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Fitness: Fighting childhood obesity and improving kids' health

BY MARIA HOWARD Richmond Times-Dispatch Posted Sunday, August 26, 2012 1:00 am



OB BROWN/TIMES-DISPATCH

Mason Anderson, 9, left, and Taemon Doswell, 8, learn how to plant a blueberry bush with Toby Vernon at the Boys & Girls Club West End. Fit4Kids will introduce gardening to schools this year.

Fit4Kids, a new nonprofit in the Richmond area, is ready to roll this fall. Actually, it's ready to run recess games, put more activity into classroom lessons and plant gardens at area schools. Mary Dunne Stewart, executive director of Fit4Kids, explained the first round of initiatives in her organization's quest to bring down childhood obesity levels locally and improve children's health. Recess seemed like a good place to start. Although we might think that children run around and get lots of exercise at recess, that's not necessarily so. Some kids stay away from recess games because they feel clumsy or shy. Others may choose to sit and talk to friends instead of moving during their free

time. Fit4Kids hopes to engage those not-so-active children with activities that appeal to all levels and interests. "It's like field day every day," Stewart said. A "recess coach" will be assigned this fall to Woodville Elementary in Richmond, Bellwood Elementary in Chesterfield County and St. Andrews, a small, private school in Richmond that serves low-income families. After one year at those schools, the recess coaches will relinquish their duties to teachers there and move on to other schools that might be in need of such activity-boosting efforts. Another Fit4Kids effort will be taking place in the classrooms at Bellwood Elementary. Modeled after a program in the Williamsburg area, the Wellness Integration Program will encourage teachers to incorporate movement into the learning process and make nutrition part of the regular curriculum.

Activities such as "subtraction tag" will get kids moving while learning math concepts, Stewart said. Research has shown that combining learning with movement often boosts test scores. And

obviously, if children are moving in the classroom instead of sitting at their desks, there are health benefits as well. The third program starting this fall under the Fit4Kids push for better health is one that involves gardening. Already, new gardens have been planted at St. Joseph's Villa and the Boys & Girls Club West End location under this program. When school starts, gardening also will be part of the curriculum at Evergreen Elementary and Elizabeth Scott Elementary, both in Chesterfield. The goal is to have kids raise produce, prepare it and eat it, Stewart said. Instruction in cooking and nutrition will be the final piece of the gardening program. In a pilot program last year, Stewart watched kids eat spinach salad without complaining. "When they're doing it with their friends, and they're making it, they'll try it," she said with a laugh. The goal of Fit4Kids, spawned by Sports Backers and supported widely in the area by health and wellness professionals, is to teach kids to make healthy choices so they don't develop weight and medical issues. Ironically, the start time of these local programs coincides with National Childhood Obesity Month in September. Some of the Fit4Kids initiatives already have been tried, in different forms, at area schools. Many elementary schools have gardens, for instance, and some elementary-level teachers are spending a lot of time on health and nutrition. That's why Fit4Kids is targeting schools in lower-income areas to roll out these programs. "There's more of a need in Title 1 schools," Stewart said.