



Mealtime Memo

for Child Care

Outdoor Playtime is the Best Time – Winter Play



Young children do best when they have many opportunities to participate in physical activities throughout the day. A variety of play and movement activities will help children develop gross motor skills, balance, coordination, and social skills. Children also gain health benefits such as proper bone development, a healthy heart, strong muscles, improved flexibility, and achievement of a healthy weight. However, in the winter months participating in outdoor play may be less favorable than staying indoors where it is warm and cozy. On the contrary, it is important for young children to participate in outdoor play throughout the year, even in the winter months, for four key reasons.

First, playing outside is good for children's bodies. Physical health is one of the best reasons to play outside. Kids who enjoy outdoor activities for at least an hour a day tend to be fitter and maintain healthier weights. Studies show that most youth do not make enough vitamin D for optimal health. Therefore, when children play outside, they are more likely to get more vitamin D from appropriate sun exposure. Additionally, outdoor play helps to develop children's immune systems.

Second, playing outside is good for children's behavior. Time spent in outdoor activities, such as kickball, walking, or free-play, helps to improve the behavior of children with attention and hyperactivity disorders. In fact, the chance to run, jump, and burn off some excess energy usually improves the indoor behavior of almost any young person.

Third, playing outside is good for children's brains. Outdoor time, especially in green settings like parks and playgrounds, helps concentration and focus in the classroom. Creative outdoor play, such as building a fort or treehouse, also helps kids develop active imaginations and problem-solving skills.



Fourth, playing outside is good for child and adult connections. Any outdoor activity from vigorous games to quiet bird watching is a good way for multiple generations to spend time making memories together. Playing outside can include goal-directed activities (Let's see if we can make some really big bubbles today.), as well as simple exploration and discovery (What kind of bugs are living on these flowers?).

Playing Safely

When participating in outdoor activities during the winter months, always begin with safety in mind. Keep these basic tips in mind to ensure playing is a safe time:

- Ensure children are dressed properly. Children will need proper clothes for playing in colder temperatures. For example, children may need hats, scarves, mittens, boots, winter coats, snow pants, and a change of clothes.
- Use safe equipment. Some play equipment may be unsafe for the children in your care during the winter months. Additionally, the equipment may be covered with snow or ice. Therefore, plan activities that allow safe play, such as building snow people or painting the snow with food coloring.
- Always move. In cold temperatures, both you and the children should constantly move and avoid standing still. Reason being, standing still in cold temperatures can lead to frostbite and hypothermia; therefore, always move during cold temperatures.
- Talk to your local or state regulatory agency. Each state has different rules and regulations as it relates to child care operations. Additionally, northern states with colder temperatures will have different rules than southern states with warmer temperatures. Therefore, contact your local or state regulatory agency to determine any procedures you must follow when participating in outdoor play.

As you plan for outdoor play during the winter months, check out the Is it Safe to Play Outdoors in Winter? resource at http://www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org/pdfs/healthandsafety/wint_en0910.pdf.

References

California Child Care Health Program. 2010. Is it safe to play outdoor in winter?. Retrieved from http://www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org/pdfs/healthandsafety/wint_en0910.pdf.

Institute of Child Nutrition. 2010. Active lifestyles. 5 key reasons to play outdoors with children. Retrieved from <http://www.theicn.org/documentlibraryfiles/PDF/20100901095133.pdf>

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