

Lifestyle Tips



Issue 3- 03/13

Dark or Dreary? How to Keep Kids Active When Days are Short or Inclement



Rain, snow, wind, sunshine. The elements play a pivotal role in influencing human behaviour. Shorter days or inclement weather can make even the most active kids head indoors to take cover.

It makes sense that when days are warmer, and longer, children tend to pack more physical activity into their routine and research backs this up. There is a pronounced difference in physical activity levels on longer days when compared to short or medium-length days.¹ On these longer days, children were found to be more active after 3 pm both during the week and on weekend days.

But what are the activities that get shelved when daylight becomes increasingly scarce?

When researchers examined three types of physical activity that kids participate in (unstructured out-of-home play, structured sports, and active travel - which is getting places under your own steam), it is the amount of unstructured playtime that fluctuated with the changes in daylight and not scheduled sports or active travel. Kids just don't get enough playtime when days are shorter.

Here are some ideas to boost kids' physical activity levels year round, when we don't always have the luxury of long, sunny summer days.

Make play while the sun shines. Kids naturally play more during daylight hours; time which is often spent in the classroom or finishing schoolwork at home. When shorter days dampen enthusiasm for outdoor, after-dinner play, consider making the 3-6 pm after-school period a "get-outside" time zone. Take advantage of the sunlight and free time for physical activity, and save the homework for darker hours.

Give sport a sporting chance. Research shows that kids' time spent in structured sport does not fluctuate as significantly from season to season as unstructured play does. Consider trying a new sport in winter, spring or fall that keeps kids moving throughout the seasons. Seasons with shorter days and



nastier weather could involve indoor sports like swimming lessons or a fun, non-competitive basketball or volleyball league.

Advocate for active indoor recess. Rainy days are associated with lower levels of physical activity for kids during the middle part of the day – when recess or lunch breaks happen. Physical activity is especially needed during school breaks to allow kids to concentrate better and focus attention in class. Advocate for the use of the gymnasium and hallways by kids for active play on rainy days. Desks in classrooms can easily be pushed aside for an impromptu dance party.

Supervise an outdoor after-dinner playdate. Darkness is seen by parents to be a barrier for permitting unsupervised outdoor play. Make playing outside in the darker hours a family adventure. Instead of turning on the television after dinner, make going to the playground or local school yard an outing that includes several families to create a safe yet “thrilling” outing.

Take advantage of indoor play spaces.

Find out if your community has a public indoor playground – spaces that are becoming more popular as parents look for safe, supervised play spaces that are weather-proof. Community centres often offer “kindergym” sessions with lots of equipment such as mats, balls, scooters and hoops. All perfect for adding to unstructured play time when the weather conditions at the local park might be less than ideal.

A swimming idea. Pools are a terrific play to boost physical activity levels all year round. Find an indoor pool for winter months, and enjoy the pleasure of swimming in an outdoor community pool when the weather permits it. Learning how to swim and some basic life-saving techniques are important life skills for kids and adults alike. Most municipalities offer lessons that will get your child in the pool and active regularly. And don't forget how fun it is to just splash around and play in the pool. Most public

pools offer free swims for families, where playing in the water is a fun way to spend time on a weekend.

Put winter on ice. Skating at the local rink, either indoors or out, is another way to ramp up activity in winter months. Public facilities in Canada are abundant, and usually well-lit in the evening hours – extending physical activity opportunities beyond sundown. What could be more Canadian, in fact, than donning skates and taking some turns? Lacing up, and learning how to skate early on, gives us a skill that can be enjoyed throughout a lifetime.

It has been shown that physical activity boosts your mood, gives you a sense of well-being, and makes you happier. So making the extra effort to get moving when dark and dreary winter days might be giving you the blues is advice we should all take to heart.

¹ Goodman A, Paskins J, Mackett R. Day Length and Weather Effects on Children's Physical Activity and Participation in Play, Sports, and Active Travel. *J Phys Act Health*. 2012 Nov; 9(8): 1105-16. Epub 2012 Nov 8.