

YOUR BODY

Bundle up, head outdoors and enjoy some winter fun

By Jane Peterson
For Digital First Media

"Do you want to build a snowman?" Ever since the movie Frozen was released, it seems that children are continuously asking that same question over and over in the winter. The next time, you might want to take them up on their offer.

Charis Calender-Suennick, admissions director at Detroit Waldorf School said playing outside fosters a close-knit sense of family and helps children learn to appreciate and value nature in all four seasons.

"Children imitate us and if we value nature and observe our surroundings, they too will become curious and a true sense of wonder and awe about the world is fostered," she said.

While playing outdoors provides great family fun, the backyard is also an outdoor classroom for your child, a place where the sights and sounds of winter come alive.

While making a connection with nature, children can learn about the life cycles of plants, such as with a small pot of herbs you grow together, or observe how certain plants go dormant in the winter, said Calender-Suennick. They can learn how water freezes, leaves compost and seeds grow food to eat.

"Play is extremely important for assimilating new knowledge and building problem-solving skills, empathy, social and emotional intelligence. It also promotes the development of eye focus and coordination, said Mary Cryderman, Detroit Waldorf School Pre-K teacher. "Our students play outside in all weather."

Research shows that children need time to ab-



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Children love burning off some of their energy by playing outdoors in the crisp, cold air.

Children love burning off some of their energy by playing outdoors in the crisp, cold air. sorb information they have learned in the classroom — and that happens best when there is a break from structured learning. Waldorf's philosophy is based on the idea of capturing what is natural for children, who experience the world through the senses.

"Our play-based early childhood curriculum is grounded in the idea that children have a huge need for movement. In this time of obesity in our increasingly sedentary society, we are extremely focused on meeting the natural needs of our students while en-

couraging a healthy balance of learning and play," Cryderman said.

Just like adults get cabin fever after being cooped up inside for a while, children also get antsy when they don't get enough fresh air and sunshine. They need to run, play and exercise their



Children explore the world by using their senses like touch and sight. That's one of the many benefits of playing outdoors in the winter.

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imagination.

"Playing outside allows children to run, climb, jump and have time to blow off some steam," said Calender-Suennick, adding that children may grow physically stronger and even sleep better when they get plenty of outdoor play time.

She encourages outdoor play as much as possible. At Detroit Waldorf School, students are outdoors for a total of two to three hours a day.

As long as they have the proper cold-weather gear, like snow pants, hats, gloves, boots, scarves and coats, children can thrive outside.

Even older children can benefit from setting down their electronic devices and video games to have a snowball fight, glide down a hill in a toboggan or strap on some snowshoes. The key to getting older children, pre-teens and teens involved in outdoor

fun is to make it a family activity.

"Join them in unplugging," said Calender-Suennick. "Make no electronics a family decision."

To further motivate older children, consider what activities they already enjoy and then get creative. Start a new tradition, jog or go walking together, see who takes the most steps on their pedometer, build an amazing outdoor structure, schedule a family ski trip or make time for an outing to the local ice skating rink, for example, she said.

Use positive reinforcement to encourage electronics-free outdoor play, Calender-Suennick suggested. This will be unique to each family, but could include reading a book series together or staying at a nearby hotel that has an indoor swimming pool.

"Children love it," she said.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DETROIT WALDORF SCHOOL

All children need to play outdoors in cooler weather is warm outerwear and their imagination.



There is a lot of learning happening during outdoor play.



NEED SOME SUGGESTIONS TO GET STARTED?

When you look at the window, all you may see is a gray sky, snow-covered lawn, icicles hanging from the eaves and cold air thick with frost. What your child sees, however, is an outdoor playground with plenty of potential for fun and creativity.

If you need some inspiration to get your snow boots out of the closet and go play outdoors with your children, then consider this list of fun winter activities you can do together, courtesy of Charis Calender-Suemnick, admissions director at Detroit Waldorf School:

- Make a birdfeeder
- Take a nature walk
- Gather pinecones
- Build a campfire
- Make hot chocolate
- Go ice skating
- Visit the animals at the zoo
- Listen to birds
- Explore animal tracks in the snow
- Play seasonal sports
- Enjoy sledding
- Shovel the walkway

"Any outdoor activity is great. There are lots of opportunities to play in the cold," she said.

Outdoor play is crucial for children to learn how to problem-solve and build other skills.