

Soccer program giving kids their share of kicks

Youngsters play for fun, with no instruction



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KIDS STUFF

Signing up 2-year-olds to play organized soccer sounds like the plot for a new reality show. Call it "Parents Gone Wild."

But the Northwest Youth Soccer Association has much tamer ideas behind its new "Eaglet Program," a Saturday morning clinic designed for 2-to-4-year-olds. It's a way for toddlers to have fun on a soccer field while their older siblings are playing games, plus it provides socialization and learning opportunities some kids may not get in their rural community.

Greg Stavros of Comstock Park, director of the Northwest Youth Soccer Association, said the program exists in other states but is the first in the Grand Rapids area aimed at this age group. About 60 kids had been signed up through this week, he said.

"When you see soccer Saturdays, and the families are out there watching their brothers and sisters playing, you can see that the little ones would prefer to participate instead of watch," Stavros said. "The parents are excited to have this opportunity, (but) we have to do it right."

Encouraging physical activity

There will be no soccer games, Stavros emphasized. Parents will accompany their toddler on the field for about an hour, or as the clinic description states, "however long the children are able to remain attentive."

Dr. Eddle O'Connor, a sports psychologist at GRSportscenter, 1640 E. Paris SE, likes the basic concept.

"As long as they're encouraging free play and physical activity, that's good," he said. "There are so many concerns with youth today, watching TV and playing video games, so anything that encourages physical activity is fine."

But toddlers aren't ready for soccer instruction, he said. "As long as parents don't get stuck on skill development ... free play is the key here," O'Connor said. "Anything more than that, I'd be concerned."

Much of the time will be spent simply kicking a soccer ball around, which is what they would be doing at their brother's or sister's game, anyway. Interaction with other children might also provide their introduction to teamwork, and parents will have plenty of input, Stavros said.

For the fun of it

"We're not doing games, we're just about making it fun," he said. "We've got balloons on the goals, we'll count the

IF YOU GO
Early kicks
An introduction to soccer for toddlers
What: Northwest Youth Soccer Association Eaglet Program
Who: Ages 2-up and their parents
Where: Alpine Township Sports Complex, 1850 Alpine Church Road, Comstock Park
When: Saturday mornings, April 30-June 11
Cost: \$25

numbers on the shirts."

Andy Sack of Walker, who coaches his 7-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son in the NYSA, has enrolled 3-year-old Nicole in the clinic. "I understand, people might think, 'What's going on here?'" he said. "But she plays in the back yard with her brother and sister, it's what she likes to do."

"It's just a lot of fun to go out and play, and that's all I want for any of my kids. I want them to play for fun."

Sack and his wife, Lisa, will be among the parent volunteers on the field. The Eaglet program also will utilize players from their U-19 boys and girls teams to help at the clinic.

"You have to keep it in good perspective," Sack said. "You also want to teach good habits like recreation and exercise. I think if little ones see their parents and siblings outside, being active on the field, it teaches them that."

Crossing passes and headers will have to wait until they're older.

"In terms of soccer skills," Sack said, "I don't expect anything like that. This will be a great way to socialize, to learn to share, skills like that."

Stavros, who said he hopes other area soccer organizations try the program, said the clinic is designed with developmental aspects in mind.

"It gives them a chance to play with other kids their own age," he said. "There's a lot of farming community around here ... this is for social development, too."

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— Andy Sack, parent