

Keeping body and mind active and warm

These winter activities are healthy—and creative

By Janis Hashe
Photos by Julie Hogue

Winter in Chattanooga is no Wisconsin. Two or three snow days just mean fun sliding down hills or making a soon-to-melt snowman in the front yard. But it *can* get kinda chilly outside—and that can mean even more time in front of TVs and PlayStations.

Concerned parents want to make sure kids get enough physical activity to keep them healthy, both in body and mind. So we put out a call, asking parents and experts for suggestions on what works for winter fun. We got some great suggestions—see if you agree.

A winter workout—for everyone

Jim Massaro is the owner of Advanced Body Personal & Athletic Training Center in Nyack, NY, and known for training people of all ages. “In winter, there’s a real tendency to sit and eat,” he says. “The number-one priority is for parents to be active *with* their kids. Run around in the backyard. Kick a soccer ball. You have to walk the walk, literally.”

Becky Cryne, who’s a personal fitness trainer and mother of two, agrees. “Don’t be a couch potato yourself. Kids learn behavior from their parents,” she notes. “Be an active role model. My daughters love to help Mommy with her ‘exercisers,’ as they call them. While it is really cute to see my 2-year-old stretching alongside me when I work out, there



New twist on old favorite: Just because it’s cold outside is no excuse for kids to plug in. Chattanooga mom Vangie Ruth suggests a new twist on an old favorite, the indoor fort. “The objective of this fort is known up front—it’s a reading fort. After it’s built, they climb inside and spend time reading by flashlight.” Here Bryan Hogue reads to his 2-year-old son, Brett.

is much more to it. I know I am instilling values and behaviors in her that will last a lifetime.”

Playing *with* your kids will help keep them in the game, she says. “My 2-year-old daughter loves for my husband or me to play ‘chase’ with her. A few trips around our circular hallway are good for everyone’s health and fitness!”

Even—and in fact, especially—non-athletic kids need to be encouraged to exercise. “Parents need to let the child know it’s supposed to be fun. Encourage them. Let them know there is something they are good at,” says Massaro. “If they admire a professional athlete, explain that that person did not get so good by playing video games.”

Easy obstacle course

If it’s a day for staying inside, however, that doesn’t have to mean “sitting around.” Local mom Vangie Ruth, parent of four, three of whom are now teenagers, has a couple of creative suggestions. She calls her indoor obstacle course “a sure winner for ages 4 to 8.”

We’ll let her describe the rules:

“We design an obstacle course with the items already in the house, just as it already is, no setup required. It’s great to burn some of that youthful energy when outside play isn’t possible. Ours starts on the stairs (kids go as high as is safe for each age). Jumping from the step to the floor,

they must hop on one foot over to and crawl under the coffee table without bumping any part of it. Then run around the end of the couch, rolling the exercise ball (that lives in this room) with their feet or hands (age-appropriate) without bumping anything, climb under the dining-room chair and on top of the other dining-room chairs, slide to the end of the row of chairs and to the floor, then fill a cup with water and walk through the kitchen without spilling. Take it to the bathroom and dump it in the toilet and flush. That marks the end!

“It’s a lot of fun working together to establish the course and obstacles. Once the course is established, since it doesn’t require moving anything around, you can call out, ‘obstacle course’ any time some energy-burning is needed, and the game is off and going. They all run to the stairs and wait their turn. Again, we modified it as they got older, or we thought of new things to increase

the level of challenge. As the judge, I sit on the couch, cheering and timing them. You can easily implement some math, spelling, telling time or trivia questions as a challenge. I’ve even made folding towels or washcloths part of it. (They may get folded a dozen times before the game is over, but in the end, a chore gets done.) We have passed hours with this one, and it’s sure to provide lots of laughs.”

Another suggestion from Vangie:

New spin on the old blanket fort

“Building a fort in the living room is an oldie but goodie. Before construction can begin, the children have to gather three to five books, a favorite stuffed animal and a flashlight. The objective of this fort is known up front—it’s a reading fort. After it’s built, they climb inside and spend time reading by flashlight. After some free play, we get a couple more books and go a second round. The flashlight and animal seem to be pretty important elements that keep them excited about the book-reading twist.”

From mom Tara DiMilia:

My kids LOVE the game Hullabaloo

“It comes with 6-inch shapes that go on the floor, and they have to jump around and move from one to another, based on directions from a battery-

More indoor/outdoor winter fun

Catherine Holecko, author of *Guide to Family Fitness*, offers a number of suggestions for multi-season play on her website, FamilyFitness.about.com.

Yet another Web resource is the Family section on Active.com, which offers a variety of resources on ways to get kids moving, including a list of family-friendly activities that parents and their children can sign up for, as well as tips and expert advice on how to keep kids fit for life.

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—Alice Hohl

operated 'thing,' and everyone feels like a winner. They play it by themselves, too. My kids are 4 and 6, and we've had it for two years. I have no association with the company, but I tell everyone about it for the winter."

From mom Anneliese Curtis Place:

I hula-hoop with my daughter.

"She can use up to three hula hoops at a time, and she really works up a sweat. I got the idea because her friends all have a Wii and they do a hula-hoop game, and I couldn't afford it. So I went to Walmart and bought four hoops. It takes very little space, and the hoops store away easily. When we started, I couldn't even keep a hoop up. Now I am 13 pounds lighter in five months. It is a win for mom and daughter!"

From Betsy Cryne:

Be creative.

"Bring in a large box from a fridge or freezer. Mom or Dad can help toddlers cut windows into their new 'house,' and the kids can easily be kept busy for an hour or two painting the inside or outside.

"We bring some of our 'outdoor' toys inside during the winter months...I think the Little Tikes basketball net gets more use inside during the winter than it does in the summer when it's outside."

From Jim Massaro:

Indoor circuit training

"Set up stations where they do jumping jacks, squats, and running in place. You can make these times during commercials, for example."

Bouldering cave

Sherri Bergman from St. Andrew's-Sewanee School in Sewanee, Tenn., sent us a picture of the school's bouldering cave. "It isn't open to the public," she says, "but it might offer ideas to folks. The bouldering cave was built a few years back in a shed on our campus. It is actually possible to create a similar, albeit smaller, set-up in a garage or attic. Our students practice in the shed, and then we take them down to the Tennessee Bouldering Authority (TBAGym.com) in St. Elmo for occasional climbs or Saturday competitions. It's great indoor fun."

The great outdoors

Alice Hohl is part of an organization emphasizing how much kids need to be outside, connecting with the natural world. "After reading *Last Child in the Woods*, a friend and I co-founded the Ohio



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—Soleman Hatch, with son Soleman, II

chapter of the Children & Nature Network," she says. "It's so important to return that outdoor play to childhood."

She reports that even during cold Ohio winters, she and her children, ages 3 and 4, bundle up and go for short evening walks. "We take flashlights, and clip blinking lights on their coats," she says. "The idea that kids always have to be in 68 to 72 degrees is ridiculous. And they love being outside with the stars and the night sounds." (Find out more about this at KidsAndNature.org.)

Chattanooga dad Soleman Hatch says his 4-year-old son, Soleman, II, has already taken karate and gymnastics, and that the local rec center is a family favorite. "We also get outside the house, play at the local playground, where he meets kids from the neighborhood, or go out to Coolidge Park, where he loves to ride the carousel," dad Soleman says. The Children's Discovery Museum is also a main Hatch family destination.

"We also go to Family Skate Night and do nature walks with Outdoor Chattanooga," he reports. "And sometimes, at home, he will show me his jump tucks or rolls, and he really gets a kick out of it when he sees me trying to do it, too!"

Suggests Jim Massaro: "Set up an agility course outside, places where kids can throw balls back and forth, change direction, turn and jump."

He adds advice about feeding that energy: "Teach them at an early age that a reward might be a piece of fruit—not candy or salty snacks." 🍌

One school district's bookish brainstorm

We got a great out-of-the-box suggestion from Scott Ertl of Marvin Ward Elementary School in Winston-Salem, N.C. He's a school counselor and coordinator of the program called "Read and Ride." He writes:

"I wanted to let you know about a program our elementary school has to provide children a fun way to be active and read. It's called the 'Read and Ride' program, where students ride exercise bikes while reading fun magazines and books. The kids LOVE it! Our original goal was 30 exercise bikes, but we received 39 from members of our community.

"The excitement with the program has been overwhelming. We have received hundreds of donated children's magazines as well.

"Our school has been fortunate enough to have an empty classroom this year, so we dedicated it as our Read and Ride room for 30 bikes so teachers can bring their entire class, and every student has his/her own bike to ride while reading. (Even the teachers participate!) The teachers sign up to bring their classes for a 15-minute period any time throughout the day for this 'extra recess' period. It's especially full on inclement days when the students are unable to go outside during recess. The teachers especially appreciate the opportunity for the students to be active instead of being so restless in class.

"Our website is KidsReadAndRide.com. We want to encourage more schools to start similar programs for their students. The kids are reading more than ever before. Even though we initially developed this program as an effort to reduce childhood obesity and increase literacy, we never expected the tremendous support, positive results, or excitement—what a joy!" 🍌