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Sun Protection Guide for Children

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Would you send a child out in the rain without a raincoat or an umbrella? Would you send a child to play in the snow without gloves or boots? Would you send a child out in the sun without sunscreen and a hat?

If you said *no* to each question, you are well aware of the importance of protecting children from the outdoor elements. If you said *yes* to the last question about the sun, think again.

Playing in the sun is a fun outdoor activity for children. But is it safe and healthy?

The sun can be dangerous. Even though a suntan may look nice and make one feel good, there is no medical evidence to suggest that a suntan improves health.

Recent medical research shows it is important to protect children and teenagers from overexposure to the sun. Skin damage is cumulative and starts with that first sun exposure.

Young people get about 80 percent of their total lifetime sun exposure in the first 18 years of life. Sun protection and prevention are important to preventing skin damage later in life. Some studies suggest there is a link between early exposure to the sun and skin cancer as an adult.

The two types of ultraviolet sunlight that can damage the skin are Ultraviolet A and Ultraviolet B rays. UVA rays are the slow-tanning rays that penetrate deep into the skin and age the skin prematurely. UVB rays cause burning of the skin and are considered the major cause of skin cancer.

Many young children spend their early years at a day-care center. They are dependent upon the primary care giver to take the appropriate precautions in providing sun protection.

As a parent of young children or UV, or a person who cares for children in a day-care center, there are several precautions you can take to help protect the children around you from future health problems related to the sun.

Follow these simple guidelines to help minimize the risks of excessive sun exposure.

1. **Keep children out of the sun from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.** This is the time when the sun's rays are the strongest. If outside activities are held between these times, check to see how much shade there is in play areas. It is better to sit or play in the shade.
2. **Use a sunscreen.** Apply a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15 to block the most harmful sun rays. This needs to be done before the child goes outside. Don't forget the lips, backs of hands and feet.

Reapply sunscreen every two hours. Teach children to use sunscreen regularly, like they use a toothbrush and toothpaste.

Children under six months should never have sunscreen applied to their skin. Keep infants out of direct sun and covered up.

3. **Wear a hat.** A wide-brimmed hat offers protection for the eyes, ears, face and back of the neck.
4. **Wear sunglasses.** Protect children's eyes from ultraviolet radiation. Sunglasses that provide 95+ percent protection greatly reduce sun exposure.
5. **Wear protective clothing.** Loose-fitting clothes that are tightly woven are a good choice.
6. **Be aware of ground surfaces.** Ground surfaces such as sand, cement and white painted surfaces reflect the sun's rays. In the water, ultraviolet light penetrates three feet deep.

Summertime is not the only time of the year children need to be protected from the sun. Snow reflects from 80 to 90 percent of the sun's rays.

7. **Practice the "shadow rule."** Look for shade when your shadow is shorter than you are tall. Teach children the *ABC'S for Fun in the Sun*.
 - **A** is for *away*. Let children know about staying away from the sun in the middle of the day.
 - **B** is for *block*. Encourage children to use a sun protective factor (SPF) of 15 or higher sunscreen.
 - **C** is for *cover up*. Wear a shirt and a hat.
 - **S** is for *speak out*. Have children talk to family and friends about sun protection.

What children are more at risk to sunburn? A commonly used method to assess the risk is the Skin Type system. The lower numbers indicate children are more likely to burn. These include children who are fair-skinned, with light, red or light-brown hair; blue, green or gray eyes and have numerous moles.

Skin Types

Type 1 Always burns, never tans

Type 2 Usually burns, tans with difficulty

Type 3 Sometimes burns, sometimes tans

- Type 4** Burn minimally, always tans (Asians, Native Americans, Latin Americans)
- Type 5** Rarely burns, tans profusely (light-complected African-Americans, east Indians)
- Type 6** Never burns, deeply tans (dark-skinned African Americans)
may need protection with intense exposure

Since all skin is not created equal, it is important to know that the more skin pigment, the better to prevent sunburn. For individuals who tan, tanning is a way the skin acts as a defense shield against damaging ultraviolet rays.

Since parents and child-care workers become role models to children, they need to set an example and follow the sun protection guidelines.

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