

Many of us can remember the joy that we felt as children when we went outside to make a snowman or play in the cold. Today, our children want to experience the same thrill up during these cold months as they go outdoors to enjoy a variety of winter activities. Susan Gauthier, the Community Care Physicians Wellness Concierge, offers some important advice for parents who are sending their youngsters outside this season.

Parents need to take care to protect their children from the cold, wind and moisture. Remember to dress them in layers and cover all exposed parts of the body. Bundle up your children right before going outside. If they stand around indoors while dressed for outside, they will begin to sweat, which will make them even colder once they get outside. Moisture from snow takes heat away from the body. Remind your child to come indoors and change clothing if they become wet.

Make sure your children have plenty to eat and drink before heading outside. This keeps blood circulating and ensures that they have enough energy to produce body heat. If it is sunny outside, be sure to apply sunscreen to exposed areas. Don't forget places where snow might reflect sunlight, like under the chin. If it is especially windy outside, apply petroleum jelly to your children's exposed skin to protect against chapping.

If your child is going sledding, be sure they choose an area with a clear terrain. It's important to avoid hills with dangerous obstacles, such as bumps, rocks and trees and stay away from hills that run onto a roadway. Watch weather conditions closely. Ice on the ground means more speed, which makes it easier to lose control. Teach your child to move from their sled quickly once they reach the bottom of a hill to avoid injury from other sleds.

Most skiing and skating injuries involve twists, sprains, strains and breaks. Prevent injuries by providing your child with competent instruction, proper equipment and appropriate supervision. Remind them to never skate on a pond or lake if there is any doubt as to the ice thickness; safe ice is at least five inches thick. If possible, children should skate only at indoor or outdoor skating rinks. Be sure your children have comfortable skates with good ankle support and sharpened blades.

Children can have great fun while playing in the snow, ice skating or participating in other winter activities, however parents need to set limits so that their children are not outdoors continuously for hours and hours. While fresh air and a little outside activity is good for you and the kids, when it's cold outside, exposure needs to be limited. Be sure to provide indoor activities for your child such as games, books, arts and crafts, playing dress-up. During winter school vacations, enroll your child into a gym program at your local Y so they can get the exercise they need.

The cold weather and the heat indoors can cause your child's skin to dry. Be sure that they drink plenty of water. Encourage them not to lick their lips. Contrary to popular belief, licking promotes dryness by removing the skin's natural oils. Instead of licking, apply over-the-counter lip balm. Avoid bubble baths, and use gentle bath soaps, rather than harsh deodorant soaps. Always pat — rather than rub — your child's skin dry. Rubbing the skin with a towel can irritate dry skin. Avoid using strong detergents on your child's clothing. They can aggravate chapped skin. Use mild, baby detergents instead. Use a cool-mist humidifier in your child's room. It will help to keep the skin hydrated.

Although many people think cold weather causes colds, it doesn't. However, when there is cold weather, people tend to stay indoor more, allowing viruses to be more easily transmitted from person to person. The most common illnesses include upper respiratory infections, such as colds,

ear infections and stomach viruses. Most of these illnesses occur because the child is exposed to the illness in another child or an adult. One way to prevent illness is through good hygiene. Most illnesses are passed from touching the eyes, nose or mouth. Encouraging your family to wash their hands frequently, especially after coming in contact with someone who has a cold can prevent germs from spreading. Children should also be given a generous supply of tissues and encouraged to use them, instead of wiping their nose on sleeves or hands. Exposure to cigarette smoke increases the chances of getting illnesses. The toxins from cigarette smoking get into a child's respiratory tract, making it harder for the child to fight off the illness. Make your home a smoke-free environment.

Susan Gauthier, Community Care Physicians Wellness Concierge, can help your family make healthy choices. Her office is located at the Capital Region Health Park, 711 Troy-Schenectady Road, Latham. For information call 783-3110 extension 3347.