



How-To Guide

Outdoor Play in Winter

The health benefits of outdoor play year-round are numerous. For whole child development, it is critical for children to have daily time outdoors including in cold and winter weather. While outdoor play in winter can prove more challenging, it also has wonderful and unique opportunities for children to explore and observe their world.



Brrr...It's Cold Outside!

Outlined below are a few tips and tricks for taking advantage of the benefits of outdoor play in winter.

Address Challenges

There are many challenges to taking young children outdoors in winter. From obtaining proper clothing to planning for time outdoors, it is important for educators to take the time to address these challenges. Teachers need to be supported to engage in discussion to develop strategies to solve existing challenges. Challenges can also be perceived as learning opportunities for both teachers and children. A child struggling to zip their coat could be supported by another child who has mastered the skill and teachers can take turns preparing the outdoor space for play.

Plan for your time outdoors

Often educators believe time outdoors is for children to run and engage in gross motor play. While this is critical for child development, educators can also plan intentional learning experiences in the outdoors. When snow covers play structures and sand boxes, children still need choices for play outdoors. Just like in the indoor classroom space, where educators plan daily learning experiences for child development. These same experiences can be planned for outdoor time.

Create choices for play

In the indoor classroom, children have many opportunities to make choices for play. There are multiple learning centers from a dramatic play area, sensory table, art, construction, etc. The outdoors can also include unique activity settings for children. The same choices children have indoors can also be implemented outdoors. When children have choices between activity settings, there are increased opportunities for play leading to positive opportunities for whole child development. When children have multiple choices outdoors, children are more engaged in play and can sustain play for longer periods of time.





Photo: ECHO

Involve Families

Families are the cornerstone of early childhood programs. They are a critical pillar to supporting child development. Involve families in setting expectations for outdoor play. How are families reflected in your outdoor spaces? Are there spaces for families to spend time with their child outdoors? Is outdoor play a part of the family handbook? What resources can you share with families so they can engage in outdoor play in their communities? When new families join the program, include the outdoor play spaces as a part of the tour. Educators should learn and honor how families already spend time outdoors with their children.

Consistency

Young children thrive on routines. Ensure children and families know when children will or will not be going outside. Is there a consistent weather source that you can share with families so you are clear about when you will be going outdoors? Maintain routines when preparing to transition outdoors. Maintain the number of times and duration of time spent outdoors. If the weather does not accommodate outdoor play, supplement gross motor and similar activities in an indoor setting.

Utilize nature

Children can view the world through a new lens in winter. Whether it's a leafless tree revealing a hidden bird's nest or a blanket of snow displaying fresh rabbit tracks, there are a variety of learning opportunities that can only be experienced in winter. Children have natural curiosity for the world around them. Educators can use this curiosity to plan learning experiences for children and encourage a connection to the natural world.

Role Model

Educators are role models for children and families. Educators can model proper winter attire and behaviors outdoors. If teachers are happy and engaged in play outdoors, children will reflect this mentality. Teachers can also show curiosity and encourage children to observe the natural world. Families also learn from teachers. Families observe how children engage in outdoor play in a child care program and can extend this play at home or in their communities.



Photo: NLI



Photo: ECHO