

Get Past the Cold

On a cold December day, a delicate layer of frost edges the corner of each window and mounds of snow smooth over bushes and trees. Birds are huddled under eaves, fluffing their feathers, reminding you that winter is well and truly here. Meanwhile, the kids are hunched behind computer screens, or tapping their feet to the latest download on iTunes™. And you are thinking, I've just got to figure out some way to get the kids outside!

With the average child spending more than five hours per day in front of some kind of luminescent screen (TV, DVD, computer, games, etc.), encouraging outdoor play, even during those coldest of winter days, becomes more critical than ever. Richard Louv came up with the thought provoking phrase, "Nature Deficit Disorder" to describe the effects on our children if they don't go outside. Louv cites spiraling levels of obesity, increased incidence of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), feelings of stress and a general sense of feeling disconnected from the natural world as the unintended consequences of a childhood spent indoors.

From TV, computer games, Wiis and Xboxs, our society has created many enticing reasons for kids not to go outside. Children are easier to monitor when they stay indoors. They are "safer" inside. In the age of multi-tasking, we can "look after them" while we are busy doing something else and we have the satisfaction of knowing that they are being entertained.

And yet, if we have the fortitude and gumption to get our kids off the couch and into the magic of a winter's day, we not only provide exercise and fresh air, we help to forge a real and lasting connection between our children and the outdoors.



Photo: Makia Mazolli

If we give them some winter experiences in nearby fields, forests and green spaces, we'll help them to recognize, as John Muir once said, that if we "tug at a single thing in nature, we'll find it connected to the rest of the world."

Redeem this winter day. Grab your hat, mitts, warm boots and winter jacket and don't forget the kids! Experience the exhilaration of winter while the air is crisp, sharp and clear. The spring thaw will come far too soon!

Tracking and Trailing

As I am fond of telling my students, every trail has a story to tell. If you are patient enough you can learn to read the writing each footprint makes in the soft snow of winter. Go to a nearby forest, field or natural area. When you find tracks, follow them. Ask your children which direction the animal was heading (look for scuff marks, usually located at the rear of the tracks). Was it running, hopping or walking; did you find a crushed area indicating the animal had lain down? Look for signs of browsing (rabbits have sharp teeth and nip small saplings at a 45 degree angle); deer don't have any top teeth and they tend to tear and chomp overhanging branches and saplings (especially cedar).

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Enjoying Winter With Your Children

BY JACOB RODENBURG

Red squirrels love to husk cones, pulling off the scales in large piles under trees. Was the animal walking in a straight line (fox, coyote, house cat)? Was it hopping (squirrels, rabbits, mice), or did you notice one larger foot landing beside one smaller foot (raccoon, porcupine)?

The more children follow tracks, the sharper their eyes become. If you are lucky, you can follow tracks right to their source (perhaps a squirrel up in a tree). To further practice tracking skills, take a solid round log 20 centimetres in diameter, approximately 30 centimetres long and drive in a series of wood screws (30 or so) so the heads are sticking out all around the log. Attach a stout rope and drag the log in a winding fashion through a wooded area. Hide a small stuffed animal at the end. The screws catch on the undergrowth, turning over leaves, moving branches and of course, the path of the log leaves a distinct trail in the snow. The screws mimic the movement of claws and feet through the underbrush. Have your children attempt to follow the trail to the stuffed animal. As your kids become more keen and adept, begin to remove some or all of the screws. This makes the challenge of following the log trail much more difficult. You are teaching your children the fine art of trailing! Use this technique as a way of discovering signs of an animal's passage. Overturned leaves, bent grasses, scraped moss, disturbed earth, scat (animal droppings) and browse marks are sure signs of an animal passing through.

Make a Tracking Stick

For added adventure, try a tracking stick. Use a 3/4 inch dowel about two feet long. Attach two hair elastics, one for either end. If you find tracks in the soft mud or snow, slide the elastics on the tracking stick so you can measure the stride of the animal (the distance between the paw prints from the heel of one to the heel

of the next paw print ahead). Once the tracks leave the mud or snow, flip the tracking stick over and this will tell you where the next paw print *should* be. Look for subtle disturbances (bent grass, scratches etc.). Follow the trail as far as you can.

Inuit Games

Who better to teach us to enjoy winter than the very people who have lived in some of the coldest regions of the planet? During the long winter when the sun hung low or disappeared altogether, the Inuit played games in order to hone hunting skills, develop balance and test strength. These games also helped to pass the time during raging blizzards and severe cold.

Toe Tag: Choose an opponent and face each other. Place your hands behind your back. Try to touch your opponent's toes with your toes before they touch yours with theirs. The game quickly becomes a light-footed dance, as people try to avoid descending feet. A perfect way to restore circulation to chilly toes!

Butt Bump: Choose an opponent and stand back to back, posterior about 20 centimetres apart. At a given signal, use your rear end to try to unbalance your opponent (while they try to do the same to you)! First person to shift their feet loses.

Knee Jump: Kneel in the snow, feet flat along the ground. On a given signal, jump as far as you can but you must land on your feet! Jumps of close to three metres have been recorded.

Kicking Games: Essential for traditional kicking games is the object that is kicked, called the "seal." It can be made out of a stuffed sock, a small roll of paper or anything that can be suspended from a rope. Throw the seal over a low-lying limb of a tree, so that its height can be adjusted. Perhaps the most popular of all the kicking games is the "one foot high kick." The contestant approaches the seal at a trot and jumps as high as possible from both feet. They then attempt to kick the seal and land on the same foot. Landing on two feet constitutes a "no jump." The contestant has to at least touch the seal for a successful jump. Inuit hunters could kick well over three metres in height! "Two foot" variation. The contestant must jump with both feet linked together and kick the seal. Once again, to be a successful jump, they must land on one foot. The highest jump wins. Jumps of over two metres have been recorded.

To find more winter games, search "Arctic Games" or "Inuit Games" on the Internet. There are literally dozens of challenging activities to keep the blood circulating and the toes warm, even on the coldest of days. X

— Jacob Rodenburg is the Executive Director for Camp Kawartha and the Kawartha Outdoor Education Centre in Lakefield, Ontario. An outdoor enthusiast, you can find Jacob outside in any season. Visit www.campkawartha.ca for more detail.



Photo: Jacob Rodenburg