

# Room to Play:

## A Recipe For Fun



By Joan W. Ziegler

Why does a jungle gym sit empty or the expensive play structure in the backyard fall into disrepair? Why do children choose a mud puddle over a pile of expensive toys? At our house, the tire swing hanging from the tree near the back door was a family favorite, while the “official” swing set is rarely used. Over the years, I have learned that it is not the specified play structures that give children room to

play, but the ordinary outdoor spaces and potential they provide for kids to invent, imagine, explore, run, tumble, hide, and play games.

Busy scheduled lives make free time a precious commodity for both adults and children. Opportunities to explore and create lie just outside our doors in the spaces we’ve created. Once there, we have all the ingredients for

imaginative play. Searching for treasure opens the door to the wonders of nature. Gold and precious stones lie buried in the gravel of pathways, and seedpods, fruits, and flowers ignite the imagination. Find a forest, or become the architect of a house or small fort in the tall sunflower stalks that are planted in groups. Tuck yourself away in the secret rooms and hideaways of evergreen plantings and shrub borders. Variety and interesting forms, flowers, and textures draw children outside to discover and explore.

The sensory delights of soil, sand, and water offer endless entertainment opportunities for young children. Sandboxes and playhouses can be incorporated seamlessly into the landscape or garden. A vacant raised planter near the front door was the favorite play spot of my friend’s son. After years playing with dump trucks and front-end loaders in this planter,

his “construction site” was easily returned back to a floral accent.

With thoughtful planning, you can encourage and give reason for both children and adults to go outside to play. Design your deck to be a multi-level play structure by adding elements that can host a number of activities. You can provide different ways to climb up and get off of the deck with spiral staircases, fire poles, and slides. Invite kids and adults to nap, read, sit, play, or work out under the deck by hanging a hammock; placing chairs or benches and other multi-use features like a tire swing, rings, bars, or hooks; or even mounting a steering wheel to a post.

Enrich your yard space by building a terrace that levels a sloped portion of your yard for running and games. Design accent boulders and retaining walls for sitting, climbing, and jumping, in addition to transitioning and holding grade. Give tall trees more responsibility than just providing shade by hanging swings or knotted ropes for climbing. Design driveways and walkways to include space for basketball, skateboarding, biking, hopscotch, and chalk drawing.

Take hold of your yard and landscape by creating outdoor living spaces. You can still do your serious daily living, but can also plan for running, jumping, hiding, exploring, climbing, and swinging in your landscape. Proximity is key, though; you will use it if it is convenient. And while younger kids feel free to play if they know that



you are close by, older children prefer separation between you and their hideaways. Either way, the essential ingredient in the recipe for outdoor fun is a landscape with flexible spaces and challenges, and one that provides opportunities for imagination, invention, and exploration.

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Photographs provided by Ziegler Design Associates.

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