Going Wild in Winter-The Unique Benefits of Winter Outdoor Play

Outdoor play in winter can offer numerous benefits for early years children. While it's tempting to stay indoors during the colder months, winter outdoor play offers some fantastic advantages. With limited daylight hours, outdoor exposure becomes crucial for our vitamin D synthesis, which is essential for bone development and immune function. Gaining much needed exposure to fresh air in colder months of the year helps reduce the spread of coughs and colds by avoiding the bacteria and viruses that thrive at this time of year in more poorly ventilated indoor environments. At Hambledon Nursery we feel it is important to maintain outdoor routines throughout winter to help prevent the onset of 'cabin fever' in both children as it does for adults. It provides a much-needed change of scenery and fresh air, supporting the overall well-being of everyone.

The first benefit to note is the **development of gross motor skills**: Children engage in activities like sledding and building snowmen, which require coordination and balance. The colder weather in winter encourages children to move and keep themselves active and warm. Children use their large muscle groups when running and jumping and even perhaps in throwing snow if they have the opportunity.

This physical development promotes overall health and wellbeing, leading to healthy habits as children grow older and become we hope, adults who will declare, "Oh look, it's cold outside…come on, let's wrap up and go for a winter's walk"! We know that is formative early experiences which will lay the foundation for future well-being in adulthood.

Research indicates that exposure to natural environments can lower cortisol (stress) levels, even in very young children. The physical activity involved in outdoor play releases endorphins, contributing to improved mood and emotional regulation.

Even on overcast days, outdoor light exposure can help regulate circadian rhythms and boost serotonin levels, potentially mitigating the effects of; ‘Seasonal Affective Disorder’, which can affect even young children.

Nature exposure has also been linked to improved focus and attention. For children exhibiting early signs of attention difficulties, regular outdoor experiences can be particularly beneficial. The varied stimuli in a winter landscape naturally encourage mindfulness and present-moment awareness. Fostering an early connection with nature can support emotional wellbeing and foster environmental stewardship.

The changing natural environment in winter- leaves having fallen, ice forming provides children with new experiences and opportunities which lead to **deeper cognitive growth**. The concept of cause and effect becomes tangible as they observe phenomena like footprints in snow or their visible breath in cold air.

The sensory experiences of playing outside in the winter, the textures of snow, ice, and frost provide tactile experiences that support neural development as **problem-solving skills** are honed as children figure out how to break through the ice that has formed on the top of a pan left out in the mud kitchen or navigate icy patches. Observing weather changes, interacting with natural materials, and problem-solving (how to climb over that log, for instance) all also contribute to cognitive growth.

Children learn to identify potential hazards for themselves, to risk assess simply as they negotiate slippery winter surfaces outside. They learn to moderate their movements when they sense it might be necessary, slowing down, taking more deliberate and tentative steps to ensure their own safety and avoid falling over.

Winter play also fosters independence as children learn to dress for the weather and explore safely within boundaries which extends their social and emotional development. Fine motor skills also get a workout too as children are encouraged to manipulate snow if they are lucky, or handle ice from frozen water in puddles and containers, to pick up small objects

while wearing mittens, or attempt to zip up their coats. These activities, while seemingly simple, are excellent for developing dexterity and hand-eye coordination in day-to-day tasks.

Spending time outside in the winter introduces children to season-specific vocabulary through interactions as they play and this encourages their descriptive language as they discuss new sensations, colours, and textures. One child beautifully described the light dusting of snow on the ground, “oh wow, it looks like a cloud”.

As Early Years professionals dedicated to nurturing young minds, we are aware at Hambledon Nursery of the importance of outdoor play for early years children's development and well-being. We understand that winter also offers unique learning opportunities. It’s the perfect time to introduce early concepts of weather, seasonal changes, and environmental awareness.

However, when winter arrives, there’s often a tendency to limit outdoor experiences for children and that is why we feel it is important to spend time exploring the reasons why we should be encouraging outdoor experiences and play for young children, regardless of the weather!