

## Ten Nature Destinations for Toddlers and Preschoolers in Orange County

1. **Tide pools.** Visiting a tide pool is a wonderful way to spend a few hours after school or on a weekend. Make sure you pick an area that's safe for children: [Little Corona Del Mar beach](#) is wonderful, as is [Picnic Beach](#) below Heisler Park in Laguna Beach. Check a [tide calendar](#) before you go: it's only fun within about two hours of low tide!
2. [Irvine Regional Park](#) is a great place to visit over and over again. It's got it all: lots of open space to explore, from meadows to wooded areas and hillsides; playgrounds for active play, an old railroad, a lake, a pony ride area and the [Orange County Zoo](#), where children can experience local wildlife up close.
3. **The [Pacific Marine Mammal Center](#)** in Laguna Beach is a great place to watch true seals, fur seals and sea lions that come here to recover from injuries or after being abandoned by their mothers.
4. **The [Newport Beach Back Bay](#).** It's a great place to go for a bike ride and to observe birds and other marine species in their natural habitat. Every young child should get on a two-wheel bike from an early age: start with a [glider bike](#), and your two- or three-year-old will be much better able to keep up with you as you walk, jog or bike yourself!
5. **Hiking** – for example, in [Crystal Cove State Park](#). Start with short hikes, maybe a mile or so, and build over time; a five-year-old with practice can hike six miles! The guidebook, [50 Hikes in Orange County](#), is a great resource for finding new places to explore, and a treasure trove of information about the plants and animals you may encounter on your explorations.
6. [Tucker Wildlife Sanctuary](#). Discover desert tortoises, observe birds and explore the nature center. Older children may also enjoy some of the hikes in the area (just make sure to bring plenty of water!)
7. [Tanaka Farms](#) or another local farm. Touring a farm is a great way to help children see where our food comes from, to taste fresh vegetables and fruit right from the field.
8. **The animal area at the OC Fair, or [Centennial Farm](#) during its public hours.** While the fair rides are obviously not very natural and rather expensive, the farm animal area is a great place to meet sheep, turkeys, rabbits and other animals, whether during the fair or at other times of the year.
9. **A local [garden center](#).** Great to visit in spring or fall; while there, let your children pick out some plants. Then go home and let them work in your garden. [For Small Hands](#) offers great gardening tools for children.
10. **Stargazing.** To prepare for an evening of stargazing, get this excellent book about [constellations for children](#). The [Star Walk app](#) for the iPhone is a great tool for those of us not that familiar with the night sky, as it shows you what is up there as you hold your phone up in front of you! Find as dark a spot as you can in our urban area (the [OC Astronomers](#), who occasionally organize star gazing parties for our elementary students, meet in [Black Star Canyon](#), but it's probably too much of a hike for many preschoolers). You don't need a telescope; if you have binoculars, do bring them, though: it's amazing to look at the moon through one!