

Spring Into Action 15 Favorite Playgrounds

by Erin Mantz

After a few cold and icy months, we are thrilled to welcome spring! Washington, D.C.-area moms share information about some of the area's best playgrounds. You might recognize your favorite or discover someplace new. The important thing is to savor the season and go out and play with your kids.

Maryland

Ayrlawn Park

5652 Oakmont Avenue, Bethesda (behind the Ayrlawn YMCA)

www.mcparkandplanning.org/parks/park_of_the_day/mar/parkday_mar30.shtm

At last September's grand reopening of Ayrlawn Park, neighborhood families had a lot to celebrate. This playground now has new and renovated play equipment, and the reopening reflected how much community members could accomplish when they work toward a common goal. Friends of Ayrlawn Park, a neighborhood organization formed to create a safe and inviting environment for its members, went on a mission to restore and improve the existing features of Ayrlawn Park. Many neighborhood people got involved and the Friends raised more than \$75,000 to renovate the playground. They accomplished their mission with help from the Montgomery Parks Foundation and the Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission. Ara Casey, Friends director, board member and mom of two, is still amazed. "It was a huge neighborhood effort — no businesses were involved," she says. "Some people contributed financially and others volunteered, from walking around with flyers to running the popcorn machine on hot summer days." She recalls the park was always inundated with kids, but since the reopening, she sees 100 instead of 25 on a typical day after school. Her 5- and 7-year-old sons are a true measure of the park's success — they go there all the time!

Cabin John Regional Park

10610 Westlake Drive (you can also enter from Tuckerman Lane), Bethesda

www.mcparkandplanning.org/parks/enterprise/park_facilities/trains/cabin_john.shtm

All aboard! Take a miniature train ride on an 1863 C.P. Huntington engine replica through the woods. After the ride, go to the gigantic, recently renovated playground. It looks like six playgrounds in one, with many distinct areas for tots and older kids, plus regular and baby swings. Picnic tables and pavilions are perfect for snacktime or lunchtime. Liliana Dychtwald of Kensington brings 2-year-old Beka here often. "The park has great shade, so it's a good place to play and picnic even during hot August days," she says. Attending a Big Train Baseball game at the park's Shirley Povich Field is a fun way to spend a summer night (www.bigtrain.org/published/index.html) and don't miss Montgomery County's free "Summer Sounds" concerts here and at some other parks. Visit www.montgomerycountymd.gov/rec for dates and venues.

Candy Cane Park

7901 Meadowbrook Lane, Chevy Chase

Located within Rock Creek Park and bordered by D.C. and Silver Spring, Candy Cane Park is a shady haven. It's away from main road traffic and fenced in to keep little ones from wandering off. When Chevy Chase mom Kara Dowd goes, her kids "think getting there is half the fun; they follow a little path over a stream to get there." Moms and dads like the separate big and little kid play areas. On a given day, horses from nearby Meadowbrook Riding Stables saunter by, and ducks share the scenery, too.

Glen Echo Park

7300 MacArthur Boulevard, Glen Echo
www.glenechopark.org/index.htm

A D.C.-area institution, this special spot is rich in history, originally home to the Chautauqua Indians and later to a high-flying amusement park that many area adults recall fondly. Today, the restored 1921 Dentzel Carousel reflects the park's pride and captures the magic of a time gone by. As merry-go-round music plays, you can also enjoy the playground, picnic area and great gelato in the new café. Art fairs, puppet shows and children's theater (tickets required), kids' activities at Discovery Creek and festivals offer more opportunities to enjoy, so check their website for details. Celebrate the Family Day Festival on April 28, the carousel's opening day!

Hadley's Playground ("Falls Road Local Park")

12600 Falls Road, Potomac

This open, accessible play area was built especially for children of all ages, regardless of disabilities or special needs. This popular spot offers play equipment for everyone, including forts and castles, slides of all sizes, built-in hopscotch, a tire ride, swings and rings. Many kids arrive toting scooters, tricycles or bikes; padded tracks and winding sidewalks are great for riding. Others arrive carrying soccer balls, Frisbees or baseballs to play on one of the many well-kept fields. Moms like Amy Greenberg of Rockville like the safety factor. "The soft ground makes me feel better when my two-year-old son falls! He's a daredevil, always trying to climb higher or go down the slide headfirst," she laughs. When the ice cream truck arrives on hot summer day, excitement is in the air.

Woodacres Park

5850 Wyndwood Road, Bethesda
www.mcparkandplanning.org/parks/park_of_the_day/jul/parkday_jul28.shtm

Tucked away in this family-friendly neighborhood, Woodacres Park evokes a kind of small-town feel that's hard to find elsewhere. The playground is smaller than some others on this list, but big on fun. Kids bring big wheels and bikes to ride around a path circling the tot lot. Even the youngest kids interact when they climb aboard fake trains and take imaginary journeys. Kids of all ages enjoy the ever-popular swings. On another side, older kids get active swinging on monkey bars, playing games across a "bridge," going

down slides or running across the hilly fields. Families enjoy the tennis courts, too. Since it's set far off busy streets and it is small enough to keep an eye on two kids, Woodacres scores points with parents and caregivers who appreciate added serenity and security.

District of Columbia

Lincoln Park

East Capitol Street (between 11th & 13th Streets), Capitol Hill
www.nps.gov/cahi/historyculture/cahi_lincoln.htm

This public space was the site of a Union encampment during the Civil War and of civil rights rallies in the 1960s. Today, neighborhood families gather here to embrace the big open space, since many area homes have small backyards. Resident Andrea Fuller likes the two separate play areas that keep the big kids from trampling the little ones. Two statues, including one of Lincoln, serve as reminders of the space's rich history and offer cover for kids' games. Fuller's preschooler and other tots love to run under the Bethune Statue and "hide" from their parents when it's time to leave! The straight-on view of the Capitol is an added bonus.

Palisades Playground

5200 Sherrier Place, Northwest

Multilevel forts, ramps and five tire areas make this playground the place for climbing. It's also a great place for a game of hide-and-seek or tag. This sunny spot off a quiet Palisades side street has a twisty tunnel slide, tall fireman's pole, rings and adjacent fields. Little ones enjoy the sandbox and baby swings. According to Palisades resident Jimmy Ervin, renovations underway include a big, new soccer field.

Turtle Park

45th and Van Ness Streets, NW
<http://turtlepark.org/index.php>

Lots of families congregate in this lively neighborhood spot near American University. Kids stay busy playing in a gigantic sandbox and climbing onto the turtle statue. Plenty of benches surround the sandbox so adults can even sit and read or chat (imagine!) while watching their children. Older kids enjoy playing or watching games on the baseball field and basketball court, and a hard top area is perfect for riding bikes, big wheels and scooters. Boredom can always be beat at Turtle Park.

Virginia

Clemyjontri

6317 Georgetown Pike, McLean
www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/clemyjontri

Every child's senses come alive in Clemyjontri Park, where four outdoor "rooms" spread out across a two-acre playground. The Rainbow Room, Schoolhouse and Maze, Fitness and Fun, and Movin and Groovin Transportations areas inspire kids' imaginations and activities. The "Chariots" carousel, featuring a spinning teacup and 14 prancing horses, is a favorite. Clemyjontri is also a place with extraordinary accessibility for children who use wheelchairs, walkers or braces, or who have sensory or developmental disabilities. Adele Lebowitz donated 18 acres and an incredible vision to make this park a reality. Ten more acres are scheduled for future development, and people can't wait to see what's coming next. Its unique name — Clemyjontri — is from letters of Lebowitz's four grandchildren's names: Carolyn, Emily, Jon and Petrina.

Frying Pan Farm Park

2709 West Ox Road, Herndon

www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/fpp and www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/fpp/kidwell.htm

For something different, head to Frying Pan Park, home to Kidwell Farm, a working model farm resembling early 20th- century Fairfax County. Kids get a taste of the "old days" by riding a tractor (known as the "hayless hay ride"), observing farm animals, touring an old farmhouse and more. Lorraine Marshall of Oakton and her three daughters get a kick out of the country store that sells ice cream and fresh eggs. Visit the website for the spring and summer birthing schedule and you just might see a newborn pig. Check their schedule for farmer's markets and special events.

Great Falls Grange Park

9818 Georgetown Pike, Great Falls

You'll find this park in the heart of Great Falls, next to the library. Parents like the separate play areas for big and little kids, the softball and soccer fields and tree-filled setting, but for Ileana Perotti, mom of three, it is the merry-go-round that makes it special. "I had not seen a merry-go-round since I was a little girl! It brings back such fond memories," she says. Her kids range from ages 4 to 10 and never get bored here. At Grange Park, you can rest assured: the merry-go-rounds of *your* youth are not completely gone.

Lincoln Park

Lincoln Avenue and Great Falls Street, Falls Church City

www.ci.falls-church.va.us/community/recsandparks/cityParks.html#Lincoln

Some days, a special place means no crowds and plenty of shade. Lincoln Park is that low-key haven. It's small, but has a sandbox and enough equipment to interest both toddlers and young elementary school kids. McLean mom Caroline Hacker says her two sons, ages 5 and 2, love it because, "It is not that crowded, and they can feel like they own the place." She likes how the manageable size makes it easy for her to watch both boys and how the big trees offer shade on hot summer days.

Mount Vernon Elementary School Park

2601 Commonwealth Avenue, Alexandria

Meredith and Andy Barbour head here on weekends with 6-year-old Jack. Parents gather with coffee and muffins from nearby Caboose Café and St. Elmo's. Kids run around three playgrounds and play impromptu soccer and football on a large rubber play area. Parents also love the four rows of stadium seating, so they can easily keep an eye on their kids — even those climbing and sitting in nearby trees. They also like the convenience of the library and bathroom right next door. Bigger kids aren't bored; they head to "their" playground and basketball court.

Oronoco Bay Park

701 North Lee Street, Old Town Alexandria

http://alexandriava.gov/recreation/parks/oronoco_bay_park.html

You might feel like you are on vacation when you see this riverfront park. You won't find swings and slides here, but you can climb on rocks, watch boats go by, play Frisbee or get into a volleyball game. Trails are perfect for family bike rides or kids starting out on scooters. Mom Meredith Reinsdorf heads here with her sons, bringing bread so they can feed the ducks. King Street is just steps away, making it easy to grab a bite to eat or bring something back for a picnic.

Erin Mantz is *Washington Parent's* editor at large. She lives in Potomac with her husband, two sons and a pug named Rizzo.

Play It Safe

How safe is your favorite park? Check out the "Dirty Dozen Checklist for Safe Playgrounds" on the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) website at www.nrpa.org. You'll also discover how to find a Certified Playground Safety Inspector for *your* neighborhood park, thanks to NRPA's National Playground Safety Institute program.

Headed For Healthier Air

At the time of this story, the South Germantown Recreational Park — home of the Adventure Playground, the Maryland SoccerPlex and splash park — is set to become Montgomery County's first completely smoke-free park in March 2007.

Imagine This...

Imagine a great place to play within walking distance of every child in America. That is the vision of a national nonprofit organization called KaBOOM!, which has tried to make this vision a reality over the past 11 years. Their mission is to create great playspaces through the participation and leadership of communities. In 2007, KaBOOM will support playspaces in the District of Columbia. Get involved and learn more at www.KaBOOM.org.

The County Connection:

Don't forget to check out your county's website and parks and recreation page for detailed information about park facilities, events, playground openings, renovations and more.