Exercise Science Program Co-Organizes Fit Kids Field Day in Norwalk

Wendy Bjerke, Ph.D., Sacred Heart University
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Health lessons and exercise wrapped up in grin-driving fun.

That was the scene at Fox Run Elementary School on May 18 as Fit Kids Field Day capped the fourth year of the highly interactive Fit Kids afterschool program delivered by Norwalk Health Department, Sacred Heart University and Norwalk Community College.

Designed to teach elementary school students about nutrition, physical activity and healthy choices, the program runs each year from January to May, with an hour-long session held twice a week. The culminating field day integrated some of the programming taught during the year while adding carnival-style elements that included face painting, an obstacle course, freeze dancing, arts and crafts and a food group relay. Eighty students in all, grades K-5 from Fox Run, Columbus and Cranbury elementary schools, participated in the field day.

Wendy Bjerke, clinical assistant professor of SHU’s Department of Exercise Science as well as director of the University’s Wellness Program, said Fit Kids has been an excellent opportunity for the Exercise Science undergraduates who have served as program guides to gain service knowledge. “They have learned about exercise programming for children, health promotion and health education, which is all within the context of my Exercise Physiology course,” she said.

Bjerke added that the collaboration with the Department of Health included data collection and assessment of health indicators such as Body Mass Index (BMI), performance measures and health behaviors. Program participants, for example, take a quiz pre- and post-program to determine if there has been a positive change in health attitudes and behavior. Collected data is disseminated at regional conferences that promote health and fitness.

Norwalk Health Director Tim Callahan spoke highly of the collaboration between the city and SHU. “We’ve had a partnership with SHU for several years now,” he said. “It’s been a great opportunity for their students to get involved with younger people and teach them about the impact of nutrition and physical activity,” he said. “They also serve as great role models.”
Callahan added that Bjerke, a Norwalk resident, brought SHU to the Fit Kids table, stressing its importance as a lifestyle influencer. “Kids are cooped up in school six to seven hours a day and need to have some vigorous physical activity,” he said. “By incorporating these valuable lessons at this early age, kids are more likely to become healthier, physically active adults.”

As participating SHU students had just graduated or left for summer break, students from Norwalk High School’s B.R.O.W.N. (Bears Reaching Out Within Norwalk) team, as well as volunteers from Pepperidge Farm, were on hand to help guide field day activities.

Pepperidge Farm’s Manjita Kulkarni said the company was glad to assist. “We’re headquartered in Norwalk and do a lot of community outreach,” she said. “We’re also all about good health.”

Of course, Bjerke was front and center amid the game stations, guiding in particular the Food Group Relay Race, one of the best integrations of health education and physical activity onsite. “This is based on the new food pyramid developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Centers for Disease Control,” she said. “Children organize into teams, with names like the Kool Kiwis and Bodacious Blueberries, pick ‘foods’ at random from a container and then race across the gym to place the food in the correct food group bag. It’s a great way to reinforce their learning while they have fun and exercise at the same time.”