

GO CLIMB A TREE

By Helen Newling Lawson

Climbing trees seems to define childhood – a magical combination of freedom, solitude, adventure, and nature that pushes the limits of kids’ strength and daring. But when was the last time your kids had the chance to actually climb a tree?



Photo by Helen Newling Lawson

Sawnee Mountain Preserve



Fun In Trees

We live in a mecca for recreational tree climbing, thanks to the pioneering influence of Peter Jenkins of Atlanta-based Tree Climbers International. With so many big trees perfect for climbing (many of them over 200 years old), he calls Georgia a "Yosemite of trees." He's been training tree climbing instructors since 1983, and many of his students lead programs in metro Atlanta.

These climbs operate on a "safety first" principle, and require the use of harnesses, helmets and ropes at all times. Patty Jenkins at Tree Climbers International tells us their techniques not only protect the tree from harm, but have never resulted in a serious injury in climbs led by their trained instructors.

Climbers as young as age 6 can follow the multi-step instructions. Climbing is very much a go-at-your-own-pace activity. The rope system allows you to stop to rest or just enjoy the sights and sounds from your new vantage point. Although some kids will focus on conquering the next branch, most find themselves slipping into "tree time," where the journey is more important than the destination.

Some studies are showing a link between activities like tree climbing and an improvement in issues affecting kids, including ADHD, anxiety and obesity. Researchers also have linked tree climbing to a deeper commitment to conservation and a measurable sense of relaxation.

Taking Fun to New Heights?

Here's where beginners can go out on a limb with recreational tree climbing:

● Tree Climbers International

Two Introductory Climbing sessions (noon and 3 p.m.) held the first Sunday of the month, April through September. Pre-registration is required. At Blackburn Park, 3530 Ashford-Dunwoody Rd., Atlanta. \$29 per climber; ages 5 and older. treeclimbing.com

● Fun In Trees

"Tree for All" public introductory climbs held monthly in Roswell, Alpharetta and Brookhaven. See website for dates and locations, and to register. \$28 per climber (higher for non-residents); ages 6 and older. funintrees.com; 404-229-9224.

● Panola Mountain State Park

Intro to Tree Climbing sessions at 1 and 3 p.m., third Saturday of every month. Preregistration required; groups should schedule a private session. 2620 Highway 155 SW, Stockbridge. \$15 per climber; \$5 per car park entry fee; ages 8 and older. gastateparks.org/PanolaMountain; 770-389-7801.

● Sawnee Mountain Preserve

Public tree climbing sessions available first and third Saturday of every month except June and July. Private group sessions can be scheduled Saturdays. Public climbs \$15 per person; private climbs \$30 per person (\$180 minimum). Ages 8 and older. sawneemountain.org; 770-781-2217.

● Tree Works Atlanta

If you have a large, healthy hardwood tree in your own yard, Tree Works Inc. will bring all the gear and lead climbs for groups of up to 15 kids and adults (they will provide a pre-party site visit to check for hazards). treeworksatlanta.com; 404-379-1700.



Panola Mountain State Park



Treetop Quest

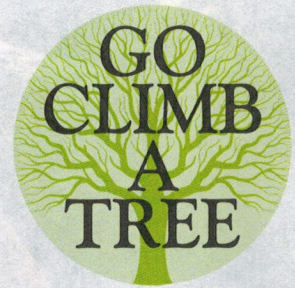


SkyHike at Stone Mountain Park

The Risks of Playing It Safe

Risk is an essential part of play for building physical and emotional strength, researchers are finding. According to a "Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play," allowing children to assess risk for themselves was a key component in healthy child development. In other words: Parents, back off.

While this might be a nerve-wracking proposition, not allowing kids to engage in risky play can make them more prone to injury, because they haven't developed important skills like balance, studies suggest. Lauren Reese, a yoga instructor and mom of two in Suwanee, says she's "all for kids climbing trees," and is even "perfectly happy with the unsafe way – it's a very important way for kids to build upper body strength."



Up in the Trees

I took my son Patrick, and his buddy, Grant, both 10, to Sawnee Mountain Preserve in Cumming to give it a try.

The boys weren't really sure what to expect, and I got lots of questions on the ride over about how big the tree was going to be. Turns out, both were a little nervous about the idea, but as they day went on, comments like, "This is hard" or "I'm kind of scared," started changing over to "This is fun!" and "How do I hang upside down?" My personal favorite: "This makes you feel like James Bond!"

By the end of the day, both boys had maneuvered their ropes over so they could hug the tree, and my son said, "This is making me actually not afraid of heights."

Our family spent Spring Break checking out two other adventurous options for getting up in the trees: **SkyHike at Stone Mountain Park** and **TreeTop Quest** (locations in Dunwoody and Buford).

Challenges like wobbly walkways and tightropes are just as much about agility and balance as they are about overcoming your fear of heights. Or, as my daughter Charlotte, 12, put it, "It's not how high you are, it's the lack of handrails!"

Once you get started, there aren't many escape routes to let you chicken out. But the harnesses ensure you won't actually fall, so take a deep breath and go – it really does get easier with practice! The zip lines in every course at Tree Top Quest are an awesome reward. A giant net at the Buford location's SpiderQuest course also lets you experience free falling thrills.

● **SkyHike at Stone Mountain Park**
Park's Adventure Pass includes admission to SkyHike and other attractions. Adventure Pass: \$26.95 ages 12 and older; \$20.95 ages 3-11; free younger than 3. stonemountainpark.com, 800-401-2407.

● **TreetopQuest**
Locations at Gwinnett Environmental and Heritage Center, 2020 Clean Water Drive, Buford, and at Liane Levetan Park at Brook Run, 4770 N. Peachtree Road, Dunwoody. Pricing varies by age, \$22-\$49 per person; make reservations or call for same-day availability. treetopquest.com, 770-365-0356.

Staying a Little More Grounded?

Trees Atlanta's new TreeHouse, backing up to the Atlanta Beltline, hosts environmental programs for kids and is the jumping off point for their Junior TreeKeepers Summer Camp.

A number of Atlanta playgrounds now have treehouses, including Chastain Park's newly renovated playground. The treehouse was created in memory of Summer Dale, a Chastain Park teenager who died of cancer in 2012. A bridge from an adjacent hill provides universal access and inside has areas for wheelchairs.

The Urban Tree House at Bessie Branham Park in Kirkwood is an enormous platform, built in cooperation with the USDA Forest Service and shaped like the United States, and is a popular spot for birthday parties.

The Atlanta Botanical Garden has also unveiled plans to nestle a treehouse-styled play structure, including climbing net and "nest," between two pre-Civil War oaks in its Children's Garden (part of the garden reopens in early June, but the treehouse section won't be finished until late June or early July). In the meantime, the garden's Canopy Walk lets you get a bird's eye view of Storza Woods while keeping you on firm footing.

- **Atlanta Botanical Garden**

1345 Piedmont Ave., Atlanta. atlantabg.org; 404-876-5859

- **Chastain Park**

135 W. Wieuca Rd. NW, Atlanta. chastainpark.org

- **Bessie Branham Park**

2051 Delano Ave., Atlanta. 404-371-5010



Photo by Houser Walker Architecture

Chastain Park

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JOSH DUHAMEL

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