

CHILDCARE IS COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

BRINGING THE VILLAGE BACK.

A Free, Adaptable Childcare Framework for Businesses and Community Organizations

A research informed open source model designed to help any organization provide free, safe, and legally sound childcare.

What Bringing the Village Back made possible in a parent's own words:

"The ability to drop off our child and be able to run errands that would otherwise be difficult to get done."

Village Day Parent | 2026 Pilot Evaluation

100%

support the Village Economy Model

86%

would use Village Day again



University at Buffalo

Center for Leadership
and Global Impact
School of Management



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CENTER
ARTS, EDUCATION & RECREATION



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Introduction

About This Framework

Bringing the Village Back is a qualitative research study and community design project that produced this framework. Village Day is the name given to the childcare sessions that run under this model. The Village Economy is the community exchange model that funds it.

Organizations provide space and institutional support, and community members contribute time and skills in return for access to free childcare. This framework gives any organization the operational foundation, regulatory guidance, and safety protocols to launch free childcare sessions within a community exchange model. It is a model that is virtually free to launch and does not require a large budget. All you need is a space, a community, and the commitment to show up for families.

It is grounded in qualitative research with community stakeholders, piloted at The Kenan Center in Lockport, NY, and designed to be adapted for any community context.

What This Framework Is Not

This is not a replacement for licensed childcare programs, Head Start, or subsidized daycare. It is not designed to compete with existing childcare providers or displace the childcare industry. It is a drop of service with low curriculum lift, intended to fill gaps that existing programs cannot reach.

Think of it as a complement, not a competitor. Village Day can serve siblings who are too young for existing programming, or create a pipeline into other services. During The Kenan Center pilot, parents with two year old siblings waited for their older children to finish programming or drove home and came back. Village Day can serve those siblings or create a pipeline into existing programs. The model can incentivize families and increase engagement with your organization.

Who This Framework Is For

- Community organizations running civic events, town halls, or enrichment programming
- Nonprofits that want to increase event attendance and community participation
- Businesses that want to offer free childcare during school breaks as an employee benefit
- Any individual or group that wants to bring the village back in their neighborhood

The customization of this framework is limitless.

Take what applies. Adjust what does not. Share what you build.

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The Problem

Childcare Is a Participation Problem

The people who most want to engage in civic life, arts, education, and community enrichment are often the ones least able to show up. Not because they lack interest, but because they cannot find childcare.

Childcare cost and access are not just workforce issues. They are community infrastructure issues. When childcare is unavailable, parents skip town halls, miss enrichment events, reduce workforce participation, and pull back from civic life. The ripple effects touch every institution that depends on community engagement.

50%+

of U.S. families live in childcare deserts

childcaredeserts.org

\$14,117

average annual cost of center based infant care in the U.S.

childcareaware.org

86%

of Village Day parents said it met a family need

2026 Pilot Evaluation

The Middle Income Squeeze

Research participants across all focus group sessions independently described the same trap, earning just enough to disqualify from childcare subsidies, but not enough to afford licensed care. One participant described both adults in a household working, with one income going entirely to childcare costs. Another chose to live on one income because the math made dual employment irrational.

In many counties, childcare subsidy funds have been exhausted and families are placed on waitlists. The eligibility cliff is not a policy gap in isolation. It is a structural challenge. The Village Model does not solve the systemic problem, but I hope it creates a community solution that works now, virtually for free, without waiting for policy change.

What Happens When Childcare Is Provided

Organizations and institutions that provide childcare during or alongside programming consistently see higher attendance and more diverse engagement. Research from the National Recreation and Park Association (nrpa.org) confirms that childcare availability is a top driver of program participation. One Village Day parent reported she would attend more plays at The Kenan Center if this service were available. Another was able to attend her town hall meeting. Respite is not trivial. It is the difference between participating in community life and sitting it out.

The Village Economy

How the Model Is Funded

The Village Economy is a community exchange model. Childcare is free because the community funds it collectively. The anchor organization provides space and institutional support. Community members contribute time, skills, or in kind support in exchange for access to free childcare. This structure makes the model virtually free to launch and sustain.

The anchor organization is typically a nonprofit, community center, library, or business with existing institutional infrastructure. Anchoring at a known, trusted institution matters for two reasons: the location can absorb liability through its established insurance coverage, and it can provide staff members already on payroll if the community prefers an experienced childcare facilitator. That said, a strong volunteer with classroom management or childcare experience can also anchor the sessions. What works best depends entirely on the community being served.

What the Village Economy Enables

Beyond funding free childcare, the Village Economy creates measurable organizational value:

- Increased revenue for existing programs: families who have access to free childcare are more likely to sign up for other services and programming offered by the organization.
- Increased nonprofit capacity: the exchange model creates a structured way to obtain volunteer hours in areas the organization needs most, including accounting, marketing, event coordination, and more.

The Exchange at a Glance

THE ANCHOR ORGANIZATION PROVIDES	THE COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTES
Space and facility access	Volunteer facilitation hours
Institutional liability coverage	Professional skills (teaching, nursing, etc.)
Insurance and regulatory standing	Snacks and program supplies
Program credibility and community trust	Promotion and outreach support
Operational infrastructure	Administrative and logistics help

What Pilot Participants Said

*Supporting families and children with contingencies is not really supporting them.
The long term possibility of parents helping each other strengthens community bonds.
For socio-economically diverse areas, this could be a solution.*

Kenan Center Staff | 2026 Staff Evaluation Survey

Use Cases

Community and Civic Organizations

Offer free childcare during events, fundraisers, town halls, or enrichment programming. Families who previously could not attend now can. The Kenan Center pilot directly enabled one parent to attend a civic town hall meeting. Program attendance increases, donor engagement deepens, and the organization positions itself as a true community anchor.

The model allows families to volunteer at events or contribute skills to the organization in return.

Nonprofits

Use Village Day sessions to increase participation in existing programming and create a volunteer pipeline in areas the nonprofit needs most. Families who bring their children gain access to the nonprofit ecosystem and are more likely to engage in other programs, donate, or advocate for the organization.

The model allows families to contribute volunteer hours in areas the nonprofit needs, such as accounting, marketing, or event support.

Businesses and Employers

Provide free childcare during school breaks, holidays, or professional development days. Staff retention improves, absenteeism drops, and the business differentiates itself as a family forward employer. Employees gain access to reliable childcare without the organization building a licensed facility.

The model allows employees to experience a meaningful workplace benefit that supports their families and strengthens loyalty to the organization.

Feeder Programs for Existing Services

Use Village Day as a pipeline into existing licensed programs. Children who participate in informal drop in play may be identified for enrichment programming, specialized services, or structured curricula they would not have accessed otherwise. Siblings of enrolled children can benefit from Village Day while their brothers or sisters attend programming.

The model creates an entry point for families who may not yet be ready for or aware of other available services.

Regulatory Guidance

Understanding Childcare Licensing

Childcare licensing requirements exist to protect children and ensure program quality. This framework is designed to operate as a drop in enrichment program, a recognized operational category that is distinct from licensed childcare in most jurisdictions. Understanding the difference between the two allows organizations to design a program that is both compliant and impactful.

Licensing is typically triggered by specific program characteristics, not simply by the act of supervising children. The two most common triggers are session duration exceeding a defined threshold (in New York State, programs providing three or more hours of care per day on a regular basis) and formal enrollment combined with a set schedule. Drop in enrichment programs that operate below these thresholds are generally exempt. Always confirm your interpretation with your regional licensing authority before launch.

RSVPs, Ratios, and Compliance

While Village Day operates as a drop in program with no formal enrollment, RSVPs are an essential operational tool. Parents make RSVPs through Spond to indicate planned attendance. These RSVPs allow the lead facilitator to anticipate the number of children by age band and ensure the appropriate adult to child ratios are in place before each session begins.

In New York State, NYS OCFS Part 418.1 governs staff to child ratios by age group. Spond is configured to enforce session capacity limits based on these ratios. When a session reaches its ratio based capacity, Spond automatically places additional families on a waitlist. This ensures every session remains within compliance without requiring formal enrollment or guaranteed slots.

Key Design Principles for Compliance

Keep sessions under your jurisdiction's duration threshold.

In New York State this is under three hours. Other states have different thresholds. Confirm yours with your regional office before setting session times.

Use RSVPs, not enrollment.

Parents RSVP to indicate intent to attend. RSVPs are not guaranteed slots. Families who do not RSVP may attend on a space available basis. RSVPs exist to manage ratios, not to restrict access.

Frame programming as enrichment.

Unstructured and lightly structured play, creative activities, and supervised outdoor time all qualify as enrichment. This framing is both accurate and recognized as a distinct program category.

Do not charge a fee.

Free programming further distinguishes the model from licensed childcare. Note: not charging a fee alone does not exempt a program. The other design principles above must also be in place.

The Most Important Step Before You Launch

Contact your regional childcare licensing authority before your first session. Bring your program design. Ask whether it meets the definition of a program requiring licensure. Document the response in writing. This call costs nothing and protects everything.

Operational Design





Session Structure

- Session length: under the licensing threshold in your jurisdiction (under 3 hours in New York State)
- Format: drop in, no formal enrollment. RSVPs required to manage ratios.
- Age range: recommended 2 to 12 years
- Indoor space: minimum 35 square feet per child recommended
- Outdoor option: strongly encouraged when space allows

Age Bands, Ratios, and the Wristband System

Children are organized into color coded age bands at check-in. Wristbands serve as a visual identification and safety system throughout the session. Each age band has a corresponding adult to child ratio drawn from NYS OCFS Part 418.1 guidelines. These ratios represent the maximum number of children one adult may supervise safely in a group setting. All ratios require direct adult contact at all times.

Format: no formal enrollment, but RSVPs are required. Spond session capacity limits are configured to match these ratios. When a session reaches capacity, Spond automatically places additional families on a waitlist.

Color	Ages	Ratio	Notes
	2 to 4	1:5	Highest supervision. Direct adult contact required.
	5 to 8	1:9	Mid range group. Structured and free play mix.
	9 to 12	1:15	Most independent. Regular check-ins required.
	Any	Alert	Opposite wrist. Signals a medical condition on file requiring staff awareness.

Check In and Check Out Protocol

**More on the tools for this protocol on the following page.*

- 1 Parent scans QR code at drop-off station and completes the check-in form.
- 2 Staff verifies child profile in Spond and assigns the correct color wristband.
- 3 Child is admitted to their age-appropriate group zone.
- 4 At pick-up, authorized adult presents valid state-issued photo ID.
- 5 Staff verifies ID against the authorized pickup list on file in Spond.
- 6 Wristband is returned. Parent completes check-out form via QR code.

Tools and Technology

Running the Program at No Cost

Every operational component of the Village Model can be set up and managed using free tools. The following tech stack has been tested in the field and is recommended for any organization launching a pilot.

Spond spond.com

Registration, RSVP management, attendance, and record keeping

Child profiles and safety information, age subgroup assignment, session RSVP creation and collection, waitlist management, capacity enforcement, attendance tracking with Excel export, family communication.

Tally tally.so

Surveys and data collection

Unlimited free submissions, conditional logic branching, QR code delivery for check-in and check-out, parent and staff evaluation surveys, e-signature support for waivers and consent forms.

Google google.com

QR codes, storage, and data analysis

Free unlimited QR code generation, Google Drive for secure document storage, Google Sheets for attendance tracking and reporting, Google Docs for planning and communication.

Jotform jotform.com

Alternative form builder

Free tier available for basic forms and waivers. Note: free tier has submission limits. Tally is recommended for higher volume pilots.

Quick Reference

Spond	spond.com	Registration, RSVPs, attendance, waitlists, record keeping
Tally	tally.so	Check-in and check-out surveys, evaluation forms, e-signatures
Google	google.com	QR code generation, document storage, data tracking
Jotform	jotform.com	Alternative form builder for waivers and consent

Launching Your Pilot

Recommended Timeline

8 WEEKS OUT	Confirm your anchor organization and session space. Identify your lead facilitator. Confirm liability coverage with your insurance carrier. Contact your regional licensing authority to confirm your program design is compliant.
6 WEEKS OUT	Build your registration system using Spond. Configure age bands and session capacity limits per ratio requirements. Draft your waiver, photo consent, and Village Economy commitment. Generate QR codes using Google.
4 WEEKS OUT	Begin community outreach. Post on social media, community boards, and partner organization networks. Lead with the program and the community it serves.
2 WEEKS OUT	Confirm your volunteer roster. Complete background and sex offender registry checks. Run facilitator orientation. Set up check-in and check-out stations with printed QR code signs. Test everything from a device that is not your own.
LAUNCH WEEK	Run a soft launch. Expect lower attendance than capacity. Use your first session to test your operational flow. Debrief after every session and document what you observe.
POST PILOT	Deploy parent and staff evaluation surveys via Tally. Analyze results. Document what worked and what needs refinement. Use findings to make the case for continuing and scaling.

Lessons from The Kenan Center Pilot

Give your pilot enough runway.

The timeline between design and launch directly affects registration volume. When promotion time is short, fewer families find the program. Build in at least four to six weeks of active outreach before your first session.

Test every platform and link before going live.

Registration links, QR codes, and forms should be tested from multiple devices before they are shared publicly. Platform reliability affects how many families successfully register and show up.

Prioritize facilitation experience.

The quality of the facilitation experience determines parent confidence and child safety. An experienced lead facilitator who understands child development and group management is the most important operational variable in any session.

Confirm connectivity at your venue.

If the session space has limited or no cell service, ensure WiFi is available for the check-in and check-out process. A paper backup plan should always be on hand.

The model works.

Despite the constraints of a first pilot, parents showed up, the community exchange model was received with unanimous support, and families reported meaningful impact. Give this model the runway it deserves.

Safety and Liability

The Anchor Organization

The anchor organization, whether a nonprofit, community center, library, or business, provides the institutional foundation that makes the program possible. It is strongly recommended that the anchor organization have existing institutional liability coverage before launching. In most cases, general liability insurance already in place extends to programs of this kind. Confirm this with your carrier before your first session.

Facilitator Recommendations

The following are recommendations informed by focus group research and best practices in child supervision. Requirements vary by jurisdiction and organization type. Anchor organizations should confirm applicable requirements with local authorities.

- Complete a background check and sex offender registry check before working with children, along with any additional checks the anchor organization chooses to include
- At least one person per session should hold current CPR and first aid certification
- Trauma informed care training is recommended for all facilitators. Trust Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) was specifically identified by focus group participants as a scalable, accessible training option
- Professional references are recommended as a complement to background checks
- Facilitators should be adults with demonstrated experience working with children. A strong volunteer with classroom management or childcare experience can effectively anchor sessions
- A tiered model is recommended: one experienced lead facilitator per session with additional volunteers in supporting roles

Safety Procedures

Bathroom Protocol

An adult accompanies any child to the bathroom and waits outside the door until the child comes out. No child goes to the bathroom unaccompanied.

Emergency Response

A written emergency plan must be posted in the session space. Facilitators must know the chain of command, the location of first aid supplies, and the procedure for contacting emergency services.

Incident Documentation

Any incident, injury, or near miss must be documented in writing before the session ends, including what happened, how it was handled, and any follow up required.

Medical Alerts

Children with a medical condition on file wear a Red wristband on the opposite wrist. Relevant information is accessible to the lead facilitator only.

Screen-Free Sessions

Inspired by the research on play based childhood in Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation*, Village Day sessions are designed as screen free environments. No televisions, tablets, or phones are used as childcare tools. This is a core design principle of the model.

Adapting the Framework

What Stays Fixed

Certain elements of the Village Model protect the safety of children, the legal standing of the anchor organization, and the integrity of the community exchange. These elements should not be removed regardless of context. All jurisdictional requirements vary and should be confirmed locally before launch.

- Sessions must remain below the licensing duration threshold in your jurisdiction. In New York State this is under three hours. Other states differ. Confirm your threshold before setting session times.
- Operation must be drop in with no formal enrollment and no guaranteed slots for specific children. RSVPs are used to manage ratios only.
- Background and sex offender registry checks are recommended for all childcare facilitators and any adults who will be in the presence of children during sessions.
- At least one CPR and first aid certified adult should be present at every session.
- A written safety plan including bathroom protocol and emergency procedures must be in place before the first session.
- Children must be released only to authorized adults verified by valid state issued photo ID.
- The anchor organization should confirm its liability coverage extends to the program before the first session.

What Is Flexible

Everything else is adaptable. The Village Model is a framework, not a prescription. Configure the following elements to fit your community context, organizational capacity, and population served.

Session frequency

Daily, weekly, monthly, or event based. Match your community demand and volunteer capacity.

Contribution structure

The Village Economy can require contributions, invite them, or defer them to a future phase.

Space configuration

Indoor, outdoor, or both. Separate age zones when possible. Adjust capacity to your square footage.

Age range

Narrow or expand based on your space, staffing, and community need.

Facilitation model

Volunteer led, staff supported, or hybrid. Match to your community and organizational capacity.

Curriculum approach

Unstructured free play, light enrichment, or themed sessions. All three are valid and supported by research.

Share What You Build

This framework is offered as an open resource. If your organization implements the Village Model, share your results. Every pilot adds to the evidence base that makes the case for community funded childcare as a national solution. For more information, contact jaleapha@buffalo.edu.

It takes a village. Ours is open.

Jessenia Leaphart | jaleapha@buffalo.edu | Jordan A. Daniels Nonprofit Board Fellowship | 2026