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NEIGHBORS

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The Miami Herald

TAG, YOU'RE IT!

ALLISON DIAZ/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

Children are running, playing and learning healthy habits at a new after-school program at Miami-Dade parks, aimed at getting them moving. Xavier Williams, 6, plays a flag-tag game with other kids at Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park in Liberty City. PAGE 10

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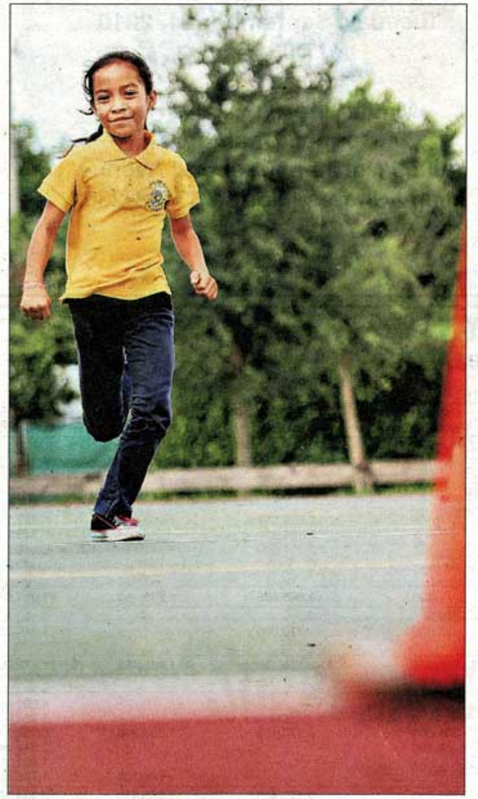
FITNESS MADE FUN



KEEPING COUNT: Blanca Zavala, 8, runs around cones to see how many laps she can complete at Leisure Lake Park in Homestead during the Fit-to-Play: Health, Wellness and Obesity Prevention Out-of-School program.

A NEW AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM AT MIAMI-DADE PARKS GETS KIDS MOVING WITH FIELD-DAY TYPE GAMES, PLUS HOMEWORK HELP AND LESSONS ON HEALTHY EATING – AND FEES ARE MINIMAL, IF NOT AT ALL

BY KARINA CHAVARRIA
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On the basketball court at Leisure Lake Park in Homestead, Fatima Beltran stands behind the white line, waiting to charge the orange cone 15 meters in front of her.

As soon as the music starts, she sprints down the court. Back-and-forth she runs — six times without stopping.

As she rounds the cone for the sixth time, her counselor shouts for her to get a drink of water. Sweat shining on her face, Fatima pours herself a cup, barely containing her excitement.

"This is the best part," said Fatima, 8, a third-grader at Leisure City Elementary in Homestead. "I love to run and I can do a lot of that here after I get out of school."

Spurred on by first lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign, Miami-Dade's Parks and Recreation Department is leading the initiative locally with Fit-to-Play: Health, Wellness and Obesity Prevention Out-of-School program.

The fitness program, in its inaugural year, is dubbed SPARK, or Sports, Play and Active Recreation for Kids. It involves students from 6 to 14. After school, they head to their neighborhood park, where they play tag, kickball, and running games. In addition, they get homework help and are taught about eating well.

"We were one of the first programs in the neighborhood to promote healthier living," said Marvin Burroughs, manager at Martin Luther King Jr. Park in Liberty City, which has 45 children participating. "Kids have started eating better and losing weight at home because of what we are teaching them after school."

Ja'Karrie Daniels, 9, a fourth-grader at Hialeah Elementary enrolled in the program, attests to that.

"I really like coming here after school. They teach us about the food pyramid and give us healthy snacks. We also get to play a lot of sports like kickball. It's my favorite."

More than 1,000 students have registered. Fees are determined on a family's income — many of the children attend for free due to funding from The Children's Trust.

"Our program is of no cost to the kids and their families because of The Children's Trust's contributions," said Daryl Miller, manager at Leisure Lake Park, which has 63 children enrolled. "There is a waiting list of families who want to participate in Fit-to-Play right now, but we hope to be able to allow more of them in as time goes by. This kind of initiative really does great things for our community."

Miami-Dade Parks also is working with the University of Miami UHealth System. The children will record their fitness improvements, which will be measured by medical students throughout the year.

"Being a part of this program really allows our third-year medical students to see the importance of community outreach," said Dr. Donna Wiener, assistant professor of clinical pediatrics.

"If we can get kids to understand the importance of a healthy lifestyle now, future generations will benefit from it."

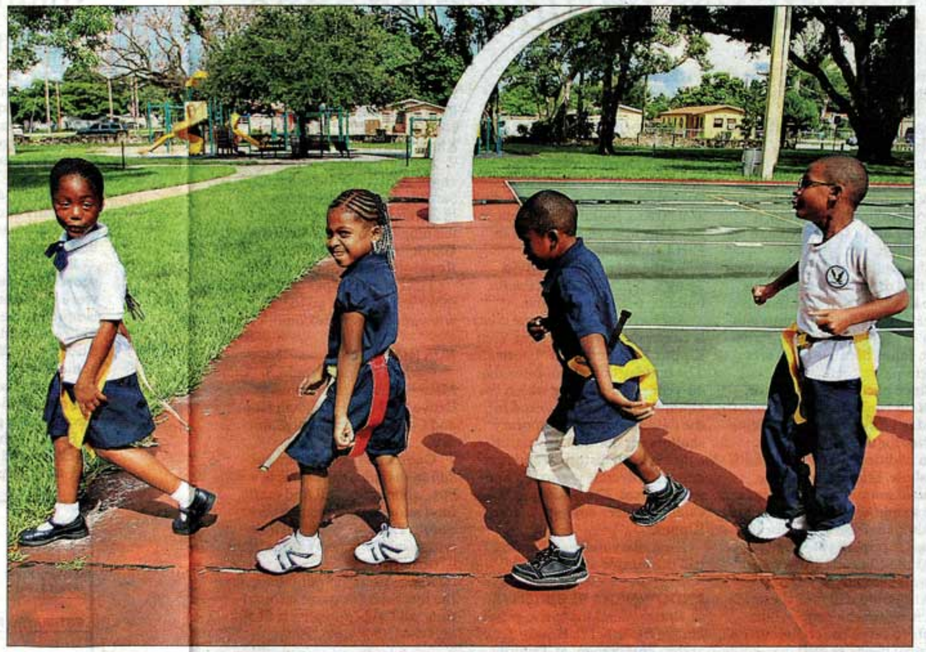
UHealth oversees the health, wellness and obesity prevention initiatives.

"We have our med students make these bracelets with the kids that change color once they get in the sun," said Wiener. "When the kids see the beads change from white to a different shade, they know they need to put sunscreen on. It's interactive projects like this that make them more aware of what's going on."

Fit-to-Play also requires the students to dedicate one to two hours to homework and reading comprehension.

"When we get here after school, the counselors sit with us and help us with the things we don't understand," said Gabriella Carbone, 13, an eighth-grader at Kenwood K-8 Center who participates at Continental Park in Kendall.

"They have a lot of patience and explain everything really well. I wouldn't get the same attention after school at home."



PHOTOS BY ALLSION DIAZ/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

KEEPING BODIES AND MINDS IN SHAPE: From left, Kemya Green, Ta'Keria Tanner, Adrian Barron, and Xavier Williams, all 6, walk in a line before playing a game of flag-tag at Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park last week as they participate in Miami-Dade Park's Fit-to-Play: Health, Wellness and Obesity Prevention Out-of-School program. At right, Erika Abreu, left, and Gabriela Carbone, both 13, help each other with their language arts and math homework at Continental Park in Kendall.

PROBLEM SOLVED: Michael Salvatore, 9, gets some math homework help from Miami-Dade Park service aide Luis Davila at Continental Park.

Fit to play: How to sign up

- Funded by The Children's Trust, the after-school program is free for many students, depending upon the family's income. Parks funded through community development grants charge $5 a week. Other parks charge a maximum of $35 a week.
- For more information, go to www.miamidade.gov/parks/kids-afterschool.asp, or call 305-755-7800.