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Support for parents and families: A
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Broome County Living magazine 1986 – 1988

Local and Regional Projects

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The inside scoop on outdoor play

V. Sue Atkinson

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Living



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Tour

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•
The
Children's
Garden

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Information Center Tip

Our Information Center has all the information you need on preserving the fresh fruits and vegetables of summer. Free fact sheets, such as "Microwave Directions for Blanching Vegetables," "Jams & Jellies with Low Sugar or No Sugar," "Can-

ning Problems," and "Fruit and Vegetable Leathers," are available. Call us at 772-8953, or stop by for your copy. While you are here, you may want to visit Cutler Botanic Gardens and pick up a free fact sheet on preserving flowers.

Cover: Scenes from our Wall Street Tour. Preparing for the return trip (top), and heading toward the New York Stock Exchange.

The Inside Scoop on Outdoor Play

V. Sue Atkinson
Home Economics Program
Assistant

"Let's go to the playground!" my three-year-old urges once again.

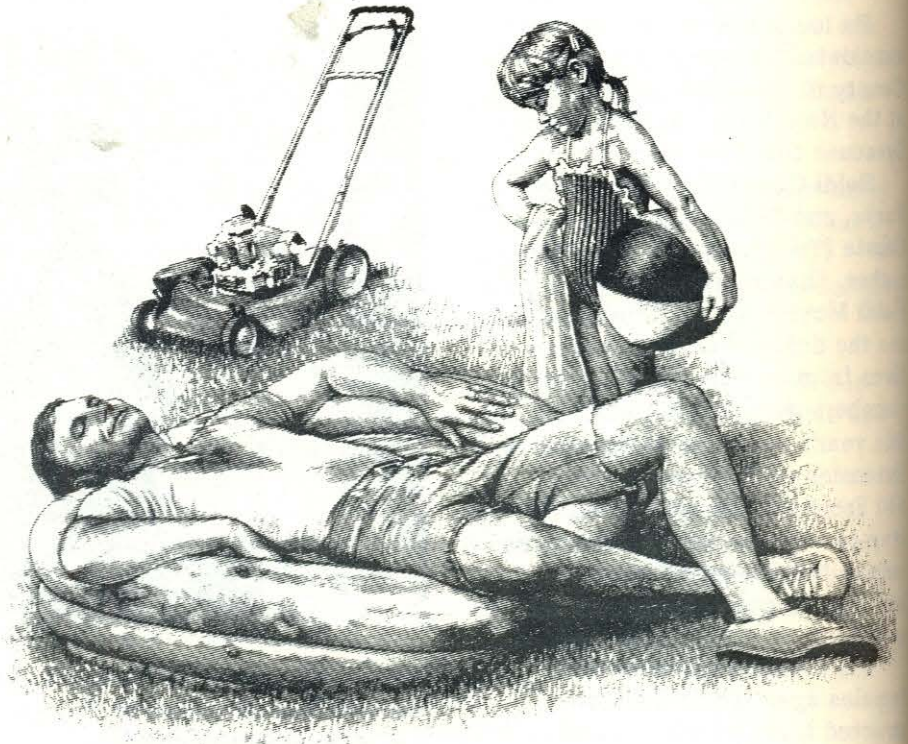
Playgrounds have been a favorite of hers since well before her second birthday, and this summer she is determined to get her fill of them. As a parent, I welcome the warm days when going outdoors means simply opening the door, rather than the ordeal of snowsuits, boots, and other winter paraphernalia I'd rather not remember at this time.

GOOD PLAYGROUNDS

What makes a good playground? From my daughter's point of view these are the essentials: a variety of equipment that's sized for preschoolers' legs and arms; other children (but not so many that much time is spent waiting rather than doing); some equipment that can accommodate a parent and child together, as well as equipment she can use by herself; grass or some other soft surface under the equipment; and most of all, a slide or two. Her favorite playground is usually the last one she visited.

From a parent's point of view, a good playground is:

- **Safe.** Some common safety hazards include equipment intended for larger children (supervision is the only answer here); equipment in poor repair (When I began to take a hard look, I found



this to be a much more common problem than I had imagined, and one I never noticed until I toured playgrounds with my husband, whose work involves maintenance of outdoor recreation facilities); poor design, such as traffic patterns that lead youngsters in front of swings; and obvious hazards, such as unfenced, empty pools, and proximity to busy streets or parking lots.

- **Fun for kids.** Every child has his or her favorite playground activities, and a child's criteria for a good playground might be quite different from an adult's. I

remember well my disapproval when, in the midst of a trend toward building playgrounds out of natural and recycled materials, fast food restaurants began constructing playgrounds of metal and fiberglass with equipment in the shape of giant hamburgers. Now that my opinions have been tempered by the reality of parenthood, the brightly painted metal and fiberglass doesn't seem quite so bad. In fact, I recall one very long, hot car trip with a one-and-a-half-year-old when the play area at a fast food restaurant on the turnpike seemed like a godsend, I

and I was able to see past the commercial theme items and appreciate toddler-friendly features such as stairs (rather than a ladder) and no drop-off at the end of the slide.

- **Comfortable for parents or other adults.** Attractive features include benches or other seating space (for those rare times when we actually sit down at a playground!); shade; a reasonable level of cleanliness; proximity to available parking (since invariably the same toddler who has boundless energy for playground activities needs help getting back to the car); and congenial adults.

BACKYARD SPACE

But outdoor play doesn't have to involve an outing to the playground. Great outdoor play opportunities can be found right outside the back door, and parents can help make that area safe and enjoyable.

What do children need to play happily and productively outdoors? Expensive, purchased equipment is certainly not a necessity. Safe play space may be set up by installing fencing, removing hazardous objects, filling in holes, and removing poisonous plants. A combination of sunny shady areas, and level ground and hills is enjoyed by children.

Some ideas to fill the space:

- **Sandbox or other digging area.** Sandboxes can be made from wood, a discarded tractor tire, or a toddler's old swimming pool. A sandbox need not have a bottom, but if it does, make sure it has some drainage holes. A cover is a necessity.

ty. Purchased sand toys are fun, but so are kitchen utensils and containers of any sort. Old pots and pans, jello molds, strainers, funnels, and spoons all make great sand toys. Wet and dry sand have very different characteristics, and children enjoy both. A place to dig in the dirt and unearth stones, roots, and earthworms will also be enjoyed. A pile of smooth stones provides other opportunities.

- **Water play.** Summer weather makes this activity so much easier since concerns about cold, wet clothing are eliminated. A wading pool, sprinkler, or large tub of water can be used along with containers, cups, egg beaters, and plastic squirt bottles from the kitchen. Adding ice cubes on a hot day is fun. Children will also enjoy "painting" the walls or sidewalk with water and a wide brush.

- **Riding toys.** Paved flat or gently sloping surfaces lend themselves best to tricycles and other riding toys, but many children become adept at riding on lawns and other surfaces.

- **Equipment for climbing, sliding, and swinging.** A purchased swingset is a popular option. Another alternative is a sturdy home-made frame of logs or lumber, with purchased or home-made swings, or even swings salvaged from a discarded swingset. Climbing structures or "jungle gyms" can be built by creative and energetic families from lumber, pipe, old tires, or other materials. If a back-

yard play area is likely to be used by a number of children at a time, it's a good idea to take a safety tip from well-designed playgrounds and separate the swings from other play equipment. A tire swing is a still popular option. In fact, a favorite cartoon of mine features children on a brand new swingset looking over the fence at their neighbor's tire swing hanging from a tree by a rope and asking dad to "buy us a swing like THEIRS!"

- **Taking indoor activities outdoors.** Nearly any indoor toy or activity can be taken outdoors. For a small child, this will seem like even more fun. Picnics are a good example. Painting is a good activity for outdoors and involves less cleanup than when done indoors. Large boxes are fun to play in anywhere, but the extra space outdoors is a plus. Rhythm instruments and other "noisy" toys will seem less so outdoors.

PERIODIC CHANGES

To keep children's interest high, outdoor play areas need to change periodically. Of course, large pieces of equipment cannot be moved around, but smaller items can be rotated to provide variety and sustain interest. Keeping items in good repair makes them more fun to use, as well as being an important safety practice.

Trends in Playground Design

V. Sue Atkinson
Home Economics Program
Assistant

It is reasonable to assume that children have always played outdoors, running around, climbing hills and trees, swimming where they found water, swinging on vines and branches, and sliding down slippery slopes.

If we take a look at popular playground equipment, we can see that it probably had its roots in such natural outdoor activity. In an effort to make playground equipment durable for large groups of children and as maintenance-free as possible, however, some of it has become less than "user-friendly."

In the late 1960s and early 70s, some community activists and educators began to take a look at how playgrounds were being used, and not used, by children. Traditional playgrounds equipped with heavy metal slides and climbing equipment, swings with hard, heavy

seats, and blacktop surfaces were very expensive to construct and were not popular with children. In addition, large numbers of accidents occurred in such playgrounds. One study revealed that less than half of the accidents resulted from poorly constructed or inadequately maintained equipment. Most resulted from improper use of the equipment by children, which led one playground planner to ask, "Should we redesign the playground or the child?"

Community playgrounds began to spring up, using recycled materials such as railroad ties, large wooden cable spools, old tires, concrete pipe, and utility poles. Some ideas came from "adventure playgrounds" in England and Denmark, where children, with adult supervision, built their own play structures from available raw materials. Multi-

purpose play structures were favored over individual pieces of single-use equipment. These playgrounds were far less expensive, often involved volunteer labor, were more popular with children, less likely to be vandalized, and had a lower rate of accidents.

Most playgrounds in Broome County today seem to combine these newer ideas with more traditional playground technology. Commercial playground suppliers now offer equipment made from natural materials as well as from metal. Safety matting is used under play equipment if the playground area is paved, and soft seats on swings are almost universal. Playgrounds can still be cooperative community efforts, as witness by the "Build-a-Dream" playground project undertaken last year by the students, parents, and staff of Harry L. Johnson School in Johnson City.

Issues for Families

Because we live some distance from the nearest playground, backyard play equipment seems a necessity. Having grown up in a suburban area, it's easy to make that assumption. I was surprised, then, to talk with friends from a large city who were adamant about not getting a swingset for

their two preschoolers. They believe it is important for the children to go to the park to play, and that parents should provide that experience, rather than simply send the children out to the backyard. I had always envied my urban friends' opportunity to walk a few blocks and find activity and

companionship for their children. In fact, this seems to be the primary avenue of socialization for many urban toddlers and young preschoolers. In contrast, for us, a visit to a park or playground involves a long drive, and the few play areas in our town are typically deserted.

What are the implications of all our backyard swingsets, sandboxes, and swimming pools? What price are we paying for the fun and convenience they provide if they lead us to isolate ourselves in our own backyards? There is, of course, no set answer to these questions. Those of us who cannot walk down the block to a well-equipped park may find different answers than my friends in the city. Children also differ in their abilities and temperaments, and at different stages of their development may benefit differently from public or private play space.

Another issue parents face when setting up backyard play equipment is liability. In these litigious times this is no small concern. I spoke with an insurance agent from the Thomson

Agency in Johnson City who told me that backyard play equipment is considered an "attractive nuisance," and if a child, even uninvited, is "attracted" to a swingset and is injured, the owner would be liable for medical bills resulting from the injury as well as any judgments resulting from a lawsuit brought by the child's family. Typically, damages would be covered by a homeowner's or tenant's insurance policy. In the case of a lawsuit, the insurance company would provide legal defense and possibly negotiate an out-of-court settlement. Even in the case of a fenced-in swimming pool with a locked gate, the pool owner would be liable for any injury that might occur. Insurance companies recommend that swimming pool owners acquire

"excess indemnity" coverage in addition to a typical homeowner's policy to cover such costs.

For more information on play materials that are readily available at home, request from our Information Center "Found and Scrounged," 30 cents.

RESOURCES:

Planning For Play, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, MIT Press.

Playgrounds For Free, Paul Hogan, MIT Press, 1974.

"Toward a Science of Playground Design," Louis Bowers, University of South Florida. (unpublished monograph)

-V. Sue Atkinson

Refillable (cont'd)

continued from page 6

garbage going to landfills. "In 1983, New York started requiring deposits of soft drink and beer containers," said Fischer. "A year later, solid waste tonnage was down three to five percent around the state, resulting in an eight percent saving of space. That's a lot!"

He notes the deposit law has been successful in reducing litter and spawning recycling operations. "Unfortunately, it has not done as much to encourage use of refillables," he said. "The vast majority of containers being sold can be used only once. Most of those plastic and foam-covered bottles are being carefully returned only to end up in the dump."

And what about those that are recycled? "To me, recycling is a misleading word,"

said Fischer. "It takes a huge amount of energy to crush the glass, shred the aluminum, melt the glass and aluminum, and make new bottles and cans. And all you end up with is what you had in the beginning. It's much better to heat some water, put in a little caustic soda, clean out a bottle, and use it again."

He would like to see the law amended to promote refillables. Refillable bottles are more expensive to produce originally because they must be strong enough to withstand repeated washings. But they are far cheaper over the long run, when you consider they may be re-used about 15 times.

Beyond that, he would like to see the idea extended to other containers. "Why not a

refillable salad dressing bottle or jelly jar?" he said. "And why not do something to encourage standardization of containers so that different companies could reuse the same bottle, just by changing the label?"

In the meantime, Fischer urges consumers to seek out and buy refillables whenever they can. "It's a little less convenient to do the environmentally sound thing. But in the long run, we'll all come out ahead."

* The New York Returnable Beverage Container Law: The First Year Report of the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government to the Temporary State Commission on Returnable Containers, March 15, 1985.