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'Tis the season after the season.

This one is the season when my family prepares to ward off the cabin fever epidemic that strikes every year in Pittsburgh during January and beyond. When winter's cold sets in I pine for the days when I could shoo my three boys out the door to frolic in the warm summer sun. Indoor arts and crafts projects keep some kids entertained for a while, but when you see them writing "all work and no play..." over and over again with their neon-colored markers, it's time to *get out*.

But what do you do with kids outdoors, in Pittsburgh, in winter? Besides sledding, of course.

We look for things that other families only do in summer. Miniature golf courses are often packed in summer at the beach and most local courses are hibernating for the winter. [Robert Morris University Island Sports Center](#) offers mini-golf year round, with great views of the Ohio River. My kids love golfing and barge-watching at the same time. When they're done playing outside but not ready to go home, we head inside the Dome and continue to hone their skills with a bucket of 35 balls for \$4.50. Even my 2-year-old can borrow a club and practice on the putting green and sand trap.

Another activity that works better for our family in the winter is geocaching. We've done it in the summer but it



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usually means my husband and me carrying our boys over thorny bushes and snatching poison ivy out of their curious hands. But in winter, we're all wearing long, thick pants and boots -- and poison ivy is out of sight. The lack of vegetation makes it a little easier to find the caches, too. As long as snow doesn't make park trails impassable, geocaching is virtually free. [Venture Outdoors](#) offers excellent clinics with GPS devices in local parks, but you can also make your own fun. If you have a smartphone, download the introductory version of the app [Geocaching for free](#). (The full version is \$9.99.) Find hidden treasures that may be as close as your backyard. With careful research on the description of the caches in advance, you can plan a treasure hunt that is perfect for all ages.

[Round Hill Park's](#) working farm is a classic that many Pittsburghers swear is a must-see, but everyone heads there in the summer. Savvy families switch it up and head there in winter. Watch for a break in the weather, dress in layers and pour some hot chocolate in your thermos as you hit Round Hill Park without the crowds. Free parking and no admission make it super-easy on your post-holiday budget. See the horses with their shaggy coats and get up close and personal with the animals as they spend more time in the barn than out in the field. In February, the Visitor's Center offers a program called "Signs in the Snow" to teach how to identify animal tracks.

My boys are no different from other dinosaur-loving tots, so I'm always grateful we live in Pittsburgh with access to some excellent prehistoric resources. I've scheduled "Dino Week"

in the winter and mixed indoor and outdoor venues. Start at [Carnegie Museum of Natural History](#) under towering dinosaur fossils. Follow up with a visit to [Carnegie Library](#) and load up on books about their favorite extinct reptiles. Then, live the paleontologist life and visit the Fossil Cliff on the [Panhandle Trail](#) in Rennerdale, Collier Township. Again, visiting in winter means smaller crowds, less sweating and no poison ivy. The Panhandle Trail is a smooth, flat, gravel trail easily accessed from the Walker's Mill parking lot. To get to Fossil Cliff, you cross a small bridge and then navigate a few small up-and-down ridges, so this isn't an activity for kids in strollers. The trail takes you right to the scree pile, a collection of chipped and fallen pieces of the cliff.

"Not every piece of scree will have something, but if you are careful, you might find a fossil!" Kay Downey-Clarke, Treasurer of the Panhandle Trail Association, who has acquired plenty of fern fossils and even a few precious insect fossils.

When it's really just too cold to head outside and the best parts of summer seem like distant memories, it's time to get packed for [Conley's Resort](#) in Butler. The water park is open from 4 to 9 p.m. on Mondays and Thursdays and from noon to 9 p.m. on weekends. Families can enjoy a late afternoon pirate-themed escape from the winter blahs on the high seas with two twisting tubes that empty into a four-foot deep pool. Limited seating above the pool deck provides a space for a quick dinner before heading home with exhausted children who (with luck) head right to bed! Kids three and under are free with a paid adult, but call ahead to check on the throngs. This is one winter activity that is too summery to keep the crowds away!

Photographs of sledding; Carnegie Libraries; Toonseum; Allegheny Observatory; copyright [Brian Cohen](#)

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**Jen Meyercheck** · Interactive Web Designer at Education Management Corporation (EDMC)

Thanks to [Chuck Gohn](#) for sharing this newsletter with me. Great winter activity ideas!

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**Roger Walburn** · Carnegie Mellon

thanks for the reminder. need to get some geocaches!!!

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