



ON THE HOUSE: Play houses can be easy as child's play

By **MORRIS and JAMES CAREY**
The Associated Press

Warmer weather turns our attention to the great outdoors or, for the children, the great backyard. And sooner or later, they may request a little something extra: a tree house.

Tree houses and other play structures are a joy for children — a place to explore, to imagine, to keep younger brothers and sisters out. Unfortunately, they can also be a source of anxiety for parents.

But with the right kind of planning and construction, play structures can prove beneficial to adults as well. According to the National Association of Realtors, outdoor spaces have become a bigger part of the “curb appeal” that attracts buyers and can even increase a home's selling price.

We asked San Francisco artist and play structure expert Barbara Butler for her top 10 DIY safety tips on building a backyard play space for children. Whether you're planning to build a mini-mansion for your mini-me, or a simpler structure that houses imagination more than amenities, it's important to keep safety in mind.

1. Consult your local building codes and file necessary building permits before starting your project. Nothing is more frustrating for you or devastating for your child than finding you have to tear down the structure when it doesn't pass local standards. If there are no specific codes for tree houses or play structures, use building codes for backyard decks as a guide. In

earthquake or hurricane areas, you may need to add tie-down hardware. Keep deck heights at a maximum of 7' off the ground and install 3' high railing.

2. Plan your space before you build and watch out for overexposure to the sun. Try to place your structure in a shady spot.

3. Round all of the edges on the structure to avoid sharp corners, and sand or grind wood surfaces down to reduce the possibilities of splinters.

4. Anticipate a child's natural tendency to explore. Avoid creating any entrapments in the railing for a child's head or torso. Avoid any gaps in railings larger than 3-1/2" x 5-1/2".

5. Watch nearby greenery. Keep 40se bushes and other thorny, spiky plants away from the structures and, especially, keep your eyes on trees.

6. Make sure overhead branches of trees are trimmed regularly, so that nothing will fall on the kids during play and keep tree branches out of reach of young arms. Nothing is more enticing to a child than the realization that if they stand on the roof or railing of a play structure, and stretch just a little, they can reach a previously unreachable

upper branch. Make sure no electrical wires are within reach of the structure. Once kids get playing, they don't stop to think whether an overhead wire is part of the play structure or not.

7. Use only nontoxic materials on your structure. Use lead-free paints or stain the wood instead. Barbara suggests staining over painting, as stains are easier to maintain; paint tends to chip & peel, while stains simply fade with time.

8. Remove any loose additions that kids may have attached to the structure. Talk to your kids and their friends about making “additions” to the play structure and set ground rules early that adding ropes, stairs, and towers won't be tolerated.

9. Design easy ways up and down for smaller kids, as well as challenging ways for older kids. Adults will also appreciate the easy way up.

10. Inspect your play structure frequently, before the spring and summer when kids start to play outside. Tighten bolts, check for damage, clean off debris and spider webs, inspect for splinters and peeling paint, and check the swing hardware.

A well-built, well-maintained tree house will amuse your children today and enchant your grandchildren in the next generation.

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