

Defeatng the Winter Doldrums

As the days of winter get darker and longer, kids sense the change in the quality of daylight and need lots of stimulation to keep from going into mental hibernation.

This is the time of year that traditionally stories fill the long hours of waiting for spring. Storytelling in our culture has been supplanted much and often by TV, which is not there to tell us stories at all but rather to sell us stuff.

Take time to begin a tradition of storytelling at least once a week. (See Chase Collins, Tell Me a Story \$9.95, Houghton Mifflin) Raid the library for myths and legends about

- why is there snow?
- why do the days get shorter and shorter and then grow longer after the winter solstice?

- why are the stars in the night sky different in the winter?
- where do the flowers and warm breezes go in the cold winter?

Some sources that will prove helpful in the search for tales you can tell are Thirteen Moons on Turtle's Back by Joseph Bruchac, (Philomel) and Celebrate the Solstice by Richard Heinberg. (Quest). Also available on audio cassette are stories by Jim Weiss like King Arthur and Arabian Nights and we highly recommend introducing Joe Hayes' Coyote and....., thirteen tales from the coyote traditional tales of the Southwest which can only be told in the winter because otherwise the snakes would come and listen too.

Make a refrigerator chart showing the exact time that darkness falls each night. Instead of being glued to the tube, kids will be staring out the window waiting for the dark to descend so they can chart it on the "dark days chart."

(They'll see the evening come upon them later and later beginning December 22nd.) This is the perfect time to tell the tale of Persephone and her forced stay in the dark, dead underworld due to her goof-up in eating pomegranate seeds when she was being held hostage by Hades. A good source of this tale is Persephone and the Pomegranate by Kris Waldherr. (Dial)

Other legends that will be fun to learn and tell are of the northern snow climates, and how the Norse gods and goddesses and the other assorted creatures of the colder climes came to be and where they disappeared to as told in Ingri and Edgar D'Aulaire's collection, Norse Gods and Giants (Delacorte Press). Also use How the Seasons Came: A North American Indian Folktale by Joanna Troughton. (Peter Bedrick) and The Animal That Drank Up Sound by William Stafford. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).

After some snow legends, how about making "Snow pictures" on dark blue or black construction paper background using paper cutouts of a winter sun or moon, naked trees, children at school or home, and homes and cars blanketed in silence with a layer of Ivory Snow mixed with enough water to make it spreadable with a fingertip. When the goop dries, it will stick to the paper and look a lot like snow.

Now is also the time to teach the "lost" art of paper snowflake making. Take a piece of white paper, 8 1/2 x 11, and fold it down from the top with the edges aligned so that a 2 1/2 " piece is left at the bottom. Cut this off. Now you have a square. Fold the square in half again. Now fold it in thirds. On the edge of each fold, cut out little pieces. Don't cut too deeply or your snowflake will come apart in pieces. When you unfold it, you'll have lovely snowflakes to hang on the windows, or on a tree outside, or even on the tree inside if

you have one.

If you live in a place where winter camping in the wild can be a survival exercise rather than fun, you might try a backyard winter campout, with a campfire in the barbecue. It's a great excuse to tell winter stories around a campfire, roast some marshmallows and hot dogs and talk about different times and places where people really live like this all the time. We take too often for granted the warmth and security of indoor heating and plumbing and a single overnight in the bitter cold, with kids huddled in sleeping bags can change a lot of their perception about the problems facing refugees around the world, or victims of earthquakes, or those whose cultures of the far north are seen in "romantic isolation" with "friendly reindeer" instead of the adaption of skills to the demands of climate. Read Jan Brett's [The Wild Christmas Reindeer](#) (Putnam) as a follow up to the campout, or start the excellent chapter book sequel to [Rabbit Hill](#) by Robert Lawson, [The](#)

Tough Winter.(Penguin)

In the dead of winter is a good time to go to museums and browse the exhibits. It's also a great time to go to the zoo, since the animals are often awake during the day time. If you are headed to a major theme park like Disneyland or Disney world, often the middle of the winter is the time you will find few lines, since kids are supposed to be in school.

It's also a good time to make homemade games using old board games whose pieces have long ago disappeared. Cover the boards with solid color contact paper, and have the kids design a game from scratch. Will it use a track around the outside like Monopoly? Or a lot of interior tracks like "chutes and ladders" or Parcheesi? How many spaces will there be? (HINT: A good ratio of forward jumps to backward penalties is 2 to 7.) Kids can use dice or coins to advance their playing pieces. The goal of the game ought to

be something important: how about the coming of spring?

With the ever present one-eyed monster in the living room, now is the time to make a family video. Have each kid rehearse. Maybe this is going to be a family comedy club video, or a story about the most outrageous lies you can make up. Maybe the kids would like to dress up as their favorite book character and talk about their "life" of fiction. Having the group cooperate to act out their favorite fairy tale in costume could be fun. And there's an endless variety of possibilities if the kids just ham it up on camera and tell jokes they have gathered from here and there, funny stories about each other and their parents, and even recitations of memorized poems and songs. Kiddie Karaoke can be a great video event with the soundtrack in the background and the kids in costume.

Perhaps, now is the time to start a family newsletter to be

mailed out quarterly. Have kids take a look at the daily paper and decide who wants to do which kind of column. Do you have a budding sportswriter, advice columnist, recipe maven, or even crossword maker? This is a perfect opportunity for the kids to learn the computer possibilities of publishing, creating puzzles, importing pictures, and learning how to scan.

And remember our feathered friends? The birds are probably hungry. What about making a bird feeder out of big fat pretzel sticks glued together into a "birdhouse" shape (use peanut butter) and fill the house with seeds. Use a piece of cardboard for the bottom of the "birdhouse" and attach it to the structure with sturdy string loop that goes around the structure in both directions and then hang it from a low branch of a tree or bush. The birds will eat the whole thing, and then you get to make it all over again. This is a good way to celebrate Groundhog Day! The video

Groundhog Day with Bill Murray would be fun to rent, too.

If you live where small wild creatures abound, what about an early morning walk in the new fallen snow to look at the various animal tracks left from the nighttime pursuits of the wild wild world of winter. Drawing the different tracks may help kids to identify them from a tracking book like [Crinkleroot's Book of Animal Tracking](#) by Jim Arnosky (Macmillan)

This could be a perfect time to create a homemade calendar with artwork from each child at the top of the monthly entry on the calendar and the boxes of the months containing birthdays and special family dates of significance. Use 11x17 paper folded in half to 8 1/2 x 11 size and stapled in the middle.

If your children are old enough, they might want to strike up

a pen pal relationship. The National Pen Pals Letter Exchange, PO Box 6218, Albany California 94706 can help. Or they might just want to write to cousins they seldom see, as a "cousins club". If they don't know what to say, you can get them going with a list of "Things I love" and "My Favorite _____ is" and "Don't you Hate it When _____"

This time of year, there's a definite let-down from the holiday hullabaloo, and kids often need solid projects to get their adrenalin pumping. What about a letter to relatives that live far away? Kids love to get mail, and here's a great way for them to learn about their family at the same time they are getting a deluge of letters. After writing a letter like the one below, print out personalized copies and help the kids learn to address envelopes properly.

SAMPLE LETTER

"Dear Aunt Misty-

I am a relative of yours and am collecting information about my family. Would you please write back and tell me about your family. Would you please send me a picture? And would you please send a copy of this letter to two of your family members?

Thank you,

Billy The Kid.

Do your kids cook? Now is a good time for each one of them to learn to make one dish well. Even the youngest child can handle salad preparation, and the older ones will have a lot of fun figuring out where to find necessary ingredients.

In the dead of winter is the time when you can help the kids engage in the ancient art of theater. It's time for the old, "Hey kids, let's put on a play. My mom can make costumes" routine and help them turn a favorite picture book or Mother

Goose rhyme sequence into a play. Don't forget to help them write scripts to enhance reading even for the youngest. Invite friends and neighbors over to partake of the festivities and serve popcorn and homemade treats (made by the kids, of course). If you have a local theater, or if the local high school has a play they are performing, it's always helpful for kids to see the finished product as well as the behind the scenes aspects of theatre.

Maybe this is a good time for your kids to start a list of books they have read. Make a form for them to follow in their endless quest for literacy. Maybe a trip to the library and a perusal of the family bookshelf will help fill up the lists.

Since this period is filled with famous birthdays, this is also a good time for your kids to start their own autobiographies. It's much easier for them to appreciate the childhood of famous Americans when they've written down their own family tree

and committed to paper the early events of their lives.

Maybe a guess as to what they will be when they grow up could turn this activity into a "time capsule" activity too.

Valentines Day filled with visions of chocolate is celebrated well by reading "Valentine Bears" by Eve Bunting (Clarion) with delightful illustrations by Jan Brett. As a tie-in activity you might want to enjoy some "chocolate covered ants" which feature heavily in the story, using Raisinets. To help kids get a feel for the passage of time, make a Valentine Bears Clock (the illustration in the book shows that instead of hours, the bears' clock has months on it). Take a paper plate, find the center, and using a metal brad attach two "clock" hands made of construction paper. Mark off the months. Start with January at 12 o'clock. Now add July opposite it at six o'clock and April at 3 o'clock and October at 9 o'clock. Add the rest of the months in evenly spaced increments between these positions. You can either write

them on the plates or add pieces of construction paper with the words on them glued on with a glue stick. Have the kids practice finding the "time" for their own birthday, for spring's coming, for summer, for fall, and add different holidays so they can practice looking at the months as if they were hours.

Homemade playdough is always a treat this time of the year. Make some of this bright colored kind. Take 4 cups flour, add 1 cup salt and 1/4 cup powdered tempera color. Mix with about 1 cup hot tap water and you'll have brightly colored dough that gets better the more you moosh it with your hands. Store in zip lock baggies.

While outdoor sports are on hold, maybe this would be a good time to teach your kids to bowl. Or if you're handy, teach them to knit or crochet. The boys may have some of their fine motor skills enhanced by a bout with the old knitting

needles and find that it's not as easy as it looks.

Maybe the kids would enjoy making some dog biscuits to give to Fido, or a neighborhood dog shelter.

DOG BISCUIT RECIPE

1 cup uncooked oatmeal

1/3 cup margarine

1 teaspoon beef bouillion granules

1 1/2 cups hot water

3/4 cup powdered milk or powdered goat milk

3/4 cup cornmeal

3 cups whole wheat flour

Put it all in a big bowl and pour the hot water on top of it all and let it stand five minutes to soak up the water and moosh it with your hands until it's like meat loaf. Roll it out and cut with cookie cutters or make little balls or twisty logs or gingerbread dogs. Make them ugly enough that people don't eat them (even though they are nutritious and

healthful.) Hint: To cure doggy breath add dried or fresh mint leaves too. Put on baking sheet, greased or Teflon. 325° for about a half an hour, or until they are brown Let cool until hardened. Makes about two pounds of dog treats.

As spring seems to get further away, now is the time to make Easter baskets. Take a strawberry basket and at the bottom put a layer of paper towels or an old divorced sock. Add a thick layer (about one finger thick) of grass seed or sesame or dill or any sorts of seeds left over from last year's garden. Wrap the whole works in plastic wrap, and just before you close the wrap tightly, add a mouthful of water. Place in a warm dark place until the seeds sprout. Then,. open up the plastic wrap to allow in air. Water with another mouthful of water once every other day, or less often if it's not dry. By Easter time you'll have a little basket full of grass to put little Easter eggs on. You can add handles made of

twisted pipe cleaners and use these as centerpieces for the dinner table.

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gwynnespencer@aol.com, reprint rights available.