

FIT Magazine, October 2007

Kids' Corner: Monkeying Around

Jungle gyms and other play sets engage minds and bodies

By Eric Billingsley

As fall sets in, and with winter on the way, it might be tempting to rely on video games, television and the Internet to entertain the kids. But while modern media may captivate their minds, it does little to keep them physically active.

Albuquerque's moderate climate lends itself well to kids playing outdoors most of the year. And local businesses sell a host of innovative structures that engage kids' minds and bodies. Wooden play sets, modular units and geodesic dome jungle gyms are just a few. Parents and children can even build their own home rock climbing wall.

But all outdoor play equipment can be dangerous. So invest in quality products and safety gear, and know how to install and maintain the equipment properly, experts say.

Here are a few products and tips to keep in mind when setting up a backyard play area.

The Fitness Superstore in Albuquerque sells home playground sets that range in price from \$699 to \$8,000. On the low end, the store sells simple swing and slide sets. Upper-end units may include elaborate plastic crawl tubes, rock walls and other modular devices that can be added onto a base.

"There is more of an emphasis on trying to make it the kids' space...the ability to personalize for what they feel like they want," says Dean Bentley, general manager of The Fitness Superstore. Some people close in the space under platforms to make a clubhouse. Others add a picnic table underneath rather than just a sand box, he says.

But even wooden and modular play sets need to be properly installed and maintained to reduce the chances of kids getting injured.

Bentley says hardware loosens if the units aren't installed on level ground. Wooden play sets need to be treated with a water repellent every other year and re-stained every third or fourth year to avoid splintering and warping. It's also important to install a soft ground cover such as sand, pea gravel or rubber mulch around the equipment.

Little Climbers

Zia Toys Inc. in Albuquerque manufactures a geodesic dome climbing structure made of schedule 40 PVC pipe. The 8-foot diameter unit (\$249) is appropriate for children ages 2 to 7

and the 12-foot diameter one (\$349) can take the abuse of older kids, according to company co-owner Howard Jones.

“It can be used any time around the year,” says Jones. “(The PVC pipe) can take quite a bit of pressure, and it does not get hot in the summer and does not freeze in the winter. They’re good for learning motor skills.”

Jones says the geodesic dome design is naturally strong. The series of triangles is constructed in a way that pressure to one point is equally distributed. That means the dome can handle quite a bit of weight and abuse. The PVC components also don’t have sharp edges. In addition to being a climbing structure, the dome can be covered to make a fort, he says.

If you’re handy with a power saw and comfortable working with wood, you can build a climbing wall for kids. Standard framing techniques can be used. Some are freestanding while others are tied into the structure of a house, according to Bryan Pletta, owner of Stone Age Climbing Gym in Albuquerque.

The key to making a useful wall is to have adequate space. Some people build it in their garages. It’s also important to construct one that will keep kids interested, he says.

“I’ve seen so many home climbing walls get built and not used,” says Pletta, “especially those built by non-climbers.” Adding a climbing wall onto an existing play set with slides and bridges is one way to give kids a variety of activities to choose from, he says.

Stone Age Climbing Gym sells used kids’ hand-holds for \$3 to \$5, and 5-foot-by-8-foot climbing-specific safety mats for \$600. REI in Albuquerque sells The Metolius 40-Hold Mega Pack (\$129), which includes varying sizes and shapes of hand-holds, mounting hardware and how-to-build instructions. REI also sells wall boards (\$34.50 to \$42.50), a set of five pre-drilled boards that are 4 feet long. They are typically spaced 16 inches apart. The set also comes with mounting hardware.

Safety Concerns

Harold Prezzano, managing partner of Hansen and Prezzano, a local company that installs playground equipment at schools and for municipalities, says of the dangers of play equipment, “We want to encourage kids to take risks, but there are things on a lot of playgrounds that could cause kids harm.

“A child can make a decision on a risk, but can’t always evaluate a hazard.”

From 1990 to August 2000, nearly 150 deaths to children under the age of 15 involved playground equipment: at least 90 of those occurred in home settings, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. Almost three-quarters of the deaths in home locations resulted from hangings from ropes, cords, homemade rope swings and other similar items.

[Sam DeFillippo](#), managing partner of the parks and recreation consulting firm PlaySafe, says the majority of accidents are falls. So it's important to keep the surface below play un its soft with wood chips, pea gravel or rubber mulch; create a six-foot buffer zone around the equipment; and inspect equipment regularly. Most importantly, supervise children while they are playing, he says.

“You want children to be able to explore and test but also be able to tell them that something is beyond their capabilities,” says DeFillippo.

Safeguards

To help prevent injuries for falls and other hazards on home playgrounds, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission recommends:

- Installing and maintaining at least 9 inches of wood chips, mulch or shredded rubber for play equipment up to 7 feet high.
- If sand or pea gravel is used, installing at least a 9-inch layer for play equipment up to 5 feet high or using surfacing mats made of safety-tested rubber or rubberlike materials.
- Installing protective surfacing at least 6 feet in all directions from play equipment. For swings, the surface should extend in back and front twice the height of the suspending bar.
- Never attaching ropes, jump ropes, clotheslines or pet leashes to the equipment. It can present a serious strangulation hazard to children.
- Smoothing sharp points or edges and covering open “S” hooks or protruding bolts.
- Checking for openings in guard rails or between ladder rungs. Spaces should be fewer than 3 ½ inches or more than 9 inches so they don't present an entrapment hazard.
- Supervising young children at play.