



by Karen Stephens

Sunscreen, Water, and Shady Play Spaces Protect Children's Health

Children and outdoor play go hand in hand. Well-spent leisure hours outside leave behind wonderful childhood memories. And as children's obesity rates increase, it's clear they need year-round active play and exercise.

But before you send the kids outside, prevent as many health risks as you can. Prolonged, unprotected exposure to the sun's rays in childhood can set the stage for skin cancer. High summer temperatures also tax the body. Limited water intake and overexertion during active play can result in children suffering heat stroke.

To keep kids healthy, apply sunscreen before outdoor play. Use 30 SPF sunscreen or higher, depending on the fairness of your child's complexion and sun-tolerance. If kids will be around water — even creek play — use waterproof sunscreen. After swimming or sweating, children should re-apply sunscreen — even the waterproof brands.

Well-ventilated hats and light-colored clothing with thin texture protect kids from the sun and heat, too. If children will play in wooded areas, meaning tick and mosquito habitat, long sleeves and pants and hats are necessary.

To prevent dehydration, keep water bottles handy and encourage kids to take frequent water breaks throughout the day. Liquids just during meal times or snacks aren't enough. Garden hoses and sprinklers provide quick cool downs.

You can shield children's play from some of the sun's damaging effects by creating shaded play spaces. Cozy, sun-dappled areas encourage quieter play that helps kids' maintain stable body temperature.

Sheltered spaces can create the aura of a secret hideaway that children crave. And indoor activities can be enjoyed in outdoor "nook and cranny" play spaces. For instance, a picnic table shielded by an umbrella provides space for board games, Lego® play, block building, coloring, or modeling with clay or play dough. Shaded decks provide a stage for puppet shows, musical "concerts", and child-authored plays.

Following are ingenious ways to create outdoor shade for play. Try several and you'll have greater peace of mind about your children's health.

- **Cover a picnic table, climber, or hammock with sheets.** Kids can color pictures, share secrets, or blow bubbles while underneath.
- **Set up a tent outside to do double duty.** You can have a camp-out at night and during the day; the tent can be a shaded space for play. Set up a doll house inside or provide camping props, and the stage is set for a pretend wilderness adventure.
- **String a clothesline between two poles.** Drape a sheet over it, stretch the sheet out, and secure all four corners to the ground. You have a shady tunnel for card games.

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- **Obtain an appliance shipping box.** Cut out a door and windows for air circulation. Then let the kids play house or doctor's office, whatever they choose!
- **Set up oversized umbrellas in the lawn.** Rotate them as the sun moves. The umbrellas provide just enough shade for miniature toy play with plastic animals and farm toys.
- **Plant shade trees.** Even small maples will provide some shade in their first summer.

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- **Plant a weeping tree, like a willow, cherry, or mulberry.** Beneath arched branches is the perfect place for breezy "under the canopy" play.
- **Plant crab-apple trees.** Once mature, they make for great climbing. And they provide shade while the kids are perched for a bird's eye view of the world!
- **Plant a green bean tepee.** In a sunny spot, outline a 6 foot circle. Dig a planting space along the circle for seeds. Stake 6 large bamboo sticks in the ground along the circle and tip them toward the center. To simulate a tepee, tie the top of the sticks together with twine. So beans have something to grow on, weave string or twine around the tepee. Plant the seeds (with the kids!) and watch the tepee become engulfed by vines of green beans. Beans that mature quickly and climb vigorously include scarlet runner and purple hyacinth.
- **Plant a vine vegetable arbor.** In the plumbing section of the hardware store, purchase five or more 10 to 12 foot lengths of plastic, bendable 1 inch tubing. Select a sunny spot and dig up an 8 foot by 8 foot space. Line the 5 tubes next to each other, a foot apart. Bow each tube. Secure each end of tubes into the ground. This will create a tunnel of arched tubing. So vines climb over the arch, drape nylon netting over the tubing, or weave string from end to end. Place mulch inside the arbor to avoid mud holes! Baby pumpkins, cucumbers, squash, or gourds can be planted along the arbor's outside walls. Inside will be tunnel of vegetables!
- **Plant a bower of lilac bushes.** This works if you have a lot of sunny space. Plant a horseshoe or even circle of lilacs; in a few years they'll fill in, providing a shady place. The springtime scent is sure to lure the kids!
- **Plant a sunflower house with a morning glory roof!** Buy seed packets of morning glories and sunflower seeds. (Be sure to select sunflowers that will grow 6 or 7 feet tall.) Outline at least a 6 foot by 9 foot rectangle on your sod, leaving a 2 foot doorway that won't be planted. Remove about 4 inches of sod from around the rectangle. Have children plant seeds along the rectangle, alternating the sunflower and morning glory seeds. With time and daily watering, the sunflower seeds will provide a wall for the morning glories to climb. The morning glories will stretch across the top of the sunflowers to create a sky-blue roof!
- **Grow vines on netting draped from an overhang.** Bird netting can be purchased at garden and hardware stores. Purchase enough netting to drape to the ground from your overhang. At the netting's "drip line", plant a row of vine seeds that will climb the netting. Seeds will grow to create a colorful wall! Morning glories and nasturtiums are good candidates for all summer. Sweet peas do best in spring.
- **Arbors and pergolas.** Garden centers sell these structures or they can be made by a skilled carpenter. Willow arbors are rustic and sturdy. Cedar arbors are more formal and costly, but they last a long time and require little care. Libraries have how-to books with building plans.
- **Gazebos.** With built-in benches, gazebos can be used for reading books, storytelling, tea parties, and art projects. Gazebos can be screened in to keep the mosquitoes out!
- **Tree houses.** Some tree houses are just platforms, letting leaves provide shade. But deeper shade can be achieved by adding wood or canvas tarp roofs.

- **Child-sized log cabin or play house.** Dress-up play is a favorite pasttime in this type of shady place.
- **Awning.** Cloth awnings can be placed over patios for dependable shade.
- **Overhead Trellising.** Sandboxes can be dappled with shade by building overhead wooden trellises. The overhead trellis is supported by 4 inch by 4 inch vertical poles. Vines can grow over the trellis for added shade. Trumpet creeper, honeysuckle, and wisteria vines grow in full sun.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.