

6 ways The Salvation Army encourages play for people of all ages

When you hear the word “play,” you probably think of childhood memories with friends. And while those are important—researchers have found time and time again [how critical play is to child development](#)—everybody, regardless of age, benefits from setting aside time for recreation.

Adults, who have increasingly [squeezed play out of their schedules](#), can see improvements in physical and mental health, relationships and innovation, among other things, according to the [National Institute for Play](#).

[The Salvation Army's mission](#) to meet human needs in Jesus' name without discrimination includes the need for play. Throughout its programming, people of all ages find safe places to let loose, have fun and learn something new.

In the western U.S., intentional play can look like everything from monthly drum circles for seniors to specialty summer camps and a Vacation Bible School-style program for disabled adults. Throughout the programs, it's clear: Play is not just a practice, but a foundation for belonging.





Older adults feel the rhythm with monthly drum circles

At the Chula Vista (California) Silvercrest Residence, one of The Salvation Army's 34 HUD-funded independent living communities for low-income seniors in the western U.S., a [monthly drum circle](#) is part of the music therapy program. Participants move through a curated playlist designed to get the class moving, with tunes ranging from "Moondance" to "Eye of the Tiger." It's fun, and helpful. "There's an emotional connection with music, and there's a lot of neuroscience that shows how music helps activate the brain and creates new connections and new pathways," said Music Therapist Annela Flores.

Teens connect with nature and themselves

During [Teen vs. Wild](#), 11 teens between the ages of 13-16 participated in a week of fishing, hiking and other fun activities—a localized take on The Salvation Army's traditional wilderness camps—designed to help young men grow in faith, leadership and outdoor skills. "They really had a blast," said Alaska Divisional Youth and Candidates' Secretary Captain Brandon Kyle. "You could see at the beginning they were hesitating... by the end they just were beaming and so proud—the transformation from not confident and being very confident in themselves."

A dance party like no other

At the [2025 Western Territorial Adaptive retreat](#), young adults with disabilities enjoyed a weekend filled with interactive workshops, uplifting worship and plenty of fun—all designed to inspire joy and connection. The weekend culminated in a glow party, where delegates donned glow bracelets, sticks and necklaces for a glow-in-the-dark dance celebration. "By making space for all, we create an experience that everyone can enjoy," said Territorial Social Justice Ministries Director Jacqui Larsson.



Youth gain music skills and confidence

The Salvation Army Anaheim (California) Red Shield's [Freer Forte music program](#) gives kids ages 7-14 space to play—literally. Young musicians can choose to learn drums, guitar, ukulele, keyboard, singing or musical theater through low-cost, high-quality lessons. Jacob, 11, started lessons in 2025, and said he's always been interested in learning music, since rock is his favorite genre. "Music is like a nice break," he said, while practicing for his guitar lesson. "I can have fun and do something I like."

Disabled adults find fun with community at Bible Adventure Thursdays

During the month of March, disabled adults in Yuma, Arizona, come together at The Salvation Army Yuma Corps for [Bible Adventure Thursdays](#), a specialized Vacation Bible School every Thursday evening. At the heart of every program is worship supplemented with fun activities, like you'd find in a traditional VBS. "This is a great opportunity for us and the volunteers that we have to be able to reach out to these families and say, 'Hey, you're welcome here,'" Corps Officer Lt. Amber Herzog said. "For them to know we love you, and God loves you, and this is something that's special for you. It's something that isn't just adapted for them, but it's intended for them."

Teen drop-in center gives a safe place for fun and support

The Salvation Army Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center in San Francisco's [Teen Drop-In Center](#) aims to provide a safe space for youth in the Tenderloin, a neighborhood known for its challenges. During its regular hours of 4-8 p.m., Monday through Friday, youth can come to the Teen Center for homework help, life skills classes and other workshops, or just some fun—games and sports. Membership is free. "[The engagement]—that's definitely the secret sauce to this," said Kroc Center Program Director Katharine Au. "The Kroc Center is about relationship building, so we do that with activities."

Do Good:

- You've probably seen the red kettles and thrift stores, and while we're rightfully well known for both...The Salvation Army is *so much more* than red kettles and thrift stores. So who are we? What do we do? Where? [Right this way](#) for Salvation Army 101.