

Play Zone

School's out, and it's no surprise your kids are clamoring to stay outdoors. Keep them safe and close to home by building an outdoor play area.

Start by asking your kids what they envision. Do they want a nature area with a garden or bug observation station, or perhaps a building area with toy blocks and a table? Swing sets, slides, play towers and the like are the most popular choices for play areas, and you don't have to have a huge yard to accommodate them. If you want to include this kind of play equipment, be sure to consider size, materials, components, price and safety features before buying.

Once you've decided what you want to include in the play area, assess your yard for the ideal location. Choose a large,

level area in your backyard, and remove any rocks or roots so there's little chance of tripping on uneven ground. Consider placing the play area underneath big trees for extra protection from the sun. Then, prep the play area: Dig up the dirt or grass and refill the play zone with a protective surface such as mulch, sand or shredded rubber at least three inches deep to minimize injury if a child falls.

Install bender board (landscaping border material) on the outskirts of the play area to ensure the filling stays put. Depending on how old your kids are, consider adding a fence around the border of the play area for added safety, and keep it free of obstacles (like rocks or lawn chairs) at least six feet around each edge.

Keep in mind that not all play areas need to look and feel like a playground. Kids can have just as much fun with



weatherproof chalkboards, a basin of water with toy boats to race, or even cardboard boxes in different sizes.

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