



You'll need a big garden (and budget) for Rainbow Play Systems' £34,000 Metropolis climbing frame

SPILT FOR CHOICE

A £17,000 playhouse, a £70,000 bedroom — the market for luxury kids' stuff is going through the roof. Are they really worth it, asks **Wendy Sloane**

At a time when financial markets are in turmoil and first-time buyers are finding it increasingly tough to get their foot on the property ladder, spending £17,000 on a glorified Wendy house might seem a little extravagant. Then again, the Grand Victorian, which measures more than 9ft from the ground to the top of its turret roof, lives up to its name, with stained-glass windows, a fireplace, a loft and a brass-door knocker.

"We have a real mix of customers, from footballers to investment bankers," says Nick Marlow, managing director of Rainbow Play Systems, a Surrey-based company that sells the playhouse as part of a range of upmarket, swings, climbing frames and other outdoor equipment. "One banker recently purchased more than £35,000 worth of products in a couple of weeks. I suppose the real reason they are willing to spend so much is the same reason Chelsea FC's car park is full of Ferraris and Porsches. They have money to spend, so they want the best for their families."

Already bought the playhouse? Next stop must be the bedroom. For the little girl who has everything, the handcrafted wooden Cinderella coach bed, by Mark Wilkinson Furniture, on sale at £25,620, should fit the bill. The complete bedroom — which costs about £70,000 — comes with a themed walk-in wardrobe, dressing table, chair and hand-painted murals, and has been snapped up by footballers from Manchester United. Other themed bedrooms in the range include Sir Galahad and Goldlocks.

"We are selling more children's bedrooms than we have for many years," says Mark Wilkinson, the founder and chairman. "Customers tend to be anyone from industrialists to stage, television and sports stars. The bedroom is the child's magical domain — and, although our furniture is expensive, it is hand-made and bespoke. People who want quality are willing to spend money on that."

Having spent all that money on the bed, it would be a shame to skimp on the sheets and pillowcases. Vikas Shah, director of corporate strategy for Charlotte Thomas, an upmarket purveyor of linen and throws, has been pleasantly surprised by how many people have been buying its bespoke range for their children. Made by hand, with 22-carat gold sewn into the finest merino fabric, each piece is backed with a silk jacquard and complemented by Egyptian cotton sheets with a thread count of 1,000. A single pillowcase can cost £1,200.

"The level where people have liquid cash to spend on expensive home products is increasing year on year, and what people buy for their children is becoming more competitive, whether it's schools, toys, clothes or bed linen," Shah says. "The super-rich are going for elegant rather than nursery styles for their children. They want to decorate their children's rooms to match the rest of their homes. If someone has the disposable income to buy the best product on the marketplace, the price is often irrelevant." Once you've spent tens or even hundreds of thousands on your child's playroom, upkeep is paramount — which is where Practical Princess, a consulting service, comes in. Its founder, Erika

Gibbs, brings order to the homes of the wealthy — including Tamara Mellon's shoe cupboards — and has recently branched out into arranging children's bedrooms and playrooms. "Of course, people employ nannies and housekeepers, but you're going to be organised," says Gibbs, who charges £600 for a one-off visit and can provide

regular staff briefings on how to maintain the order she has created. The spending doesn't end there, according to luxury property-finders who make a living sourcing luxury homes. "One client briefed us to find a house with a tree large enough to accommodate a plough, tree-

The Buying Solution. "We found him one, and he subsequently spent a lot of money on a decadent treehouse with all mood cons, including electricity." When it comes to interiors, Lawson says, many clients let their children loose to design their own space — often with predictably over-the-top results. "One client's child wanted a certain type of marble for the bathroom, which had to be imported from Italy," he says. "Wealthy parents will go to great lengths to keep their offspring content."

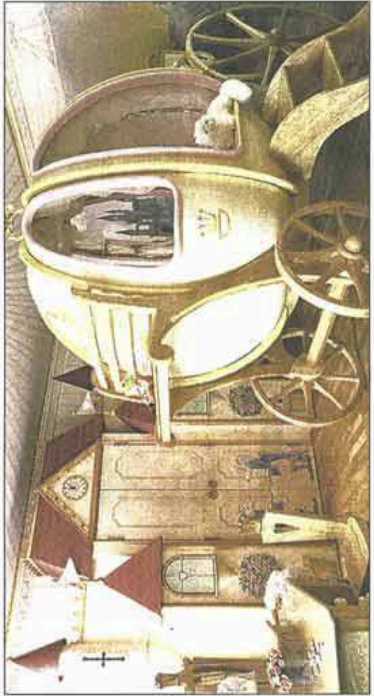
Robert Bailey, founder of Robert Bailey Property, a buying agency, has also seen his share of sumptuous surroundings, from silk shag-pile carpeting in children's bedrooms to wall-to-wall fish tanks. "The most outrageous thing I have seen is a house in Holland Park where the owner took out an entire floor and created a huge padded climbing frame with a slide for his little darling," he says. "When you think that property in the area sells for £2,000 to £3,000 per sq ft, and an entire floor would be about 2,000 sq ft, that's about £4m for a climbing frame. That must be a pretty extravagant indulgence."

Sam Elishafey, chief executive of Unlimited International, a lifestyle and investment club for the super-rich, has witnessed "immense amounts" of wealth coming in from eastern Europe and the Middle East, as well as new money from within Britain. "The more exotic spending habits on children tend to come from countries that have done incredibly well out of oil," he says. "Some people spend a lot to put halliours in the back of their homes so they can chauffeur their children in and out of central London if they are being

schooled there. They also use the helicopters for shopping trips with their nanny or mother, flying into Battersea, being chauffeur-driven to the King's Road or another opulent area, then flying back. The super-rich also like to spend money on long-term investments for their progeny, items to enjoy at home that will appreciate in value. "My clients buy exclusive one-off pieces of art for their children, or jewellery — things that can be passed down to other generations," Elishafey says. They also buy "individually handcrafted custom-made shoguns" for children of legal age, and "like to invest in fine wine, often creating underground wine cellars in their homes for older children, which they see as a significant investment". Maybe the playhouse is not so extravagant after all.

■ [Rainbow Play Systems](http://RainbowPlay.com) (0845 130 0335, www.rainbowplay.com); www.mnf.com; Furniture (01380 850007, www.mnf.com); Charlotte Thomas (0845 365 1625, www.charlottethomas.co.uk); Practical Princess (020 7571 0276, www.practicalprincess.com); The Buying Solution (020 7824 5830, www.thebuyingsolution.co.uk); Unlimited International (020 7887 6148, www.unlimited-international.com); Robert Bailey (020 7552 0899, www.robertbaileyproperty.com)

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Mark Wilkinson's Cinderella bedroom is fit for the most demanding princess — with £70,000 to spare