

The Magic of Play for Early Years in Winter's Wonderland

Play is the most enriching and fulfilling activity that can ever be devised for the under-fives. It builds the imagination, feeds the soul and brings untold joy. Encourage your child to play and develop a passion for life and surprisingly there's no better time and place to start than now in Winter's amazingly magical wonderland.

Warmly dressed against the cold with hats and coats, gloves, scarves and warm boots, you're all set to explore and play outdoors. Autumn, with its wonderful russet-coloured falling leaves, the ground strewn with conkers, beech nuts and acorns and hedgerows full of rose hips, has given way to a more barren landscape, but none the less full of magic and treasures for the under-fives.

Huff and puff and see your breath in the cold air. Look for the spider's webs glistening on the hedgerows in the chill morning sun. See the red berries glowing on the holly. Look up high and discover the shapes that the trees now make, devoid of their leaves. You may find some letter patterns in the branches, such as the letter Y or the letter L or I or even an S. Encourage your child to copy the shapes in the mud or in a puddle with a stick and play 'I spy'.

Look for ice on the top of a puddle. Let your child explore, chipping at it with a stick or stone and savour their excitement as they find the water underneath and start splashing in the puddle. You may find a larger or thicker piece of ice floating on top of a water trough. See if it's the same size on your return journey. If not, why has it changed shape and size? Here is a science lesson in the making. Maybe it's back home now to make ice lollies or to take an ice-cube out of the fridge and watch it melt. The experience will be much more meaningful and memorable set in context!

Have fun squelching in muddy puddles. Listen to the amazing slurping sounds you can make as you take big strides and then small steps in the mud. Look at the footprints you have made. Which is the biggest? Which one is the smallest? The children in my Nursery School just love doing this, but their favourite game is to try to find a puddle deep enough to get the muddy water over the top of their wellies!

Can you see any animal footprints in the mud? Maybe a horse has gone by and left his hoof marks. Maybe you can see some bird footprints. Which bird might it be? Which birds do we see in winter? Perhaps you could make some bird food and hang it in a tree during the winter months and see which birds come to eat it. The internet has lots of useful recipes. Look under a stone. Can you see any creepy crawlies or have they all gone away to hide until Spring comes?

When you go out walking, you will still find the odd conker and a few damp acorns, precious stones and snail shells too, so it's worth taking a bag with you or a paper cup to collect your treasure trove. Often you will be able to find pine cones and twigs too. Back at home it's time to let the imagination run riot. What shall we make with our treasure? Children have lots of ideas, but some ideas that have been very successful in the past include making a treasure-trove tree, where you paint a fairly large twig and plant it in a pot and then tie on the treasure you have found. If you don't have soil and a pot, any modelling dough or filler left overnight to dry will enable the twig to stand upright and away you go. Shells and stones can be painted and stuck together to make animals or imaginary creatures and pine cones can be painted and tied with ribbon to make pretty decorations for the festive season.

Nature's way of giving us time for all these things I believe is to make it dark by late afternoon! The under-fives love having time to snuggle with the curtains drawn and talk to you and listen to stories and music before getting ready for bed. The darker evenings somehow seem to slow down the pace of life a little, so that we can appreciate winter's magic.

However, nothing beats the excitement and thrill for little ones as they look through the window on a frosty morning and see the landscape magically changed into Fairyland. Wait for that squeal of excitement too when your child sees that their world has been transformed overnight by a covering of snow. They will be keen to rush out to play, making footprints in the fresh snow. Maybe they will be enjoying snow for the very first time and keen to touch it, throw it and roll in it. Maybe they will want you to help them make a snowman or pull them along on a toboggan. One of the parents in my Nursery School brought rubber gloves for the children to wear over their woollen gloves to keep their hands dry when they played in the snow last year. This idea proved to be a great hit: no children complaining of cold hands, so a good, simple idea to bear in mind.

My Winter Wonderland theme for the under-fives would be incomplete without mentioning that it is a time of huge celebrations around the world, including Diwali, Hannukah, St Nicholas, St Lucia, Christmas and Epiphany. These particular celebrations share the common theme of light and warmth and most children love celebrating and having parties. They enjoy helping to make their homes pretty and sparkly with candles, fairy lights and decorations. Children enjoy dressing up, playing and having fun. So let them play, open presents, explore, discover and be captivated by this special, magical time of year.