

WANT TO LURE YOUR CHILDREN OUT OF DOORS THIS SUMMER? PLAY SETS HAVE COME A LONG WAY FROM THE WOBBLY OLD SWING SET. NOW THEY ARE PLAY SYSTEMS AND THE SKY'S THE LIMIT WHEN IT COMES TO WHAT THEY DO.



PLAY *all day*

BY STEPHEN NEUBAUER

Just as the backyards of our youth, with their endless lawns, a poplar tree and the odd spruce or two, are being replaced by architecturally designed landscapes, so too are our children's backyard play sets being replaced. That wobbly, rusty swing set from our childhood memories are, thankfully, being replaced by sophisticated engineering marvels of plastic, wood and steel.

In an effort to get the children away from the computer for the summer, many parents are opting to invest both the money and the space to accommodate a backyard playground—or play system as they are now often referred to.



Photo courtesy Rainbow Play

When planning to install a play set in your yard, consider the following factors:

space:

1

Planning proper space for your set is very important. There must be room not only for the structure itself, but clearance around the perimeter should include a six-foot fall zone in all directions. This means the area must be free from all obstacles, such as decks, fences, tool sheds and surfaces like sidewalks that could lead to worse injuries in case of falls.

2

design:

Check that the openings in the structure are narrow enough that little heads won't go through, or wide enough that if they do they won't become trapped. Openings and spaces between bars should be narrower than three and a half inches and wider than nine inches.

Check, also, that the various play areas are arranged for safety. For instance be sure kids on the swing won't be kicking into others climbing a ladder.

3

equipment safety:

What is the system made of? Look for durable material and high-quality hardware. Play sets generally come in plastic, steel and wood, all good alternatives now, although older wood sets from the 1980s and '90s were protected with preservatives that have now been banned and some people continue to be wary of wood preservatives.

Look for vinyl-sleeved or coated chains, gentle ladder angles and safety handles located where they can add some extra stability to climbing tots. Install bumper pads for corner cushioning, and consider adding non-skid strips in places where small feet could use a better grip.

4

sub-surface:

Over 50 per cent of play set injuries are caused by falls. Asphalt and concrete are never appropriate under a play set, but lawn is also a hard surface and not considered appropriate. Shock-absorbing, loose-fill materials such as wood chips, pea gravel, or crumb rubber from recycled tires are required now more than ever since play systems are higher than ever and feature rock-climbing walls, cargo ladders, monkey bars and more.

choosing a system:

5

How do you decide from the array of options? Do you purchase a prefabricated play system from a supplier or go the do-it-yourself route, purchasing lumber, plans and accessories from a hardware outlet? This decision is entirely yours. Scout out the various suppliers. Stores like Revy and Home Depot offer the do-it-yourself options and these can be very good. In Calgary, some garden centres specialize in prefabricated brands and have experts on staff to advise you on some of the many overwhelming options. For instance, do you choose something permanent and cemented in, or a play set designed to be moved at a later date? How does the system fit your children's current age and can it be customized and added to as they grow? Play sets are pricey and can work their way into several thousands of dollars as the bells and whistles add on, so be sure you are getting exactly what you want, and that it fits esthetically into your adult outdoor area.

6

maintenance:

Play sets take a lot of tough wear, so inspect equipment regularly for loose nuts and bolts, cracks, splinters and sharp object. Check around the play area, too, to ensure it is free of rocks, and other sharp objects.

teach your children play system safety:

7

No pushing is one of the first rules of play and parents need to be sure their kids know they shouldn't push while on play set equipment and to look out for others while they are swinging and climbing. Then the final safety rule is supervision. Parents should always watch over children playing on a play set. Be sure you can see them from a window or the part of the garden that you spend your time in. 🌱

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