

Nature Escapes for Kids **Build a Toad Abode with Your Children**

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I first learned of this whimsical nature activity (building toad abodes) while I was living in the wilderness of Central Pennsylvania soon after college, training as an environmental education intern at Shaver's Creek Environmental Center. Our soft-spoken instructor always took us through training activities as though we were children ourselves, which helped to get us in the mindset of seeing the world through the eyes of a child. In this mindset can you understand what makes these little people tick, what ignites their imagination, and what sparks those seemingly small moments to burn into their memories forever.

So there I was curiously scrambling and scuffling about the crisp brown bed of cool soil, fragrant dried needles, and damp green moss beneath the shade of the giant hemlocks. My fellow interns

and I each worked our own patch of the forest floor, collecting bits of bark, twigs, pinecones, stones, and fallen leaves — anything that could be used to build the foundation of our own sturdy toad abode. Then came the interior design aspect because it only took a small

stretch of the imagination to surmise that toads are discerning creatures with particular aesthetic tastes. A discarded shimmering butterfly wing might become a welcome doormat, or a fern frond might act as a cozy curtain.

As you can probably guess, a child can be entertained by this activity for quite a long time. And just as I look back fondly on that time on the forest floor of Central Pennsylvania, so too may your child remember their toad abode building fun. The best part about it is its simplicity; the core of this activity is really a tactile connection to nature. All you need is a patch of earth (in the woods, your yard, or a nature preserve) and a fertile imagination. The only rule is that you try to avoid picking mushrooms or plants from the earth. Instead, focus instead on items already at rest.

You can extend this activity from one simple toad abode to a whole village or even focus on houses for fairies instead of toads. The details are not important. This kind of free play in nature as a child is what fosters critical thinking, creativity, empathy, and mental health as adults. In doing something as simple as building a place for a toad to rest his head, a child is actually creating a healing space in his/her heart to return to as an adult.

Toad Facts

So who exactly are we building toad abodes for? Read below to learn about the wonderful world of toads.

- Just like frogs, toads are amphibians, meaning they are cold-blooded and live on both land and water.
- Unlike frogs, toads have dry skin, warts, and glands called parotoid glands that produce poison to defend themselves from predators.
- Here in Pennsylvania, you might find these species of toad: American toad (*Anaxyrus americanus*) and Fowler's toad (*Anaxyrus fowleri*). These toads are masters at camouflage. Their brown coloring allows them to easily blend into their surroundings so predators cannot find them.
- Toad predators include snakes, raccoons, and birds of prey.
- Toads generally prefer moist open habitats like fields, grasslands, or forests. You might find toads in your backyard after it has been raining, or by a nearby stream in the woods.
- The American toad is known for helping gardeners with pest control. They like to eat harmful insects typically found in your backyard.
- Unlike what you might read in storybooks, toads do not give you

warts when you touch them! They may cause slight skin irritation or they might urinate on you as a defense mechanism (ew!), but they are otherwise harmless to humans. Remember to wash your hands after handling a toad, and be sure to always put your toad friend back in a safe place outside, or where you found it.

And how can we help our toad friends beyond toad abodes?

- Reduce lawn and plant natives to support more insects (toad food).
- Don't use pesticides.
- Provide cover with brush piles, native plants, or toad abodes!
- Add water like a garden pond or ground level bird bath in which toads can lay their eggs.
- Protect wetlands.



A Rushton Nature Keeper building a toad abode



A Rushton Nature Keeper shows off a baby toad he found at Rushton Woods Preserve last summer