

## Powering up for "Power Off & Play"



**By Brock Weir**

Gemma Goldstein resisted temptation for years.

As smart phones became the standard in so many places around the world, Ms. Goldstein was one of the few holdouts, keeping her old fashioned mode handy whenever it was needed.

But work intervened and two years ago she had to join the smart phone revolution.

“Since then, I have to say I have found myself much more addicted to it,” says Ms. Goldstein. “When it pings, you automatically go to it, you scroll and scroll and it never stops. You find yourself attached to it.”

She has, however, been making a concerted effort to break free and power off, something which she is now encouraging local kids and parents to do for the latest phase of the Healthy Kids Community Challenge: Power Off & Play.

Power Off & Play is the latest initiative launched by the Healthy Kids Community Challenge, which promotes powering off before sleep, during meals and snack times and encouraging physical activity and social interaction through a number of fun and educational activities.

While Power Off & Play was launched last month, it will be formally kicked off Sunday with a Nature Play Pop-Up event at Shepherd's Bush, and continues this week with an expert-led conference sharing tips and comparing notes on how parents, teachers, and even kids themselves, can encourage others to turn off and start living.

Each theme launched by the Healthy Kids Community Challenge is selected by Ontario's Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care which examines the most effective themes to combat childhood obesity, and the local facilitators. In this case, the Healthy Kids Community Challenge is a partnership between the Town of Aurora and Windfall to develop programming to suit the needs of the community.

“What's really exciting for me is to get people outside,” says Ms. Goldstein. “The turning off is really important because that gets kids away from their screens, but what really excites me is getting kids outside in nature and participating in local sports, getting involved in community activities, cooking in the kitchen, all of those things together, the play part, because that is where children get their memories. When you think back to your childhood, what do you remember were your most fond memories? Were they sitting at home watching a screen, or were they when you were outside playing with a friend?”

A number of programs are already planned for the course of the year, including further Nature Play Pop-Ups this spring, and one in August and September, kitchen workshops, co-hosted by the York Region Food Network, to give kids a handle on preparing healthy food in the kitchen themselves, and the launch of a Nature Play backpack program for the community.

“This was already trialled in the Aurora and Newmarket Public Libraries and we're now bringing it to four schools so kids can take it out on the weekends, and teachers can take it out and use it with their class,” Ms. Goldstein explains. “Each one has a different theme, like going out and looking for animal tracks, or spotting different bugs and birds. It is going to be really exciting and it is

aimed at getting kids out and into nature.

“We are also planning lots of wellness nights at the schools, so we’ve really upped our game. We are also launching a Neighbourhood Play Club in April or May where we will have groups of parents in two parks in Aurora where we’re going to try and encourage free play and offer incentives for parents to come out and have a community approach to play. They’ll develop a group so if one parent doesn’t want to be there at a time, they can help other parents be there ? along with more incentives for kids to get out into the park and make it a safe, easy way to get out together.”

As facilitator of this program, Ms. Goldstein is talking the talk ? and talking well away from her smartphone whenever ? and however ? she can. She doesn’t have it when she is playing with her own kids, or sitting down for a meal. On weekends, she and her husband have one phone between them so they can spend genuine time with their kids.

“Working with this program has changed how I do things,” she says. “I have my work email on my phone so when I am at home in the evenings, it pings up and it effects my time at home. Having a smartphone and having the ubiquitous media and screen time around is a big problem for me at night and I find myself gravitating towards using devices much more frequently. Through this program I have learned of the effects of them and I fight that gravitation, that attraction to try and give myself and my kids time away from screens, more times playing outside and doing other activities like going to the library, going to play in the park, going for walks in the countryside and leaving the devices behind and have a life that is not completely controlled by screens.”