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# South Florida's Best Playgrounds

By Robyn A. Friedman  
South Florida Parenting

Many South Floridians visit playgrounds that aren't in their own backyard - or even in their own county.

Chris Dardet may live in Boca Raton, but her favorite playground lies across the Broward County line, in Parkland. Once a week, she takes her two children - Matthew, 6, and Delaney, 3 - to Liberty Park, where Matthew hops on the swings and Delaney runs into the giant wooden playground, slides down its slides and climbs through its tunnels. "It's a hidden treasure," Dardet said. "Of course, now I'm ruining [the secret]."

Dardet chooses to travel to Parkland, rather than taking her kids to the renowned Sugar Sand Park, located closer to her in Boca, because it's less crowded at Liberty Park.

"It doesn't get mobbed, like Sugar Sand does," she said. Dardet also likes the visibility at Liberty Park, where she can keep a closer eye on the kids without having to physically follow them around the playground.

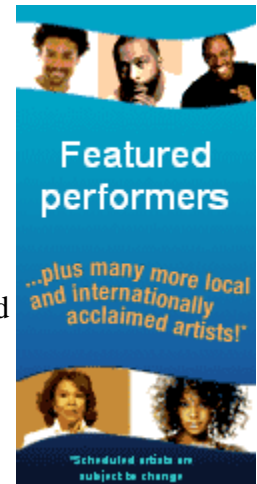
South Florida is filled with playgrounds. But parents need to be careful; experts say that not all playgrounds are safe or suitable for children of all ages.

"A playground should meet the physical, emotional, social and intellectual needs of a child," said Donna Thompson, executive director of the National Program for Playground Safety in Cedar Falls, Iowa. "A playground that breaks down play areas for kids of different ages - so they meet their developmental needs - is better."

Thompson said that most playgrounds for children of school age are built for ages 5 through 12. "Parents need to be cautious not to let their preschoolers play on school-age equipment," she said. Thompson also cautions parents not to automatically assume that a playground is safe just because it's located at a school or a municipal or county park.

The best playgrounds fit the following criteria, Thompson said, citing the acronym "SAFE." They should be:

- 1. Supervisable.** Parents should be able to easily see their children at all times and should actually do so. "Don't just pick up a New York Times and sit on a bench and let the kids play," Thompson said. Since 40 percent of all playground injuries are caused by inadequate supervision, she said, parents really need to pay attention.
- 2. Age-appropriate.** Optimally, a playground should include separate areas for kids 2 through 5 and 5 through 12, Thompson said.
- 3. Fall surfacing.** There should be a suitable surface under the playground so that children don't get hurt when they fall. Thompson recommends a depth of at least 12 inches and said that wood products, sand, gravel and rubber products are acceptable surfaces.
- 4. Equipment and surfacing maintenance.** The playground should be secure, with all the screws tight and the surfacing thick enough.



In choosing a playground, South Florida parents seem to not only search for a play structure itself, but also for open fields for running, picnic tables, sitting areas and, of course, restroom facilities. Here's a sampling of some of the best:

## **Broward County**

### **Deicke Park**

1200 NW 106th Ave., Plantation

This park has a large tot lot for both toddlers and older children as well as a half-mile-long jogging trail with exercise stations, tennis courts, a sand volleyball court, a basketball court and open play areas. Restrooms are available during daylight hours. Sight lines are excellent, so it's easy to keep track of your exploring child.

### **Holiday Park**

701 NE 12th Ave., Fort Lauderdale

In addition to a small children's playground with a real train engine to climb on and in addition to the typical play equipment and swings, this park has baseball/softball fields, basketball courts, football/soccer fields, jogging trails with exercise stations, picnic pavilions, racquetball, shuffleboard, an outdoor hockey rink, sand volleyball, horseshoe pits and a bicycle/skating path.

### **Liberty Park**

9200 Ranch Road, Parkland

This seven-acre park has a one-acre tot lot and playground built by volunteers, as well as a water play area. There are pavilions for barbecues or picnics, grills, restroom facilities and a horse corral.

### **Betti Stradling Park**

10301 Wiles Road, Coral Springs

This 21-acre park is home to the "Slide & Glide playground," as well as three baseball/softball fields, two basketball courts, two sand volleyball courts, two picnic pavilions, a milelong jogging/walking path and a large open play area. It fits the needs of children of all ages because it has so many things to do and has lots of grassy areas to run in. Built by volunteers, the Slide & Glide playground is a huge wooden structure with bridges, slides, swings and areas to climb. The area is fenced so little ones can't wander off.

## **Miami-Dade County**

### **Dante Fascell Park**

8700 SW 57th Ave., Miami

This park has good tree cover and lots of shade - perfect for those hot days of summer! It features new playground equipment and is separated into play areas for both young and older children. The playground lies alongside a canal, complete with ducks, so be sure to bring lots of bread so the kids can feed them - and, of course, watch carefully so they don't slip into the water. In addition to the playground, there is a large grassy area, two pavilions and tennis courts.

### **Evelyn Langlieb Greer Park**

(formerly Pinecrest Park)

8200 SW 124th St., Pinecrest

This 10-acre park has a covered playground area complete with a climbing wall, firefighter pole, slides and other play areas. There are separate play areas for little children and older ones, as well as swings, open grassy areas and a wide sidewalk just perfect for inline skating. The park also features athletic fields, batting cages, a recreation center and community gazebo.

### **Founders Park**

3105 NE 190th St., Aventura

This 12-acre park, just south of the Lehman Causeway and east of West Country Club Drive, has an age-appropriate (and handicapped-accessible) playground, an exercise trail, sun shelters, tennis courts and athletic fields and open spaces. There are restrooms and vending machines on site. Note: There is an admission fee for nonresidents.

## **Palm Beach County**

### **Sugar Sand Park**

300 S. Military Trail, Boca Raton

Within this 132-acre park lies the famed Science Playground, a huge, three-level wooden play structure that has interactive activities that illustrate scientific principles. Kids can take a simulated rocket trip or see what the inside of a human eye looks like. There is also a water play area. Adjacent to the Science Playground is the Children's Science Explorium, with hands-on interactive exhibits for ages 6 to 12. The park also has a theater, baseball/softball fields, an in-line hockey rink and picnic pavilions. While Sugar Sand is an awesome park, it is also a wildly popular one and gets very crowded on weekends. Some parents don't like the lack of visibility at the park as well. When children start climbing in the wooden structure, it's easy to lose sight of them. There's only one entrance into and out of the play area, but parents of young children can find it disconcerting that children may not be visible at all times.

### **Tiger Shark Cove**

13800 Greenbriar Blvd., Wellington

This park features a large wooden play structure that was built by hundreds of volunteers. It has swings for both toddlers and older kids, as well as interactive chimes and a shark for kids to climb on. There are also softball fields, batting cages, pavilions and restrooms.

### **Veterans Park**

802 NE First St., Delray Beach

Just north of Atlantic Avenue, this beautiful park overlooks the Intracoastal Waterway (read: cool breezes). In addition to a fabulous wooden play structure that was designed by Delray Beach's youth and built by the community, the park features waterfront picnic facilities, restrooms, a gazebo suitable for weddings and a recreation center with shuffleboard courts.

*Robyn A. Friedman is a freelance writer and frequent contributor. The mother of one, she lives in Boca Raton.*