

Four Crucial Ways Playing Outdoors in Winter Benefits Children

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During the warm spring and summer months, it seems natural to allow children to play outside. However, when winter comes along, parents may be more hesitant to send children outside.

However, there are plenty of ways to make sure children stay safe and healthy outside in the winter, and there are even several health benefits that accompany this outdoor playtime.

1. Children Can Escape Indoor Germs, Bacteria

It is impossible to shield children completely from all viruses or bacteria that can make them ill, especially in the winter when they are more prevalent. However, allowing children to come into contact with some of these pests and bacteria in a natural way can actually make them less likely to develop autoimmune disorders and allergies, according to the Center for Disease Control (CDC).

"It strengthens the immune system by allowing your child an escape from indoor germs and bacteria and helps form a resistance to allergies," [the CDC said](#).

It is important to get fresh air because all of the bacteria and germs that you bring into the house get recycled over and over again through the air vents, according to the California Childcare Health Program (CCHP). Therefore, the more time you spend inside, the more you are exposed.

"When children and adults spend a long time together in indoor spaces that are small, overheated and poorly ventilated, germs and illnesses pass easily from one person to another," the CCHP said.

Therefore, the commonly held belief that keeping kids out of the cold will keep them healthier is not necessarily true.

2. Opportunities for Better Exercise

According to the CDC, children should get 60 minutes of exercise everyday, and exercising during the winter can be even more beneficial.

Ben Bahlmann and his children take their sled back up the hill for another ride, at the Capitol as snow falls in Washington, Tuesday, Jan. 21, 2014 (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

Larger muscles are able to get more use when children have to walk through snow, and this helps with gross-motor development, according to the CCHP. Limiting outdoor exercise until the end of winter can stunt growth of muscles which can lead to a variety of health issues.

Increased exercise will help promote a better sleep cycle and can lead to children growing stronger and maintaining a healthy body weight.

Some fun physical activities for children during the winter include going sledding, helping to shovel snow or building a snow fort or snowman.

Safety Tips for Outdoor Play During Winter

- 1. Set time limits and have children come inside periodically to warm up.**
- 2. Watch out for common [warning signs](#) of frostbite and hypothermia.**
- 3. Dress children in multiple loose layers so they stay dry and warm, and never let them play in extreme cold.**
- 4. Rule of Thumb: Dress children in one more layer of clothing than an adult would wear in the same conditions.**
- 5. Check surroundings beforehand to see if there are any icy or slippery patches.**

Information provided by The American Academy of Pediatrics

3. Promotion of Problem-Solving, Imagination

Winter presents a whole variety of new challenges for children to overcome, both physically and cognitively.

Toys and equipment, such as swing sets, that were once readily available may now be frozen or covered in snow. This forces children to use their imaginations to find alternatives or figure out a way to access their favorite toys.

Playing winter games offers a different way of learning that is not available during the rest of the year, according to parenting tips from kidsinthehouse.com. Learning how to pack snow tightly to build things, to steer a sled or to avoid slippery and unsafe objects are all important lessons that can be learned outside in the winter.

A boy builds a snowman, in the mountain of Hortiati, northeast of Thessaloniki, Greece, Tuesday, March 8, 2011. (AP Photo/Nikolas Giakoumidis)

One fun way to stimulate the imagination is by using food coloring to make colored snow, and watching how the colors blend together when the snow melts or when you combine multiple colors.

4. Provides Essential Vitamin D

According to the National Institute of Health's Office of Dietary Supplements (ODS), Vitamin D promotes calcium absorption, prevents rickets in children and prevents bones from becoming too thin or brittle.

Sun exposure is an important source of vitamin D, especially for children, since very few foods contain it naturally and the ones that do are unappealing to children such as fatty fish, according to ODS.

The amount of sunlight children are exposed to and the amount of vitamin D they absorb can have a large impact on their mood.

"Vitamin D, which is produced in skin exposed to the hormone of sunlight, has been found to change serotonin levels in the brain, which could account for changes in mood," according to a 2008 study conducted by Jaap Denissen about the effects of weather on daily mood.

Serotonin is a hormone that plays an important role in regulating mood. Lower levels of serotonin, and higher levels of melatonin, could correspond with depressionlike symptoms. The less exposure you have to the sun, the lower your vitamin D and serotonin levels will be.

"Therefore, lower levels of vitamin D could be responsible for increases in negative affect and tiredness," according to Denissen's research.