



by Karen Stephens

Snow Activities Let Children Explore the Wonders of Weather

One of my favorite children's books is *Stranger in the Woods*, a charming photographic book by Carl R. Sams II and Jean Stoick. It records children building an edible snowman for deer and other woodland wildlife. It celebrates all the fun kids have when the land is covered with a blanket of white.

If it is 20 degrees or higher (including the wind-chill factor) bundle your kids up in snowsuits and boots and let them have fun in the white stuff, too. Nylon or plastic insulated mittens are best for keeping snow-building hands warm. A face mask helps protect cheeks from windburn. If your child prefers a scarf, be sure to tuck the scarf inside your child's coat; otherwise scarf ends can get caught and lead to accidental choking. If the kids are old enough to enjoy the snow outside alone, keep an eye on them every 15 minutes or so to make sure they aren't thirsty or under/over heated.

Keeping those safety precautions in mind, it's time to let the kids go out and for some fun snow play! Following are activities they'll enjoy.

- **SHAKE A STICK.** When low branches of trees and shrubs are piled high with snow, (not ice!) have the kids whack them with a stick or broom. The snow cascading down like a waterfall provides dramatic fun and introduces kids to the physics of cause and effect.
- **SNOW MESSAGES.** Have kids write BIG word messages by dragging their feet through snow to make letters and words, like "Hi, Gramps!" Messages are most easily viewed from a second story.
- **SNOW SCULPTURES.** Snowballs and snowmen are perennial favorites of those who love snow's packing possibilities. But don't stop at snowmen; make snow creatures, too, like cats, dogs, squirrels and rabbits. When kids line up three snowballs, they have a caterpillar! Or create a porcupine by sticking clumps of pine needles all over a small snow body. With a lot of snow, go for a whale or even a dinosaur! Let kids decorate sculptures with items from the garage, kitchen, and sewing box.
- **WATER-PAINTING SNOW.** Fill a spray bottle with water and a heavy dose of food coloring. Provide as many different bottles and colors as you choose. Let kids spray paint the snow landscape. Painting snow sculptures with a spray bottle is fun, too. Plastic eyedroppers can be used to paint with colored water.
- **TRUCK PLAY.** Let the kids use jumbo toy bulldozers and dump trucks to plow roads in the yard. Provide old shoeboxes and markers so they can create houses to set along their plowed roads. Plastic people, toy cars, and animals can populate their town. Fir tree branches stuck in the snow represent trees.
- **CASTING SNOW COLORS.** Give kids several large sheets of different colored cellophane or a plastic report covers. (Available at office supplies stores.) As kids hold up the colored sheets, the sun shines through them casting lovely color onto the palette of snow. Kids can overlap two colors to create a third.
- **SNOW LINE DESIGNS.** Bring out the small sand rakes that make straight, zigzag, or curvy designs in sand. With a light powdery snow, kids can make snow top designs with them, too. (Homemade rakes can be made from 12" squares of cardboard. Using scissors, cut different designs along each edge of the square. Kids drag the square across the snow to make designs.)

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- **SNOW PRINTS.** Give the kids different types of objects to make prints in the snow. Ice cube trays create lines of squares. Old-fashioned potato mashers create either square grids or wavy curves, depending on type. Old boots or rubber sandals with interesting tread designs can be used for printing, too.
- **SNOW PAINT WITH COOKIE CUTTERS.** Line several old cookie sheets with slightly moistened paper towels. Pour a different color of water-based tempera paint on each sheet. Spread the paint over the paper towels with a brush or spatula. Give kids a variety of cookie cutters. They press the cutters into the paint and then lightly onto the snow. They leave painted shapes behind.
- **BUBBLES.** Yes, I mean blow bubbles. Observe how differently bubbles react in the cold compared to warm weather. (Hint: Kids' warm breath makes the bubbles lighter than the cold air around them, so they rise up.)
- **PLAY WOLF.** It's hard work traveling in deep snow, so wolves travel in a single line. The leader makes tracks that all the others step into, thus they conserve energy. Kids can do the same. Children can take turns being wolf pack leader. The others have to follow stepping exactly into the leader's tracks.
- **TRAIN PLAY.** Kids can pretend to be steam engines by puffing out their warm breath to create smoke in the cold air. Make train tracks all over the yard.
- **SNOW CRYSTALS UP CLOSE.** Provide a square of black velvet or a piece of black construction paper for kids to catch snowflakes on. When a few are caught, examine them with a magnifying glass.
- **SNOW SHADOWS.** On a sunny day, walk in the snow. Notice all the shadows on the snow. Can the kids make their own shadows dance and take on different shapes?
- **MAKE A SNOW GAUGE.** Clean a plastic jar with a wide opening, like a mayonnaise salad dressing jar. Attach a strip of masking tape vertically along the side. With a permanent marker, mark off inches on the masking tape. Before it snows, place the jar on level ground outside. After the snow stops, go out and see how many inches fell.
- **SNOW CAVES.** After a good snow, let kids use child-sized snow shovels to build caves into the sides of snowdrifts. To make it cozier, provide a blanket for the cave's floor.
- **MEASURE SNOWDRIFTS.** Give the kids yardsticks, paper, and pencil and let them go around the yard measuring and recording the size of the snowdrifts. Can they figure out why some drifts are larger than others?
- **TUNNEL IT.** When inches really build up, kids can make underground tunnels to maneuver. Make SHORT tunnels; you don't want them collapsing on the kids. For long tunnels, every few feet make a large peek-through head hole in the top of the tunnel.
- **SNOW ANGELS.** Lay on your back in the snow. Flap your arms up and down and your legs open and shut to create (you remember) your angel wings.
- **BEYOND SNOW ANGELS.** Once you have snow angels mastered, try putting kids' problem solving skills to work by making other snow imprints with their bodies. Can the kids make a giraffe, an airplane, the Eiffel tower, the St. Louis arch?

For more winter play ideas, see Parenting Exchange column, "Creative Ways for Kids to Enjoy Snow Play."

Book Citation

- *Stranger in the Woods* by Carl R. Sams II and Jean Stoick. (Milford, MI: Carl R. Sams II Photography, 1999).

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.