



Veni, Vidi, Video-free:

"I came, I saw, I got the kids away from the tv"

Reviewing the Joys of Indoor Playgrounds

"Coffee, comfortable chairs, and a clean and bright space."

This haven may sound like your local donut shop, but thankfully it's what more and more indoor playgrounds in the GTA are turning into. Playgrounds were originally set up to satisfy only the children's needs, but smart owners have discovered that making Mom (or the occasional Dad) comfortable and relaxed while they're visiting their playgrounds makes for many return visits. Fresh coffee, comfortable seating areas, up-to-date magazines, clean bathrooms,

(one playground even has wireless capabilities) and a bright and spacious play area, are all drawing regular customers back again and again.



If you are new to Toronto, or to the world of indoor playgrounds, here are some facts that will help you negotiate your first few visits.



"What makes a great indoor playground?"

From the moment you enter an indoor playground, you should feel assured that it is a place where you would allow your children to play. Clean, bright, and open spaces are great for maximum comfort, and the ability to watch your children from the "adult corner" that most playgrounds offer, while not having to jump up and run every time you can't quite see where their mouths and hands are. Friendly staff who seem child-oriented are a great bonus, but typically an indoor playground will only have one staff member on duty (particularly on weekdays). Her primary role is to act as a receptionist/cashier. Don't expect her to be hands-on with your children. The playground is "unsupervised," meaning you are responsible for the children you bring. However, a good playground will have an attentive employee who notices when toys are being abused, Mom could use a little help, or when a mini-battle is breaking out.

Many parents choose to visit an indoor playground due to inclement weather or safety concerns about

their younger children playing in a large, sandy, or untended playground area outside. Safety is a key consideration when visiting an indoor playground. A good indication that the playground operator is taking safety seriously is that the toys are clean, with all working pieces, and that they are kept in good condition.

If the playground advertises that they have activities for infants to school age, make sure each group is going to have enough to do before handing over your cash. An "infant play area" should be more than a bouncy chair and a tired-looking mobile. Finding a playground where it seems there are "locals" or "regulars" making return visits is a good indication that your children will have a safe and fun time.

"I totally 'get' an indoor playground when it's cold or rainy outside. But why wouldn't I just go outside to a playground if the weather is good?"



Indoor playgrounds offer a closed, clean environment, which can be hard to find in even the best outdoor playground. You don't have to worry about your child picking up garbage, rocks, and assorted unmentionables, and they're unable to wander off when you turn your back for 15 seconds. It is very unlikely that a young child would be able to open the front door of an indoor playground and walk out without anyone noticing. The indoor playground allows you a chance to sit, sip, and enjoy the company of your friends, make new acquaintances, or catch up on your gossipy magazines without this extra worry. While fresh air is very important for children (and parents), indulging in an activity that doesn't require sunscreen, hats, or a rain jacket, "just in case," can fill the energy and exercise requirements of your child in a fun and safe way. In the case of allergies, outdoor pollen-laden

Family Fun

or cold air can be avoided. And, in the case of babies, it can be a challenge to find an outdoor playground with enough toys that are suitable for babies to play with on their own, (my lower back remembers the 1,000 pushes of a baby swing at a local park) whereas a good indoor playground has a well-stocked baby-suitable play area.



“What can I expect from most indoor playgrounds? How much do they cost?”

The term “indoor playground” encompasses everything from one-room play areas to warehouse-sized facilities, complete with wall climbing, gymnastics and sporting equipment. Most common are playgrounds with a small separate baby-play area, and a larger space for pre-schoolers and toddlers that might include a climbing structure, slides, plastic kitchens, cars, and the requisite ball room. You can expect to pay anywhere from \$6.00 per child for the smaller venues, and up to \$10.00 for the larger, more extensive locations. Normally a “volume discount” will be offered when bringing in more than one child, and infants under the age of 12 months are often given a reduced rate, or admitted free of charge. Coffee, juice, and small snacks are normally available (at an extra cost), as are seating areas for the children to eat, and a comfortable couch for the larger folks.



Win some great toys! TPT has terrific prizes to give away, including LittleTykes toys! Tell us the name and location of your favourite indoor playground, and in one sentence explain why you like it. Email entries to maria.paguirigan@tpg.rogers.com. Contest closes Jan. 16, 2006. See contest rules at todaysparenttoronto.ca

“How can I get the most out of my indoor playground visit?”

It's great if you have had the opportunity to visit the space prior to announcing to your young children that you will be going – that way you know what to promise and what to expect when you walk in the door. Meeting friends is a fun way to let your kids enjoy a playdate without requiring anyone to either clean their house or feel guilty about the mess. Support the playground and purchase their nominally priced coffee, but take advantage of their child-sized chairs and tables to bring your own snacks (peanut free of course) and juices. Snacks are allowed at indoor playgrounds, but as most have a policy about not leaving food out, set a specific time for snacks with your kids or you will be constantly taking snacks out and putting them away. Take all the supplies you normally would with your children when venturing out (change of clothes, diapers, wipes, etc.) so that you don't have to leave the fun because Junior got too excited and forgot about his bodily function



timetable. Take a current magazine or book if you want to guarantee some reading time – some indoor playgrounds are as bad as doctors' offices for keeping their publications up-to-date. Make sure that the day you choose to go the playground hasn't been booked for a private party (most playgrounds aren't open to the public on Saturdays, or even Sunday afternoons due to birthdays), or a special event at the playground which required pre-booking and an increased fee. This is common around holidays (Christmas, Halloween, Valentine's Day), but many playgrounds also offer visits with popular cartoon characters during non-holiday time as well.

Making the trip to an indoor playground can add fun, excitement, and hopefully exhaustion (theirs, not yours) to a dull winter day – check one out to see what you've been missing. See our directory under Family Fun at todaysparenttoronto.ca. The coffee's on...

Kathy Buckworth is a contributor to Today's Parent Toronto. Her book, "The Secret Life of SuperMom" is available at bookstores everywhere.

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For more information, please contact Heidi Kiefer at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, (416) 535-8501 extension 4594.