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Politicians should make America better for parents by thinking Swedish [1]

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EXCERPTS

As they say here in Sweden, there's no bad weather, only bad clothing.

I learned the phrase early on in the dark throes of my first Scandinavian winter. I moved from Maryland to Stockholm, Sweden, six years ago, unprepared for the two-to-four hours of daylight, plus constantly chilly temperatures and blustery winds. I expected the weather would keep locals holed up by the fireplace all season. Instead, they were gearing up to head somewhere even colder for their holidays—maybe going local at Sweden's own ski resort town, Åre, or crossing over to mainland Europe for the Swiss and French Alps.

It took me a while to wrap my head around this. Even the daily ritual of bundling my toddlers in suits like astronauts, then leaving them to spend hours playing outdoors in subzero temperatures, felt wrong. Six years later, it feels natural to spend lots of time outdoors no matter the condition—in fact, it's encouraged nationally.

Here in Sweden, I've learned, spending time outdoors—come rain, shine, or blizzard—is a social institution that's supported by real school policies and national laws. The country provides vast swaths of nature and allows families plenty of time for play, making outdoor fun something that most Swedes take for granted.

I've seen how it's positively affected my own family. And there's strong evidence that Swedes grow up to become healthier and more environmentally-conscious citizens thanks in part to that lifestyle. The country ranks as one of the highest in life expectancy and reported an obesity rate of 11.8 percent of the population in 2012 (in comparison, the U.S. comes in at 35 percent). Sweden has been one of the top five most sustainable countries in the world for decades (the country's recycling program is so successful that only 4 percent of waste goes to landfills). And Swedes of all ages have fun getting outside (a lot of fun).

All year long, another government initiative called Allemansrätten grants the public free recreational access to Sweden's vast nature—97 percent of the country is uninhabited. Allemansrätten allows anyone to camp, cross-country ski, forage, and trek on any land. This even applies to private property, unless signs prohibiting trespassing are in place. This right also includes picking wild berries and foraging for mushrooms. Allemansrätten actively encourages people to explore and use their surroundings, and it helps that over 80 percent of Sweden's residents live within three miles of a national park or nature reserve. According to the country's outdoor association, Friluftsfrämjandet, 97 percent of Sweden's 9.8 million residents are in favor of protecting Allemansrätten as their right.

It's expected that we'll want to take advantage of all that wide-open land. Recreation is built into the yearly and daily schedules. From late February through March, Swedes take sportlov, a winter holiday break from both school and work. Think the American equivalent of spring break—except here in the Nordics, it's meant specifically for winter sports, especially downhill or cross-country skiing. (The world's oldest, largest, and longest 90K cross-country race, Vasaloppet, is held in Sweden during sportlov, with over 15,000 skiers participating each year.)

Sportlov started after World War II when a youth organization started taking elementary schoolers on mountain field trips. The government created a school break that coincided with the trips, seeing an opportunity to conserve heating fuels. By the 1960s, the idea had expanded to save heating in offices, and sportlov applied to the entire family. Since then, it's become a cultural norm for families to take a week out of their annual vacation time (full-time employees get an average of six weeks' vacation) and enjoy winter-based sporting activities together.

Over 200 Swedish daycares also follow the Outdoor Association's recreational program called I Ur Och Skur, which means "come rain or shine." At daycares and kindergartens, kids are bundled up and left to play outdoors for hours under piles of snow, and they're taught about outdoor skills like composting. Even babies under six months are allowed a few minutes to sleep outside to soak up fresh air, even in winter. The program teaches children to spend time outdoors and in nature without fear. They don't perceive time outdoors as "exercise" and instead approach it as a necessity.

So stuffing my toddlers into multiple puffy jackets no longer feels like the 20-minute chore it actually is. At such a young age, they've

already developed a healthy and instinctive need to be outdoors. My four-year old gleefully looks forward to daycare excursions into surrounding forests. My 18-month-old puts on muddy boots himself and perches by the window every day, waiting for our next trip out. And on the coldest, snowiest days, you won't find us at the fireplace—we go tobogganing.

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