

Keys to keeping kids active in the summer

Moving Grays Harbor

By Maryann Welch

I am sure all of you readers have noticed that summer is really here and school is out. This column has, in the past, highlighted the role of schools and programs such as the YMCA in promoting physical activity for young people. However, as summer marches on and the structure of school is lacking, parents are more and more challenged with the role of encouraging their children to move. Granted, there are numerous offerings of parks programs, camps and other organized activities. However, time spent at home with family can be expanded beyond computers, video games and television. This is no small feat and will generally take a fair amount of persistence and creativity on the part of parents.

Kids need at least an hour of physical activity most days of the week as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. But remember that exercise is cumulative, so kids don't have to do 30 minutes or an hour at a time to realize the health benefits. Even short activity sessions during the day can add up and be beneficial. Just as for adults, activity doesn't just mean "exercise" or working out. There is an unlimited range of things children can do to meet or exceed this recommendation and they will be likely to move more if fun is involved.

I visited with Wilma Weber, a former co-worker, about her family's approach to summer activity for her two children Alahna, 14 and Conner, 12. Wilma and her husband, Dan, try to set a good example with activity in their own lives and this is a

key component to physical activity in children.

Wilma agrees that "activity must have a fun component to it and cannot be seen by the kids as fitness or exercise." She commented that "with the extra daylight hours it is easier to go throw a ball around, pepper with the volleyball or shoot baskets with them when we get home from work. We also have a badminton net set up in the backyard that helps keep us entertained – lots of options depending on the mood."

Wilma and Dan obviously have taken steps to have fun equipment available to grasp opportunities for activity as they arise.

Anytime young people are around water is a great chance for extensive activity as well. Wilma says, "perhaps the most active the kids get is when we go to the lake. They spend hours jumping in and climbing out of the water, treading water, paddling, etc., without even considering this a "fitness" activity. Even hunting for snakes and frogs is an activity I encourage!"

As a grandmother, I will ditto Wilma's comments about swimming and water activity – it's the best way to wear out the grand kids (and Jim and I too when we get involved!). In fact, a simple sprinkler in the yard and some water squirt toys is guaranteed to draw our 10-year old granddaughter, Corbyn away from her Wii or television.

Wilma and Dan enjoy bicycling as well and strive to involve their children in this sport. Wilma even persuaded her daughter to join her in a 30-mile ride around Lake Quinault recently – way to go both of you! The Weber children are even encouraged to see their bicycles as "body power" for short distance transport around their neighborhood in Central Park. "Teaching your children the rules of the road while walking or cycling is an important factor in helping them to be independent," shares Wilma.

Parents, too, can realize health benefits when joining in fun activities, even if it's just pushing a swing, throwing a ball around or taking a short walk. I know a

simple game of chase with the grandkids gets my heart rate up!

So, a few tips for keeping those kids moving this summer: set time limits on television and other media; find fun in simple ways to play; parents, set an example and join in to get double benefits for your family; and lastly, be sure and find ways to take advantage of the great days we are sure to have by getting outside and actively enjoying the fresh air.

Maryann Welch is the recently retired director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.