



by Karen Stephens

## Creative Ways for Kids to Enjoy Snow Play

A winter many (many!) years ago, we neighborhood kids took great pains to build snowmen in the field behind our house. The herd of snowmen varied in size and sturdiness according to age and individual snow-how. One of the neatest creations was my older brother's. He tunneled through the bottom of a snowman to create genuine legs!

I played as long as I could, and then finally shivered my way inside. But even then, my mind stayed in that field of snow. Peeking over a window's ledge, I gazed for a long long time at that nifty two-legged snowman. That memory of a childhood winter still gives me a smile.

If you're lucky enough to live or vacation with a blanket of white, your kids can build memories only winter can provide. Though the kids will probably outlast you, get out and enjoy some snow play with them; it's a perfect chance to be a kid again!

**SNOWRUN RACES.** Have the kids build a mountain of snow as tall as they can. Using their hands, sand shovels, or even orange juice cans, they can smooth out and pack down miniature snow runs that twist and turn from the top to the base of the mountain. (Like those bobsleds race down during winter Olympics.)

Using a stop watch, kids can race various objects to the bottom of the snowy mountain. Consider matchbox cars or assorted balls, such as ping pong, golf, tennis, croquette, or rubber balls. To add more fun, provide scrap materials so children can make checkered flags for an official finish line. If you have a budding sports announcer, kids can make a microphone by gluing a foam ball on top of an empty paper towel tube.

**TIRE SWING TARGET.** Throw snowballs through the center of a tire swing hung from a tree. To make the game more challenging, move farther from the target. To make it really challenging, throw a snowball through the middle while the tire swings from side to side!

**SNOW TREASURE HUNT.** In untracked snow, decide on an outdoor hiding place for a simple treasure. First, you walk to the hiding spot, making a meandering trail full of twists and turns. After hiding the treasure, retrace your steps in the same tracks. Then have the kids come outside and follow your path to seek their treasure. Treasures can be a toy, or perhaps mugs with packages of cocoa mix for warming up later.

**FOX CHASING GEESE.** In a large area of untouched snow, walk in a path to make a circle, like a huge wheel. Cut the circle into quarters or sixths, by walking across the middle from one side to another. The game's "safe zone" is in the circle's center, where spokes intersect. To play chase, everyone must stay on the tracks of the circle and spokes. The appointed fox begins by chasing the geese. If the geese make it to the center, they are safe. If a goose is tagged before reaching the safe spot, it's her turn to play the fox.

**I-SPY ANIMAL TRACKS.** Go into soft, fresh snow. Find different types of animal tracks. Who do they belong to? Where was the animal going? The books *Whose Tracks Are These?* by Jim Nail (Boulder, CO: Rinehart Publishing, 1996) and *Big Tracks, Little Tracks: Following Animal Prints* by Millicent Selsam (New York: Harper Collins Children's Books, 1999) will help younger children identify common animal tracks.

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**TRACK DOWN BACKYARD VISITORS.** On top of snow, sprinkle animal feed, such as bread slices, sunflower seeds, cracked corn, shell corn, peanuts in shells, raisins, cranberries, popcorn, and/or halved apples and oranges. Help the kids investigate wildlife tracks around the feeding area for clues on who visits. They can even find very delicate wing prints left behind as birds take flight by pushing off the snow with their feathers.

Feeders filled with sunflower seed or suet are welcomed by chickadees, nuthatch, titmice, and blue jays. Peanut butter smeared onto tree bark attracts flickers as well as hairy and downy woodpeckers. Cracked corn spread on the ground or inside a fallen hollow log is gobbled up by cardinals, mourning doves, and sparrows (and a marauding squirrel or two). Depending on your habitat the kids' offerings may also attract mice, deer, opossums, and raccoons.

Kids can enjoy watching the wildlife while standing quietly behind a blind, such as an evergreen bush or side of the house. A child's tree house is an excellent observation point, too. Elementary age kids can photograph or videotape from the blind.

**SNOW SHAPES.** Kids can make their own shapes in the snow. Pretending to be deer, they can make ovals. Or they can scoop out shapes, letters, and numbers.

**SNOW DRAWING.** Provide kids with a variety of items they can use to draw on the snow, such as sticks, rulers, yardsticks, dowels.

**SNOW MOLDS.** Children pack snow tightly into molds, and then turn it over to release. Provide a variety of sizes of containers for making snow molds. Use cardboard boxes, plastic funnels, clean, smooth-sided soup or vegetable cans (be sure to smooth edges to prevent cuts). Half pint, pint, quart, and gallon milk cartons (with spout and top cut off) create molds kids can arrange in sequence or alternate for design patterns. Pie tins, muffin tins, and loaf pans create interesting shapes, too.

**SNOW CASTLES.** Castles are as fun in the snow as they are in the sand. Add old dolls to enhance the play.

**ICY SUN-CATCHERS.** These ice sun catchers hang from trees, sending sparkles onto the snow. You need freezing temps outside for this activity. Fill aluminum pie or potpie tins with water. Children place nature finds, like leaves, feathers, tiny pinecones, or acorns into the water-filled tins. Create a 4-inch circle with thin wire. To create a hook for hanging the sun catcher, place the wire halfway into the water, along the edge of the pie tin. Place the tins outside a window where the kids can keep an eye on the freezing water. Once frozen, invert pans and pour a little water on the back to release the ice sun catcher. Hang from trees to enjoy as long as freezing temperatures last.

**OWL HUNTING.** On full moon, walk in a snowy wooded area. Keep an eye and ear out for owls. White washes (owl's waste) on tree trunks indicate a likely perching spot. Jane Yolen's *Owl Moon* (New York: Putnam Publishing, 1987) is a good book to read before or after your walk.

**HIKE WOODLANDS.** Hike snowy woodland trails at a local park or forest preserve. Gaze at the lacy patterns created by twigs frosted with snow. At hike's end, leave a pile of apples, pears, or peanuts as a thank you to the critters whose home you've visited. At bedtime that night, read Jane Aragon's *Winter Harvest* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1989). It's a charming story of a young girl feeding a deer in winter.

**SNOWSHOE IT.** Child and adult size snowshoes enable great exercise for everyone.

**CROSS COUNTRY SKI.** Elementary children can cross country ski, and it's great for their coordination.

**SLEDDING.** Take a big cardboard box, cut off one side, and voilà, a sled. It won't last long, but you can't beat the price.

For other snow play ideas, see Parenting Exchange column, "Snow Activities Let Children Explore the Wonders of Weather."

**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*.