

Go Out and Play

When the weather turns nice, kids want to climb a tree, hit a ball and run around. Kids with disabilities are no exception. *Atlanta Parent* has identified three recreational programs that allow kids with special needs to have outdoor fun for little or no cost.

by Ann Hardie

Tree Climbing at Panola Mountain State Park

For children 8 years and older and young adults with physical and intellectual disabilities. \$15/person for an introductory climb. 770-389-7801; www.gastateparks.org/panola

On a picture-perfect spring afternoon, 12-year-old Kristin Davis stares up from her wheelchair into the boughs of a 100-foot Southern red oak.

Born with spina bifida and paralyzed from the waist down, Kristin doesn't let her disability keep her from playing basketball, handball, even football. But till now, climbing a tree has eluded the fifth-grader from Pate's Creek Elementary in Stockbridge. "I do like high stuff," she says.

Panola Mountain State Park in Stockbridge offers fishing, backpacking and tree-climbing for kids of all abilities. Today, Jody Rice, the park's resource manager, will give Kristin and two other kids with special needs the chance to look down from one of those leafy branches.

For Rice, who is specially certified to assist kids with disabilities in tree climbing, the experience is about building trust. "You have to trust in nature. You have to trust in the tools. You have to trust in yourself," he says.

After strapping on a helmet and the specialized rigging system that allows Rice and his team of volunteers to manipulate the pulleys from the ground, Kristin begins her ascent. She calls stop at about 20 feet. Rice's wife Naomi, a volunteer, scales the tree to help Kristin get situated on a limb.

From her perch, Kristin takes in a glimmering lake as two blue herons fly by. Her biggest booster, mom Ina Davis, watches from the ground below.



Mike Fuller

"Most kids sit inside and watch TV and play video games. Any chance Kristin gets to get outside, she goes," Davis says. Kristin comes down for a break a half-hour later. It isn't long before she pipes up, "Can I go again?" This time she gets a little higher.

The park team operates under a "challenge by choice" philosophy – go as high as you want, as fast as you want. Thirteen-year-old Mike Fuller of McDonough, who has an intellectual disability, gets a few feet off the ground before he wants to stop. He is proud nonetheless because he has chosen to operate the rigging system himself, which takes some strength and coordination. The rigging system can be adjusted to ease the load for kids with heart problems or other conditions.



Chip Ford (top) and Kristin Davis up a tree.

Chip Ford, who has a mild intellectual disability, masters his rigging system almost immediately and climbs until the rope runs out. He is easily 35 feet off the ground and wants to go even higher. "It is awesome. I can see everything," the 19-year-old from McDonough yells down. He feels like Spider-Man, he says. Once grounded, Chip says he plans to come back soon to achieve a new goal – hanging upside down like a bat. "I just realized that Spider-Man does that, too," he says.

All climbers need to pre-register. Rice requests that families who have kids with special needs speak with him directly so he can assess what equipment and special accommodations may be required.

Special Pops Tennis

For children 6 years and older and young adults with intellectual disabilities. Year-round at 14 sites. No charge; rackets provided if needed. 770-998-7826; www.specialpopstennis.com

On Friday nights, Ashley Lebovitz obsessively checks her mom's Blackberry for up-to-date weather reports. Downpour-free Saturdays mean one thing – tennis! Asked if she cares about competing, Ashley doesn't hesitate. "I care," the 16-year-old from Johns Creek says adamantly.

Ashley is among 350 kids and young adults with Down syndrome, autism and other intellectual disabilities who take to the courts each week through the Special Populations Tennis Program, Special Pops for short.

Tennis players of all skill levels hit groundstrokes and work on their net game. The Roswell-based organization hopes to expand to the south side. "We will go wherever the tennis players are," says Jim Hamm, the program's executive director.

The program accommodates whatever goals and ambitions athletes have, whether that means competing in the Special Olympics or volleying with their friends. "We are finding that the socialization for this population and their parents is as important as being able to hit a tennis ball," Hamm says.

Special Pops does not charge athletes but relies on fundraisers, grants and volunteers – hundreds of volunteers – to operate. "We don't want money to ever be part of the decision on whether a child can play," Hamm says.



Ashley Lebovitz

Ashley, who has Down syndrome, first picked up a tennis racket eight years ago. Her forehand is her best shot, she says, though she admits to having a pretty wicked serve.

Most of the year, Atlanta's weather cooperates with Ashley's passion. On rainy days, she practices hitting foam balls in the house. Her cat, Rowdy, serves as ball boy. What does she like best about tennis? "My friends," she immediately answers.



Christina Young

BlazeSports America Track and Field

For children 6 years and older and young adults with physical disabilities. Sundays, 1-4 p.m., Marist High School, Atlanta. \$35 for a three-month program. 770-850-8199; www.blazesports.org

Three years ago, Christina Young, paralyzed from the waist down since birth, decided to give track a try. She has been racing ever since.

"Sports have made me feel like a normal kid. I also learned that I can do anything I want in the world," says Christina, now 16 and a sophomore at Cass High School in Cartersville. Her grandparents drive her to Atlanta for the Sunday track practices.

Christina hopes to race in the 2012 Paralympic Games in London. But the track and field program offered by BlazeSports is not just for kids who want to compete at the highest levels.

"We have some very competitive kids who will go to national competitions. We also have some kids who come out for fun," says Jeff Jones, who directs the organization's sports programs. Parents also

are welcome to come and get a workout during practices.

BlazeSports is a legacy program from the 1996 Paralympic Games in Atlanta. The group offers programs on a seasonal basis for kids and young adults, ages 6 to 21, with physical disabilities. The programs include wheelchair basketball, wheelchair tennis, swimming, team handball and boccia.

The track and field program offers kids the chance to learn to throw the discus, javelin and shot put. Ambulatory kids can participate in the long jump.

For kids who can't walk, the program has racing wheelchairs of various sizes that it loans to families who can't afford one. (The average racing wheelchair runs \$2,500.)

"We have the opportunity to let families borrow wheelchairs for their sons or daughters to find out if track is going to be something they want to participate in for the long run," Jones says.

Christina can't imagine why kids wouldn't want to participate in this and other sports. In addition to the exercise, she has made "tons and tons of friends, like more than I can imagine," she says. "It is very cool. It changed my life, honestly." □