

GROWING UP

Playing Outside in the Winter Wonderland

By Dan Florell, Ph.D. & Praveena Salins, M.D.

As soon as the air gets a bit of a cold sting, children are preparing for snow. Most are hoping for a lot of snow that allows for school to be cancelled and to be able to go out and have fun sledding, making snowmen, and having snowball fights. Many get so anxious about going out and playing in the snow, they often rush out with a light coat or no coat at all.

As parents and grandparents, it is important to realize how to adequately prepare children for the winter weather even if there is snow on the ground. Children tend to have more trouble regulating their internal temperature and as a result can get very hot or very cold much more quickly than an adult. This means that parents and grandparents need to insist children dress appropriately before going outside.

The main focus for children is to dress them in layers. A basic rule of thumb is to add one layer more for children than what adults would normally put on before going outside. Rather than choosing bulky or heavy materials, try to choose clothing that is lighter and easier to move in. We don't want our children looking like the character Randy from *A Christmas Story* who has so many bulky layers on that he can't even move his arms! Some of the lighter and easier to move fabrics include merino wool, polyester fleece, and other fabrics that trap heat and absorb moisture.

At a minimum, children always need to wear a jacket or a coat and cover all exposed areas like their hands, ears, and head. That means children wearing hats, scarves, and gloves too. This may be the hardest area to monitor as kids will often take these off as soon as they get out of view from supervising adults. As the day gets warmer or children start sweating from running around and playing outside, it is ok to start taking off a layer or two of clothing. Don't worry about putting on too many layers initially, it is always better to have too much on than not enough.

One example of how children might dress in layers is for children to wear a long-sleeve undershirt, turtleneck, shirt, sweater, and a coat on their top half. They then can wear long underwear and a pair of heavy pants on their bottom half. It is good to avoid wearing jeans or cotton clothing as they don't keep children very warm and can actually make children colder if they get wet. In addition, make sure children are wearing heavy socks and waterproof boots.

Sometimes children get so caught up in the fun of playing outside, they don't realize how cold they have become. If this is the case, parents and grandparents should encourage the children to come in for a brief break to warm up and have something to drink. For some reason, hot chocolate never tasted as good as when it was drunk right after playing outside.

There is a final item to address that is easily forgotten. Children should wear sunscreen on their faces when playing outside in the winter, particularly when there is snow on the ground. The sunscreen should be an SPF of 15 or above.

The winter wonderland is a fun time of year to play outside. Make sure children are able to fully enjoy it by dressing in layers and taking some indoor breaks.

Biography:

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