

46 Backyard Play Ideas for Children

Children need to get outside and be away from the TV. Especially in the summertime, when they can get loads of fresh air and exercise. It is even more important if you live in areas that have cold winters, since being cooped up in the winter happens often!

Pediatricians have also recently concluded that children do not get enough free play during their day. One great way for them to have free play is by being in their backyards. Setting up play areas and giving them ideas for play is vital to their health, but now and for their future.

There are several ways to make any backyard area more fun for the kids.

1 – Garden

The love of all things in nature can never begin too early. Start that love with your child's very own garden. This garden can be very small or elaborate, depending on their age. A simple garden that is low maintenance contains sunflowers, green bean plants and tomatoes. Annual flowers like marigolds, petunias and zinnias offer bright colors and blossoms all year long. Give your child small chores like watering and weeding (with help). They can also be artistic and make signs to label all of their plants. A scarecrow can keep away the birds. In the fall, have them harvest any fruit or vegetables you planted.

2 – Garden House

The garden house is actually made from a specific garden design. The house is the garden itself. To make the house, you need to plant strategically. Plant giant sunflower seeds to form a large square or rectangle. Leave one gap to act as a door and the rest boxed in for a house effect. On the outside of those sunflowers, plant smaller sunflowers and bushy flowers like cosmos or zinnias. Once the sunflowers grow tall, pull the heads towards each other and band loosely with rope or string. The thicker the row of sunflowers, the more like a "roof" it will seem. The shorter sunflowers and bushes will provide a solid wall.

3 – Swing set

A swing set is the ultimate play machine. Swing sets are made in so many different ways, it's hard to choose what you want. Well, what the kids want. There are metal sets, with the basic swings, slide and a glider. Then there are the deluxe plastic sets with slides, climbers and tunnels. Even more elaborate are the wood designs. They have forts, swings, tunnels, walls, ropes and everything a kid could possibly want. The only limit is your budget. If you can't afford a pre-made set, plans are sold individually and you just buy the materials and construct it yourself.

4 – Sandbox

Every child needs to play in the sand. Sandboxes can be purchased as a plastic shape and ready to fill. There are dinosaurs, ladybugs, trucks and plain shapes available with different sand capacities. Sand for fill is available in five-pound bags, already screened and cleaned at toy stores, home improvement stores and some department store. Sand can also be ordered by the truck full from a landscaper or garden store. Make sure to buy shovels in a variety of sizes and buckets, tractors and other sand toys. If you don't want to buy a sandbox, use 4 pieces of wood, nail at the corners and fill with sand.

5 – Trampoline

A trampoline provides hours of recreation, even for young kids. The jumping helps their coordination and flexibility, and giving them exercise at the same time. Kids can make up games when jumping inside with a group or just jumping alone. Some games could be leapfrog, popcorn or kangaroo. When buying a trampoline, you should also buy the safety net that goes around the outside perimeter. The net will keep all kids inside and prevent serious injuries from happening.

6 – Fort

A fort is a wooden structure, all by itself. Many boys like to play hunter with the fort, or act like a spy from it. The fort has four wood stilts built into a square and secured in the ground with cement. Support boards are put in place and then a floor over top of that is made of plywood or two by fours. Add sidewalls for security and to prevent anyone from falling out. A roof is optional. Make several small peepholes and a space for an opening. A ladder rests at the opening for easy access.

7 – Tree House

Every child has dreams of a great tree house. Tree houses can be simple structures made of cardboard or designs made of wood. Whichever route you choose, make sure it is sturdy and secured so it will not fall down. Tree houses can be just platforms, a floor and walls or a complete house structure with a roof. Make sure it has easy access with a rope or a ladder for exit.

8 – Chalk

Your child can use chalk to draw pictures on the sidewalk or driveway anytime. Make a contest with all of the neighbor kids to see who can make the funniest, scariest or prettiest picture. Of course, give out prizes to every participant. Chalk can also be used for games. Draw a hopscotch chart, write numbers for shuffleboard or draw a road for the bikes to travel down. Chalk opens up endless possibilities for creation and imagination. Large pieces will keep finger scrapes to a minimum too.

9 – Bubbles

Bubbles are a cheap and easy way to occupy your child's time. To make your own batch of bubbles, mix 4 quarts of water, 1 cup of corn syrup and 1 cup of dish soap and store in a two-liter bottle. Label it so it is not mistaken for something else! To use, pour soap into a shallow bowl. Use straws or bubble wands and blow bubbles all afternoon. Hook several straws together and blow large, fancy bubbles. Bubbles can be stored indefinitely under the sink or in the garage.

10 – Basketball Hoop

A basketball hoop can be purchased for any level of player. You can have your hoop mounted to the garage or side of the house or have a freestanding hoop. More expensive systems allow for dunking and breakaway rims and then basic models to just shoot hoops through. If you have serious players, mark the garage where the actual free throw line would be. Hold neighborhood contests for free throws and two on two tournaments.

11 – Wiffle Ball field

A waffle ball field will require a bit of space. If you don't have a large yard, modify the game to fit the space you do have. The most important part is to get out and play with your kids. Mark home plate, then where the three bases are. The pitchers mound is in the center, or wherever the potential pitcher can throw from. Make sure to keep the batting spot out of the direct line of any windows. Get enough neighbor kids together so you have two even teams. See who can hit the farthest or score the most.

12 – Stage

Every actor had to start somewhere, why not in the backyard? A stage can be a simple puppet stage, where they hide behind and let their arms and puppets show. Or it can be a fancy platform where they have skits and play for the neighborhood. On the sides of the stage, use two poles or wood beams and string rope across. Hang or sew old sheets or curtains to make an actual stage curtain. Have the kids make up tickets and programs and hand out to all of the neighbors. Make it a weekly event during the summer for added fun.

13 – Slide

A slide usually comes with a pre-made swing set. However, if you want to create your own, you can make wooden frames and buy plastic or metal slide attachments. Be creative and loop around the slide from the fort to the sandbox. Or from one side of the yard to the other. Check the stability of the slide often so that all of the parts remain secure.

14 – Pool

A pool doesn't have to be big and expensive for the kids to enjoy. Buy a small plastic or inflatable pool and let them go swimming. Fill it up with water early in the morning so it gets a chance to heat up. Add some toys to squirt each other with and they are good for the afternoon. If you do have a large pool, make up games like shark, Marco Polo and dive contests. Toys to use inside the pool can be noodles, floaties, rafts, pedal boats and dive sticks. Supervise any child at all times near a pool.

15 – Sprinkler

On a hot summer's day, every kid is looking for relief. Bring out the sprinkler! Sprinklers come in a wide assortment nowadays. There are standard ones where the water spits up, fancy ones that twirl the water around or a combination of the two. Slip and slides are also fun and give the kids some exercise too. Hook the hose up and lay it in the sun for an hour or two before use so some of the water is warm. Turn on and let them enjoy.

16 – Flower Garden

A flower garden is different from any old garden. It only has the prettiest and brightest flowers in the neighborhood. Have your child pick out their favorite flowers to plant and let them do the planting. If your child is older or really in to gardening, make a design. Have a star filled in with yellow flowers and surrounded by purple flowers. Use red, white and blue flowers to make a flag design.

17 – Butterfly Garden

Another summer activity for kids is to plant a butterfly garden. There are certain plants that will attract butterflies as host and nectar plants. Go to the library and see what is best for your climate zone. Head to the garden center and buy seeds or plants and the necessary supplies for planting. Plant your flowers and wait for the butterflies to arrive. Once they do, have your child keep a journal. What butterflies visited on what day, how many and what they liked the best.

18 – Bird feeder

A year round activity that kids can enjoy is feeding the birds. Bird feeders come in every shape and size. Bird feeders can be generic and hold a mixture of seeds or they can be specialized for hummingbirds, woodpeckers or bluebirds. Feeding the birds is especially important in the winter, when their natural food sources are gone or buried under snow. Keep the feeders full and write down every type of bird that visits for a few days or weeks each season. Then compare the notes after a year and see the differences. This will also teach your children about migration habits – and they won't realize it!

19 – Bird bath

To keep the birds happy, help the kids maintain a birdbath. The birdbath should be plastic and shallow so the birds don't drown. Place a large rock in the center so the birds can stand on it to drink. The rock also keeps it from tipping over in a windstorm. Scrub with mild soap and water every few weeks to keep the algae and germs from building up. Have the kids watch and see if anything else visits the birdbath.

20 – Toad house

Protect the little animals around your house. Use a clay flowerpot and make a toad house. Toads keep the bad bugs away and you should encourage more to live in your yard. Carve or cut a two-inch hole towards the top. Let the kids paint or decorate it however, they want for their toad friend. Flip it upside down and place near the shrubs or where your toad likes to hide out. Set a rock on top so it isn't easily tipped over. Eventually, the toad will find his new home and move right in. Have the kids check back often and see how big he grows through the summer.

21 – Leaf pile

Leaf piles can only happen if you live near deciduous trees, and only in the fall. Choose a dry day, and preferably one that isn't windy to rake. Pile the leaves as high as possible and let the kids run and jump. Since this is a seasonal activity, they will enjoy every time since it is fun and they can't very often.

22 – Worm Farm

A worm farm is stereotypically for boys, however girls will enjoy one too. To build a wood farm, you need a frame set up like a fish aquarium. Use plexi-glass for the sides so you can peek in and see the worms anytime during the day. The kids can watch how they dig and what benefit they bring to the earth. Worm farms require little care or maintenance. They do need a cover so rainwater does not get in and flood them out.

23 – Ecosystem

An ecosystem for your kids to enjoy outside might be in the form of a pond. It can also be a bird garden, butterfly garden or bug haven. No matter which one you pick, involve the kids in setting it up and implementing. If you want to study pond ecosystems, go to the library and get books to study. Find out what plants are needed and what animals live in ponds. Tadpoles can be purchased, as well as snails and fish to stock a pond. You can also set up butterfly gardens, bird gardens and bug havens.

24 – Play House

With modern technology, playhouses can be very elaborate. There are plastic models that come in the shape of a castle, a log cabin and a house. Some have roofs, some do not but they all have doors, windows, and room to play inside. You can also buy patterns and construct your own out of wood. No matter what you do, the kids will love it and play inside for hours.

25 – Teeter Totter

One of the oldest toys on the books is still keeping kids entertained today. A simple see saw, made of wood or plastic, can easily be installed in the back yard. Find or use the pole for the center balance and secure the see saw in place. Make sure your kids know how to properly use one so injuries don't occur.

26 – Jungle Gym

A jungle gym can keep your kids busy for hours. They can play monkey, they can play cops and robbers or use it for a hideaway. Let their imagination do the trick! When you are buying a jungle gym, make sure it is sturdy and passes all manufacturing safety laws for size and content. If you are building one, buy a pattern and follow it closely so it is safe for all the children who use it. Jungle gyms can be made of poles, ropes or even netting.

27 – Merry Go Round

A merry go round is an old-fashioned playground toy. You can still buy metal and wood ones, or you could even create your own. Make a circular base out of sturdy material. On top, put supports and handles to hold on to. Using a pole, hook it securely into the ground. Load it up and spin away.

28 – Rock Climbing Wall

A rock climbing wall can be plain if made or elaborate if purchased from a store. Using 2 x 6 wood slats, lay them flat against other wood supports and nail down. Prop up and secure into the ground with cement, so it looks like a wall. Place hooks or steps sporadically in the wood to appear like natural rock holdings. Or place a rope at the top and tie securely so it hangs down and they can scale up like in the military.

29 – Bench

Along every walking path, nature trail or even a bike trail, place a bench for resting. The bench can be in a small garden or near a pond. Have it be child sized so they know it is just for them. The bench can turn into a place where they retreat when they just want to be by themselves. Have them paint or decorate the bench with their name for a personalized touch.

30 – Wishing Well

A wishing well makes for a good kid distraction, as well as decoration in a yard. The wishing well can cover a real well spot or simply placed in the landscaping. To keep your children happy, tell them it is a real wishing well. Offer them pennies to throw in every so often and have them make a wish. Just because there isn't real water in it doesn't mean it won't work like at other fountains that do have running water!

31 – Water Fountain

Kids love water. A practical use for water in the yard is to create a water fountain that feeds a pond, the birds or bees. The water fountain can also be used by other critters that need a drink of water during the day or night. Kids will like to watch what animals come to the water fountain. They are also attracted to water for its soothing sounds.

32 – Bike Path

A bike path can be crafted by making the dirt packed around the yard so it is easy to ride on. If your kids are older, the dirt path can be used for motorcycles and small dirt bikes. Make it loop around your yard and be interesting. If it is for larger, motorized bikes, make sure it has ample room for turning. Keep it groomed by raking so debris doesn't get buried underneath and puncture a tire.

33 – Nature Trail

If you have a large yard, build a nature trail. This trail can be elaborate or basic. Pick a path and outline both sides so the kids don't wander off into flowers or seedlings trees by accident. You can also use woodchips or stones for the actual path. Woodchips will keep weeds from growing in the walking area. Make the trail interesting and weave around trees, from one side of the yard to the other. It will be so fun, the kids won't even know they are getting exercise.

34 – Birdhouse

Part of playing outside and having things to do involve nature. One great way for kids to do both is by having a birdhouse in the backyard. If the kids are old enough, they can even be responsible for keeping the birdhouse clean each year. They have a great time watching the birds feed the babies while they are in the sandbox or swinging nearby. Provide food and water sources to keep the birds in your yard all year long.

35 – Ball Pit

A ball pit is a great place for exercise. Make a square box out of wood or buy a plastic one that is large enough to hold several children. Fill it with soft, plastic or foam balls. Let the kids jump inside one at a time or together for even more fun.

36 – Campfire Pit

What is better on a cool summer night than a campfire? Roasted marshmallows! Use a chiminea or build a campfire pit in the backyard to have impromptu cookouts. If you build a fire pit, you will need to check the state's regulations, but they often need to be dug into the ground and have a solid surface all of the way around. If you use a fire pit pre-made, pile the wood in and light. You can have those marshmallows golden brown in no time.

37 – Pond

A pond requires some major work, unless you want a really small one. First, you need to find your spot. Then you need to dig it out, either with shovels or a backhoe. After it is dug out, then you will need to decide if you will be having any plants and wildlife. If so, then they need to be purchased and planted. After the plants in place, fill it with water or wait for it to rain. When it is full, let the kids add fish, tadpoles and bugs to the water to create own ecosystem.

38 – Swim Platforms

Kids also love to swim in ponds, so a dock or swim platform is ideal. A dock can be as simple as two by fours nailed over some barrels that float. They can jump off the end and enjoy the cool water. A swim platform is a little fancier. The swim platform requires something on all four sides to make it float evenly. Plastic drums are good for this. Hook the four drums together with wire or wood so they remain evenly spaced. Then cover with plywood and fasten securely with nails. Cover with outdoor carpet if desired. Secure the platform in the pond so it doesn't float around. Remember to supervise children in the water at all times.

39 – Tire Swing

A tire swing is an inexpensive way to get your kids to play outside. Find a sturdy, long rope and tie it to a large and sturdy tree branch. Use one of your old tires and tie the rope around the top. Make sure to drill small holes in the bottom of the tire so rainwater can drain out. The kids can swing alone or as a group on the swing. Check the rope every so often for wear marks and that it is secured tightly.

40 – Lemonade Stand

Start your child in the right direction as an entrepreneur. Build a real lemonade stand with wood for them. Use the same pattern of Lucy's stand in Charlie Brown cartoons for your stand. Have a small counter, a short overhead sign and a front. Let them be creative and paint it up with their own design and logo.

41 – Picnic Table

What summer is complete without at least one picnic? You can plan your picnic for the conventional picnic table or create one of your own. Tree stumps work well as seats, as do large rocks. Place a larger rock or stump in the middle to use as a table. Natural picnic tables don't require much cleaning; the rain will take care of it. Real ones do. Wipe clean after eating so the bugs won't get all of your leftovers and make a mess.

42 – Spy Zone

Creating a Spy Zone will require some creativity. Throughout the yard, make some places that are hidden from sight, but great for a little spy to sit and watch from. Behind the lilac bush where the branches hang down, under the slide or next to the bush by the shed. Point out the spots once and see how often they are used. Spy areas are also good hide and seek locations.

43 – Hammock

A tree is not just a tree in the kid's backyard. If there are adequate trees that are a good distance apart, hang a hammock. Let the kids climb up and be animals. Maybe they will even fall asleep!

44 – Rope

A rope to climb will also require a sturdy tree branch or a swing set bar. Use a thick rope, preferably nylon so slivers won't develop, and tie it tightly around the bar or branch. Every so often, tie a large knot on the rope. This will act as a place for them to get a grip with their hands or feet. Using a rope to climb improves coordination, arm strength and muscle development.

45 – Electric Toys

Even though they may not be using their own legs to pedal or push, they are outside playing in an electric toy. Using the electric toy like a tractor, motorcycle or Barbie Jeep may improve their imagination skills and free play. Other forms of electric or motorized vehicles are police cars, fire trucks, four wheelers, hummers and jeeps.

46 – Igloo

Granted, this is harder to do in areas that don't have any or much snow during the winter. However, you can be creative too. When you do have adequate snow, buy the square ice mold or simply use your hands and pack snow. Build a small igloo by stacking the blocks of snow or packing walls four like structures. Use cardboard or wood for the roof, so the kids won't have a collapse or get hurt. Or, leave it roofless so the igloos doubles into a snowball fight barrier. Leave a space for a door and let the kids at it.