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## 7 nature play spaces in the Baltimore/Annapolis area



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On a recent morning at the nature play space at Irvine Nature Center in Owings Mills, a group of preschoolers build a life-sized bird's nest out of sticks and pinecones, while some friends gather nearby to make mud pies.

“It  
is



Donovan, 3, and Dominic Cerminaro, 6, explore the new nature play space at Jug Bay. Photo by Margaux Cerminaro

play time the way Mother Nature intended,” says Monica Wiedel-Lubinski, early education director and founder of the Nature Preschool at Irvine Nature Center.

Kids can explore hollowed out logs, climb on uprooted trees and jump from old tree stumps. There are no slides or monkey bars, but the kids don’t seem to mind.

“On a traditional playground, there is one way to play. But in a natural play space, kids make their own purpose for being there,” Wiedel-Lubinski says. “The elements are much less predictable and kids must bring their imagination to it.”

Nature play spaces — outdoor playgrounds that use only natural elements such as trees, sand and rocks — are growing in Maryland. Since 2008, 16 nature play spaces have been established and more are in development, according to the Maryland Partnership for Children in Nature.

“What’s old is new again,” says Sandi Olek, chairman of the organization, which is dedicated to promoting nature play spaces in the state. “We wanted to reach out to families and encourage interaction with nature. These spaces promote climbing and getting your hands dirty. They challenges kids in different ways than a traditional playground.”

The benefits of nature play spaces are many. A recent study by the University of Tennessee found that kids who played in a natural play space versus a traditional playground engaged in more physical activity, played for longer periods of time, and appeared to use their imaginations more.

“Not everyone grows up near green space,” Olek says. “Our goal is to connect kids in a fundamental way to the natural world.”

Mary Rivkin, professor of Early Childhood Education at University of Maryland Baltimore County and author of “The Great Outdoors: Advocating for Natural Spaces for Young Children,” believes that these spaces can reestablish a child’s ability to connect with nature.

“The world has become such a manufactured environment that children miss out on experiencing a natural habitat,” she says. “In a nature play space, we restore some of that habitat. Having that sense of connection and belonging with nature is absolutely essential to a child’s development.”

Check out these seven spots where Mother Nature rules the playground and kids can dig, climb rocks and jump stumps.

## Paw Paw Playground at Adkins Arboretum

The Paw Paw Playground has a Native American theme that features two wigwams, a snake balance beam and a turtle-shaped tree stump ring. It is tucked into the Upland Forest along the Upland Walk trail.



Families can also hike the 5 miles of trails or

explore the 400 acres of fields and woodlands filled with plant life native to the Mid-Atlantic.

*12610 Eveland Road, Ridgely*

*Admission: \$5 for adults, \$2 for students 6-18 and free for 5 and younger.*

*Hours: Tues.-Sat., 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sun., noon-4pm. Grounds open daily dawn to dusk.*

*410-634-2847, [adkinsarboretum.org](http://adkinsarboretum.org)*

## Jug Bay

The newly installed nature play space at Jug Bay has a wetlands theme and includes stump jumps, balance logs and a digging area. Kids can build nests with sticks, play instruments from the musical mailbox or sit in a canoe, all surrounded by the natural beauty of Jug Bay's ponds, marshes and 16 miles of hiking trails.

*1361 Wrighton Road, Lothian*

*Admission: \$6 per vehicle; free for active military, veterans and their families with ID.*

*Hours: Wed. and Fri.-Sun., 9 a.m.-5 p.m.*

*410-741-9330, [jugbay.org](http://jugbay.org)*

## Patapsco State Park

The Hollofield area of Patapsco Valley State Park has a natural play space with a stump jump, willow tunnel and a natural staircase made of logs. Kids can climb on the many boulders that dot the space or hike along the bark trail that leads to more trails and a wooded area.

*8020 Baltimore National Pike, Ellicott City*

*Admission: \$2 for in-state vehicles on weekdays; \$3 for state residents on weekends.*

*[dnr2.maryland.gov/cin/Pages/NPS/PatapscoValleySP.aspx](http://dnr2.maryland.gov/cin/Pages/NPS/PatapscoValleySP.aspx)*



## Irvine Nature Center

The outdoor classroom at Irvine Nature Center has multiple zones, such as the stage and music area with wooden instruments, a storytelling circle and a building station with

blocks for young engineers. Kids can play in a canoe in the dry creek bed, crawl through hollowed-out logs, balance on log beams or explore two uprooted trees perfect for climbing. A mud pie station complete with rainwater barrels and water pumps promise good old-fashioned fun.

*11201 Garrison Forest Road, Owings Mills*

*Admission: One-time guest passes available to the Outdoor Classroom or \$75 membership annually.*

*Hours: Daily, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.*

*443-738-9200, [explorenature.org](http://explorenature.org)*

*Click next below for more nature play spaces.*