

Camp promotes essential bond between sports and mental health

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Playing sports in middle and high school can be a gateway.

A doorway to friendships, improved physical health, and if one is good enough, eventual scholarships and financial rewards.

During July, the YMCA of the Twin Tiers brought back its 21st Century Sports Camp, a completely free, four-week program at Floyd C. Fretz Middle School for students in grades 6-12, to provide kids with an opportunity to gain all those benefits sports have to offer.

But in 2022, the camp introduced a valuable element that the times have called for, an emphasis on mental health.

The programming began July 6 and takes place at Fretz field from 11:30-3 p.m. The camp runs three to five days a week and ends July 28.

Thanks to the state-funded



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During the 21st Century Sports Camp, Chelsea Smith, a counselor in the Focus Room at BAHS, did a one-hour session talking about emotions and the importance of maintaining mental health. The camp has attempted to put a greater emphasis on mental health during the four weeks of programming in relation to sports.

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21st Century Community Learning Center Grant Program and the YMCA, the camp has been provided completely free of charge with lunches and transportation included for all participants.

In addition, all students who register & attend two or more weeks of camp will receive a free YMCA membership for July. Twenty-three students have registered with an average of 11-12 attending each day.

Each of the four weeks has a different activity-based theme, including "Kick-off Kickball & Baseball" week, "Olympic Yard Games" week, "Football & Cheer" week and "Quidditch Cup" week. The camp also includes trips to Pitt-Bradford, Allegany State Park, tours of local business and the Bradford YMCA.

But for July 12-13, the camp took a turn towards a more serious note, inviting guest speakers from the Guidance Center at Bradford Area High School and Beacon Light Behavioral Health to talk about the importance of and skills to improve mental health.

Since local schools and the YMCA returned to full-time following the pandemic, camp supervisor Georgie Auteri and her staff have noticed an increase in mental health troubles and regressed social abilities among students.

"Everything is free, and everyone gets a goodie bag with a water bottle for coming, which is great," Auteri said. "But this year we're focusing hard on mental health because we have all seen in our age groups over the past two years that a return to normalcy can be difficult, and that we need to be reteaching them a lot of stuff."

The 21st Century Camp decided to improve the gaps in mental health education involving mental health in its curriculum. Sports, to the camp, appeared as the most flexible and easiest activity to center their mental health-related activities around, while also drawing kids in with the athletic pursuits.

"Using sports as the primary activity and then involving mental health within it gets a lot of the kids wanting to come," Auteri said.

For teen and pre-teen-aged kids, sports

can often be their first run-in with recognizable emotions. As players on a field, ice or court, they can feel and acknowledge anger when losing, joy after a win and jealousy after teammate success.

Auteri and her team use the lower-stakes sports games during the camp to spark emotional responses. They then demonstrate and teach students how to deal with emotions and mental health later in life.

"These are kids of all age groups that are still learning, and sports is a good place to start to learn," Auteri said. "You realize you can't hit someone if you are losing. You're learning how to control all of those emotions, especially middle school age, where there's a whole bundle of emotions."

Not wanting to solely rely on camp supervisor and natural sports-related emotional responses, on Tuesday, the camp got its first visitor and expert in the mental health field, Chelsea Smith.

A counselor in the Focus Room at BAHS, Smith spends her days working in 20-30 minute sessions with students having a challenging time concentrating on tasks in the classroom. Smith provides students with options and counseling that help improve their skills and get them back to a healthy learning state.

During her first day with the camp, Smith did a one-hour session following lunch talking about emotions and the importance of maintaining mental health.

"I know a lot of kids when they first get referred to even the focus room, they're like, 'I don't need to be here, I don't have mental health prob-

lems,' but it's not really about that," Smith said. "It's about taking care of yourself and learning how to do that in a healthy way, and that is what I am trying to do here at the camp."

Smith ran through three activities and — in simplified terms — asked each student to express what emotions they felt during and outside of playing sports. She then taught coping skills that could guide the students back to their emotional center, their "window of tolerance," as Smith called it.

"I think sports and mental health are very closely related," Smith said. "You're talking about teamwork. You're talking about communicating with other people. You're feeling a lot of feelings and competitiveness in sports."

"Some children are not going to perform as well as others. You have to be able to deal with those emotions and those feelings. So, I think it's really important to have great skills to help."

The camp features a wide range of students, but has found the lessons it teaches about mental health span all age groups, and they plan to continue promoting the curricula.

"In ninth grade or even in the eleventh grade, you are still trying to understand your emotions," Auteri said. "And this is important for you, as you get older, to get an understanding of what you can do to better understand your emotions."

A speaker from Beacon Light Behavioral Health is scheduled to speak Wednesday on a similar topic. Smith plans to return next July 19 for another session.



Era photo by John Pullano

A counselor in the Focus Room at BAHS, Chelsea Smith talks to students in grades 6-12 about the importance of mental health and understanding their emotions in relation to sports.