



Health & Safety Notes

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 re-breathe 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, and 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. Active outdoor play at all times of the year is also an important part of obesity prevention and helps to establish life-long patterns of healthy physical exercise.

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. Practices that help to ensure safe outdoor play in cold weather include:

- Make sure that children are dressed appropriately for the weather; use layers of clothing that can be put on and taken off easily. The air between the layers helps to keep the child warm.
- Establish a policy for shoes and outerwear for the children in your program.
- Assess outdoor play spaces for safety in cold weather. Outdoor play spaces and equipment that are safe for young children during warmer weather may be totally inappropriate when the ground is frozen and equipment is slippery from ice and/or snow. For example, sand and composition rubber surfacing materials, often used under climbing equipment and swings, freeze in the winter months and become very hard, losing their shock-absorbing quality and their ability to lessen the impact if a child falls. These surfaces not only lose their effectiveness when frozen, they can be dangerous. Certain equipment may have to be off limits when the ground is frozen.
- Instead of using unsafe play equipment, plan activities that take advantage of cold weather
 - Use snow to build snow people.
 - Use colored water in spray bottles to paint snow.
 - Pile snow for climbing and sliding activities.
- Watch for signs of frost bite, especially in the face, ears, fingers or toes:
 - Look for skin that is whiter than the surrounding area.
 - Ask the child about feelings of pain or stinging, followed by numbness.
- If you suspect a child has frostbite
 - rub frostbitten areas.
 - warm the area in your hands or an armpit.
 - for more severe frostbite, place the area in warm (not hot) water until color returns.
 - serve a warm snack like soup.

- Watch for signs of hypothermia (when your body loses heat faster than you can produce it and your body temperature gets very low):
 - Cold feet and hands
 - Puffy or swollen face
 - Pale skin
 - Shivering (in some cases the person with hypothermia does not shiver)
- Keep children moving in cold weather to prevent frostbite and hypothermia.

When you prepare for active play in outdoor winter weather, everyone can enjoy the health and mental health benefits of being outside and active in winter.

Monitor outdoor air quality index (AQI) and follow health advisories from local health authorities. Limit prolonged active play outdoors for children with asthma as advised.

Improving indoor air quality is also important

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.

Resources

Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs, Fourth Edition, 2019, available at <https://nrckids.org/CFOC>

CCHP Health and Safety Note: Indoor Air Quality, online at <https://cchp.ucsf.edu/content/health-and-safety-notes>