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Among the swing set

Horseplay . . . pony rides in the Jardin du Luxembourg are a quintessential Paris experience.
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Michelle Griffin discovers modern dreamscapes and old-fashioned fun in Paris playgrounds.

Unlike other tourist attractions, the playgrounds of Paris are more fun when they're crowded. An empty playground is a little eerie: lonely swings, abandoned cubbies, shadows cast by the climbing frames. A busy playground looks like a scene Sempe might have sketched for his Nicholas books, with bright-eyed children running riot over the equipment while their phlegmatic parents ignore them.

In all seasons and all weather, the local children take control of their own public spaces every weekend, every Wednesday (when there is no school) and every evening after a hard day at creche. Joining them throughout the year are the tourist children: stir-crazy, jet-lagged and desperate to run around.

Standing in a busy playground is a great way to judge your own grasp of French. Do you have the vocabulary of a child of three, five or perhaps eight? The direct present-tense exclamations of preschoolers are much easier for beginners to grasp than the murmured nuances of adult talk in cafes. "Maman, je veux une glace!" is not difficult to grasp, especially when the child is pointing excitedly at the ice-cream van.

Finding a playground is easy in Paris. Sandpits or climbing frames are tucked alongside many of the city's churches and market squares and at street corners carousels grind ever onwards. All the major parcs and jardins have proper, fenced playgrounds and you'll also find them close to all the big tourist destinations: the Louvre, Notre Dame and the Eiffel Tower.

But it is worth making a special trip to some of the city's best playgrounds, especially if your children are in primary school and need something more challenging than a horsey and a slide. Playground design is taken very seriously here and the best are beautiful and whimsical, with an element of danger that was eradicated in Australia long ago by nervous local councils.

Le Jardin des Enfants aux Halles

In the centre's unloved Jardin des Halles, above the subterranean mall that replaced the picturesque old markets, you'll find the city's queerest and most mysterious playground. It's hidden behind a high fence and guarded by a pair of ivy-covered elephants. Parents are only permitted inside on Saturdays between 10am and 1pm. The rest of the week, they must say "au revoir" to children aged seven to 11, who roam the space under the supervision of youth workers.

There are no slides or monkey bars. Instead, sculptor Claude Lalanne spent six years (1980-1986) creating a series of dreamscapes: classical ruins, volcanic slopes, bamboo forests, shallow streams and ball pits, with concrete runways perfect for hurtling down in trolleys.

The hours are erratic: it's closed Mondays and Sunday mornings; miserably desolate on school-week mornings; shut for lunch; then a wild adventure spot full of schoolchildren for an hour before closing time. Sections are often closed for repair but that's probably a very good thing.

In summer, there are queues and children are admitted and expelled on the hour. But it's free, adorably mad and supervised by first-aid-trained workers. It's also under threat: families have been campaigning to save Lalanne's garden from being bulldozed as part of Les Halles' latest makeover.

Smaller children can play in the sweet little sandpit and cubbies alongside the secret garden but don't expect them to be gracious about it.

105 Rue Rambuteau, 1st, metro Les Halles. Open Tuesday-Saturday 10am-6pm, Sunday 1-6pm but closed noon-2pm on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and hours vary with season and holidays. See jardindaventure.free.fr/pratique.htm (in French).

Jardin D'Acclimatation

"A toute vitesse!" The little girl at the top of the slippery dip is perhaps five but she is determined to conquer the older children's playground at the far corner of this venerable funfair, founded in 1860. Her little brother, perhaps three, bumped his head hurtling down the hillside's polished steel waves and now he's run away crying. His sister scrambles back to the top, chasing the thrill. Other children test themselves on a massive web of ropes strung two storeys high, or hurtle down the slopes on flying foxes.

Further along, we discover a miniature firehouse where toddlers can play pompiers, a pirate ship and fabulous wrought-iron butterflies that turn out to be seesaws, bouncing off big rubber balls buried in the sand. If that isn't enough, there's a water play area in summer, little boats that snake through miniature canals, a house of mirrors, a tiny farm with pigs and ducks and a funfair with an excellent if alarming chaise that spins above the treetops. Once you can open your eyes, you can see to the Eiffel Tower.

Bring baguettes to eat on the pretty picnic lawns and skip the mangy and distressing menagerie. Tweens might like the geeky interactive science displays at the Exploradome, which will set you back another EUR5 (\$9.80).

Bois de Boulogne, 16th, metro Les Sablons. Open May-September 10am-7pm, October-April 10am-6pm. See jardindacclimatation.fr. Admission EUR2.70, free for children under three.

Parc de la Villette

When the cold winds blow between the surrealist follies designed by Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi, Paris's largest park looks more like an out-take from the nouvelle vague sci-fi film Alphaville than any child's frolic. But in warmer weather, the 10 themed gardens, busker-lined lawns and mad walkways within its 35 hectares are so much fun, you needn't mention the on-site children's science museum, Cite des Science.

Next year the eight-metre giant dragon slide, with its slippery-dip tongue, reopens after a year

of repairs. But if that's still off limits, try the bouncy, air-cushioned rubber dunes, the fun-house mirrors hidden in a little forest glade or the optical illusions in the Garden of Shadows.

Instead of a playground, the Garden of Acrobats offers complicated balancing apparatuses and the Garden of Childhood Frights plays eerie music as you walk across a bridge in a gloomy forest, which can be unnerving in the evening when families make their way to the lawns for free concerts.

As a special bonus, there's a land-locked submarine, a tiny funfair and canal boat rides.

Avenue Corentin-Cariou, 19th, metro Porte de la Villette. See villette.com. Free.

Jardin du Luxembourg

The aristocratic pleasure palace built for dowager queen Marie de Medici in the 1620s has evolved through years of turmoil and revolution to become the city's favourite playground. If you want your child to have the Parisian postcard experience, this is where you should come to ride ponies, watch century-old puppet shows and race toy sailboats in the pond in front of the Palais.

You'd think children weaned on Nintendo would spurn a wooden thing you push with a stick but no, even the most jaded urge on their crafts as they tack across the water with even the tiniest of breezes. It costs EUR2 for 30 minutes and it's a bargain.

Technically the park is free but expect to spend about EUR10 a child here unless you have a heart of stone and a will of iron. It costs EUR2 for the go-karts; EUR2 for the giant boat swing; 50 centimes for the toilets; and a mighty EUR2.50 to enter the adventure playground. Parents, save yourself EUR1.50 by staying outside the low perimeter fence with the rest of the adults. Inside, children climb a giant spiderweb, spin themselves cross-eyed on massive discs and tiny cup seats, burrow through tunnels or swing dangerously around corners on a spectacular U-shaped flying fox.

It looks berserk but the entire area is carpeted in spongy rubber matting and the children do a surprisingly good job of policing each other. The day we visit, one little girl, stern-faced above her flowery, pink trench coat, appoints herself the guardian of the flying fox and drags queue-jumpers to the end of the line. Others stand below the rock-climbing wall helping little ones find their feet. Everywhere, children urge each other to climb higher, spin faster and make their way back to the top of the slippery dip.

"A toute vitesse!" they yell and once more into the breach.

Place Auguste-Comte, 6th, metro Odeon. Open in winter 8am-dusk daily; summer 7.30am-dusk. Free but only if you do nothing.