing activities, and be represented in the power structure of their school.

Create space for input/choices
• When facilitating play in the classroom, during PE, or at recess, give students a chance to express what they want to learn at the beginning of the year and provide space for their voice to be heard.
• Competency-based activities can also give kids opportunities to use the power of choice to develop holistically at their own pace. When possible, offer choices rather than mandating a single option.
  - “Which of these three games would you like to play today?”
  - “Who would like to lead today’s warm-up activities?”
  - “We have 10 minutes until lunch. What game should we play?”

“Teachers and school leaders spend countless hours researching the best practices to improve student attendance. I’ve found that providing students with daily opportunities to play with their classmates during recess and learn new skills in physical education class improves daily attendance.”

—Ismail El-Shaakir, teacher/school leader
Create a sociogram

- Every week, or every month, ask students to list three partners they would like to be on a team with during classroom playtime (they may not get to be on a team with whom they listed, but it provides the teacher or coach with options). This offers insight into the social relationships and power dynamics in play and may highlight students who need more help being included and participating in play activities.

Shift from competitive games to collaborative games

- Offer activities where kids are playing collaborative games and working together. This provides students opportunities to learn together, focus more on skill building, improve intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, and learn from their peers.
- Shift individual competitions to team competitions, changing the goal from winning against teammates to completing a task together as a team.

Ask how they want support

- Ages seven to nine: Provide young students with options for how they can be supported. Do they like more-frequent check-ins, verbal vs. written, etc. They might not have the agency to know exactly what they want, but by providing them with choices, they are getting to choose how they are supported in their classroom.
- Ages 10 to 13: As young students gain agency, they may be more aware of how they best learn and can be best supported. Invite young people to tell you how they think you can support them during their time in your classroom.

Offer leadership opportunities

- Offering students a chance to be recess or PE leaders for the day or week is a clear show of student autonomy and encourages participation. Students who may not normally enjoy PE could be motivated to get active if they are given the chance, or know there is an option, to lead warm-up drills, for example.

Conduct play assessments

- As part of your student evaluation, include a section on how physically active they are or are not in the classroom and if they play well with others. Ask them and their parents what can be done to encourage them to play during recess or free time, if needed.

* Students perform better academically when they participate in play at school. Have students read, write, and talk about play and sports throughout the school week. Then create opportunities for them to experience play before, during, and after school. Students with these experiences will improve their vocabulary, reading comprehension, and math skills.*

—Ismail El-Shaakir, teacher/school leader

* After years of implementing a variety of research-based practices to improve school climate and culture, I have found play to be one of the most effective practices. Being intentional by including recess and physical education on the master schedule contributes to improved classroom and school behavior.*

—Ismail El-Shaakir, teacher/school leader
## Appendix

### Developmental differences

#### First to third grade (seven to nine years old)

Kids who are seven to nine years old are excited about learning, are optimistic, and are developing fine motor skills. At this age, kids naturally relate “effort” to “success”; they are more interested in working on a project than they are on completing it. They need assistance and rules to guide behavior and help make good decisions and choices. They are working on fundamental physical literacy skills at this age: agility, balance, coordination, and speed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical development</th>
<th>Intellectual development</th>
<th>Social development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Working on fundamental physical literacy skills</td>
<td>• Attention span of 10 to 15 minutes</td>
<td>• Forms pair relationships, e.g., best friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased coordination</td>
<td>• Active learning/hands on</td>
<td>• Trusting and outgoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Developing gross motor skills</td>
<td>• Increased awareness of surroundings</td>
<td>• Relationships with other adults besides parents or guardians</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Developing fine motor skills (writing, typing, etc.)</td>
<td>• Understand change, cause, and effect</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Learning to follow directions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Curiosity about the world</td>
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#### Fourth to sixth grade (10 to 13 years old)

As kids transition into adolescence, their developmental status (both maturation and skill level) becomes increasingly important in further advancing overall development. Specifically, a lack of coordination or control displayed in fundamental movement skills, strength, or agility performance needs a continued focus on foundational concepts rather than pushing underdeveloped youths toward more-complex movements. At this age, kids love to learn facts and want to know how things work, often wanting to source their own information. They are starting to handle more-abstract ideas but still often think in terms of concrete objects. They can handle ideas better if they are related to something they can experience with their senses. They often look to adults for approval and guidance in staying on task.

The physical focus should be on improving movements for strength, power, agility, dynamic joint stability, dynamic balance, core stabilization, and overall athletic potential.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical development</th>
<th>Intellectual development</th>
<th>Social development</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Wide variation in development through ages 10 to 13:</td>
<td>• Attention span of 15 to 20 minutes</td>
<td>• Learning cooperation—more group activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Steadily developing fine motor skills</td>
<td>• Developing personal opinions and values</td>
<td>• More likely to segregate by gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Developed gross motor skills</td>
<td>• Ability to verbalize curiosities</td>
<td>• Competitive with peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Well-developed gross motor skills</td>
<td>• Concerned with things rather than ideas</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Can draw conclusions</td>
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Organizations/schools/coaches that helped along the way


Special thank-you

We would like to give a special thanks to our consultant, Jules Leiterman, for all her hard work in helping put this toolkit together.
Citations


