



Sunday, August 23, 2009

America's 10 Best Places to Grow Up

Low crime, strong schools, green spaces, and fun activities are key ingredients for a happy childhood

By *Luke Mullins*

Posted August 19, 2009

If you could create the ideal community to raise a child in, what ingredients would you include? First off, you'd probably want a low crime rate. A strong school system would also be key. From there, you'd need lots of other children, expansive green spaces to play in, and plenty of nearby family events. Toss in an abundance of artistic and recreational activities, and all of a sudden you've got one heck of a place to grow up. At *U.S. News*, we wanted to find out if any communities like that already existed—and if so, where they were located. So we dug into our database of 2,000 different places all across the country and pinpointed the locales that met these criteria. We then examined these communities more closely to determine which places offered the best combination of safe neighborhoods, fun activities, and top-notch educators. Our selections appear below, in our list of America's 10 Best Places to Grow Up:

People Who Read This Also Read

- [How Clueless Are College Graduates?](#)
- [Help for Forms and Repaying Loans](#)
- [The Home of the Future: 8 Innovations in Store](#)
- [America's 10 Best Undervalued Places to Live](#)
- [Best Places to Live 2009](#)

Virginia Beach, Va.: Junior adventurers will love Virginia Beach, Va. This community of 434,000 residents in the southeastern part of the state has a low crime rate, a solid school system, and 35 miles of majestic beaches on the Atlantic Ocean and the Chesapeake Bay. "It's kind of neat to be able to come home from work, make a call to my wife or son, grab a bucket of chicken or some sandwiches, and then go out on the bay and have dinner," says Greg Ward, who works for a marketing firm that represents the Virginia Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Children can explore an impressive ecosystem of threatened and endangered species—including bald eagles and loggerhead sea turtles—in the 9,000-acre Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge. The warm summers and mild winters provide plenty of opportunities to hike, bike, and picnic your way through the 19 miles of scenic trails

Recommendations by **loomia**

over at First Landing State Park. And after checking out the sand tiger sharks and the cow-nose rays at the Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center, children can catch an educational picture in its 3-D IMAX theater.

[\[Slide Show: America's 10 Best Places to Grow Up.\]](#)

And in early September, the community is launching an online resource—VBparents.com—designed to keep parents plugged in to local health and school news, while ensuring that they are up-to-date on all of the community activities available to their kids. "There are lots of great parenting resources out there. This one is going to be specific to raising your child and your family within the city of Virginia Beach," says Jenefer Snyder, city of Virginia Beach GrowSmart coordinator. "We are constantly going to be connecting it back to community services, activities, events, programs, and classes."

Madison, Ala.: Of the roughly 43,000 residents in the friendly, churchgoing town of Madison, Ala., about 12,000 are under 18 years old. And this bedroom community of Huntsville, Ala., offers no shortage of outlets to keep these young folks active. "There is an event almost every weekend—whether it is in Madison, Huntsville, or Madison County—that families can attend," says Paul Finley, the mayor of Madison. Children can take advantage of the area's expansive outdoor amenities: watching beavers plunge into Bradford Creek or rabbits dart through the 130-acre Rainbow Mountain Trails park. And if they behave well enough, perhaps some lucky children can even persuade their mom and dad to send them to Space Camp at the U.S. Space and Rocket Center in nearby Huntsville.

San Jose, Calif.: With 9 square miles of green spaces, 300 days of sunshine a year, and four different professional sports franchises to follow, San Jose, Calif., has everything you need for a happy childhood. At just over 1 million residents, San Jose considers itself the capital of Silicon Valley, but it doesn't take a computer scientist to understand the city's appeal to kids. San Jose is the country's safest big city, and although it's certainly expensive—the median home price is \$449,000—the city offers all sorts of great activities for children. Rather than chasing its skateboarders away, San Jose has embraced them by opening six public skateboarding parks, including Lake Cunningham Regional [Skate Park](#), the largest one in the state. And at the Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose, children can experience everything from theater to gardening.

Overland Park, Kan.: Just 12 miles outside of Kansas City, Mo., is the lovely community of Overland Park, Kan. This family-friendly suburb in America's heartland has a four-season climate and is opening a 12-field, artificially turfed, fully lit soccer complex in the late summer. "Soccer is a big sport in this community," says Mayor Carl Gerlach. Meanwhile, at the Deanna Rose Children's Farmstead, kids can visit nearly 200 farm animals, toss a bobber into a fishing pond, or take a ride in a horse-drawn wagon. The 17-mile-long Indian Creek Trail makes for a great bike ride. At the same time, sports fans are only a short car ride away from a [Kansas City Chiefs](#) football game or a Kansas City Royals baseball game. In addition, "we have three different school districts in Overland Park," Gerlach says. "All three have been nationally ranked and won awards."

[1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [Next Page >](#)

Tags: [real estate](#) | [crime](#) | [housing](#)

Reader Comments

[Read all 51 comments about this article](#)

Go Plano!

I agree with Alan's comments about Plano. I graduated from Plano Senior High Class of 2005, and I cannot be more thankful for having grown up there.

I went to (a top-tiered) college better prepared for the workload, stress, and academics than many of my peers. I left Plano with more knowledge in math, science, history and other subjects than many people who have *graduated* college. PISD's curriculum gave students many opportunities to pursue varied interests: orchestra, band, choir, debate, dance, sports, academic decathlon, NHS, KEY Club, at least five foreign languages, and so much more.

To those people who say Plano schools have too stressful of an environment for kids, well, all I can say is life IS stressful. College isn't easier than high school and neither is the real world. What good does it do our children if they are sheltered through high

Tina of TX

Aug 23, 2009 12:46:11 PM

[\[permalink\]](#) [\[report comment\]](#)

school and then left unprepared to live in and deal with a world where nothing is free, nothing is stress-less, and jobs aren't just lined up left and right ready for you to choose? Graduate from PISD, and you have the courage and skills to tough through the hard times and shine during the good.

To those people who mock drug-addicted Plano teens, you really need to live in Plano to understand. I lived there from 3rd grade through 12th, and I never once ran into drugs. Sure, I knew they existed, and I knew some of my peers did it, but a kid who chooses to avoid drugs will never have to deal with it at all. My friends and I never once saw heroine, much less tried it.

When it comes to drugs, Plano is no different from any other decent city. It's there if you want it, it's not if you don't.

To Fancy of Texas who lives in Austin, I left Plano to go to college, and now I'm in Austin for my job. In many ways, Austin is even worse than Plano and definitely no better. Many people, like Fancy, have a blind love for Austin. Well, you know what? Austin schools suck. Nine AISD schools were ranked academically unacceptable this year. Two have been forced to shut down before reopening.

Austin is old and rundown. It exists solely based on its glamour and reputation. Crime is shooting up. Gangs are becoming an increasing problem and there are so many school dropouts here. The streets are poorly designed and not well paved. Traffic is horrendous. Austin, the "green" city, has no city-wide recycling program. It's expensive to live in Austin. Smaller, older houses cost double the new mansions in Plano. Groceries are overpriced and less fresh and varied than what's available in Plano. Austin is so broke it's cutting back library hours, police officers, firemen, park hours, and much more.

In the end, Plano isn't perfect, but it's a nice, quiet suburb to raise your children, give them a good education, and settle down. It's certainly much nicer of a place than my Texas cities...including Austin.

Cedar Rapids Iowa

A great place to raise a family. good public Schools, good people

A beautiful city. If kids do well in school, the University of Iowa

is only a few miles from Cedar Rapids. A great college-I give Cedar Rapids

a thousand percent! I wish I never had to leave Cedar Rapids.

J Sandberg of CA

Aug 23, 2009 09:46:18 AM

[\[permalink\]](#) [\[report comment\]](#)

Living in Plano

To be honest I was a little surprised that Plano was one of the top 10 listed. I would have never guessed that my town would have been considered a position in the list. I thought that there would be other towns that would overshadow Plano.

I'm a graduate of Plano Senior High Class of 2009 and have lived in Plano for about 14 years of my life. I've been blessed to receive a solid education, a place to call home, and opportunities to grow as an individual.

While it is not exactly a number one town to live in, there are many positive qualities about Plano that overshadow it's heroin scandal of the past.

I agree that all of the schools here are very competitive, but it teaches you to prepare for college and the outside world. To be in the top 10% in all three senior high schools (Plano East, Central and West), you have to work very hard in your classes. I know that

Alan of TX

Aug 23, 2009 02:39:56 AM

[\[permalink\]](#) [\[report comment\]](#)

PISD administers the second highest amount of AP exams nationally and the teachers do their best to help the students to prepare for those exams. In addition to academics, all three schools boast an incredible amount of sports and extra-curricular awards.

I also agree with the low crime rate in Plano. I have left my house key on the door a few times by accident when I entered my house and not realize it until the next day. Anyone could have opened the door and stolen items or threaten my family, but none of that has ever happened.

I have volunteered as a Teen Court attorney for the past two years and seen the various cases that arise among teenagers. Plano has a strong sense of justice and the teens are required to perform a specific amount of community service hours as well as pay court fees in order for the misdemeanor class C crime to be cleared.

There are not too many areas for entertainment that are close by, but the amount of parks provide recreation and relaxation for many. Plano stresses the importance of a clean atmosphere as well as the Go Green environmental cause.

In addition, Plano boasts a strong amount of diversity in its community. I have been grateful to meet people of all races and ethnicities. I've learned to be more open-minded and aware of the increasing importance of diversity in today's society. Being of Asian descent myself, I feel blessed to fit in with a variety of cultures without feeling awkward.

For those that rant about Plano and its drug-addicted teens or competitive atmosphere, I ask you to live in my town rather than rely on speculation and outside news sources. As I said earlier, Plano is not a number one town, but it provides a safe, healthy atmosphere for children to grow up in.

[Read all 51 comments about this article](#)

Copyright © 2009 U.S. News & World Report LP All rights reserved.