

Fun Places for Kids

By Melissa Rooney
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After my last column, several people requested information about places and programs for young kids in the Triangle. I could write a book on this, but given the great spring weather I'll concentrate on outdoors.

Before my oldest kids were in school, I coordinated a playgroup and determinedly scheduled each weekly playdate at a different location. The kids may not have minded visiting the same playground each week – or picking up stones from the same parking lot, for that matter – but I needed variety, and what better way to see more of the area I call home? Durham alone has over 60 park/recreation areas. My favorite ones with playgrounds are Duke Park (which, in addition to its beautiful big trees, has a new playground with *giant* slides, tires, climbing walls, etc.), Indian Trail Park (a shady, uniquely wooden playground with a fun fitness trail), Forest Hills Park (including a large sandbox area with water-play, and public tennis courts and pool, all within view of Third Fork Creek), Northgate Park (surrounding pretty Ellerbe creek, with tennis courts, a unique playground and a great dog park), Trinity Park (a small playground in an open field, half-fenced for toddlers and close to Duke's East Campus, where stone-walls and large trees are favorites with young kids). Another great park is the RDU (Airport) Observation Park, where everyone can watch planes lift and land while the kids play on the spider climbing-structure in the big sandbox.

Moving beyond playgrounds, Duke Gardens, Duke Forest and Duke Campus are free. My kids love wandering around the 'secret' nooks, particularly near the duck and lily-pod ponds. There are numerous musical and other activities, many free of charge, in Duke Gardens from Spring to Autumn. We also spend hours walking along the waterfalls and playing in the open areas around the American Tobacco District, which hosts free live music in warmer months (as does Bright Leaf Square, Southpoint Mall, and many other Durham places). A trail leads from Northgate Park, past the now infamous, life-size brontosaurus, to the Museum of Life and Science (half outdoors), which is free (donations requested) to Durham residents on Wednesdays from 1-5.

The North Carolina Botanical Garden in Chapel Hill has a perfect little Nature trail for active toddlers, an herb garden that's home to fairies (with little mailboxes for exchanging notes), a giant chess board with metal pieces as big as a two-year-old, water plantings with frogs and fish, beautiful locally-made garden art and a big new welcome center, all of which are more magical when seen through a child's eyes. There are storytimes and hands-on garden activities with preschoolers (2-5 YO) on Thursday mornings and other activities throughout the year. UNC's Coker arboretum (and UNC campus) has beautiful paths for

toddling (and older) children. On Sunday late mornings, Carrboro's Weaver Street Market has free live music on the lawn, late-spring through fall; talented hula-hoopers, frisbee-performers, etc. do their thing while the music's on. Chapel Hill's Carolina Inn also hosts free live music on their lawn every Friday evening, and kids are warmly welcomed.

Umstead State Park (Reedy Creek entrance off I-40) has picnic shelters and easy trails, the shorter of which are perfect for rambunctious two-year-olds, and abundant wildlife, particularly during mornings and evenings. Midway between South Durham and Raleigh off I-40 is the NC Museum of Art, where kids who refrain from touching exhibits are most welcome, and entry is free. The trails behind the museum are easy, mostly stroller friendly and pass large sculptures, several of which are entered (especially exciting for kids). Continuing to Raleigh, it's free to meander through the open space and small trails at Pullen Park (adjacent to NCSU); there are multiple playgrounds, a life-filled pond, caboose, and a circa 1900 carousel and other rides for the kids. Walking through NCSU's campus and the open spaces within NC's government center is fun too. If it's hot, you can duck into the Museums of History or Natural Sciences, both free and full of fun things.

Jordan Lake has sandy beaches (with shallow areas for wading/swimming) and playgrounds, as well as great trails and wildlife-viewing areas that are toddler accessible, particularly when it hasn't rained recently. We're partial to Ebenezer Church where we watch the windsurfers after tiring, but Poplar Point and Seaforth are also favorites. The Eagle Observation Point on 751 has easy trails with views of an eagle-nesting site. My kids also like hanging-out at the picturesque Jordan Lake visitors' center and its engaging exhibits. In addition to Jordan, Eno River State Park is a must –wildlife is everywhere along the trails, especially in spring, and there's nothing like seeing a kid splash half-naked in this beautiful forested river. The Eno Festival, with live music and activities for young and old, is a must-do if July 4th weekend hits a cool spell (that is, below 95 for both ⁰F and % humidity).

Speaking of Festivals, don't forget to mark your calendars for these others in Durham: Durham's Earthday Festival (May 1, free); CPSC and Old North Durham Park's Strawberry Festival (May 2, free); Piedmont Wildlife Center Festival (May 14, children 12 & under are free); Durham's Bimbe festival (mid-May, free); Arts on the Plaza (June 4, Northgate Park); Juneteenth Celebration (June 18); and Durham Centerfest (fall), to name a few.

And of course, there are farmers markets in multiple locations throughout Durham, Raleigh, Chatham and Wake Counties, many of which have live music and art sales as well (South Durhamites should visit Thomson Ranch at 8321 Fayetteville Road on Saturdays (8-12), especially when chicks are hatching). Strawberries are already ripening, so you mustn't let April/May pass without picking your own (with and without kids). Our favorite spots are Waller Family Farm (complete with farm animals, 5005 Kerley Road, Durham),

Oakley's (an old Farmhouse on 383 Oakley Farm Road in Chatham County), and Jean's Berry Patch (3003 Highway 751). In June and July, the kids and/or I pick thumb-sized blueberries almost daily at Herndon Hills farm (7110 Massey Chapel Road, Durham), where scuppernong grape picking starts in late August.

See you there!

Email Melissa with your favorite Triangle places/activities at mmr121570@yahoo.com