



# The good carpenter

## Remodeler donates test playhouses to schools

By Jen Walters  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

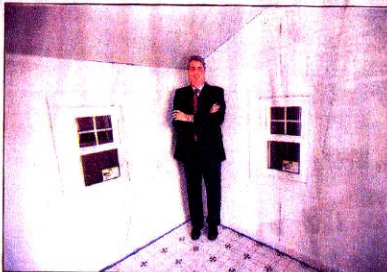
**H**ome remodeler David Foster is solving two problems at once.

He evaluates the skills of apprentice carpenters by having them build playhouses — which he then donates to area preschools.

Mr. Foster is president of Foster Home Improvement Inc. in Lorton. Before he sends carpenters to hammer and saw in a client's home, he wants to make sure his employees are well trained.

"I started the playhouse program to assess the skills of newly hired carpenters," says the remodeler, who does about \$3 million in business a year, with the average job costing about \$100,000. "I give them a blueprint. They make a list of materials. They start building, and we try to see where their skills are."

Mr. Foster's program is unique to the national remodeling industry, which makes \$140 billion a year in revenue. Most apprentice carpenters learn solely under the supervision of lead carpenters.



David Foster of Foster Home Improvement Inc. tests carpenters he may hire by having them build playhouses, which then are donated to schools. Plans for the buildings, which are 11 feet long, 8 feet wide and 8 feet high, are at top.

Since homeowners want craftspeople with a high level of skill, Mr. Foster implements further testing through the playhouses. The more innovative the worker, the better the finished product.

Carpenters whose skills do not measure up while they work on a playhouse are let go. Mr. Foster tested four persons through the first two playhouses that were built. As a result, only two carpenters have been permanently hired.

"The theory is hopefully they will stay with us," says Mr. Foster, who began his company in 1983 and in 1998 was selected one of the top 50 remodelers in the United States by *Remodeling* magazine.

"Everyone you interview says they can do everything. The first man who worked on the second playhouse was let go because his skills and attitude weren't what we needed. Hopefully, we will be putting a qualified person in people's homes."

When evaluating a carpenter's work on a playhouse, Mr. Foster considers the overall quality of the labor, including the hours it took to complete the task, the amount of material waste involved and

see PLAYHOUSE, page B4

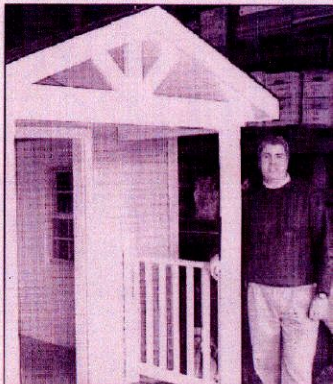
# Builder apprenticeship program benefits area pre-schools

"We've built one house to solve two problems," home remodeler David Foster explains, rapping his knuckles against shingle siding of an 8 x 11' x 8' children's playhouse recently constructed by one of his company's newly-hired apprentice carpenters.

But the efficiency insight might also refer to how the 36-year-old Lorton-based entrepreneur approaches life generally as he daily juggles the responsibilities of a growing business, single parenthood and community commitments. "When you're time-pressed,

the best ideas give you a range of solutions in a single stroke", Foster observes.

Such has been certainly the case, in any event, with the child-friendly playhouse Foster designed and most recently donated to the Mulford School in Centreville.



David Foster stands next to the playhouse before it was delivered to the school. Below, the playhouse of its permanent home at the Mulford School in Centreville.

A by-product of a training program Foster created to evaluate the skills of apprentice carpenters, the precisely-scaled playhouse was constructed at the Foster Home Improvement facility in Lorton then moved to its new home on a flat-bed truck where it was removed, as planned, by a forklift truck.

"I started the playhouse program to evaluate the skills of

our newly-hired carpenters," says Foster who, as a one-time graduate and now board member of Fairfax County's Foundation for Applied Technical Education (FATE), is well aware of the area's shortage of skilled construction workers. "I wanted to learn how well a new carpenter can read blueprints, assess the quantity of materials needed to finish a project and execute specific building and detailing skills. This house requires framing, trim work, roofing, siding, window installation, and there are many fine details."

The idea for a functional, scale-model child-sized home arose in a conversation between Foster and his son who was then attending an area pre-school. "We were talking about the outdoor recreation activities and we both decided a well-constructed playhouse would be something the kids would enjoy."



Sided and trimmed in vinyl, the playhouse features a front porch, shingled roof, three operable vinyl replacement windows. Floors are constructed of Trex, a splinter-free wood and plastic composite based material. The interior incorporates fine cornice soffits and other finishwork.

Foster persuaded South Building Supply, K Signs and other suppliers to donate the materials needed for the project. Cardinal B. Palkone Chevrolet and software developer Reliabuild made financial contributions.

Foster currently plans to produce four playhouses a year and already has its day-care centers eager for Foster originals.

To check on playhouse availability, or have your organization added to the waiting list, call 703-550-1371.

\* Courtesy of Home Front News