Winter Wonderland? Meeting Sensory Needs During the Winter Months

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Keep Moving

After surviving the snow and an extended Holiday Break, we are finally back and beginning to establish a routine despite delays and changes in schedule. Many find that they feel “stuck indoors”, unable to meet movement and sensory needs due to weather, temperature, and lack of sunlight. We often refer to this feeling as “cabin fever.” Finding ways to incorporate movement into each day is encouraged to maintain optimal arousal and to meet sensory needs, thus improving attention and cognitive function.

Movement has been directly linked to improvement in brain function. One example of this research can be found in the book Spark: the Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain, by Harvard John Ratey, MD, a clinical psychologist and professor at Harvard Medical School. Videos about this theory are also on YouTube.
Indoor Activities and Exercises for Movement-Based Sensory Needs  
(Vestibular, Proprioceptive, & more)

- Use a corner of the classroom, basement, or garage for indoor play areas, whenever space allows.
  - Set aside a few minutes each ½ hour to an hour for an active movement break to improve attention.
  - Hang an indoor swing in your building, if possible.
  - Use a mini-trampoline with safety bar.
  - Try to set up silly obstacle courses with your kids, including specific movement challenges like rolling, jumping, or climbing.
  - Set up classroom scavenger hunts related to subjects or topics you are covering.
  - Set up activities, such as ring toss, indoor bowling, balance beams, etc. in your home or classroom.
  - Consider roller skates, a roller racer, scooter board play, or bouncy balls in an unfinished basement or gymnasium.

- Explore kid-friendly movement based (i.e. Yoga and dance) videos on YouTube that can be done in your room as brain breaks, such as: Just Dance Kids 2 – The Gummy Bear Song or Car Wash Brain Break.

- Bundle up when the temperature allows and go to the park or play on the playground. Dress in layers and clothing suitable for the weather to adjust conditions and temperature accordingly.

- Use indoor exercise equipment, such as a stationary bike or treadmill. Set a timer and put on a movie or a favorite song list.

- At school, consider working with building administrators on developing a schedule for a rotating indoor recess in the gymnasium, cafeteria, auditorium, or an empty wing, if possible.

- Check on indoor activities for families, children, and teens available at your local gym or YMCA. Often swimming is available indoors year-round. Scholarships may be available at some YMCA’s for families with financial need.

- Visit Museums and other indoor attractions that require walking. Look for free days at your local Museum.
Create a Sensory/Fidget Box with fidgets, stress balls, and putty as activity options.
Set limits and expectations: Post visuals for directions, time limits, volume levels, etc. during indoor play.
Look online for resources, such as Kaplan’s Classroom Activities for the Winter Months or on sites like Pinterest for more ideas.
Consider contacting your local gymnastics center to see if there are open gym times to play and explore equipment with supervision.
Play movement-based video game system games (dust off that old Wii-Sports Console, if you have one).
Consult with your OT for movement-based activities for at home and at school.