



Warming up to winter



Don't let the cold turn learners into hermits; outdoor activities can be a brisk blast

By Alice Hohl

Now that the chill is in the air in most parts of the Northern Hemisphere, even those adventurous educators who frequently engage in outdoor activities are probably hunkering down for a long stretch inside.

It's tough to work up the energy to take children outdoors in winter. First, there is the time lost in putting on coats, gloves and scarves. Then there's the possibility of icky slush and the lack of dry, warm places to sit outside. But a quick hike around the program site wouldn't be so bad, right? And after a few of those, heading over to a nearby park or landmark would be no big deal. That first step outside in the winter is really the toughest step to take. So here's some inspiration.

We all know that seeing real-world evidence and applications of classroom material helps students perform better, whether it's the science of leaves turning red or the poetry of an icicle melting. What many don't know about is the positive effect on students' performance in unrelated subjects.

The second phase of a California study that initially showed improvement among students who studied their subjects on the school grounds and in the local community now adds more heft to the initial findings. "Students in environment-based instructional programs score as well or better on standardized measures in four basic subject areas — reading, math, language and spelling. The environment-based programs also foster cooperative learning and civic responsibility, using the natural characteristics of the school grounds and local community as the foundational framework for the curricula," states the California Student Assessment Project Phase Two: The Effects of Environment-Based Education on Student Achievement. (SEER: Poway, CA, 2005.)

After-school professionals can also take away from this study the finding that outdoor experiences can be relatively unstructured and still be highly successful in aiding with classroom learning, reflection and discussion about many subjects, such as measurement (math), Earth science and social studies (who owns and cares for the land). It can also inspire poetry, short stories, music and art. It may be helpful to

record video or audio of outdoor excursions to help with reflections later.

Terrific technological resources can also make an outdoor hike easy to plan. Google Earth, which can be downloaded free from Google.com, is an amazing tool that allows after-school professionals to zoom in on their program site and locate patches of nature on the grounds or nearby. Most local government Web sites will help pinpoint ownership of "nearby nature" to make it easier to ask permission to take a group there.

Changing seasons can add to the challenge of integrating outdoor experiences into learning, but we are living in an era when children are hardly aware of the impact of the seasons on their lives. They have access to all kinds of food, no matter the season. They move from climate-controlled homes to climate-controlled buildings in climate-controlled cars. Most of their playtime is spent indoors, staring at screens that don't reflect the amazing changes that take place as our planet dances nearer and farther from the sun.

This reality increases the vital role educators play in keeping children and youth in touch with the wonders of our natural world — wonders that for centuries have inspired our greatest thinkers, artists and scientists and fostered creativity and curiosity.

The brisk winter air also can sharpen children's minds and attention, increasing their circulation and heart rates in order to compensate for the colder air. One of the reasons children and adults don't burn as many calories these days is that we tend to keep ourselves at a constant temperature, instead of asking our bodies to work a little to cope with the changing climate.

Educators lucky enough to live in a climate that isn't extreme in the winter should take advantage of this natural benefit and push kids out the door all year. Those who do have to brave the bracing wind on their faces must embrace the challenge, armed with all the benefits and gifts the changing seasons bring!

Alice Hohl is co-chairwoman of the Leave No Child Inside Central Ohio Collaborative (<http://kidsandnature.org/blog/>).

She can be reached at alice@alicehohl.com.

