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Now out and about: Campbell River's Summerside Express, Rec and Read kids camps

Thanks to funding from partner organizations, the City's summer day camp program for children with special needs will be busy around town.

"If you see 12 people wearing blue shirts out and about with kids all over Campbell River, chances are these are City of Campbell River instructors leading modified versions of our Summerside Express and Rec and Read programs for some of the more vulnerable children in our community," says Michele Sirett, acting manager of the City's recreation and culture department.

Due to losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the City reduced many summer recreation services to help balance the budget. Thanks to a collaboration with Ministry for Children and Family Development and School District 72, funding is available for the Recreation Department to support scaled-back summer programs for children and youth selected by these agencies.

Both programs are delivered following the guidance of the British Columbia Recreation and Parks Recreation Association, BC Restart Plan and Provincial Health Orders.

In keeping with advice from the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC), the City's programs encourage physical distancing, but do not enforce it among children. The BCCDC acknowledges: *"staying two metres apart is not always feasible and is not expected in child care settings, where the risk of COVID-19 transmission is low. Encourage children to avoid direct physical contact. This is more important than keeping two metres apart."*

"We recognize that play is vital for children. City programs encourage physical distancing, but do not require it, so that children can use playground equipment, go on field trips, such as the beach and play a variety of interactive games," Sirett says. *"To reduce the risks related to COVID-19, most activities take place outdoors. Also, we'll be going out in smaller groups than usual and doing daily health checks. We will also emphasize hygiene and provide for handwashing as children begin and end their days in our programs."*

She adds, "Families with children who have special needs are experiencing unique struggles in the COVID-19 environment and have expressed gratitude that we're finding creative ways to support them and keep everyone active and safe."

Combined, these programs offer up to six weeks of summer programming for as many as 80 children.

These programs provide respite for the families and help build community connections, independence and life skills for the children. During a program assessment last year, families reported feeling more supported, less stressed, and part of the community – and that their children felt appreciated and accepted by participating.

"Through Summerside Express, children with special needs have a unique opportunity to socialize together, to play and to shine," Sirett says.

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Media contact: Michele Sirett, Acting Recreation Manager

250-286-1161