

Why kids should play outside, even in extreme cold: pediatrician

Health benefits of physical activity outweigh risks of cold exposure, pediatrician says

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A Toronto pediatrician is calling for more outdoor time for kids in winter, saying the health benefits of staying physically active outweigh the risks of cold exposure. (Clay Jackson/The Advocate Messenger/Associated Press)

Frozen parks? Fear not. A pediatrician is calling for school boards and parents to send kids outdoors despite the frigid cold.

Dan Flanders, a pediatrician based in Toronto, calls some school boards' decisions to cancel outdoor recess "a terrible idea" for kids and also urges parents to find ways to get their kids outside on even the coldest days.

"I think it must be horrible for them. They must be going bonkers," Flanders said in an interview with CBC's *Metro Morning* host Matt Galloway on Wednesday.

The health benefits of staying physically active outweigh the risks of cold exposure, Flanders added.

"With very few exceptions, if you dress your kids properly, if you look at the weather and dress them according to the weather, there really isn't much risk," he said.

"If you look like the pros and cons, if you look at both sides of the argument, it's a no-brainer,"

School boards are only half of the equation. Parents need to play their parts in keeping kids active too, Flanders says.

A parent himself, Flanders said that he sometimes feels reluctant to send his kids into the frigid cold.

"But when we do manage to go outside with our kids ... it really feels great when you've done it," he said.

The Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines suggest that children aged 5 to 11 should get at least 60 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activities daily.

Bike riding and playground activities, for example, are moderate in intensity, which will cause children to sweat a little and breathe harder. Activities like running and swimming

are considered vigorous in intensity, which will cause children to sweat and be out of breath.

The same recommendation applies for youth aged 12 to 17.

According to the guide, staying active for at least 60 minutes a day can help children:

- Improve their health.
- Do better in school.
- Improve their fitness.
- Grow stronger.
- Have fun playing with friends.
- Feel happier.
- Maintain a healthy body weight.
- Improve their self-confidence.
- Learn new skills.

ParticipACTION, an organization that promotes physical activity and sport participation in Canada, has some tips for parents on how to get young children moving. Some of them apply in winter too:

- Too wet or cold to go out? Simply turn up the music and dance.
- Visit the local community centre and make use of its programs and facilities.
- The little ones love to dig, rake and shovel. Invite them to help out when shovelling snow.
- Limit screen time by removing TVs and computers from your child's bedroom. You can also squeeze in some pushups, jumping jacks or leg lifts during commercial breaks.
- Encourage your kids to join a sports team or club.
- Be a role model. Parents should live an active life and build physical activity into weekend plans. For example, parents can join an adult sports team and encourage kids to cheer them on at the games.