YOUR FREE READER'S COMPANION

The Playhouse Build Pack

A companion to The Backyard Playhouse & Fort Building Bible · by Ben Carver

Thanks for picking up the book. This is the companion you tape to the garage wall before you cut a single board: a cut-list and materials summary for all three plans, the safety checklist that actually keeps kids in one piece, and a build-order checklist so you do the jobs in the order that won't paint you into a corner. Print it, fold it, and keep it where you'll see it when you're standing in the yard with a tape measure and three kids asking if it's done yet.

My first fort was a beautiful thing I was proud of right up until my middle kid went off the platform headfirst because I'd left the railing for "later." He was fine — landed in mulch I'd thrown down on a hunch — but I never forgot the sound. Every build since, the safety isn't the last step. It's the first decision in every step. Build it like a kid will test every inch, because they will. — Ben

The Three Plans — Cut-List & Materials Summary

These are summary numbers to size your lumber run and your budget. The book has the full step-by-step; this is the one-glance sheet for the lumberyard. All framing is pressure-treated for anything within 6 inches of the ground; cedar or PT above that. Use exterior structural screws and hot-dip or stainless hardware throughout.

Plan	Footprint	Posts	Floor / platform	Roof	Rough material cost (2026)
Cottage Playhouse (on-grade)	6 x 6 ft	4x4 corner posts on precast piers	2x6 joists @ 16 in, 5/4 decking	Gable, 2x4 rafters, asphalt shingle	$450 - $750
Raised Fort + Slide	5 x 5 ft, deck ~4 ft up	4x4 (or 6x6) buried 1/3 in concrete	2x6 joists @ 16 in, 5/4 decking, full guardrail	Simple shed or gable	$700 - $1,200
A-Frame Swing Set	~8 ft beam span, 2 bays	4x4 legs, 4x6 top beam	n/a (open)	n/a	$350 - $600 + swing hardware

Carry these numbers in your head:

- Guardrail height: 36 in on raised decks 30 in or more above grade. Balusters spaced so a 4-inch sphere cannot pass (the under-4-inch rule below).
- Slide exit height: bottom of the slide 9 to 11 inches off the ground, with a clear flat run-out.
- Swing beam height: 7 to 8 ft top beam for standard belt swings; hang seats so they sit 12 to 16 in off the ground.
- Post embedment: for raised structures, bury posts 1/3 of their total length (or to frost depth) in concrete, on a gravel base so water drains.

The Safety Checklist — Build for the Worst-Case Kid

A kid will find the one weak spot you left, on the first afternoon, at speed. You don't supervise your way around a design flaw — you build it out, in advance, on a quiet day with a tape and a level. Walk this before any child sets foot on the structure.

Falls — the number-one injury, by far:

- [ ] Guardrails on every surface 30 in or more above grade, 36 in tall, no gaps a body slips through.
- [ ] Under-4-inch rule everywhere: no opening — between balusters, under the bottom rail, in a ladder — that a 4-inch sphere passes through. (Print the gap gauge below.)
- [ ] A fall zone of 6 ft of clear space in every direction around the structure, and a full 6 ft in front of and behind a swing's arc (measured from the pivot, out to twice the chain length).
- [ ] Protective surfacing under and around it: 9 to 12 in of loose-fill (engineered wood fiber, mulch, or pea gravel) or a rated rubber surface. Never grass, dirt, or a patio under play equipment.

Entrapment — the silent one:

- [ ] No openings between 3.5 and 9 inches anywhere a child could put their head or body through (rails, ladders, roof gaps). Smaller than 3.5 or larger than 9 is safe; the band between is the danger zone.
- [ ] No V-shaped or angled openings that narrow to a wedge — a foot or neck can jam.
- [ ] No protruding bolts, screws, or hardware. Trim bolts flush, cap the ends, recess or file anything sharp. Run your bare hand over every reachable surface.

Structure & anchoring:

- [ ] Posts anchored — buried 1/3 in concrete, or on rated ground anchors for a swing set. A swing set will tip or walk if it isn't anchored.
- [ ] Swing hangers with sealed bearings or bushings, not raw eye-bolts through wood; hang seats far enough apart (24 in between, 30 in from the frame).
- [ ] All hardware hot-dip galvanized or stainless; re-tighten everything after the first month and every spring.

Print This: The 4-Inch & Entrapment Gauge

Cut a stiff piece of cardboard or scrap to these exact sizes and carry it as you build. If the small block passes through a gap, the gap is too big. If the big block fits in a head-sized opening, it's in the entrapment danger band.

- Baluster / guard gauge: a 4-inch square block. It must not pass between any two balusters, under any bottom rail, or through any ladder gap.
- Entrapment gauge: a 9-inch block. Any opening it does not fill, but that's wider than 3.5 inches, is in the danger band — close it or open it up past 9 in.

Build-Order Checklist — Do It In This Order

Jobs done out of order cost you twice. This is the sequence that keeps the structure square, plumb, and reachable while you still have room to swing a hammer.

- [ ] 1. Lay out and check the site — level enough, clear of buried lines (call 811), 6 ft of fall-zone space all around.
- [ ] 2. Set and anchor the posts — plumb every one, brace them, get the tops to one common height before the concrete sets.
- [ ] 3. Frame the platform / floor — beams, joists, then decking; check for square with equal diagonals.
- [ ] 4. Frame the walls and roof — openings sized for the door/windows, roof sheathed and shingled.
- [ ] 5. Mount access and play parts — ladder or stairs, slide bolted to the deck beam, swings hung, climbers anchored.
- [ ] 6. Install all railings and guards — before anyone climbs up. This is the step my younger self skipped.
- [ ] 7. Spread the surfacing — 9 to 12 in of fill across the full fall zone.
- [ ] 8. Final safety walk — run the 4-inch gauge over every gap, hand-check every bolt, push-test the whole thing, then let the kids on.

Build it like a kid will test every inch. They will — usually before the glue is dry. Get the railings on, the bolts capped, the surfacing down, and the posts anchored, and you've built something they can grow up on. — Ben