



THEORY OF CHANGE NARRATIVE

TARGET POPULATION

Mariposa Kids serves children ages 4 years and 9 months to 11 years old that are in grades TK - 5 in the City and County of San Francisco. Children come from families with broad socio-economic backgrounds that predominantly live in the San Francisco neighborhoods of the Mission District, Bernal Heights, Potrero Hill, Mission Dolores, Noe Valley, and Castro. The majority of children in our programs attend schools in the San Francisco Unified School District with a handful from our summer camps going to private schools in San Francisco. In order for Mariposa Kids' staff to pick up children from a school for our After-School Program at least 5 or more children must be enrolled in our program and that school. These schools must be within walking distance of our Clubhouse or easily accessible via public transit. This limits the number of schools we serve. Over the last 10 years, children enrolled in our After-School Program have attended Leonard Flynn Elementary School, a SFUSD public school in Bernal Heights.

In addition to serving elementary aged school children, we provide opportunities for leadership growth and workforce development for high school and college aged students in San Francisco schools studying in the fields of education, child development, and nonprofit management. These students either volunteer, intern, or are employed by Mariposa Kids.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Over the last 50 years, the average amount of time children have for free play has continued to decline, as has opportunities for outdoor play time. Between 1981 and 1997, average free play time decreased by 25%. These declines are in part a result of increases in indoor screen time, school work (average increase of 145%), and tightly scheduled days with parents (average increase of 168%). Conversely, during this research period, children reported increases in anxiety, depression, feelings of helplessness, and narcissism.¹ Reductions in outdoor play time have been connected to issues around parents' safety concerns like road traffic, child predators, and bullies, in addition to access issues in both rural and urban areas to public spaces for play and recreation.

Children who experience tightly scheduled days can often feel discomfort when given the opportunity for free play, and so they will rely on technology to fill the gaps, make claims of being bored, or may simply pick a fight. Children ages 0-8 average at least 2 hours of screen time a day, and children ages 8-10 average upwards of 5 hours a day.² Excessive screen time and consumption of low quality media via screens negatively impacts child development by delaying language development, reducing the growth of social skills, and impairing the ability to keep attention.³ Play time is so vital for healthy child development that the United Nations includes access to play as a basic right of every child. Despite this, the value of playtime has experienced declines in systems with increased emphasis on academics and adult-directed activities starting in preschool and running through elementary school.⁴

¹ ["The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents,"](#) Peter Gray, 2011

² ["Disappearance of Play,"](#) Kaboom

³ ["Screen Time and Children: How to Guide Your Children,"](#) Mayo Clinic, 2022

⁴ ["All Work and No Play: Why Your Kids Are More Anxious, Depressed,"](#) Esther Entin, *The Atlantic*, 2011

The lack of unstructured play time has also been fed by national education policy that emphasizes high academic achievement and testing at the expense of recess time. Access to safe outdoor spaces in children's lives can cause issues with focusing attention, behavior, socio-emotional, and developmental growth. Lack of free, unstructured outdoor play can impede children's development of problem solving and decision-making skills.⁵ Outdoor play provides for more diverse and imaginative play that enhances opportunities for children to collaborate, practice language skills and in turn, improve awareness and reasoning. This play time also allows opportunities for children to develop rules for play and to resolve conflicts.⁶

Mariposa Kids is positioned to take on the issues of access to unstructured play time and outdoor time through both our community partnerships and programming centered around free play. Our work both addresses parents' concerns about neighborhood safety issues and the continued privatization of public areas or lack of safe public spaces. Privatization often reduces access to safe spaces for children, particularly in urban areas where both safety and accessibility are issues.

INTENDED OUTCOMES

Children who attend Mariposa Kids will have their natural curiosity inspired and supported, while also building a deepened sense of independence as they further their social emotional learning in the process. While our central programming provides free play based opportunities for children, we also provide opportunities to serve the community through public space activation, family engagement, and leadership growth for teenagers and college students. Through these collective activities of Mariposa Kids, we expect the following short and long term outcomes:

POSITIVE & HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Access to unstructured play time coupled with increased outdoor time provide opportunities for children to interact with one another in a variety of settings that allow for creative play moments where they can develop their own set of rules for play and skills to navigate conflict. Through social emotional learning via free play, children will learn how to have healthy relationships with others through the nurturing of friendships and mentorship from older students and staff.

Grade school peer rejection can be a predictor of a child's challenges adjusting to adolescence and participation in delinquent activities as a teenager. Furthermore, grade school victimization can also predict adolescent depression and social programs.⁷ We can fend off these possibilities by nurturing friendships between children of different grades. These friendships can help younger children navigate situations that may arise both within our program and at their school through the help of their friends in older grades. Our cross-age programming can also "increase the older child's level of independence and competence while increasing the younger child's spirit of belonging in a community of learners."⁸

The ability to maintain positive and healthy relationships as children creates beneficial habits and behaviors which will translate into improved quality of life with fulfilling and meaningful relationships. The social emotional skills required to maintain healthy relationships can be applied to personal and professional spheres of life later on.

⁵ ["Lack of outdoor play said to hurt children's development"](#), CBC News, 2014

⁶ ["Children's Pastimes and Play in Sixteen Nations Is Free-Play Declining?"](#) Dorothy G. Singer, Jerome L. Singer, Heidi D'Agostino, and Raeka DeLong, 2009

⁷ ["Early childhood precursors and adolescent sequelae of grade school peer rejection and victimization,"](#) Karen Bierman, 2014.

⁸ ["Benefits of Mixed Aged Classes,"](#) Vine Academy

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Ample time for unstructured play provides space for children to develop their social emotional skills with other children. Our trained Recreation Leaders also help facilitate conversations among kids to navigate social situations in ways that encourage reflection, empathy, respect, and understanding. Children playing with kids across different age groups encourages further social emotional learning through shared experiences in creative play. Increased social and emotional competence of children also helps improve their overall safety and positive development at home.⁹ Cross-age play also helps older children develop nurturing and leadership skills. Studies have shown that both boys and girls display more kindness and compassion towards children three years younger in age when playing. Similar studies also found that boys who assist with caring for younger children developed into kinder, more helpful, and less aggressive individuals.¹⁰

INDEPENDENCE & IMPROVED ACADEMICS

Learning how to explore curiosities through child initiated play will build children's independence and support academic performance when in school. Providing opportunities for children to make decisions on their own with gentle guidance from caring adults that inspire a child's confidence which leads to deepened independence. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that "play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength."¹¹ These factors will improve performance in the classroom. Additionally, our cross-age programming helps younger children gain literacy and numerical skills more effectively than counterparts in single age groups as older kids will incorporate reading, writing, and numbers in regular play and thereby, increasing younger children's exposure to these.¹²

Through our programming, children will develop an inspired curiosity and a higher emotional quotient as a kid, which will improve overall academic performance to help unlock personal and professional development opportunities in the long term.

HEALTHY BODY & MINDS

Through increased access to outdoor play, children will get more exercise which will improve their overall physical health. Access to safe outdoor space will promote outdoor activities that include playground use and sports. We expect that at least a third of a child's time at Mariposa Kids will be spent outdoors in an effort to increase overall outdoor time for the child and therefore each child will gain the vast benefits that come from utilizing natural or park places including¹³:

- Improved vitamin D levels
- Reduced stress, anger and aggression
- Reduced risk of obesity
- Reduced ADHD symptoms and improved ability to maintain focus/attention
- Greater engagement with learning
- Improved impulse control

SAFE SPACES

Our work in public spaces, particularly public parks, brings life to these spaces through consistent utilization by children and families. Communities tend to invest in public spaces that are used by constituents. By providing ample opportunities for children to use these spaces, the parks and

⁹ ["Strengthening Families and the Protective Factors Framework,"](#) Center for the Study of Social Policy

¹⁰ ["The Special Value of Children's Age-Mixed Play,"](#) Peter Gray, 2011

¹¹ ["The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds,"](#) American Academy of Pediatrics. 2006

¹² ["The Special Value of Children's Age-Mixed Play,"](#) Peter Gray, 2011

¹³ ["Benefits of Nature,"](#) Children Nature Network

playgrounds become safer locations for play and general public use. Through partnerships with local city agencies, schools, and businesses, we can activate more of the neighborhood with lively engagement that brings families outside and together which in turn, can alleviate public spaces from negative influences like drug use, community violence, and illegal activities.

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Bringing families together through community events allows opportunities for parents and caregivers to meet one another. Through these social connections, families become less isolated and deepen their connection to a community. Family events and even a small interaction during child pick-up can allow organic moments for members of families to connect on shared interests, experiences, and to learn about others they may have not met in other social settings.

Often other moments of parent interaction happen during school drop-off and pick-up that tend to be hurried because of family schedules like getting to work and the large volume of the systems working to get 500+ children in place. Our more intimate sized groups and the casualness of picking-up for the evening provide space for parents to engage with one another. By continuing to build social connections and the development of supportive friendships between families in our programs, Mariposa Kids can help support healthy home environments for optimal child development. This can also have the power to reduce possibilities for negative outcomes that are often found in homes with isolated and overstressed caregivers who lack the benefits of community support for things like weekend childcare through playdates or having emergency contacts for children.¹⁴

IMPROVED CHILD SERVING SECTOR

Mariposa Kids supports young professionals in their employment journey in the field of child development, education, and non-profit management. By encouraging students in local universities and colleges to apply for employment opportunities in our programs and giving opportunities to earn education funds, we help students gain experience in the profession. Adding experienced professionals into the field of service for children will help fill gaps in roles that the sector consistently faces.

In an effort to build the pipeline of future educators and child serving professionals, we extend these opportunities to gain experience working with children to high school volunteers and interns. These students learn what it is like to engage with younger children in an active environment. We consider this an opportunity for students in both high school and college to decide whether or not they may want to pursue fields of study related to children, which benefits the overall pool of child serving professionals.

KEY ACTIVITIES

- ***After-School Program***

Every SFUSD school day, Mariposa Kids provides 40 children in grades TK-5 with after-school programming from school release until 6pm. Children are picked up from school by staff transitioned on foot to a nearby park and playground for outdoor play. Children who do not go to the main elementary school(s) we serve are dropped off by their parents.

Children partake in approximately 75 minutes of unstructured outdoor play and transition inside our Clubhouse for 15 minutes of reading and/or homework time. For 75 minutes, children then partake in free play inside with options to play board games, do arts & crafts, read, construct Lego creations, or dive into imaginative play with others. Our team of Recreation Leaders also provide one planned activity each day that children can choose to participate in. The final hour of the day is spent back outside utilizing the playground space or sporting fields/courts for free play before being picked up by 6pm.

¹⁴ [“Strengthening Families and the Protective Factors Framework,”](#) Center for the Study of Social Policy

- **Summer & Holiday Camps**

Every summer, Mariposa Kids provides 6-7 weeks of summer camps to 25 children each week. Summer camps run Monday through Friday from 9a-5pm with both indoor and outdoor unstructured play time sprinkled throughout the day. Each week has a separate theme that guides optional activities for children to participate in during their camp day. Due to the length of each camp day, our summer camps tend to be slightly more structured than our After-School Program to help maintain a beneficial balance between indoor and outdoor time, particularly with a heavier focus on physical activity.

Our Holiday Camps follow a similar daily schedule to our summer camps and occur on an average of 8-12 SFUSD school holidays, and Spring Break. Each Holiday Day Camp serves up to 25 children.

- **Health & Nutrition Program**

To nurture the well-being of children and families enrolled in Mariposa Kids, we strive to provide nutritious snack options and lessons about food, meal preparation, and nutrition in our programming. Our Health & Nutrition Program provides a center of focus that is meant to prioritize good food health in children, while keeping in mind our core pillars of safety, play, and community.

- **Junior Rec Leader Program**

Recognizing the natural leadership skills of children in our After-School Program, Mariposa Kids launched our Junior Rec Leader Program to harness this leadership. Selected Junior Rec Leaders have stood out through their participation in our After-School Program by offering to support the facilitation of activities, help clean the facilities at the end of the day or after activities, and have provided helpful insights about relationships between children at elementary schools that support the efforts of Rec Leaders to navigate the social-emotional interactions among children.

The Junior Rec Leader Program is meant to not only help focus children's natural leadership skills whilst in our daily After-School Program and camps, but to help provide staff with additional support in their role of overseeing programming and to provide peer-to-peer role models for younger children who attend the After-School Program.

- **Financial Assistance Program**

Every year, Mariposa Kids board approved policy states that we must provide at least 10% of our annual budget in financial assistance to income qualifying families; in actuality, the average over the last several years has been over 20%. On average, we provide approximately 22% of our annual budget to families for participation in our After-School Program, Summer Camps, and Holiday Camps. We follow the *CA Department of Housing and Community Development* rubric when evaluating financial assistance, using an attestation form from participating families about family size and household income. Financial assistance is granted on a first come, first served basis as available with our annual budget.

- **Leaders of the Future**

Mariposa Kids launched "Leaders of the Future" to help the fields of education, child development, and nonprofits by providing hands-on experience to upcoming professionals in these areas. This program prioritizes the hiring of individuals pursuing a degree or recently graduated with a degree in these related fields of study. Our program will provide financial support to these individuals beginning after a year of successful service with our organization.

As part of this program, our organization forged new partnerships with the Urban School of San Francisco and Gateway High School. These partnerships bring high school aged youth into our programs as volunteers and interns on a weekly basis. Volunteers and interns play alongside children in our program both indoors and outdoors.

INPUTS

To best carry out our mission and programs, Mariposa Kids requires the following inputs:

- *Access to public parks and playgrounds:* SF Rec & Park maintains local public parks in the city that we utilize for outdoor play.
- *Public & private funding:* We rely heavily on registration fees for our programs. We close the gap between our fee structure and costs by fundraising from private foundations and individuals.
- *Safe integrated outdoor & indoor spaces:* Through our partnership with San Francisco Recreation & Parks, we have access to annually rent our clubhouse in the James Rolph Jr. Park, which allows us to facilitate programming indoors and outdoors.
- *Toys, games & crafts:* In order to enable unstructured play, we need a wide variety of games, toys, and crafts for children to choose from on a regular basis. Opportunities for unstructured play time entails maintaining a space where ample supplies are available for children to select from on a regular basis to open up their imagination, explore curiosities, and carry out projects they have decided to partake in while in our programs. Our clubhouse provides a consistent environment for children in our After-School Program to return to daily so that their projects can span days, weeks, or months in development if needed.
- *People power:* Employees and volunteers keep our children safe through active supervision and engaged through participation in activities. Additionally, we rely on families to build and maintain a sense of community within our spaces.
- *Partnerships:* Through partnerships with local schools, government agencies, nonprofits, and businesses, we are able to supply our programs, provide experiences for our children, and expand our reach in creating more safe public spaces for children and families.

KEY ASSUMPTIONS

- Children participating in our program do not need additional academic support to be successful in school. Parents have decided this based on their observations of their children before enrolling in our programs.
- Community risk factors and experiences related to Adverse Childhood Experiences in and out of school environments will not negatively impact or reduce social emotional learnings made through participation in our programs.
- Access to outdoor time in public parks provides equivalent or similar benefits to time spent in other natural settings (e.g., more research has been done on the impacts of nature reserves on child development than on public parks).