



Your youngsters got through their summer activities in one piece, and winter is upon us. But now is not the time to get lazy with safety.

By Emily Harris



So your young ones survived summer — open water, sunburn, mosquitoes, ticks, and all — thanks in no small part to the safety precautions you took. Now they’re looking to get ready for winter sports. What should you do to help them prepare?

It may be cold outside, but it’s just as important for children to get physical activity during the winter as it is during the warmer months. Physical activity should be a healthy part of your family’s routine throughout the year. And safety should always be a central part of your children’s recreational fun.

Fun in the Winter Sun

It’s true that many safety concerns are the same regardless of season, says Holly Benjamin, M.D., FACS, FAAP, the director of primary care sports medicine program at the University of Chicago Student Care Center. For starters, parents still need to remember sunscreen, for example. “People come back from ski trips and we actually treat a fair number of sunburns,” she says.

Even though it might seem odd, you can get sunburn in the winter. The sunlight reflects off snow and ice. Wear sunscreen with an SPF 15 minimum and cover exposed areas of the body. You should wear protective eyewear and an SPF lip balm, Benjamin says.

Safety in Layers

When thinking about outside activity, think about clothing, too. Layering is a good idea; so are moisture-wicking fabrics and clothing that’s geared to the sport. Keep in mind that regulating body temperature is more difficult in younger children (just as it is during warm weather), so hypothermia can occur more easily. “Kids can sweat, too, when they’re warm,” says Dr. Benjamin. And that sweat can chill them quickly when it gets exposed to the cold air as they remove layers.

“I think with winter sports safety, especially with kids, the temperature and the environment are near the top of the list in importance. And I think that parents have to be really proactive and responsible about dressing them appropriately in layers, covering their heads and necks.”

Chillin’ with Safety

Watch out for fashion trends that could land you in the ER. Long scarves and cords can get caught in sled blades, and hoods can block peripheral vision, she says. “Some people believe that it’s safer to just have a hat, neck warmer, a warm jacket and gloves,” she says. As long as the exposed skin is covered and the jacket can be zipped, your child should be ready for winter play.

Stay Alert

Injuries can happen anywhere, anytime. Dr. Benjamin’s advice follows that of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP): Be aware and use caution. Children should always wear helmets while sledding, skiing, snowboarding, and playing ice hockey, for example.

fractures — commonplace in snowboarding — can be prevented by simply using wrist guards.

Safety is key in ice hockey or sports involving equipment, Dr. Benjamin says. “The biggest challenge with kids is fit, making sure everything fits properly and is the right size. And that changes. No one wants to buy new skates every year, but it may be necessary as your child grows.”

Used equipment is fine, she says, but check it out before you buy it. Look at the laces, for broken blades and make sure the leather on hockey and ice skates isn’t too broken down around the ankles. Follow the team guidelines, too. If you need a mouth guard, wear one.

“A piece of used equipment that fits well and is in good condition is better than something new that doesn’t fit properly,” Dr. Benjamin says.

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“If you’re talking about sledding or tobogganing, especially with young kids, they’re not always looking for trees or rocks, so you have to scope out the environment and make sure they have a clear path,” she says.

Parents should also make sure that the hill your children are sledding down doesn’t empty onto a pond that might not be frozen solid, she says.

Older children should play it safe, too, she says. Don’t load up the sled with multiple riders; take turns. “Reckless play — actively trying to crash into each other or knock people off is obviously a setup for injury.”

“It’s fun for kids to enjoy winter sports,” Benjamin says, “and we’re fully supportive of kids participating in winter activities as long as they follow safety guidelines.”

Equipment Check

If you’re planning a skiing or snowboarding trip, have the equipment fitted by a professional. A child in too-large boots can trip and fall. A child in skis that aren’t the right size can fall, too. And keep in mind that wrist

You have to check all equipment, new and old, to see that it fits. You need to check it to make sure it’s still safe or not broken. If it gets used a lot, it may not hold up. Make sure helmets and boots are sized correctly. Make sure the equipment is in good shape. If you’re concerned, ask a sales person at a ski shop, she says.

Skills Assessment

If it’s a new activity, work to master your skills, she says. Play it safe by starting with a snowboarding lesson before you hit the slopes.

It’s recommended, appropriate and safe, she says, to start slow or on a more gentle slope. Practice with your equipment and gradually build up to a steeper slope or faster speed. Be patient and resist pressure to take on more than you’re ready for.

By taking a few precautions, you can make sure that your children get the healthy benefits of winter exercise without taking unnecessary risks. ●