The Colorado Health Foundation™



Family Voice for More PE

Parents See Blocks to Keeping Kids Active

While kids battle obesity and the teasing that goes with it, parents question whether their communities and schools are doing enough to keep kids moving. Turns out, about 11 percent of kids in Colorado ages 2 to 14 are obese and a comparable percentage are overweight, according to the 2015 Colorado Health Report Card.

That’s why Denver families like Lorena Limon and her husband, Isabel, help their kids find plenty of ways to incorporate activity ? at home and school.

In nice weather, Lorena’s older sons, Miguel, 12, and Beto, 14, head outside and rally up kids for games like pickup football. They trot off to a nearby elementary school, just a 10-minute walk from home. While Lorena encourages their enthusiasm to play outside and score touchdowns, she still worries about safety.

“There’s a busy road, and the streets are not well lit at night,” she said.

And with nearby bars strung along busy streets like Federal Boulevard, the last thing she wants is her kids walking home from a game of football while navigating busy crowds that local bars tend to attract, she said.

School Sports

Beto, a ninth-grader at Abraham Lincoln High School, plays on the tennis team, while Miguel, a seventh-grader at Grant Beacon Middle School, plays on the soccer team. Both programs are inexpensive alternatives to other community youth sports in town, Lorena said.

While she acknowledges that Miguel's school offers activities that incorporate fitness into his day, Lorena still wants to see more.

"Our middle school offers soccer and football, but I'd like to see tennis, basketball and baseball, too," she said, adding that basketball is not offered to seventh-graders, a factor that excludes Miguel.

Clearly, Lorena's kids stay fairly active compared to kids who dislike sports, dance and other activities. But it doesn't stop her from worrying about her neighbors ? kids in her community who simply won't make the cut on their favorite team.

In part, the problem stems from supply and demand – too many kids and not enough spots in sports ? plus a few other exclusionary factors. With only one team per sport at Miguel's school and small team rosters, Lorena said, about 20 kids might make the soccer team. And that's not enough.

She points out another flaw in school sports programs, something rarely discussed: equity. Only the fittest, smartest and most skilled players make the teams, she said. And it leaves far too many kids hanging in the balance when their names don't show up on the team roster.

"What about those kids? Those who are struggling with grades or aren't exactly fit? That's why they don't get picked," Lorena said. "Those struggling students should have a chance, too, and they would really benefit from being on a team or playing that sport in a more structured way."

She suggests adding multiple teams so more kids can participate.

But there is good news. Kids at Miguel's school stay active Monday through Friday thanks to gym classes that last about 60 minutes. According to Miguel, teachers don't use fancy phone apps or tablets that prompt kids to get moving, yet his teacher gets these kids to use their heart muscles regularly.

“We play football, soccer, basketball and do some exercises like pushups and jumping jacks,” he said.

Occasionally they play dodgeball during gym. Surprisingly, even some of the girls enjoy that game. But most prefer volleyball, Miguel said.

Creative Moves

Lorena wants schools to incorporate simple solutions like a “one-minute exercise break” at the end of each class. She demonstrated active breaks as she bent her knees and lowered herself to a squat position. Then she alternated a 10-second squat with 10 seconds of jumping up and down. She repeated this sequence, increasing the intervals to 20 seconds for each squat and jump set.

Lorena learned about activity breaks through social media channels. She follows a Florida-based nutritionist on Facebook who posts simple tips that boost activity. Lorena’s youngest son, Yinsen, 4, often joins her at home for activity breaks.

Community Offerings

Because public education only goes so far with extracurricular activity, the family looked outside the school for more options. But when they registered Miguel for soccer, it came with a few unexpected roadblocks.

“The cost was a barrier and it was too far from our home,” Lorena said.

A 20-minute commute by car from soccer practice to their home ended up taking three hours, she said. The family relied on public transportation, which meant Miguel sometimes arrived home at 10 p.m. Eventually, planning evening transportation for sports proved too difficult.

“Some buses stop running at 7 p.m.,” Lorena said.

But small changes like expanded bus routes would go a long way toward helping families who want to use local activity programs outside school, she said.

To increase daily activity and active play for their kids, Lorena and Isabel recognize they must play an active role. That’s why she makes sure Beto and Miguel turn in their homework and maintain good grades ? so they don’t get cut from their sports teams. Her husband, a former black belt instructor in taekwondo, spends time teaching Yinsen about martial arts and kickboxing, something the two enjoy together.

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