



Is It Safe to Play Outdoors in Winter?

Fresh air is healthy

Studies have shown that contrary to the common belief that “exposure to cold air causes a cold,” fresh air is good and healthy. 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. In fresh, outdoor air, children do not have to rebreathe the germs of the group, and the chance for spreading infection is reduced.

Outdoor play is healthy even in winter

Children of all ages enjoy and benefit from playing outdoors in all except the most extreme weather. Daily outdoor play is healthy and burns energy. It gives children an opportunity for a change of environment, a balance in play and routine, large muscle activities (gross-motor development). Even children who are mildly ill but active should go outside if the weather is not severe. Staff and children alike will feel refreshed when fresh air is part of the daily routine. Taking children outdoors daily, even in winter, can be a healthy part of their schedule, and is safe when clothing is appropriate.

Avoid cold-related injuries

The way we feel about cold, wet or snowy weather and indoor temperatures may be affected by where we live and what we are used to. Temperatures above 40 and below 80 degrees Fahrenheit are generally suitable for routine outdoor play.

Improve indoor air quality

Germs causing disease multiply in warm, dark, damp environments, so it is important to keep the environment clean and dry. Adequate ventilation, humidity and temperature control help us resist illness and increase our ability to get well after sickness.

The following measures will improve the indoor air quality in your child care setting:

- Keep the air temperature between 65° and 75° Fahrenheit, if possible.
- Open the windows in every room for a few minutes every day to circulate fresh air, even in winter. Windows must be screened to prevent insects from entering, and should be opened no more than 6 inches (or be protected with guards) to prevent children from falling out.
- Do not allow smoking in any space that children will use.
- Properly vent heating and cooking equipment.
- Avoid strong odors. Some people (including children) are allergic to smoke, perfumes and room deodorants.
- Reduce the use of toxic pesticides and cleaners and other household chemicals.
- Control dampness and dust.
- Colds, sore throats and other infections of the respiratory system are common in cold weather and are usually caused by viruses. Child care providers have the potential to improve the health of children in their care by opening up windows to improve ventilation, and having children play for extended periods outdoors in the fresh air. They can provide instruction and programs that promote enjoyable, lifelong physical activity.

Handwashing is the single most effective way to reduce the spread of infection in a child care setting.

Resources

Keeping Kids Healthy: Preventing and Managing Communicable Disease in Child Care, California Department of Education, 1994.

Healthy Young Children: A Manual for Programs, NAEYC, 1995.

The Lancet, Volume 349, Number 9062, May 10, 1997.

Well Beings, the Canadian Paediatric Society, Volume 1, 1992.

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