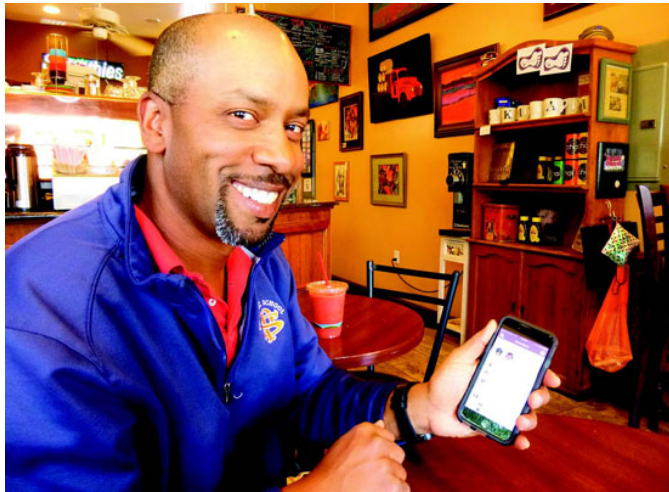


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Who Wants To Play?

By Sophie Braccini



Gary Hill using his app, ScreenDoor. Photo Sophie Braccini

A few years back, Moraga father Gary Hill developed a website called Uwithus to allow parents to schedule kids activities, coordinating with their friends. He's been at it again, drawing on his experience as a father, this time creating a free phone app that lets parents coordinate spontaneous playdates. Totally immersed in the culture of immediacy, the app is extremely easy to set up and activates with the touch of a button.

"What I realized with Uwithus, is that the process was too complicated for busy parents," says Hill, "and I found out for myself that on a daily basis, my problem was more to just get kids with other kids for impromptu play. So much is organized and scheduled, we forgot that kids just need to get outside and be able to play," he adds.

Growing up in southeast Washington D.C., Hill says his childhood playtime was unplanned. "When I wanted to play, I would go out my front door and

would look down the street. And if I could see someone's screen door, that meant that the main door was open and that the kid was free to play," remembers Hill. "That is why he called the app ScreenDoor."

A big admirer of Uber's simplicity - you press a button and a car shows up - Hill wanted something as easy to use for busy parents of young kids who are asking, what is my kid going to be able to do today and who is available to play? "When I grew up we played in our neighborhood, and we had these visual cues," he explains. "Now, people are spread out."

Now when one of Hill's two sons comes home and wants to have a playdate, he does not have to send texts, wait for responses, find another person if the first was not available, and so on. He opens the app and presses one button to send a message to his private circle. "The parents in the circle get a message on their phone: 'Charlie is free to play,'" explains Hill. On the app screen, kids that are available are indicated and parents have the option to text, call or email each other from that screen to coordinate. The availability of the kids can be turned off manually; otherwise, it resets automatically at 9 p.m.

Hill tells the story of one Sunday afternoon when he made his son available on the app. "A half hour later, one of his friend's moms texted that they would be at the Cinco de Mayo celebration at 3:30," he remembers. The boys had a great time, and the mom was so thrilled that the app made it happen.

Hill may add other bells and whistles to his app, but right now the free app is as simple as opening the front door to signal availability. He says that his targets are parents of kids from preschool to elementary school; older kids do the work themselves. Hill thinks that parents are underserved in the app development world because most of the developers are 18- to 35-year-old young professionals developing for 18- to 35-year-old young professionals. He is also thinking about other potential users of the app, such as seniors or pet owners.

"It's not about using the technology; it's about creating real face-to-face interaction," says Hill.

Hill developed ScreenDoor with his friends David Forrest and Thomas Jones. The app can be found online at yourscreendoor.com or on iTunes.

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