

# Giving kids a sporting chance

A born-in-BC organization helps brings kids into sports with confidential financial support.

by Leslie Dyson



**There** are good reasons to smile. Last year, KidSport's Tri-Cities Chapter, awarded 609 grants amounting to \$130,000 to children from low-income families. The program covers the cost of registration for organized sports.

KidSport started in B.C. in 1993 and has since become a national program. There are 41 chapters in the province. The Tri-Cities (Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam and Port Moody) and Greater Victoria chapters are large enough to have executive directors. The program supports children three to 18 years of age in parent and tot programs, sports leagues, martial arts and even some equestrian activities.

Chris Wilson, a former Olympic wrestler, is the part-time executive director in the Tri-Cities. "Sports are near and dear to my heart," he said.

Some grants are provided annually, some just once while a family is going through a transition period. The majority of grants go towards soccer. "It's the most popular.

One boy was struggling because he was preoccupied with worry that his father was going off to prison. The school, with a grant from KidSport, found him a place on a soccer team. Later the father told a school staff member, "Being involved with soccer has made a huge difference for my son, and the coaches showed me how to be a better role model as a dad."

Equipment costs are low and it's inexpensive with a long season. You get more bang for your buck."

He rattled off the benefits of participation "that we know intuitively and anecdotally — better health from more physical activity; a chance to fit in; to learn life skills, discipline and teamwork; to feel part of a team, to set goals and to learn from a coach."

But there are barriers as well, such as parents' preoccupation with other concerns or their lack of awareness of how to connect their children. But, most often, it's financial hardship. "There's a lot of guilt and shame in not being able to provide these things for their children," said Rissa Wilson, Chris's wife and administrator of the Coquitlam Alternate Basic Education Program. Being able to rely on KidSport, is valuable for principals and vice-principals, she said, "because you're helping parents to make a difference in their kids' lives."

Lisa Rinke, Principal of Miller Park Community School, said she's also seen how participation in organized sports provides great benefits for children from new immigrant families because it helps them learn about the culture. "Some Afghani students in our community, at the middle school level, arrived in Co-

quitlam as refugees ... They love soccer but they've come from refugee camps where they had very little and were playing with rag balls." With grant money from KidSport, these students are now playing in a soccer league.

"KidSport has allowed us to offer all kids who need additional support or who can't self regulate in a regular program or whose parents don't have the financial means to afford these activities, a chance to be successful ... Even with the budget crisis we're in, we're so lucky," Rinke said. "This has helped kids and the community. It's multi-layered."

Her Kindergarten to Grade 5 school with 250 students applied for grants for 10 students this year and she's seen the difference it has made.

One student with behavioural challenges could not manage a full school day, she said. However, his success in basketball enabled the kids and teachers to see him differently. Success outside the school impacted his behaviour inside and outside school.

Another child, struggling with fine motor skills got a boost when he saw he had a talent for circus acrobatics. "It's something he's so good at. And the social and emotional learning that he's getting is leading to academic success," Rinke said.

"What kids do after school and on weekends is beyond our school's control," she added, but enabling participation in sports teams "keeps them out of trouble and engaged in positive relationships in the community."

Rissa recalled one boy who was struggling because he was preoccupied with worry that his father was going off to prison. The school, with a grant from KidSport, found him a place on a soccer team. Rissa said that later the father told a school staff member, "Being involved with soccer has made a huge difference for my son, and the coaches showed me how to be a better role model as a dad."

KidSport has helped students realize their dreams of playing hockey, but it's also provided children who need support with the opportunity to "feel more normal," Rissa said. "They have stories to share of playing soccer on the weekend [and] they have jerseys to wear on Jersey Day. They're part of a team. It's a way to feel connected."

Schools and athletic associations will often waive a portion of the fees, but they're not able to keep up with the demand. That's where KidSport steps in.

The process for linking low-income students with financial support is simple and quick and school administrators and counsellors play an integral role. City parks and recreation staff also provide referrals.

"Principals are with these families all the time," Rissa explained. "KidSport trusts that the principals know. We don't want to ask for tax forms. It's just a signature after one sentence and contact information."

"It's very easy, not a hard process," Rinke agreed.

"We try to keep the barriers as low as possible," Chris added. "And sometimes principals have to say no



to parents. But we work really hard to raise the funds and it's all done by local volunteers. We want to make sure the money is spent wisely."

Rinke said KidSport addresses the questions every administrator asks when confronted with a child who's struggling academically and socially. "How can I tie this child to something that will enhance his life? How can we support families so they can support their children? That monetary piece is huge," she said, "especially in a time of restraint and cutbacks. Even in wealthier schools there are socio-economically challenged students."

"Everything is confidential," Chris said. "The only person who would know a kid has received a grant is the registrar, not the coaches — unless there's a good reason. We want

to make sure every kid is treated like every other team member."

Rissa said that when Chris took on the role of executive director, she was a school counsellor. "You're bombarded and it's hard to know what's available. I thought we have to get the word out.

"We made a concerted effort to advertise it to school counsellors and administrators and made it clear that they were going to be asked for adjudication. Now, it's an automatic part of planning for kids and a way to make their lives more positive."

Most principals and vice-principals in the district are aware of the program, but the majority of applications are for younger kids, Chris said. "Not as many older kids play sports. They start dropping out at the age of 13 or 14 because of the

competition from schoolwork, their social lives and jobs. And for some, sports become too intense. I'd love to address that at some point," he said.

For KidSport, the priority has moved from making people aware of the program to having to raise more money.

Six years ago, Chris said, the organization felt good that it had handed out 24 grants worth \$2,000. However, the program has grown exponentially since then. "I've seen poverty and the income gap grow. We've worked hard to broaden what we do, but I've seen a steady increase in need."

Rissa said "administrators feel that they're getting busier and busier. PACs are raising funds for books and playgrounds. Funding for athletic programs has been cut. Money's short all around."

The Tri-Cities program has come up with several effective fundraising strategies.

Staff and parents in the district can see the difference it's making and are calling to ask what they can do to help. Tapping into this interest, Chris said several schools have held penny drives. Some children have had birthday parties and requested donations to KidSport rather than gifts for themselves.

The program has developed partnerships with several businesses in the community, including Soccer Express, Westminster Savings and Thrifty Foods.

KidSport Tri-Cities also runs Operation Red Nose in the three municipalities, New Westminster and Burnaby. And it hosts charity curling bonspiels and golf tournaments.

But it's most successful fundraiser is its twice yearly used sports equipment sales. Good quality equipment is donated by students and parents

from schools throughout the district.

“That engagement is helping students learn about philanthropy and the disparities that exist in their own community, not just around the world,” said Rissa. “It gets them to recognize how privileged they are.”

Last spring, the event was held at Riverside Secondary and raised \$16,000. “It’s a great fundraiser for us, and kids can get all their hockey equipment for \$100,” Chris said. The August sale is held at the Coquitlam Arena.

KidSport has forged a strong relationship with the school district. “That’s really important,” said Rissa. Three former school administrators, “who are kid- and sports-passionate,” sit on the volunteer board.


“KidSport can be successful in every jurisdiction,” she added. “All it needs is someone with the time to invest in it.”

“I’ve been very lucky in my life with the opportunities I’ve had with sports,” said Chris. He played hockey, baseball and football while growing up in Winnipeg. He then took up wrestling and in 1992 represented Canada at the Olympic Games. He is a two-time World Cup Champion and he has won gold, silver and bronze medals for wrestling at the World Championships.

“Sports have made me the person I am today. It’s important for all

kids to have these opportunities. I’ve coached kids who’ve had a grant and seen the impact it’s had on their lives. It’s awesome to make such a huge difference.

“We have such a great partnership with the school district, from the board office staff to the youth workers. The schools appreciate what we do and, at the same time, we appreciate what they’re doing because we’re all trying to do what’s best for kids.”

Rissa said “Involvement in team sports leads to academic success, then graduation, and they just go on from there.” 

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professions maintain public confidence by providing assurance that professional practice is informed by current knowledge. The BCPVPA’s brief asks that the Council review other professions’ continuing education programs and consider establishing requirements for continuing education that will bolster public confidence in our profession.

The BCPVPA also recommended that the TRB re-instate the survey of recent graduates of education faculties to assist in its assessment of teacher evaluation programs. These surveys, conducted for many years

by the BCCT, the predecessor of the TRB, provided recent graduates’ perspectives on the degree to which their pre-service education provided adequate preparation for the realities of teaching. 

The BCPVPA TRB brief can be found [here](#) or visit <http://bit.ly/11Hqtzn>. We would be pleased to receive your feedback on the ideas presented ([kkrieger@bcpvpa.bc.ca](mailto:kkrieger@bcpvpa.bc.ca)).

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