

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 may include typical items such as swings, slides and sandboxes. Room should also be made for games such as tag, hide and seek, and playing with balls. Play areas can also 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. Keep seats/benches and driver's console and 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 of the way) 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 – use basic materials like an unused seat from an old tractor and a steering wheel from a lawnmower. Use scrap lumber to mount 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.

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.

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.

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.

Other items – other things that may enhance a 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.

Supervision spot – designate a spot in the 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.

More information on creating safe play areas is available at cultivatesafety.org/play

