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*“Play Without a Plan”*

Summer is the perfect time to enjoy the outdoors; it's not just fun, it's beneficial. Spending time outside with your children has positive effects on both mental and physical health. Fresh air boosts mood, reduces stress, and encourages movement, which is good for everyone. Outdoor time often naturally includes physical activity, whether it's going for a walk, riding bikes, or simply running around. More than that, it's a great opportunity for connection. Shared outdoor experiences allow parents and children to learn with and from each other.

Kansas State University Child Development Specialist Bradford Wiles says, “Some of the best advice I can give to anyone is that there's nothing wrong with saying, ‘Hey, let's go outside and let whatever happens, happen.’” Unstructured outdoor play gives kids the freedom to make their own choices, building confidence and independence. In a world where children are often told what to do and how to do it, simply letting them dig in the dirt, ride their bikes, or draw with sidewalk chalk is important to developing their self-efficacy.

Children learn about their world through play. Through explorations, they begin to understand cause and effect and develop problem-solving skills. These early experiences of self-determination build self-esteem and support mental wellness. Children who learn to manage frustration and make choices through unstructured play are more likely to develop strong emotional regulation skills, which will have long-term benefits. While these same skills can be nurtured indoors, the outdoors offers a much larger and more stimulating world to explore.

Parents can support unstructured play by creating time and space for it in their daily routines. This might mean setting aside a chunk of the day without planned activities or encouraging outdoor time in the backyard or at a park. Unstructured play doesn't require fancy toys; simple materials like sticks, rocks, cardboard boxes, or art supplies often inspire the most creativity. It's important for parents to step back and let children take the lead, resisting the urge to direct or interrupt. Letting children be bored can be a good thing; it pushes kids to use their imagination and come up with their own ideas. Limiting screen time and rotating toys can also help create an environment that sparks curiosity and self-directed exploration. Encouraging unstructured play is one of the easiest and most meaningful ways to support your child's development.

Information comes from Kansas State University Publications.