

Natural, nature-full play

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When Richard Louv coined the term, 'nature deficit disorder' in *Last Child in the Woods*, he inspired a movement to reconnect kids with nature. Whether you're building a backyard playground or creating a community play area, turn to eco-friendly, non-toxic materials and products to keep children healthy and safe in outdoor play.

Playground guidelines

Wood is favoured for its availability and natural appeal, and steel, for its strength. To help play structures weather the elements, chemical treatments offer wood pest, mould and rot protection; leaded paint keeps steel rust-free. However, children's rapidly developing brains and bodies are especially vulnerable to the harmful toxins of chemicals like arsenic and lead in these preservatives. Ensure children wash their hands before touching food after playtime.

Here's some 'dos' + 'why-fors' in structures.

NO TO Lumber, pressure-treated with arsenic-containing Chromated Copper Arsenate (CCA); creosote, pentachlorophenol and tributyl tin oxide. Paint may harbour lead. **WHY** Arsenic, a carcinogen linked to cancers, immune and cardiovascular diseases was banned from new play structures in 2003 + it leaches out of wood for years. Ingested lead is linked to brain and nervous system damage. **YES TO** Naturally rot- and insect-resistant North American cedar, redwood, white oak, walnut, larch, tamarack or black locust.

Treat surfaces with linseed oil to extend lifespan. Seal older structures every two years with a non-toxic sealant.

ECO-CENTRIC PLAY SPACES

Bienenstock designs structural pieces that incorporate natural elements including rolling hills, fallen logs, boulders and reclaimed wood, in handcrafted hill slides, climbing and art walls + activity centres of Natural Playgrounds landscapes. Open-ended play in natural environments develops creativity, fosters a sense of wonder and directly reconnects children with nature.

naturalplaygrounds.ca

Courtesy of Bienenstock



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Cheerful plastic ‘why-fors’

Bright, moldable, durable plastic adds versatility + colourful fun to playground structures. Safe choices include polypropylene; low or high density polyethylene; 100% recycled structural plastic or high density polyethylene (HDPE). Dr. Rick Smith, Executive Director of Environmental Defence, warns that of all plastics, the widely used polyvinyl chloride (PVC) is the most toxic.

NO TO PVC. WHY Added stabilizers, plasticizers and fillers can leach and are potent hormone disrupters when ingested from little hands. Smoldering PVC releases toxic hydrochloric acid and dioxins; burning leaves a surface residue of PCBs and carcinogenic dioxin.

COLOURFUL MILK JUG PLAY

Green Roots play equipment, made by Play Mart, uses reclaimed non-toxic HDPE milk jugs. At least 85% recycled, each structure uses 6,000 or more containers. These virtually maintenance-free playgrounds won't splinter, crack or shrink; never need painting or treating; are structurally strong and flexible, resistant to graffiti, fading and pests. Play Mart's Take Back Program recycles their old sets + the 100-year warranty earns extra eco-friendly bonus points. greenrootsplyequipment.com

Ground cover: good, better + best

Reduce hurtful falls with deep, soft playground surfacing. The age + number of children using the play area, structure height + upkeep determines the suitable choice. **Good** Loose-fill materials like pea gravel, wood chips or shredded bark displace and compress easily, require raking, top-up; it can hide animal feces or sharp objects. Sand absorbs less impact and is messy when wet; wood decays and harbours mould and fungus. **Better** Rubber surfaces or grass are okay for tumbling toddlers, but, higher structures for older children climbing on ladders or slides require a thicker surface. **Best** Eco-friendly, impact-absorbing materials protect nearby ecosystems, deter pests and animals + naturally resist mould, mildew and fungus, to keep playgrounds hygienic. Non-toxic recycled rubber mulch fill or bonded mats are the new top performers: low dust and superior drainage keeps kids clean and playgrounds open after rain; won't rot or fade; stays cooler than sand on hot days.

- Heffco's 100% recycled rubber mulch, inspired by natural wood and stone, won't compress. Provides exceptional cushioning, is virtually maintenance-free, durable and long-lasting. heffcogroup.com
 - Complement natural playgrounds, high traffic or environmentally sensitive areas where grass is preferred with Durolawn recycled rubber mats. Mats protect the grass root and crown allowing grass to grow through holes in six to 8 weeks. Good for temporary or permanent use, on flat ground or hills + allows wheel chair access on sand. durolawn.com
- With a little creativity + research, options abound to invite kids into nature-safe, nature-full play areas. **H&L**

