



## Upcoming Events

- National Human Rights Month
- National Impaired Driving Prevention Month
- National Influenza Month
- World AIDS Day / 1
- Special Education Day / 2
- National Mutt Day / 2
- National Handwashing Awareness Week / 1-7

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## Feel Free Drinks and Kratom: Essential Information for Parents

Many people assume natural products are safe, but substances like kava and kratom can have real side effects and addictive potential. Feel Free drinks have exploded in popularity—selling over 129 million servings and surpassing a quarter-billion dollars in annual sales—but growing numbers of users report dependency issues, jokingly calling the drink “Feel Trapped.”

### What's in Feel Free CLASSIC?

Feel Free CLASSIC contains kava root and leaf kratom, both of which affect the nervous system. Because natural products aren't regulated like medications, ingredient quality and potency can vary, making risks harder to judge. The Kava Maté version clearly lists yerba maté as its caffeine source, but the caffeine level may be higher than parents expect.

### Is kratom addictive?

Kratom is the biggest concern. The Child Mind Institute describes it as a legal but “dangerously addictive” drug. It acts like a stimulant at low doses and like an opioid at higher doses. Although some states have passed Kratom Consumer Protection Acts that set minimum age limits or regulate sales, kratom remains widely accessible—especially online, where teens can easily bypass age checks.

### Where can teens buy Feel Free drinks?

Feel Free CLASSIC and Kava Maté are sold in gas stations, convenience stores, tobacco shops, bars, and tea houses. They're often placed near energy shots and packaged to appear healthy and wellness-focused, which can make them appealing to teens. Capsule and supplement versions are also sold online, increasing access.



## KAVA BARS NEAR YOU

Kava bars carry notable risks, mainly involving the liver, drug interactions, and inconsistent product quality. The FDA has warned about cases of severe liver injury linked to some kava products.

**Liver Toxicity:** The most serious concern. Commercial extracts made with alcohol or chemical solvents have been associated with rare liver failure.

**Interactions:** Mixing kava with alcohol or other sedatives (benzodiazepines, opioids, sleep aids) increases the danger of liver damage, extreme sedation, and breathing problems.

**Product Quality:** Kava products in the U.S. are loosely regulated. Some may contain stems, leaves, or non-noble varieties, all linked to higher toxicity.

**Kratom Presence:** Some kava bars also serve kratom, which carries opioid-like effects and dependence risks.

**Impairment:** Kava can cause drowsiness, slowed reaction time, and poor coordination, making driving unsafe.

**Other Effects:** Dry, scaly rash from heavy use; possible nausea, dizziness, headaches, appetite loss; and mild withdrawal in long-term heavy users.

**Recommendation:** Consult a healthcare professional before using kava and choose products sourced from reputable vendors using “noble” root-only varieties.

## The Gift of Being Bored

**Boredom isn't wasted time, it's where creativity starts.**

As a kid, long car rides, summer afternoons, and dull classes pushed me into imagination: pretending to race dirt bikes, daydreaming about taking my bike apart. Those quiet moments built curiosity and independence.

Today, kids have almost no empty space. Every pause is filled with screens, and "I'm bored" shows up fast. But boredom is the spark of creativity — the silence where a stick becomes a sword, a box becomes a spaceship, and ideas take shape.

When we fill every gap with structure and tech, we crowd out discovery. The Child Mind Institute notes that unstructured time builds creativity, problem-solving, independence, and emotional regulation.

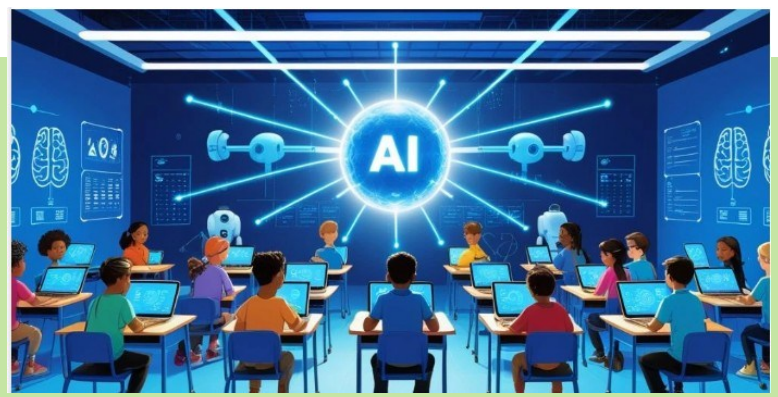
### What parents can do:

- Schedule quiet time without screens.
- Don't jump in when kids say they're bored.
- Leave materials out that invite creative play.
- Model stillness by reading or walking without your phone.

Kids need room to think, imagine, and explore. Boredom gives them that gift.



CHILD MIND INSTITUTE



## Artificial Intelligence Is Transforming Social Services and Schools

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly reshaping how social services and educational systems operate, prompting professionals to examine the technology's expanding role in supporting their work. Across agencies and school districts, AI is gaining recognition as a tool that can enhance efficiency, strengthen communication, and expand the quality of care and instruction provided to students, families, and individuals receiving services. As its adoption grows, the conversation has increasingly focused on balancing innovation with thoughtful, ethical implementation.

In social service environments, AI is emerging as a valuable support mechanism for staff balancing heavy caseloads, extensive documentation, and ongoing communication demands. AI technology is proving useful for drafting case summaries, preparing reports, developing written materials, organizing information, and identifying trends in data. These capabilities reduce the amount of time spent on administrative responsibilities, giving social workers and service providers more capacity to focus on direct client engagement and relationship-building—work that remains the core of the profession. Rather than replacing human expertise, AI enhances professionals' ability to maintain efficiency while preserving meaningful client interactions.

Schools are also integrating AI to strengthen their operations and instructional practices. Educators are using AI-assisted tools to streamline lesson planning, develop classroom resources, and tailor materials to meet diverse learning needs. In addition, school counselors and Student Assistance Program (SAP) teams are relying on AI to improve communication with families, organize resources, and manage information more effectively. For students, AI-powered platforms can offer support with reading, writing, and executive functioning challenges, helping them stay engaged and organized. School staff benefit from quicker access to information, better scheduling tools, and improved administrative structure, contributing to smoother day-to-day functioning. When used appropriately, AI can help create more responsive, accessible, and supportive learning environments.

As AI becomes more integrated into social service and educational settings, ethical considerations remain essential. Professionals must ensure that no confidential or personally identifiable information is entered into AI systems and must carefully review all AI-generated content for accuracy. Human judgment continues to guide all decisions, as AI can sometimes produce incomplete or biased outputs. Upholding confidentiality, professional integrity, and trust is paramount, and AI should serve strictly as an aid—not a replacement for human decision-making. Responsible use ensures that the benefits of AI enhance practice without compromising ethical standards.

Overall, AI presents powerful opportunities to improve efficiency, reduce burnout, and expand the availability of high-quality resources across social services and schools. Combined with human compassion, professional insight, and ethical awareness, AI has the potential to elevate the work of agencies and educational institutions, helping professionals better meet the needs of their communities. Rather than replacing human connection, AI functions as a supportive partner—one that can strengthen communication, enhance effectiveness, and enrich the services delivered to individuals, students, and families.

CHRISSY CONFER

## 7 Things Every Child Needs to Hear



