

Working together to achieve fitness goals



Y Fit 4 U participant Kevin Alguire (left) gets encouragement from volunteer Chaz Fisher at the Les Chater Family YMCA.

Kevin Alguire, 12, has a new best friend. He hasn't known him for long, but the time they spend together each week is invaluable. For the past couple of months Kevin has been participating in a joint program of McMaster Children's Hospital (MCH) and the Les Chater Family YMCA on Rymal Road.

The Y Fit 4 U program gives clients of MCH's Children's Developmental Rehabilitation Programme (CDRP) the opportunity to work on fitness goals while supervised by CDRP physiotherapists, YMCA staff and volunteers.

Each Thursday, Kevin and eight other CDRP clients who all have either physical or developmental disabilities, spend an hour working out at the Les Chater Family YMCA. Their workouts, which are based on their abilities and fitness goals, have been developed by the YMCA staff and MCH physiotherapists who originally assessed the children at the beginning of the 12-week program.

Although two YMCA staff members and two MCH physiotherapists are there to offer support and encourage good form and safety, it is the volunteers of the program who work directly with the participants, encouraging them and helping them to set up the equipment and log their progress.

“The volunteers are a very important part of this program,” said Ginny Pearce, a physiotherapist with the CDRP program who helped to develop the Y Fit 4 U program.

Kevin, who has cerebral palsy, agrees. His volunteer helper and new best friend, Chaz Fisher, has helped him lose five pounds so far and each week Kevin is lifting more and more weight. And while these accomplishments are measurable, what can't be measured is the amount of joy and confidence their partnership has given Kevin.

“I have been working with Kevin since day one – we bonded instantly,” said Chaz.

However, Kevin and Chaz's bond goes beyond the Y Fit 4 U program. Chaz has spina bifida and hydrocephalus. As a child he was a client of the CDRP and he has been volunteering his time with the program all of his adult life.

“The CDRP helped me learn about my disability and got me out into the community doing stuff like this with other kids with disabilities,” said Chaz. “Seeing these kids work out makes me feel good because I was in their position years ago and I turned to sledge hockey, which has become a huge part of my life.”

The Y Fit 4 U program is part of a broader partnership between HHS, the YMCA and McMaster University, called Live Well. It is a community model of health care that is based on a chronic disease self-management framework. While Y Fit 4 U is still in its pilot stage, a new session begins in January and is already full. The program is free, but the children must have a YMCA membership to participate.

“We've had really positive responses from the kids,” said Lindsay Bray, the other MCH physiotherapist who helped to develop the Y Fit 4 U program. “The kids have huge smiles and are excited to be at the YMCA, where they feel like they belong.”

And, according to Caleigh Farquhar, health and wellness coordinator at the YMCA, they do belong. “For the YMCA members, it's great to have that integration and many have said that it's inspirational to work out beside these kids who have to work through so much more.”

The Y Fit 4 U participants feel so accepted that some have even started going to the YMCA on days when they don't have the Y Fit 4 U program.

"Integrating children with disabilities into the community and giving them the confidence to continue with it is so important," said Robin Halls, clinical leader of MCH's Developmental Pediatrics and Rehabilitation Programme. "It's often difficult for children with disabilities to exercise, but showing them adaptations that suit their needs gives them the chance to be active."



HHS physiotherapist Ginny Pearce (right) and Y Fit 4 U volunteer Tim Chung (middle), assist Kevin Ambridge, 16, with his exercises. Kevin had the right side of his brain removed when he was a baby and has been doing physiotherapy since he was 6 months old. The Y Fit 4 U program gives him the opportunity to do his exercises in a community setting, using different equipment than he usually uses at the CDRP gym at Chedoke.