

Unplug and come out to the Power Off & Play Festival

By Brock Weir

There is so much world to see when you take your eyes off the screens on your phone or tablet ? and you will get an appetizer of the smorgasbord the world has to offer next Sunday, August 19, at the Power Off & Play Festival.

The Festival, which will be hosted by Windfall Ecology Centre at Sheppard's Bush, is one of the last events of the four-year Healthy Kids Community Challenge, which has aimed to get local kids and teens more physically active and more aware of healthy choices. Previous years have underscored the importance of water, and the essentials of eating veggies and fruit, but this year has focused on encouraging that same demographic ? and their families ? to turn off their phones for a little while and re-engage with each other, and themselves.

This Sunday's Festival will provide a wide array of nature, athletic and cultural activities that will offer something to suit every taste. ?Last year was our Harvest Festival all about trying new and healthy foods during the harvest season time, but this year we're doing something in the summer that is all about powering off your devices and getting out and playing, trying out new things and being physically active,? explains Gemma Goldstein of the Healthy Kids Community Challenge, a partnership between Windfall, Sport Aurora, and the Town of Aurora. ?We will have all kinds of things like rock climbing, face painting, geocaching, nature play, Zumba, dance, karate, baseball, football, gymnastics and so much more. There is also going to be a vendor zone where you can go out and meet local health and wellness vendors and check out things you can do locally.

?There will also be a refreshment area where you can go and get a proper meal or snack, and there is going to be a ton of things going on to get kids and families off their screens and out being active.?

Since launching their Power Off & Play initiative earlier this year, the Healthy Kids Community Challenge has taken their message out into the community and directly into the schools. Over the ensuing months, Ms. Goldstein says she has seen kids and parents really taking to the idea of powering off and ?understanding the damage it can do.?

?But, when it comes to actually getting off their screens, it becomes more daunting to kids to go, ?Oh, my gosh, I have to put my screen down? What am I going to do with myself? Kids tend to understand that they need to be limiting screen time, but actually doing it has become a scary thing for them. What the next step is to make it not scary and show them that they can actually be functional beyond their screen ? and that is the purpose of this.?

Indeed, this weekend's Festival will go a long way in dispelling that fear factor. There will be a booth with all sorts of information for people to take home and see the many ways they can embrace the ?Power Off' philosophy. The info will highlight not only why it is important, but also the variety of alternatives to being glued to a screen.

?We will show you don't have to go in one direction, you don't have to sign your kids up [for sports], but it can be [as simple as] a nature walk in the forest,? says Ms. Goldstein, adding the Festival will offer time on basketball courts, nature play pop-ups, and even the presence of the Aurora King Baseball Association who will be coming out with their radar gun to clock your speed.

The Power Off & Play Festival is the last big event of the Healthy Kids Community Challenge. The program's government funding wraps up at the end of this month and the program will be wound down in September. Nevertheless, Ms. Goldstein says Windfall Ecology Centre will continue on with the work they have been doing through the Challenge, aiming to foster future Nature Play events they have been doing throughout the program, and training others on the importance.

Wellness nights will also continue in the schools. Windfall has given schools guides so they can carry on the evenings themselves while the York Region Food Network, which has facilitated the Healthy Kids Community Challenge's cooking program, will be carrying on as well after the Network secured another funding source.

?We have a whole load of things that we have been doing that we will just continue on because the people who have been doing it have decided to carry it on, and that is just phenomenal,? says Ms. Goldstein. ?We can't thank the community enough for being so embracing, so warm and so supportive of the initiative. It has been great and what we're doing now is gathering feedback from schools and other organizations in the community to see what changes have been happening.

?So far, the feedback we have received has been really great. The schools and teachers have said they have seen real change in their children and parents' awareness and actual behavioural changes, which has been great. We're also re-looking at our Community Needs Assessment we did right at the beginning and will be introducing a new document at the end of August or early September detailing any changes that have happened in the community and really evaluating the project's success.?

For more information on Sunday's Power Off & Play Festival, including a schedule of the various activities that will be running from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., visit www.windfallcentre.ca/festival. Parking for the event is available at Sheppard's Bush's Mary Street parking

lot. Additional parking will be available at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School, a short walk from the site.