

Enjoy the Great Indoors

Often at this time of year, we dream back to those endless days of sunshine, when children played outside in the fresh air until their little hearts were content, clambering through open fields, building exquisitely-designed sandcastles on the beach and zooming around the neighbourhood, heart racing, on two wheels. And now, yes winter looms. But it's not all that bad. Is it? After all, we are used to a very changeable climate and our country is well equipped for indoor activities. OK, so, the options for play are more limited in the darker days, but there's still loads to do. And luring the children away from the computer, Play station or TV to partake in physical activity will boost their systems right through the dreariest, wettest of months of the year.

So what is out there?

In answer to that question - more than you may think. More sedate options include anything along the arts and crafts theme. Pottery painting, face painting, drawing and colouring are guaranteed winners, with both parents and children alike. You may be surprised at how relaxing an afternoon of pottery painting can be - well worth the price of a piece of ceramic, and something that would make a fabulous Christmas present for Grandma or Grandpa! Indoor play centres are not just limited to ball pools and drop slides. For the more adrenaline fuelled youngster, virtual rides, dodgems, go karts, and climbing walls offer an outlet to expend over-charged energy. Indeed, many indoor attractions are building on their strengths and are offering a wider variety of challenging activities.

Children who maintain physical activity year-round will reap a whole load of benefits:

It's easy to let lethargy set in during the winter, with less option to get out and get active. But did you know that a couple of hours of charging up stairs, slipping down drop slides, running at soft obstacles and diving into multi-coloured ball pools is equivalent to a good workout at the gym? This form of activity can be compared with what athletes term as 'interval training' - where cardio-vascular strength is improved, by fluctuating running speeds from a walk to a flat out sprint. Even professional athletes find this form of training extremely challenging, yet children seem to deal with it with relative ease, partly because they don't realise they are exercising. They just think they're having fun. With improved cardio-fitness, a child's physical and mental health is boosted. As well as combating the risk of obesity, physical activity has been shown to cut the chance of heart disease, diabetes, behavioural problems, chronic fatigue syndrome and even cancer.

In the UK, child obesity has been described as a modern epidemic, with about 20 per cent of children overweight and 2.5 per cent severely overweight or obese. Its effects can be severe. These include problems with the joints and bones, the heart, blood pressure, blood sugar and blood fat levels and the gall bladder. Many obese people also suffer from low self-esteem.

Obesity is caused by two simple factors - an unhealthy diet and not taking enough exercise. Research suggests that the main problem is a continual reduction in the amount of exercise children take, highlighting the importance of year-round physical activity. To check whether your child is obese, talk to your doctor. He or she will calculate your child's body mass index (BMI). Your doctor may suggest making long-term changes to diet and fitness.

Imaginary and interactive play will aid a child's social and cognitive development, promoting long term emotional health and well being. For example, an indoor play centre can provide the setting for an exciting adventure through the jungle where new explorers and friends can be met along the way. Children have unlimited scope to entertain themselves and their peers in such an environment, allowing expression of freedom and generating creative thinking. If disputes arise with friends or even temporary new-found friends in a shared game, children have an opportunity to fine tune their problem-solving skills. Of course, mum or dad will not be too far away to assist, if required.

By playing with others, a child will not only learn to understand and read emotions but their command of the English language will also develop, enabling them to converse more easily with others. These verbal communication skills will prove priceless, leading to greater stability in later life. By playing indoors children are taken away from 'hanging out' on the streets, with the associated risks involved.

Ways to encourage your children to play more indoors...

- Take them to a venue that provides stimulating play equipment to offer challenge and risk.
- Organise a social event with friends at your home such as a pottery-painting afternoon or baking day in the kitchen.
- Visit an indoor play centre that provides a safe environment to monitor your children. Remember: many venues cater for parents in terms of supplying quality food and an environment to socialise with other parents. Many also offer Internet facilities or a TV room to escape the chaos and noise from the main play area.
- Introduce your children to sport that can be played in a recreation hall such as badminton, five-a-side football, indoor cricket or netball.

The Play Providers Association aims to promote, develop and protect the interests of all businesses engaged in providing enclosed play facilities. Tel: 02476 414999 or visit

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