

## Play Ideas

Play is a child's way of learning and growing. A safe play area, when carefully designed, is an environment that will stimulate the physical, emotional, social and intellectual aspects of a child's development. It should be furnished with play equipment and play opportunities to enhance large muscle growth and psychomotor coordination, while providing opportunities for fantasy play and quiet play.

Play items in a safe play area do not have to be expensive. They should include non-manufactured playground items, such as objects found around the farm and from the natural environment. Ideas for non-manufactured play items in a safe play area include:

**Boat fun** – take an unused boat or canoe. Retain seats/benches and driver's console, and then stabilize by partially burying in a sand base. Include oars and play fishing poles. Drill a hole into base for draining rainwater. Surround the boat with sufficient ground cover to protect children from a fall or jump when climbing out of the boat.

**Tractor tire in sandbox** – securely bury a tractor tire vertically (one-third or more of the way) in sand contained in a sandbox. Children will climb on the tire and may fall, therefore, ensure adequate distance from the sideboards and depth of sand that surrounds the tire.

**Balance beam** – use a full length 4" x 4" wood post. Affix two or three supports on the underside of the post (fastened perpendicular to the post). Supports will prevent the beam from tipping over. A tree log cut lengthwise may also be used. Set the balance beam on a level surface.

**Seat and steering wheel** – include basic materials like an unused seat, from an old tractor, and a steering wheel, perhaps from a lawnmower. Use scrap lumber to mount the steering wheel and seat together securely. Add a child-friendly instrument panel (e.g. switches, horns, buttons, dials) to the lumber supporting the steering wheel. Paint like a racecar, rocket, or tractor to customize.

**Chalk and finger paint play** – attach chalkboards to a fence with cable ties or set against a tree for drawing. Large rocks, landscape stones and silo staves can be drawn on or colored using finger paints and chalk.

**Playhouse/clubhouse** – begin with an unused calf hutch, small utility shed, or other small sheltered structure. Cleanse, sanitize and paint the playhouse as needed. Cut enough windows for air circulation and proper supervision. A plastic storage tub can store dress-up clothes, and play dishes, tools, food, or art supplies.

**Riding path** – mark off a path and grade it smooth. Have toy tractors, small bikes, and other children's ride-on toys available for children to use. Helmets should be worn on tricycles and bikes.

**Hopping path** – use landscaping blocks, flat fieldstone or wood cookies (cross cut pieces of wood) and place alternating in a path. The rocks or wood can also be used to draw on with chalk.

**Pole bean teepee** – create this structure using wood dowels or sticks positioned in the shape of a teepee. Plant pole beans around the base of the teepee. The beans will grow and climb the pole covering the teepee frame. Children can eat the beans and utilize the inside for play.

**Water/sand table** – can be made from a cleaned plastic drum. The plastic drum should be cut lengthwise with a low edge height to allow children to comfortably stand while playing in the water. Sand the cut edges until smooth. The table should be securely stabilized to a foundation. For example, bolt it into a tree stump. The table should be easy to clean, drain and cover. It should not be easy to crawl into. Supervision should always accompany water play. Remember children can drown in as little as 1 inch of water.

**Stage/theater** – take an unused flatbed hay wagon (not a bale thrower wagon) and remove the running gear or at least the wheels. Securely set on the ground. Remove back rack or use to make a half shell. If needed, place steps up to "stage" floor. Set logs or hay bales around the stage for seating. Have dress up clothes available for play.



## Trees and plants for play

Plants are an essential part of a child's play environment and should be integrated in and around a play setting. Children can use plants in different ways thereby increasing the range of play activity. Plants can be collected, dissected, climbed and played with, used in hide-and-seek games or a treasure hunt. Plants stimulate all of the senses – touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste. Combined with other play items (i.e. sand, water, soil) plants can enhance the properties of static, unchangeable fixed play structures.

### Sensory rich trees and plants (some examples):

- **Texture** - Lambs Ears, American Smoke tree, arbor vitae, pampas grass, conifers (pine cones), oak trees (acorns)
- **Fragrance** – Spicebush, Juniper, Wintergreen, Lavender, garden herbs
- **Taste** – blueberry bushes, strawberry plants, garden vegetables, American Plum, apple trees, maples (for tapping)
- **Visual** – Paper Birch, Dogwood, Quaking Aspen, autumn colors of maple trees

To incorporate plants into a safe play area, avoid toxic and allergy-related species, for more information on selecting safe plants view the University of

Wisconsin's Poisonous Plant Booklet at [http://www.uwhealth.org/files/uwhealth/docs/pdf/poisonous\\_plants.pdf](http://www.uwhealth.org/files/uwhealth/docs/pdf/poisonous_plants.pdf).

### Good to Remember

- When planning a safe play area, it is important to include play structures and plants entirely for the use of children. Play structures may not always be aesthetically pleasing. Plants or trees in a play area may be trampled on or damaged when coming in contact with children.
- Be creative. Other things that may enhance a safe play area include benches and gliders for general seating, birdhouses, feeders and baths, squirrel feeders, walkways, tree stumps cut like chairs, pots for container gardening, a hammock, or a picnic table.
- Designate a spot in the safe play area that can be used for supervision by adults with comfortable seating, shade, perhaps a table surface for writing or working. If adults are relaxed, they will further enjoy being in the area with the children.

Some content of this publication was adapted from "Plants for Play", MIG Communications, 2002.

This fact sheet can be downloaded and printed from: <http://www.marshfieldclinic.org/safeplay/keystocreate/>

