Childhood Prosperity Lab

Co-Design Summary Report: Tabletop Game Day Afterschool Program

This report was created by Connecticut Children's Childhood Prosperity Lab and North Hartford Ascend. This document was developed with support of the U.S. Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods Grant Program.

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NORTH HARTFORD ASCEND

North Hartford Ascend (Ascend) is a prenatal-to-career initiative to ensure children living in the North Hartford Promise Zone – which includes the Clay Arsenal, Northeast, and Upper Albany neighborhoods - have the support they need to reach their full potential. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods Grant Program, Connecticut Children's is facilitating a cross-sector team of early childhood experts, community leaders, community-based organizations, and residents to identify community priorities and enhance the academic, health, and quality of life outcomes of North Hartford Promise Zone residents.

CHILDHOOD PROSPERITY LAB

Childhood Prosperity Lab (the Lab) advances social innovations that support the optimal health, development, and well-being of children, families and communities where they live, learn, work, play and pray. Collaboration is key to our work. We partner with practitioners, service providers, families and changemakers across Connecticut and beyond to improve child health outcomes. Our multidisciplinary team at Connecticut Children's brings expertise in family sciences, child development, public health and more to drive impactful change. The Lab has three core components that are unique to our approach:

- Co-designing solutions in partnership with children, families and communities using human-centered design approaches and methodologies;
- Strengthening family and community protective factors; and
- Advancing systems change to help children and families thrive in all areas of life.

PROJECT OVERVIEW & SCOPE OF PARTNERSHIP

Connecticut Children's Injury Prevention Center and Childhood Prosperity Lab are two initiatives in the Connecticut Children's Office for Community Child Health affiliated with Ascend. The Injury Prevention Center works to reduce unintentional injury and violence among Connecticut residents and to translate research into injury prevention programs and policy. As an affiliate of North Hartford Ascend, in December of 2024, the Injury Prevention Center submitted an inquiry to Childhood Prosperity Lab to explore how an emerging program, "Tabletop Game Day", might be implemented in the North Hartford Promise Zone as an afterschool option for youth.

The idea for a Tabletop Game Day, which aims to strengthen the protective factor social connections, stemmed from an expressed need for more after school programs and options for children and youth at a North Hartford Ascend Community Conversation. The Injury Prevention Center partnered with Childhood Prosperity Lab to incorporate the voice of other Ascend affiliated organizations and programs, services, and other resources (herein and after "programs") as well as residents living in the North Hartford Promise Zone through Human-Centered Design (HCD) to understand whether the Tabletop Game Day program would be of interest and priority to those who would ultimately be engaged in the program.

OUR APPROACH: METHODOLOGIES & FACILITATION

Childhood Prosperity Lab defines HCD as a methodological framework for centering the needs, goals, and perspectives of children, families, communities and other key stakeholders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of social innovations. Team members from Childhood Prosperity Lab are certified HCD Practitioners, specializing in the thirty-six methods that comprise the LUMA Framework.

The Lab proposed a two-pronged approach to designing the Tabletop Game Day Program: interviewing five members of the Ascend Community & Family Engagement Work Group and engaging youth from the North Hartford Promise Zone ages 12-16 in a co-design session. The Community and Family Engagement Work Group works to ensure that community groups, including faith-based organizations, professional collaborators, and schools, are well-informed about Ascend's mission, current priorities, and opportunities for engagement. The group continues to involve community members in Ascend's governing bodies and the Resident and Community Advisory Group, while also exploring and designing activities and events that foster deeper community participation, engagement, and leadership.

Co-Designing with the Community and Family Engagement Work Group

Childhood Prosperity Lab engaged five members of the Community and Family Engagement Work Group, leveraging *interviews*, a HCD methodology defined as "a technique for gathering information through direct dialogue" according to the LUMA Institute (LUMA Institute, 2025). Stakeholder interviews have the potential to expand and/or challenge project team preconceptions, elevate the awareness of resources in the community, and provide cross-sector context that might have otherwise been siloed. Members of the work group were selected based on their roles, responsibilities, and entity to ensure that a diverse range of perspectives were included.

Interviewees

- **Brittany Shumpert,** *Community Health Worker for HYHIL*

- **Taniqua Huguley-Chaplin,** *Economic Mobility Director at United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut, Community and Family Engagement Work Group Co-Chair*
- **Norma Pizzaro,** *Supervisor at The Village for Children and Families*
- **Dwight Thompson,** *Executive Director of School Leadership at Hartford Public Schools, Community and Family Engagement Work Group Co-Chair*
- **Courtenay Jackson,** *North Hartford Promise Zone & City of Hartford*

Each 1:1 interview was facilitated virtually for 30-minutes by Annika Anderson, an Innovation Specialist with Childhood Prosperity Lab. Interviewee's were asked what the opportunity was for the initiative; whether any existing programs existed in the North Hartford Promise Zone; who the Injury Prevention Center might partner with to host the program; how the opportunity might be effectively marketed to youth; how the design of the program can be accessible and responsive to youth and family needs and goals; what resources might be needed to implement the program weekly; and how to measure impact. These questions were selected based on Childhood Prosperity Lab's experience designing innovation models for new programs, strategies, and frameworks impacting child development, health, and well-being.

Co-Designing with Youth in the North Hartford Promise Zone

The Injury Prevention Center seeks to engage youth 12+ in the Tabletop Game Day program, which informed Childhood Prosperity Lab's decision to engage youth 12+ in the co-design session. During the intake call with Childhood Prosperity Lab, the Injury Prevention Center expressed their goal to better understand whether this is a program youth would be interested in after school, and if so, which games they would want to be available.

Childhood Prosperity Lab connected with Parker Memorial Community Center and confirmed availability for an evening session on Monday, April 7th from 5:30-7:00 pm. The Lab designed a digital and printed flyer encouraging youth to participate (Appendix A). The flyer shared information about the goal of the session, location of the session, conveyed that each participant would receive a $50 gift card, and a warm meal from a local restaurant. Recruitment efforts were led by Stacey Epps and Jennette Lopez, who represent the project team of the Injury Prevention Center. Stacey and Jennette were responsible for distributing printed flyers across community centers and organizations across the North End, inclusive of building relationships with youth and encouraging them to attend. Flyers were also sent to the five interviewees from the Community and Family Engagement work group to spread the word across their organization and settings. Youth under the age of 18 were required to provide a parental/caregiver consent form to participate in the session.

A total of ten youth participated in the co-design session. Most of the participants reside in the Clay Arsenal and Northeast neighborhoods. Of the ten participants, there was one 12-year-old, one 14-year-old, one 15-year-old, and seven 16-year-olds. The youth attended the session in clusters of friend groups and affiliation, highlighting the importance of future "bring a friend" messaging. Youth sat at a "U" shape table so that they could easily see and converse with one another throughout the session.

Before engaging in session activities, 30-minutes were dedicated to eating dinner and building rapport with the youth. A hot meal (pasta, wraps, sandwiches, chips) and an assortment of beverages were catered from a local restaurant, Pietro's Pizza. To learn more about the youth in the room and capture the spirit of the design session, the youth were given an icebreaker to respond to: What is your favorite

game? Nine out of the ten youth reported online/digital games (Apex, Madden, Minecraft, etc.) and one participant shared that their favorite game is chess.

A total of four HCD methodologies were leveraged during the co-design session, all of which were guided by individual reflection and group discussion. The *Importance/Difficulty Matrix*, a methodology for "plotting inputs by relative importance and difficulty", was adapted by the Lab for age-appropriateness of the audience (LUMA Institute, 2025). Annika Anderson, the facilitator of the session, asked the youth to write a number on their sticky notes on a scale of 1-10, wherein 1 = low and 10 = high, how interested they would be in a Tabletop Game Day. The activity was then repeated to assess how impactful youth thought a Tabletop Game Day would be, with no operationalization of "impact" so that they could report out what it meant to them.

The second methodology youth participated in was *Statement Starters*, a HCD methodology that "phrases problem statements that invite broad exploration" (LUMA Institute, 2025). Statement starters are question starters that are typically framed by "how might we…" or "in what ways might we…". Statement starters, importantly, invite creative brainstorming and promote divergent thinking. Youth were asked to use their sticky notes to individually reflect on three statement starters:

- What might be the games you are interested in playing at a game day?
- Who might be interested in and/or benefit from participating in the program?
- Where might the program take place each week?

The group then transitioned to the third HCD methodology, *What's on Your Radar?* The methodology prompts participants to "plot items according to personal significance" (LUMA Institute, 2025). Each participant independently filled in a worksheet to identify the most important thing to them about the program's design, followed by a secondary consideration of importance, followed by what would be of lesser importance to them. The worksheet pictured a bullseye diagram with three rings to capture the respective priorities, wherein the innermost circle was a space to document the most important consideration. The fourth and final activity was intentionally open-ended so that youth could express any remaining considerations, priorities, or feedback that might not have been addressed throughout the session. The facilitator documented their feedback on a large easel of poster paper.

KEY LEARNINGS & FINDINGS

Community and Family Engagement Work Group

While partners did not know of community-based organizations or groups specifically offering tabletop gaming programs, they did cite a few youth development programs, college readiness programs, and afterschool programs that are available to youth in the North Hartford Promise Zone (Catholic Charities, The Village, the YMCA). For example, the City of Hartford is exploring how it might offer electronic sport (Esport) social experiences for children through digital gaming, but not board games in the traditional sense. According to one interviewee, youth are playing Xbox and PlayStation. They are energized by the prospect of belonging to a team and creating competitive leagues. For example, there is a league at Hartford High that students can get involved in, and Parker Memorial Community Center recently purchased Smart TVs in-part so that they can host game nights for youth. One partner shared that there are clubs that convene at Parker who offer double-dutch and opportunities for swimming.

Partners agree that an afterschool program like Game Day provides an opportunity for youth to socialize and that it is a need in the three Ascend neighborhoods. According to one interviewee, it is rare to see youth socializing on the streets anymore, and youth are primarily connecting through online games and social media. The same interviewee shared that youth would be excited by the prospect of connecting with one another outside of structured settings like school through a program like Game Day. One challenge that two interviewees expressed is getting and keeping youth engaged. One interviewee shared, "I will just be clear that we are competing against TikTok, we are competing against Instagram. I think we need to keep that in mind as we are enticing kids. We need to figure out how to dangle the carrot to get them involved."

To keep youth engaged and interested in the programming, partners recommend creating "themes of the week" for games. Potential themes include Harry Potter and incorporating Nickelodeon-style silliness. Partners shared that this approach might give youth something to look forward to and elevate the nature of play. One interviewee emphasized that communication from community-based organizations must evolve and tap into TikTok and the "Intagrammable moment". The interviewee continued to share that youth are leaning into that visual need and expression of acceptance and belonging.

While some partners recommended that Game Day be implemented in community-based organizations like the YMCA, William Ware Community Center, The Boys and Girls Club, Parker Memorial Community Center, and/or local churches, others highly recommended that the program be facilitated at the Hartford Public Schools (MLK, Milner and Weaver High) to minimize the barrier of transportation. According to one partner, "I think one of the worst things that we [providers, generally] can do is we will start to deny kids based on their life circumstances just because their parents don't have a car. Now in their [youth] minds, they can't participate in this activity because of transportation, and that is not okay. Even if it costs more, we should not be putting up more barriers or restricting access for kids. I think it's important. We need to get creative." Partners emphasized that accessibility to the program will be essential for youth engagement. If the location is not at a Hartford Public School, partners shared, then it should be accessible through the bus line and/or within a safe walking distance for youth.

Partners agree that a key measure of understanding the success of the Game Day program will be whether youth are enjoying the program, connect with their peers (i.e., the protective factor social connections), and whether they continue to participate in the activities. Partners recommend capturing this data through organic observation and a baseline, mid-point, and end-of-program surveys. One partner shared that a measure of impact might be whether youth are getting connected to programs and services through referrals (i.e., the protective factor, concrete support in times of need). To connect youth to programs and services through Ascend, partners recommend incorporating warm adults and mentors into the space, such as care coordinators and family navigators. To be mindful of organizational capacity while also keeping relationships at the forefront of programming, partners recommend rotating 3-4 regular providers. One partner expressed consideration for tracking academic outcomes, sharing, "Let's say you have 10-15 kids that are regularly participating in the program. Track the heck out of those kids. Track their attendance, track how they do in school, and are they more connected to their community? We [providers, generally] are trying to change the trajectory of kids' lives, but to do so, we really need to prioritize monitoring what these kids do."

Youth in the North Hartford Promise Zone

Participants who expressed high interest in game day shared that it would be something fun to attend after school rather than commuting directly home; one participant described the program as an opportunity to "have a change of scenery" and "unplug". They shared that game day would be an opportunity to be social with their friends and possibly make new friends (i.e., the protective factor social connections). The participant who expressed less interest in game day shared that it could be boring for youth if tabletop games are all that is offered, highlighting interest in online/digital games and physical activities. Youth expressed that it would offer the opportunity to unplug. It could be an alternative to youth who might otherwise engage in risky behavior. On a scale of 1-10, most of the youth indicated high interest, documenting their answers between 7-10. Only one youth in the group indicated a lesser interest in the program, due to the specificity around tabletop games. Youth were clear that they want options between tabletop games, digital games, and physical activities.

The facilitator intentionally did not define impact when asking youth how impactful the program might be, so that the group could operationalize it for themselves. The youth participants defined "impact" of the program by the number of people who would attend, the types of games that are available to play, how competitive the games are, whether there are snacks provided, and whether friendships are formed or strengthened (i.e., the protective factor social connections). Youth highly recommended that the program be inclusive of other types of games in addition to classic tabletop games, such as physical activities/sports and video games. When the facilitator asked the youth what games they would want to see available at game day, their responses included:

- **Tabletop games:** Uno, Chess, Checkers and Jeopardy.
- **Physical activities:** Volleyball, soccer, flag football, kickball, double dutch, basketball, water sports, badminton, bowling, fishing, and tug of war.
- **Digital games:** *Madden, Apex, Minecraft, Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto*. Youth recommended purchasing one Xbox or Wii system for the group.

Youth were in consensus that competing for a prize, especially in "teams" throughout the programming might be fun. The youngest youth participant in the group, who was twelve, recommended that these teams have an older "leader" or mentor. When the facilitator asked the group who might enjoy or benefit from game day programming the most, they cohesively agreed that it would benefit youth ages 10+. Youth further recommended that the program be held at 3:30, right after school, and brainstormed a variety of locations based on the types of games. For example, youth agreed that the Albany Branch Library would be a good location because they have technology set up for games; Waverly for field games; Parker Memorial for water-based sports and activities; the YMCA; and school. In response to the variety, one youth participant recommended that the program model the nature of field trips.

Youth were vocal and specific about the most important components of the program. Youth agreed that the most important component of the program is that it is a **safe space to relax with friends (i.e., the protective factor social connections)**. In addition to diversifying the types of games available and providing snacks as an additional incentive, youth articulated the need for adults in the space "who understand them" and who can connect them to services, such as mental health support (i.e., the protective factor, concrete support in times of need). Additionally, youth recommended that space and support for completing homework be integrated into the program model.

Less feedback was lent to what mattered least to them about the program's design and implementation, however, one youth expressed that the program should focus less on the number of youth who attend, and rather, the quality of the experience attendees have in the space.

As the session closed, youth shared a wealth of additional ideas and considerations that mattered to them. While all ideas may not be feasible or connected to the opportunity game day presents, other providers connected to Ascend may benefit from understanding what youth in the North Hartford Promise Zone are looking for in after-school activities. Youth shared that they want to learn more life skills, such as how to cook, swim, and crochet; engage in volunteerism; learn more about youth employment opportunities; and experience pet therapy.

Figure 1

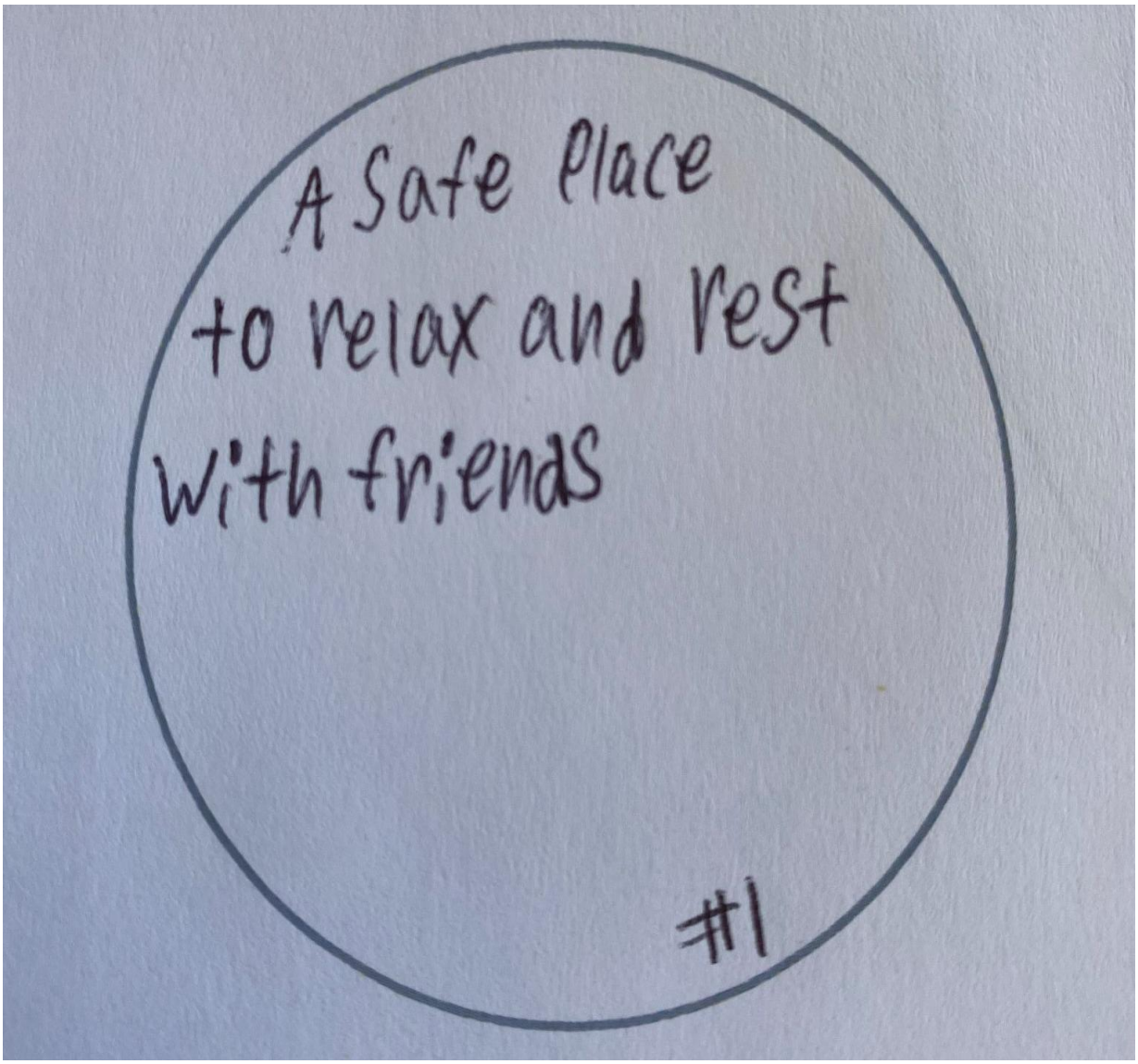
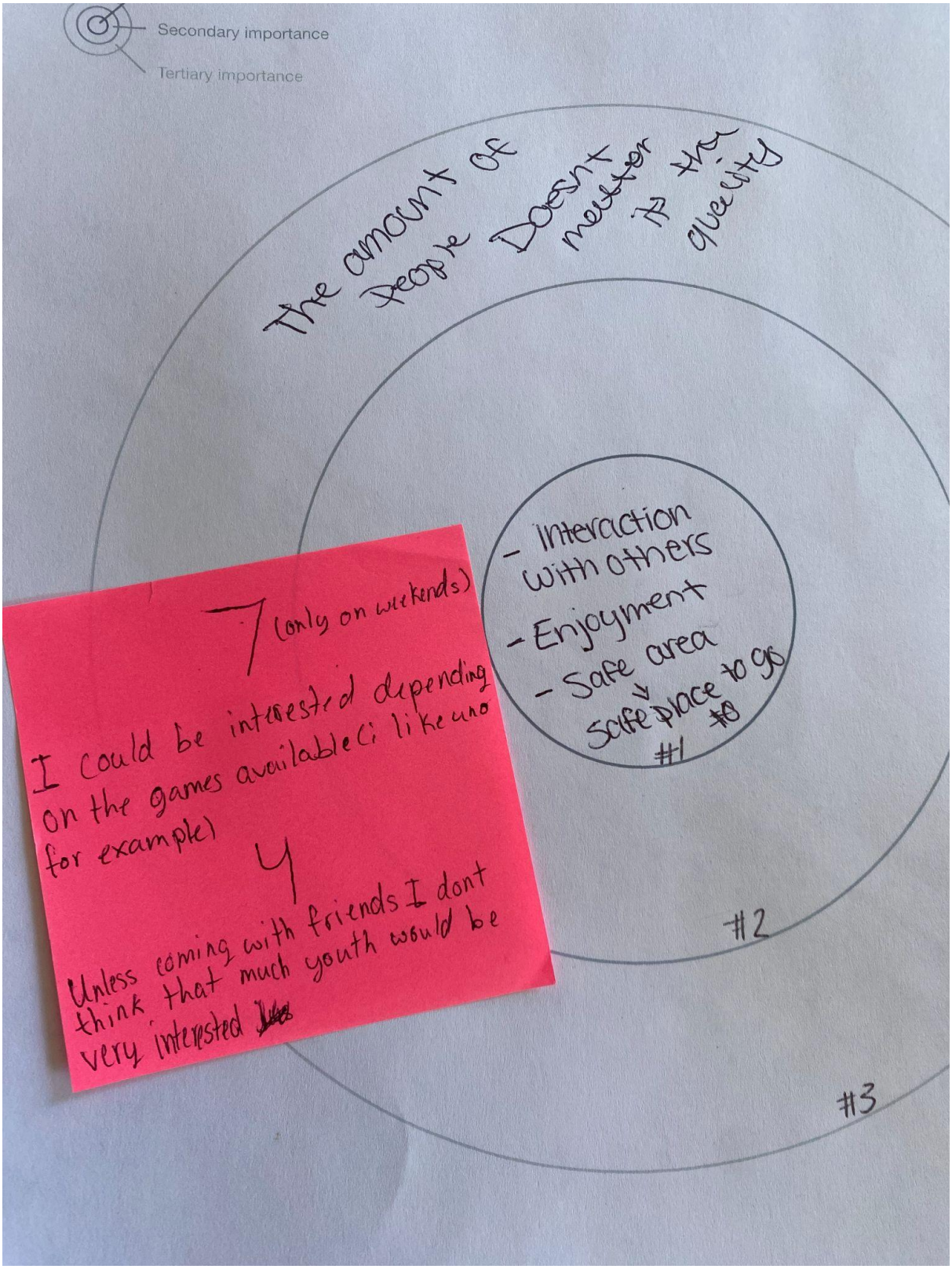


Figure 2


Secondary importance
Tertiary importance
The amount of people Doesnt matter if the quality
- Interaction with others
- Enjoyment
- Safe area
Safe place to go
#1
#2
#3
7 (only on weekends)
I could be interested depending on the games available (i like uno for example)
4
Unless coming with friends I dont think that much youth would be very intersted

YOUTH PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK & IMPACT

At the end of the session, all the youth participants were asked to rate the quality of the session on a scale of 1-5 (1 = low, 5 = high) in a round robin style; excitingly, 50% of the participants agreed (4) and 50% of the participants strongly agreed (5) that the session was worthwhile. Two participants formally completed the post-session feedback survey. Of the feedback collected:

- 100% agree or strongly agree that the activities were engaging and interactive.
- 100% agree or strongly agree that there were ample opportunities for their voice to be heard.
- 100% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt a sense of community.
- 100% expressed an interest in staying connected with Childhood Prosperity Lab for future co-design opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INJURY PREVENTION CENTER

The following recommendations are informed by a compilation of feedback from Community and Family engagement work group members and youth in the North Hartford Promise Zone. The recommendations are intended to be considered as concrete next steps for the Injury Prevention Center as the design of the game day after-school program evolves:

- Consider expanding the scope of the tabletop game after-school program to encompass physical games (indoor/outdoor) and digital games to diversify the options available to youth. Feedback from the co-design session with youth indicates that they want to engage in physical play and activities with a healthy competitive edge.
- Consult the Ascend Family Navigation System Building Work Group on how family navigators, care coordinators, and other service providers might be incorporated into the after-school program model to provide concrete support in times of need.
- Consider leveraging a multi-pronged marketing and communications strategy. Youth articulated that they use social media (i.e., TikTok, Instagram) to receive information about community events. Partners recommend connecting with key partners and messengers in the community, such as Brother Carl, the YMCA, Young Legends, and the Police Activity League of Hartford (PAL) to help spread the word with flyers. Two partners recommended leveraging Parent Square in Hartford Public Schools to reach the caregivers and adults in youth's lives.
- Create an innovation model of the program for optimal implementation, inclusive of its core components, structural requirements, a theory of change, and a logic model to evaluate impact. Given the dearth of partnership opportunities, a partner engagement strategy might also be integrated into this model.

COMMUNITY VOICE IN ACTION

Since co-designing the Tabletop Game Day after school program, the Childhood Prosperity Lab Program Manager presented the findings from the session to North Hartford Ascend's Family Navigation and Partner Engagement Work Groups. Providers agreed that the Hartford Public Library Albany Branch would be an ideal location for piloting the program, given that the Family Navigation Hub was also set up at this facility. This recommendation was responsive to what youth expressed – the need for having adults who can connect them to programs and services in real time readily available. A pilot of Tabletop Game Day was facilitated in the fall of 2025 and is currently offered at Hartford Public Library, Albany Branch. On

average, a total of 5-10 attend Game Day regularly. Youth report that their favorite game is Ludy. To date, of the youth who have completed the quality and satisfaction survey from Game Day, 100% agree or strongly agree that the program supports their ability to create social connections. One respondent shared that Game Day "helps to make more friends" and another remarked that the program "helps to build my social skills."

STAY CONNECTED

- **Email:** *childhoodprosperitylab@connecticutchildrens.org*
- **Facebook:** Connecticut Children's Community Child Health
- **LinkedIn:** Connecticut Children's Office for Community Child Health
- ***Advancing Kids Blog***

Appendix A

The QR code for registration has been removed for the purposes of this report.

Interested in helping the Injury Prevention Center design a Tabletop Game Day Program for Youth in Hartford?

Join us!

Participants will engage in a series of interactive and structured activities to help shape the design of the program.

$50 gift cards will be provided for your time and to cover transportation costs.

April 7th, 5:30-7:00 PM
Parker Memorial Community Center

SCAN ME

- **Participants must be a resident of North Hartford.**
- **Preference for youth participants.**
- **A meal will be provided.**

Click HERE to register or scan the QR code on the left!

Note: Youth ages 17 and under will need to provide written parental consent to participate.

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