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A whole new world outside

The positive effects outdoor play, proper diet have on children

By Chris Kaufman / ckaufman@appealdemocrat.com Apr 5, 2019



Michelle Palmer, of Yuba City helps her daughter Emilia, 16 months on the slide with her son Preston, 3, right, Monday October 14, 2013 at Regency Park in Yuba City.

Chris Kaufman/Appeal-Democrat

With screen time on a variety of devices offering unlimited access to information and entertainment, getting children outdoors can be a challenge, but experts say it's crucial to their development on multiple levels.

Ericka Summers, executive director with First 5 Yuba Children & Families Commission, said the environment where people live and what's available has a big influence on their health and well-being.

“People don’t always understand the importance of facilities like pools and parks, where kids are outside playing. There’s a sense of community and parents can get to talking with each other,” she said. “Children get the chance to interact with each other and that stimulates brain development.”

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She said electronic devices are now a reality of daily life and children to need to use them, but their usage should be structured.

“I definitely think it’s a problem with all the access to social media and video games, plus videos on YouTube are very popular and kids are really drawn to that,” she said. “I can see a lack of development of social skills and challenges in being able to interact with people in certain situations for some children down the line.”

Jimmie Eggers, principal and superintendent of Marcum-Illinois School in Nicolaus, said there are a multitude of benefits to getting young people outside.

“There are benefits for both structured and unstructured activities for students. Research shows that the more physically active kids are, the better they perform academically,” he said in an email. “Structured activities teach students how to commingle with peers, how to work as a team, follow directions and achieve a goal. Unstructured activities provide students with choices, how to work with peer groups and inspires creativity.”

Structured and unstructured

outdoor activities

Summers said First 5 Yuba helps fund structured activities, but they're always looking for organizations to partner with so more children can get involved.

"First 5 Yuba provides funding for the Olivehurst Public Utilities District pool to offer free swim lessons for children up to the age of 5 years old," she said. "That's huge in an area of need."

She's reached out to soccer leagues and little leagues, as well as other groups offering funding to help parents afford enrollment fees.

"I've connected with the Yuba Sutter Youth Soccer League, youth football leagues and little leagues to suggest they apply for sponsorship of children in their leagues," she said. "We have funding available for that, and I have a background in public health, so I'm passionate about it."

She said they've had some success in providing scholarships to a local youth football program.

"We sponsor some of the Lindhurst Jr. Blazers kids that wouldn't otherwise be able to afford to participate," she said. "Some families lack access to these opportunities for their children and it's expensive to play organized sports."

Eggers said children learn differently while engaging in activities outdoors versus indoors.

"Although there are many similarities for learning while engaging in activities both indoors and outdoors, with outdoor activities students are involved in physical movement, which requires them to learn spatial awareness," Eggers said. "Indoor activities tend to be more structured, led by the instructor. It is about task completion that is directed."

Eggers said parents should create a balance and variety of activities. They should also get involved in some of the fun.

"I recommend that parents play both structured and unstructured outdoor activities with their children. Parents can provide a structured game and play with them. Parents can also allow the children to create an outdoor game and play that with them," he said. "The goal is for parents to play with their children in order to help them with their development."

Miguel Cruz, a physical education teacher at Franklin Elementary School, said, on occasion, he uses fitness stations where students rotate through activities such as hula hoops, balance beams and hurdles, but parents have even more options for fun things to do with their

children.

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"I recommend that parents and their children ride bikes together, go on walks, play tag, go to the park and any other activity that creates outdoor family time together," he said.

Growing a garden and eating right

Barbara Kiernan, with the UC Master Gardener program, said they promote school gardens and are willing to go to any school to help create a program.

"Children can learn about math and science in the garden," Kiernan said. "They learn patience. They are so excited when their little seedlings pop through the soil and they see their plant growing."

She said children learn the rewards of gardening with the harvest and the pride of doing something from start to finish.

"It's even better when a parent or the whole family is involved," she said. "They all reap the benefits of gardening and the accomplishment."

She said gardening creates an opportunity for children to learn to prepare food in the kitchen as well as the nutritional benefits.

"CalFresh is a state and local program that does this with great success," Kiernan said. "They have projects going in Yuba, Sutter and Butte counties. They are starting a program at the Marysville Community Garden right now."

Kiernan said the Master Gardeners are in the process of building a learning garden at the Yuba-Sutter Fairgrounds with the intention of bringing local children to experience gardening with a hands-on approach.

“It should be in full operation when the school year starts this fall,” she said. “We’re hoping to bring in the school kids and their families to learn and grow together.”

