

PROVIDING OUTDOOR PLAY FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Here in Wisconsin, winter months may feel like a difficult time of the year for getting the little ones to engage in daily outdoor play. From the stress of getting all those small hands and feet into mittens and boots or snowsuits to parents who may not send in appropriate winter clothing, it may seem like there are way too many challenges to overcome.

Along with cold weather comes stuffy, closed up classrooms which allow an increase in germs spreading among children and staff. Many people believe going outside in cold or wet weather can cause colds or sickness; however, colds and flu are caused by germs, like bacteria and viruses. When children and staff spend long hours together indoors, illness spreads easily as everyone re-breathes germs throughout the day. One way to freshen the air indoors is to open the doors and windows in the classroom from 15 minutes before the children arrive. This allows the fresh air to circulate throughout the classroom and clear some of the germs out of the air.



Fresh air is beneficial and outdoor play, even when it is cold outside, can help keep children and staff healthy. The outdoor play provided to in-

fants and toddlers during child care may be the only opportunity they have to engage in daily outdoor active physical play.

As Thelma Harms, one of the authors of the Environment Rating Scales has said, “there is no bad weather, only bad clothes.”

Wisconsin DCF licensing rules require that programs provide daily outdoor activities except during inclement weather or when not advisable for health reasons. The recommendation is a least twice daily.

When planning high quality outdoor play experiences for infants and toddlers keep the following mind:

- Explain to parents and staff the benefits of outdoor play to children’s physical, cognitive and social development and the foundation it builds for literacy, math and science concepts.
- Develop a strong outdoor play policy for your program and encourage parents to provide appropriate outdoor clothing as well as a change of clothes in case children get wet or dirty. Start a clothing donation box so your program has extra clothing on hand.

- Encourage teachers to bring appropriate outdoor clothing that will allow them to engage in outdoor play with children. Teacher participation can stimulate and enrich outdoor play and maximize learning opportunities for children.

- Provide appropriate space for walkers, crawlers and non-mobile children. For non-mobile infants, a large tarp or play mat over the snow adds a

layer of protection from the cold and wet. Blankets can be placed over the tarp or mat for added warmth.



- Use drop off and pick up times when the temperature is not too cold to be outside where children are already dressed warmly coming from their transport vehicles.



Wisconsin Winter Outside Fun with Infants and Toddlers

Practical Suggestions and Fun Ideas for Outside Time

1. Get children ready in pairs as part of a social activity. Everything should be pulled together ahead of time. Talk to the children while you are dressing them. Ask for their cooperation. Children seem to appreciate being included in the process.
2. Integrate getting ready for outdoors as a part of your curriculum with toddlers and twos. Allow for extra time and use it to build self-help skills and vocabulary. Keep talking. Help children think about the order for putting things on. Cards with word and picture by ordered are helpful for children and staff. Have mirrors in the cubby area to children can check out their clothing application. Allow children to do as much as possible for themselves. Practicing use of zippers and fasteners is fine motor practice. Have a set of paper dolls with winter clothes with a flannel board to practice what goes on first.
3. Make outside time after lunch before nap time. Deep breathing and cool air uses up energy and makes children tires so that they nap well. Try putting on snow pants and boots before lunch. Then all that needs to go on is the jackets, mittens, and hats before going outside. Outside time can be great right after morning snack. When children know that food is waiting for them motivates them to be cooperative in pulling on their snow pants and boots.
4. If there is more than one person in the classroom, let one person go outside with the children who are ready first. It eliminates waiting. Those ready first can assist the ones who are in the process.
5. Being flexible with staffing for infants will allow the infants to be taken out two at a time for about 10—20 minutes (depending on outside temperature).
6. Have small brooms and dustpans available for children to help in getting the play yard ready for play.
7. Winter activities can include:
 - Children being pulled around the yard on a large sled.
 - Shovels available to fill up dump trucks
 - Large plastic blocks out for stacking or building forts or snow play
 - Keeping sidewalks clear and toddlers in large buggies can enjoy the winter scenery, a walk around the neighborhood to notice decorations and changes
 - Putting infants into flat-bottomed plastic infant bathtubs, pillows tucked around them and pulling them around the yard.
 - Obstacle courses or pathways around the play yard with caves and snow benches for children to climb in and out or on.

