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Mom, Dad, This Playground's for You

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Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

GROWN-UPS New York City installed an adult playground at Macombs Dam Park in the Bronx.

IT was a classic father-son moment, reversed: The 2-year-old sat and watched patiently as his parent hung upside down from the monkey bars. A few feet away, a white-haired man skipped across an S-shaped metal beam. Another man squeezed his six-foot frame onto a metal rack for situps, and two others hoisted themselves up chin-up bars.



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times
OUTDOOR FITNESS Rosie Hambery and
Joanna Gonzalez, foreground, worked out in
the Bronx in May.

Never mind the punishing diets, the gym dates and the doctors' warnings, the quest to live a healthier, more active lifestyle has come to this: playgrounds for adults.

New York City is testing its first such playground in Macombs Dam Park in the Bronx, and plans to bring as many as two dozen more to neighborhoods across the five boroughs in the next 18 months, park officials said.

The goal is to lure people off their couches and into the outdoors with specially designed playground equipment — in grown-up shades like forest green and beige — that recall the joy of childhood play while tightening up flabby abs, thighs and triceps.

Though there are no swings or slides — these are essentially outdoor gyms — such playgrounds not only have the look of traditional children's play spaces, but they are also built in some cases by the same manufacturers.

The adult playground concept is borrowed from China and parts of Europe, where outdoor fitness areas for adults have become as routine as high-fiber diets or vitamin D supplements in preventive care, particularly for older people.

Now a growing number of city and park officials, health experts and community leaders throughout the country are praising the health and social benefits of adult playgrounds. They say that the playgrounds will succeed where treadmills have failed in combating rising rates of obesity and related illnesses by enticing the grown-ups out for play dates.

“Let's face it, most of us dread going to the gym,” said Dr. David Ludwig, a Harvard Medical School professor who directs the Obesity Prevention Center at Boston Children's Hospital. “The point is to make physical activity fun, easy and accessible, so it's the normal thing to do.”

Adult playgrounds have spread across the nation, including to Miami-Dade County in Florida, where four fitness zones with advanced strength-training equipment opened this year in neighborhoods with high rates of cardiovascular diseases. San Antonio has added outdoor fitness stations to 30 parks since 2010. Los Angeles has 30, with 15 more on the way, after park officials found, to their surprise, there were “lines of people waiting to use the equipment.”

And two mothers in Washington State, Paige Dunn and Kelly Singer, started a grass-roots campaign last year to build “[Momentum](#)” sites to help new mothers shed their baby weight; each

site would face a children's play area and hold seven pieces of equipment that specifically target problem areas. The women raised \$30,000 to open the first one in Auburn, Wash; a second will be dedicated in Redmond, Wash., next month.

In New York City, where adults are banned from playgrounds unless accompanied by a child, the \$200,000 Bronx playground with 15 pieces of equipment opened two years ago as part of an effort to get more people out to the parks to exercise and slim down. Parks officials said it had been popular enough that the city was now planning a rapid expansion.

"This represents a continuing evolution of both parks and playgrounds," said Adrian Benepe, the parks commissioner.

This fall, the city will build a second adult playground with upgraded amenities — river view, exercise mats, chess tables, a sign that says, "Adult Space" — at John Jay Park on the Upper East Side. Councilwoman Jessica Lappin, who represents the neighborhood, said she had secured \$250,000 in city money for the project after some of her older constituents pointed out, "There are tot lots, but there's no place for us."

"A lot of these people live alone," she said. "So going outside to the park, and being part of the activity of the park, is important to them."

About 150 spots in city parks have one or two pieces of old-fashioned adult fitness equipment, mostly static pieces like chin-up bars. And parks elsewhere have had fitness circuits for years, though usually they've been fairly modest. Many of the new adult playgrounds will have comprehensive workout areas and equipment with moving pieces.



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

Officials say the adult playground is part of a plan to add as many as two dozen throughout the city in the next 18 months. The playgrounds are much cheaper to build than children's playgrounds.

As public policy, adult playgrounds have proved far easier to sell as an anti-obesity measure than, say, a proposed ban on large sodas. They produce almost no noise or car traffic, take up little space and are cheaper to build than children's playgrounds, though the cost varies depending on size and location.

"They're not controversial," said Michael Shull, a parks superintendent in Los Angeles, which spends an average of \$40,000 on a site for adults, versus \$300,000 for children. New York City's adult playgrounds will cost from \$75,000 for the smallest one, with five pieces of equipment, to more than \$200,000, park officials said. In contrast, children's playgrounds typically start at \$500,000, with the majority running \$1 million to \$2 million.

The demand for adult-size equipment has created a niche business in an industry that once catered mainly to the elementary school set. GameTime, one of the largest manufacturers of children's playground equipment, introduced a new adult line in 2009 called iTrack, which includes elliptical trainers and rowing machines. Outdoor Fitness in Colorado has worked with more than 600 adult sites since 2005, according to Barry King, the founder. In addition to sites in public parks, the equipment is being installed at residential developments and business complexes.

Jim Sargen, a former technology executive who started TriActive America in California, which has supplied 470 adult sites since 2004, half in the past three years, said he discovered firsthand while traveling in Beijing in 2002 that exercise could be passed off as play. "My wife, who doesn't normally exercise, climbed onto one of the pieces," he recalled. "She said, 'It's kind of fun,' and an idea clicked."

The adult playground in the Bronx, the city's poorest borough and a place dogged by troubling health statistics, is built on top of a parking garage and sandwiched between a track and basketball and handball courts. It has attracted regulars like Brian Ferreira, 20, who once tried working out at a children's playground near his home in Soundview, only to draw stares from the parents. Now he hops onto two trains and a bus, three times a week, to have a playground of his own. "I use every piece of equipment," he said. "It's good endurance training."

On a recent morning, regulars and newcomers alike drifted onto the playground and waited patiently — no tears or whining here — to use the equipment; one of the most popular was a pair of metal seats that any child would have loved, rising and falling with the push of foot pedals.

The morning hours brought fathers with toddlers, and muscled older men who wore gloves and earphones and effortlessly executed situps, push-ups and pull-ups. They retreated when noisy teenagers passed through bouncing basketballs and running around the equipment without stopping to use any.

In the afternoon, a 30-year-old court clerk swung from the monkey bars during his lunch hour. Others just watched.

"Oh no, I'm past my prime," said Daren Trapp, a bus driver with a tummy bulge who was among the observers. "It's out in the open, and I guess I'm a private individual."

But Colette Prosper, an unemployed mother of five, and her daughter, Iesha, 21, came ready to sweat. It was their third time at the playground in a week; the first time, a stranger had to show them how to use the equipment. Ms. Prosper, 45, who said she was trying to lose 40 pounds, said her clothes were already feeling looser.

"It's a free membership, and I like what they have to offer," she said. "I'm getting older, so I'm trying to get everything in shape."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/nyregion/new-york-introduces-its-first-adult-playground.html?pagewanted=2&ref=parksandotherrecreationareas>