



About Alexandra's Playground

Alexandra's Playground, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, works to bring the Gift of Play into the daily lives of children, especially those growing up in underserved neighborhoods. They are committed to creating safe environments for children to strengthen their bodies and minds.

Established in 2009 to commemorate the life of their founders' daughter, Alexandra Vitale, the organization aims to positively impact the world as they know she would have. With a focus on the NY-NJ-CT tri-state area, an Alexandra's Playground typically culminates in a community build, bringing families and neighborhoods together.

They have so far given the Gift of Play to more than thirty thousand children. Recent projects include funding a playground at a girls school in Herat, Afghanistan, and building a playground at a public schools in a low-income urban environment in Paterson, NJ. Other recent projects, located in Yonkers, NY, include a playground at War Memorial Park, and supporting swim instruction for children attending an inner city afterschool program at nonprofit Westhab's Dayspring Community Center.

Founding Story

Alexandra's Playground was founded to commemorate Alexandra Vitale, whose beautiful young life ended tragically in a sailing accident in 2008. Her parents, Dr. Michael and Andrea Vitale, recognized the void left by all the ways she would have impacted the world. Embracing Alexandra's spirit of play, they chose to focus their efforts on supporting opportunities for safe and active play throughout childhood.

Unfortunately, opportunities for active play are increasingly threatened in our society. Dr. Michael Vitale, a pediatric orthopaedic surgeon, understood all too well that the loss of play opportunities has a negative social, emotional and physical effect on a child's development. They sought to turn this around by building playgrounds in areas of need, supporting opportunities for children to experience safe active play, and raising awareness of these issues.

Purpose

Children who regularly engage in active play grow up more physically, emotionally, and cognitively healthy. Yet these opportunities are increasingly threatened. Today's children spend less time playing outside than any previous generation. With active play being replaced by sedentary activities there are increased risks of childhood obesity, type two diabetes, depression and other mental health disorders.

Alexandra's Playground helps parents and communities provide their children with opportunities for safe, active play throughout childhood. They develop, execute, and partner on initiatives that provide opportunities for safe and active play, encourage and imprint active lifestyles, and raise awareness for preventing injuries during play and the importance of active play.

Media Contact: Lori Hrbek, Executive Director lori@alexandrasplayground.org



Impact

Their initiatives reach thousands of children each year as they help parents and communities provide their children with opportunities for safe, active play and healthier childhoods. More children now have opportunities to climb, slide, explore, engage with their peers, and strengthen their bodies and minds.

Building playgrounds is a core initiative for Alexandra's Playground. With a focus on the tri-state NY-NJ-CT area, they have funded playgrounds across the US, in Haiti, and Afghanistan. They typically fund and build two playgrounds per year in the tri-state NY-NJ-CT area, utilizing the volunteer power of the local community along with a steady stream of Alexandra's Playground supporters who join the builds year after year. As of 2020 they have funded 30 playgrounds, supported many programs focused on active play, and positively impacted the lives of more than thirty thousand children, and their families and communities.

Why Playgrounds?

Playgrounds give children a safe place to be physically active while building their minds and spirits through imaginative play and interaction with other children. Playgrounds also provide a gathering place to bring children, families and communities together.

The world desperately lacks the playgrounds it needs. And there are often fewer opportunities for safe play in underserved communities. While improvements are being made, the progress is still too slow. For example, in some communities in NYC there are fewer than five playgrounds for every 10,000 children (*"NYC Comptroller Report, 2019"*).

Funding

Alexandra's Playground is at its core a friends and family supported 501(c)(3) nonprofit. This continues to include an ever expanding group of friends and corporate donors, who believe that every child should have a place for safe and active play in their own community.

Board of Directors & Board of Advisors

Christopher Ahmad, MD
Jason Howell
Lainie Lederman
Glen Lederman, DC, CCSP
Beth Shubin Stein, MD
Ken Shubin Stein, MD, MPH, CPH, CFA

Andrea Vitale, DPT
Daniela Vitale Howell
Mark Vitale, MD
Michael Vitale, MD
Elizabeth Zea
Michael Zea



Summary of Achievements and Impact

As of 2020 Alexandra's Playground has funded 30 playgrounds, and supported children in programs and initiatives which encourage safe and active play. Their efforts have positively impacted the lives of thousands of children and families in the tri-state NY/NJ area, across the US, in Haiti, and in Afghanistan.

- Asbury Park, NJ: Our Lady of Mount Carmel School, serves 200+ inner city students and the community.
- Bayville, NJ: Butler Beach, replaced a playground decimated by Super Storm Sandy.
- Brooklyn, NY: Spring Creek Towers, East New York, one of the largest federal housing developments.
- Bronx, and Brooklyn, NY: Supported NYC Parks Kids in Motion at two locations
- Freeport, NY: Freeport Recreation Center, serving 1700+ children and families, replaced a playground decimated by Super Storm Sandy.
- Newark, NJ: Jesse Allen Park Phase 2, as a partner with Trust for Public Land, serving community of 19,000+
- Paterson, NJ: School 8, School 10, School 12, School 19, School 26, School 27, School 29, Napier Academy. Each support the students and surrounding community.
- Yonkers, NY: War Memorial Playground, and nonprofit Westhab's Dayspring's afterschool program - supporting swim instruction for children.
- USA playgrounds with the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons: locations in Chicago, Las Vegas, New Orleans, Orlando, San Diego, and San Francisco
- Afghanistan: Funded two playgrounds at girls schools, in Kabul and Herat, through Playground Builders, a non-profit that builds playgrounds in war-torn areas. The playgrounds benefit the lives of 9,600 girls who attend the schools on a daily multi-session schedule, and have a wide impact in the communities they serve.
- Haiti: Six playgrounds at locations in Mirebalais, Thibaue, Grand Goave, Beudet Saint Croix, Delmas 32, and Cite Soleil. They are located at schools, orphanages, and community centers, and are shared with the surrounding communities.
- Pediatric Concussion Video: Pediatric Concussions: Early Detection and Treatment, an educational video to increase awareness of the severity of concussions in youth and educate people on how to detect, treat and minimize their risk. The video, released in December 2012, was distributed including to schools and recreation centers, and is publicly available on their website and on YouTube.
- Interactive Play Exhibit: that educates kids on the importance of being active. Installed in the waiting room at New York Presbyterian Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital.
- Summer Fun: JUST PLAY!: Distributing bags of summer fun activities to encourage children across the region to stay active, especially during a pandemic when play opportunities are limited.

You can learn more their playgrounds and initiatives at www.alexandrasplayground.org



A Sampling of Playground Builds

Paterson, NJ 2018



Paterson, NJ 2018



Paterson, NJ 2017



Beudet Saint Croix, Haiti 2016



Paterson, NJ 2015



Freeport, NY 2014



Brooklyn, NY 2012



Kabul, Afghanistan 2011



Benefits of Active Play

Play is not frivolous: it enhances brain structure and function and promotes executive function... Play is not just about having fun but about taking risks, experimenting, and testing boundaries.... Countries that offer more recess to young children see greater academic success among the children as they mature.

"The Power of Play, American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018"

Many studies have proven that healthy lifestyle habits formed through play, including physical activity, can lower the risk of becoming obese and the related risks of high blood pressure and high cholesterol, Type 2 diabetes, breathing problems, joint problems, and social and psychological problems.

Active play benefits everyone

- Active play is associated with fewer attention problems, and less aggression, sadness, anxiety and fear. And when children play with adults they have better memory.
"Boston Children's Hospital study, 2019"
- Children who were in active play for one hour per day were better able to think creatively and multitask.
"The Power of Play, American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018"
- Children who engage in at least 20 minutes of physical activity - at least 2 to 3 times a week - and engage in low levels of TV watching are almost two times *less* likely to be classified as overweight than children who do not engage in these minimum levels of physical activity.
"Play Matters: Giving kids the childhood they deserve", Mattel Children's Foundation
- The more time a family spends together at a community playground, the greater its sense of family well-being in terms of strong relationships, quality of health, and time spent together.
From recent research with Foresters, conducted by Harris Interactive. "Play Matters: Giving Kids the Childhood They Deserve", Mattel Children's Foundation

Here are some facts about the dangers of an increasingly sedentary youth

- In just 44 years (approximately 1.5 generations), physical activity in the United States has declined 32 percent and is on track for a 46 percent drop by 2030
- 8 to 18 year old adolescents spend an average of 7.5 hours a day using entertainment media, including, TV, computers, video games, cell phones and movies.
from: <http://www.letsmove.gov/learn--facts/epidemic--childhood--obesity>
- Physically inactive children are more likely to have higher levels of fat mass and have lower academic achievement than their physically active peers.
Findings from "Time use and Physical Activity: A shift away from movement across the globe." This independently peer-reviewed research was commissioned by Nike, Inc. and conducted independently by Professors Shu Wen Ng and Barry Popkin at the University of North Carolina.
- Children living in neighborhoods without access to a park or a playground are 26% more likely to be obese and 23% more likely to be overweight.
"Play Matters: Giving kids the childhood they deserve", Mattel Children's Foundation



Co-Founders

Dr. Michael Vitale is the Ana Lucia Professor of Clinical Orthopaedic Surgery at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and Chief of the Pediatric Spine Service at Children's Hospital in New York. A significant part of Dr. Vitale's practice involves the treatment of children with spinal problems such as scoliosis, reconstruction of congenital deformities, and the care of children injured by trauma. As the Director of Clinical Research for the Division of Pediatric Orthopedics, Dr. Vitale directs a large research effort which focuses on the assessment of patient outcomes in children with various orthopedic problems, and ways to optimize the quality of life of these children. Dr. Vitale has participated in various medical missions abroad including trips to Haiti, Peru and Honduras.

Dr. Vitale completed his medical schooling in 1995 at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons where he also earned a Masters in Public Health. He then completed his residency in Orthopedic Surgery, and a Subspecialty Fellowship in Pediatric Orthopedics at the Childrens Hospital Los Angeles.

Andrea Vitale received her Masters in Physical Therapy from Hahnemann University and her Doctorate from Columbia University. She worked in the Physical Therapy Department at New York Presbyterian Hospital for 10 years. Andrea then worked as Vice President of Marketing for Theradynamics, a Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation company with offices throughout Manhattan and the Bronx.

Andrea is currently focusing her time raising their four young boys, Lucas, Nicholas, Marcus and Michael. Volunteering at their schools continues to be a rewarding experience. In addition to running after their boys, Andrea continues to find time to train for half marathons, most recently running in NYC. She organizes a yearly team of Alexandra's Playground supporters to run together as Team Alex in NYC's Half Marathon, while raising money to build more playgrounds.



Michael and Andrea Vitale with their boys at a recent playground build

Media Contact: Lori Hrbek, Executive Director lori@alexandrasplayground.org