

Dressing Children for Cold Weather

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“Put on a sweater—I’m cold!”

How many times did your mother say this when you were young? How often do you say it to your children? How do we cope with cold weather, and children, in historic scenarios?

The cold-weather strategies for children are very similar to those for infants and adults; they have only a few unique needs that can be easily met using period-appropriate solutions. With some preparation, you can attend cold-weather events with children, and keep them safe, accurate, and comfortable.

The Best Fabrics

Wool is the ideal cold weather fabric. Available in a variety of weaves, weights, and qualities, it retains its insulating properties even when damp, wears well, and blocks the wind.

Even light layers of wool contribute to the overall comfort. Look for thin wool batting to use in quilted garments and wraps (it can be “peeled” in half for child-friendly weights), and lighter wools that drape easily. Heavy adult “coating” wools may be too stiff for a small child, though most will work for older children.

Purchase the highest quality wool you can. Cheap grades tend to be scratchy, and an itchy child is an unpleasant child. The better grades (often imported from Australia and New Zealand) are very soft; some are treated with modern chemicals to render them machine washable, as well (I have not found it to compromise function or fire-retardancy of the wool.) Cashmere can be truly buttery.

Wool wears for many years; your investment in fabric will be repaid as the garments make their way through the family, and then into other families. Keep an eye on internet sales; wool can be found just as cheaply as cotton if you are patient.

Even though the wool is for cold weather use, look for lighter and “tropical” weight wools for interlinings and outer layers, as they are not so stiff and thick as “coating” weights, allowing much more flexibility in temperature control.

Other cold weather fabrics include **cotton** flannel for interlining garments (though this has none of the insulation properties of wool, and can be dangerous when damp), glazed cotton for linings, and even **silks**, for lining quilted garments. Silk is light-weight, and helps the clothing slide on and off easily. It does add a bit of warmth, but should not be counted on as the primary source of warm fabric.

If you are using cotton as an outer fabric for budgetary reasons, be certain to interline with a quilted wool layer for warmth, and to protect against evaporative cooling.

As with all other period clothing, avoid synthetics. Even the modern “miracle” fabrics do not match good wool for its wicking, wind-blocking, and insulating characteristics. Modern fabrics like “polar fleece” are made of synthetic fibers that melt when exposed to flame. Wool will smolder and stink, but tends to self-extinguish rather than melting into the skin.

Use historically accurate textiles to reproduce historic styles for use in historic settings. It’s period correct, and safer.

Use Layers

As with adult cold weather dressing, **layers** are key to keeping any child comfortable. Children tend to be very active, and need to be able to take off a layer as they get up a “glow.”

It is far better to dress a child in several light layers of warm fabric, which can be removed or added as weather and temperature conditions change, rather than one thick layer that offers “all or nothing” protection. Layers should be slightly loose-fitting, to allow for trapped warm air (and growth!)

Many of the layers can be made at home, if one is willing to knit or sew. A great many of these items can be knit without a great deal of skill or effort, even by those of us who don’t care for knitting overly much.

Start at the top and bottom: for girls and small children, add a quilted hood with a deep curtain or bavolet; for boys, add a woolen cap and scarf to protect head and neck. Magazines and “homemakers” books often include diagrams and “recipes” for such garments; there are quite a few diagrams in *The Workwoman’s Guide* (1838) that will still be suitable for children in the 1850s and 60s. Humans lose the greatest proportion of their body heat through their head and extremities. Children at play will need to be reminded to keep their head-coverings in place.

At the bottom, add warm woolen stockings to cover the feet and knees. (If your child is truly sensitive to wool—reacting with welts and hives—use cotton stocking with wool worn over them.)

Patterns for knitted woolen gaiters, which fit over the ankle of the shoe and up onto the leg, block the wind and damp, and are not difficult to knit with a bit of help from an experienced knitter. These should be done in “serviceable” colors that won’t show grim easily.

Make sure shoes are sized to allow for larger sock space, and do your best to keep the feet and socks dry; try neat’s-foot oil or other light, period waterproofing, on leather shoes and boots. Waterproofing will need to be reapplied at regular intervals.



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Make it a part of the post-event routine to get every pair of boots and shoes thoroughly dry (away from direct heat!) and re-oiled well before being put away. This protects your footwear investment, and keeps the leather in good condition for years.

Continue on with warm (preferably soft wool) layers: a petticoat, possibly quilted around the hem (with wool, cotton, or silk “wadding”); a knitted close jacket ‘round the torso; a coat, quilted in the sleeves and torso, woolen trousers, woolen mittens, and the like.

A simple wool shawl, 60” x 60”, with a 1” fringed edge for a hem, is a fantastic addition to the wardrobe trunk. It’s generally quite inexpensive to buy a length of wool and fringe it yourself, and it can be used by any age or sex as an outer wrap, extra blanket, or just a warm layer over the legs while sitting.

(Glancing over the list, it looks like you’ll either be learning to knit, or bribing someone. I have a great recipe for sinful chocolate brownies, and another for “Thigh Buster” cookies that may help with bribes.)

Take
Care!

Children can chill and become vulnerable to cold injuries (like frostbite and hypothermia) very quickly, in temperatures that may not be arctic.

Do not spend extended time exposed in the open during cold weather. Retire to a slightly heated area, or at least one sheltered from the elements, as frequently as possible, to check fingers and toes for heat and good circulation, and just take a bit of respite from the chill.

Offer your child warm (not boiling hot) drinks and foods. Give tepid, rather than cool, plain water, as children can become dehydrated very quickly in cool weather, but cold water will chill them. Keep an eye on how often a child is using the toilet. Dehydration can be just as much a problem in cold weather as in hot weather; adequate hydration helps the body maintain its temperature regulation systems.

Keep on hand a good supply of soft cotton flannel cloths for wiping noses and chins. Dampness on a little face will quickly turn to chapping and rawness. Ointments and unguents may be necessary to prevent skin damage.

If you will be sleeping in a minimally heated building (I do not recommend outdoor sleeping with children in truly cold weather), take some additional precautions: use a waterproof cloth beneath, with a wool blanket on top of that. Add more light wool blankets above the child, and be sure to have each person use a night cap to trap body heat. Sharing beds adds warmth through shared body heat, and works well to keep sleepers warm on chilly nights in unheated historic bedrooms.

Change into dry clothing before going to bed. Even if the children have not gotten soggy in the snow or damp, the perspira-

tion trapped in their clothing will chill them overnight. Changing to dry clothing, or at least dry socks, will retard that chill to a large degree.

Do not have children just huddle before a fire to warm up. That leads to toasty fingers and a chilled back. Rather, lead everyone in some vigorous exercise or game, to get up a nice glow of internal heat, then do a quick rubdown of all toes and legs, pop into dry stockings, put on the cap, and tuck in.

Familiarize yourself with the common signs and symptoms of cold injuries. If you have a child that has been exposed to chill weather for more than 2 hours, and the child is lethargic, disoriented, or has any other “altered” mental state, suspect hypothermia, remove to an indoor, warm location, change them into dry, warmed clothing, and give them simple warm drinks.

If the disorientation continues, seek medical treatment to rule out hypothermia or other cold injuries.

In everything, use common sense. If you are not comfortable, your child is likely uncomfortable, too. Some events will not be appropriate for all families. Use your best judgment in all situations. It is better to depart a too-cold event than to risk harm to your family! With careful preparation, however, you will find that many cool-weather events can be safe and enjoyable—and accurately done.



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