

A Positive Impact: How Elizabeth Cushing and Playworks are Helping Change Schools For the Better



“It’s ok to make mistakes because that is how you learn. I grew up believing mistakes were bad things. Early in my career, I realized that my negative value judgment on making mistakes was getting in the way of learning from those same mistakes.”

Elizabeth Cushing is the CEO of Playworks, a non-profit organization based in Oakland, CA, that focuses on child development in the classroom through structured learning outside on the playground. Elizabeth has more than 30 years of non-profit experience specializing in youth development.

As a child, she noticed herself loving the outdoors, recess and inclusivity. And that focus on inclusivity continued throughout her life, as she centered her work on positive social change, beginning with her work with political organizers. Along the way, Elizabeth learned a lot about being a good boss to her employees and about rolling with the punches, since making mistakes is part of life.

Eventually, Elizabeth took those lessons as she turned to the non-profit world. She specifically shifted to child development after her transition from politics to the non-profit sector, as her early years as a parent reminded her of the importance of children's experiences. Things like inclusivity, conflict resolution, physical health, and kindness help children grow into adults. Elizabeth sees Playworks as responsible for helping children and the education system ensure that these core values are a part of every kid's day at school. It's hard not to love your job when all you do is help kids have fun and create memories.

“I still think about the sayings my mom taught me when I was young to figure out how to handle tough situations on the playground, like ‘Stop, think, make a good choice,’” said Anders Payne, Elizabeth's son. “Growing up with play in every corner of my life has made me a very competitive person but also very understanding of people's feelings, and I have my mom to thank for that.”

Elizabeth has helped Playworks grow from partnering with 61 schools and community organizations to more than 1,300. Ten to twenty percent of children in elementary or middle school are reported to have experience with mental health challenges. Schools were strained to find adequate solutions for kids and needed Playworks' help. It was a tough time for many companies, and everyone around the world was dealing with so much stress and anxiety. Through those times, Playworks luckily survived and returned with a renewed sense of purpose to continue its impact on

children, schools, parents, and the education system. In fact, Elizabeth has helped Playworks grow exponentially from partnering with just 61 schools and community organizations to more than 1,300.

Examples like this showcase how much of a leader Elizabeth is and how much she cares about bringing a positive light to our world, even in some of the darkest times. Elizabeth describes “Leadership” as “Enabling other people to do their best work, discovering the next ‘right’ step with others, and being a learner.” Her focus on teamwork and getting the best out of everyone is what makes her work have such an impact on kids, parents, teachers and schools.

“I find her so inspirational in how she is so outgoing toward her coworkers and always wants to learn more and hear ideas from others,” said Anders, Elizabeth’s son. “I remember calling mom when I was sick at school and being brought to the office because she had to work. At the end of those days, I always ended feeling better because of the games the adults invited me to play when they had breaks and the general feeling of positivity in the building.”

One thing Elizabeth wants people to think about when it comes to Playworks and its goal is that we all need what kids get from Playworks’ core values, goals and staff. If everyone were to play and have fun every day, they would be reminded of the joy kids feel from recess, learning, teamwork and kindness. Playworks wants kids to experience these aspects of positivity and growth, but it’s not just about understanding it; it’s about benefiting from it.

If you want to learn more about Playworks and its mission, please visit playworks.org or follow Elizabeth Cushing on LinkedIn

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