

## The Great Outdoors

Playthings

By Tina Benitez -- 5/1/2006

There's something about that first summer day when kids can run outside and play outdoors. Last year, outdoor toys made their mark, tallying more than \$2.7 billion in sales, according to The NPD Group, the Port Washington, N.Y.-based retail sales tracking firm. And, according to some retailers, water toys and sports-themed and inflatable, or "bouncy," playthings will contribute to bigger sales this season. Whether they're for cooling off or just to help get a little fresh air, this year's outdoor playthings have something for baseball pitchers, budding gardeners, swimmers, bubble fans and more.

Sheliah Gilliland, marketing manager for the Denver-based online toy retailer eToys, tells Playthings that inflatable toys are popular category choices this year. Sports-themed toys like the new MLB Pitching Kit from Franklin also sell well on the site's outdoor play area.

Outside of toys with "bounce" or a sports theme, Gilliland says that the Twist Trike will be big for the outdoors this year. The tricycle, designed by Chicago-based Radio Flyer, is recommended for kids ages 2 to 4 and has a flip mechanism that transforms the vehicle from a little kid's ride-on into a "chopper"-style trike for kids ages 4 to 7.

Wet behind the ears

On the water front, water tables, kiddie pools and pool toys and pogo sticks are making waves this year.

The Water Wheel Play Table from Step 2, Streetsboro, Ohio, for ages 3 to 5, lets kids play with cause and effect as they pour water into the wide funnel and activate the water wheel which then spills into the inner and outer harbors. The table accommodates up to three children and includes one cup, two sailboats and one water wheel tower and holds up to four gallons of water.

*Daniel Wright, owner of the Outdoor Fun Store, Wayne, Mich., says that inflatable water toys are always big seasonal sellers and he expects it to be no different this year. If anything, they may do even better. "Water toys seem to be especially popular this year—inflatables, even inflatable rock climbing walls, water trampolines," he says, are all in demand. "We also see a growing demand for sports product. We definitely sell a lot of sports and experiential product to camp programs or school programs, as well as to parents."*

Jean Rugar, director of marketing at Little Tikes, Hudson, Ohio, tells Playthings that the Jump N' Slide bouncer, an inflatable backyard jumping gym for kids ages 3 and up continues to be popular with parents looking for a one-stop play set. Kids can jump around in the center area or slip out onto the slide. The "gym" features protective walls

surrounding the jumping area and includes a big slide with side rails. The set is built of puncture-resistant material and includes stakes, a heavy-duty blower, repair kit and storage bag. It holds up to three children with a maximum combined weight of 250 pounds.

This year, Little Tikes will introduce five new bouncers with more complex and creative designs and activities. Moving into 2007, Little Tikes will extend its existing licensed characters and properties, and also add some new ones to the list, including Sesame Street, Dora the Explorer and Thomas the Tank Engine. New infant products, more inflatables and new designs for sand and water play tables are also being developed, according to the company.

Rupar says that with outdoor toys, parents are primarily looking for safety as well as something that will have enough play value to keep their children active. “Parents look for durability and reliability as well,” she adds. “If these criteria are met, parents then look for playthings that will provide the most hours of fun for their child. Parents are also looking for ‘energy-burners’ that can be the antidote for a video-watching, computer-game playing lifestyle. They also look for playthings that provide a safe and stimulating environment for a group of children as well as a single child.”

Rupar adds, “[Outdoors] are very portable and provide easy up and easy down hours of play for a single child or large group of children. They are a great value—you can own your own for virtually the same cost as renting one. They are kid magnets, and adults like them, too.”

### **An outside sell**

Think open air, limitless space. It’s no wonder outdoor sections attract consumers, whether they have a big backyard to put up child-sized play sets or need playthings to take on the road or to the playground. And retailers have done a good job selling such products to parents, Rupar says. “Retailers are very savvy in this category,” Rupar tells Playthings. “They have embraced, even fueled, the growth of the inflatable category. They recognize the importance of sand & water play and have added more outdoor sports items to the product mix.”

She adds, that where space permits, it is ideal to display merchandise fully assembled, so parents and kids can test the products. “Where space is limited, most retailers do a very good job with ‘poster programs’ where customers can view a picture of the product and read about the features and benefits, and then use a ‘pull-ticket’ to have the item removed from the store’s stock and loaded into their vehicle.”

For outdoor items that are too large to set-up or stock in-store, Rupar recommends offering home delivery and set-up services. “This is particularly true for independent retailers and regional chains that find this added service is the perfect way to differentiate from the ‘big box’ stores or mass retailers,” she says. “Most retailers also offer online/Web sales that also provide direct shipment/delivery to the end consumer.”

John White, marketing director, Insect Lore, a Shafter, Calif.-based gardening and nature toys manufacturer, says that the company works with retailers who stock their live insect kits, like the Butterfly Pavilion, Ladybug Lane and Ant Hill, to provide free displays for the live insects.

The demos allow retailers to grow the insects in the store for consumers to see firsthand. With the Backyard Bunch gardening product, they're also developing a line of in-store spinner racks.

White says that parents are looking for product that they can use with their child as well as toys that encourage individual play. Insect Lore's line of gardening tools and accessories feature watering cans, hoes and shovels, gardening gloves, aprons and cultivators for little gardeners.

An expansion of the Insect Metamorphosis and Backyard Bunch lines are in the works going into 2007, as well as winter sets, according to the company.

Parents are looking for products that promote independent play and educational growth," says White. "They want toys that are safe enough to be used without constant parental monitoring, and that have educational value."

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