

**ROTORUA DAILY POST**

# Rotorua schools tackling virtual adventure for children to learn healthy habits


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Otonga Primary School pupils are all smiles with their pedometers. Photo / Supplied

Many local children are taking on a virtual adventure that not only helps them explore the world, but also learn healthy habits for life.

There have been 22,000 Kiwi kids, including 3381 from 122 school classes across the Bay of Plenty, join forces with celebrity heroes to participate in the 2022 Zespri Young and Healthy Virtual Experience.

This health and wellbeing programme started on October 20 and is taking Kiwi tamariki on a virtual trip around the globe, instilling healthy habits along the way.

These healthy habits include moving their bodies, eating extra fruit and vegetables, drinking more water, getting a good night's sleep and reducing leisure time spent on screens.

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Classes taking part in the Virtual Adventure work as a team to travel across the world.

Along the way they are met by their sporting heroes and ASICS ambassadors who show them around and share interesting facts about local history and geography, as well as some of their pro health and wellbeing tips.

Sportspeople that feature in the programme include Ardie Savea, Ameliaranne Ekenasio, Kane Williamson and Samantha Charlton.

Otonga Road Primary School is one of the Rotorua schools taking part.

Assistant principal Amy Garrood says a programme like this is great for the tamariki because it encourages them to keep fit - "everyone is trying to beat their target and set a challenging goal, increasing the number of steps we take each day".

She says they are really enjoying it, and that it is fun to have a goal to try to reach. Sometimes the children have competitions with their friends which is fun too.

"Kids always like a challenge and it is interesting to see how many steps we can get.

"This data we enter onto the websites. We can then travel around the world. As we travel we learn things about that country.

"It is a class team-building activity, so we all encourage each other to do the best we can."

Amy says, "It is interesting to see the leaderboard and what other schools are doing."

"Before we did this programme I had never really thought about how many steps I do each day. This is something we will continue with as keeping fit is important to us."

Mokoia Intermediate teacher Toni Bocock says pupils from their school took part last year too.

She says it is great how the children can watch their avatars with sportspeople and learn about the world at the same time.

"They are enjoying it and it is keeping them motivated, and I think more aware of their healthy eating, getting as many steps as they can in a day and hopefully less screen time."

"It's fun to compare and they give each other tips."



Mokoia Intermediate pupils ready to tackle the 2022 Zespri Young and Healthy Virtual Experience with their free pedometers. Photo / Supplied

Kim Harvey, founder of the Young and Healthy Charitable Trust and Virtual Adventure, is delighted to have the adventure running for the fifth year.

"We've now had over 120,000 kids through the programme, and each year we see incredible results with teachers, parents and the kids themselves telling us they have more energy, can focus better in class and feel better, which is all the more important as we head to the busy end-of-year sprint."

The Virtual Adventure was created with the knowledge that healthy habits formed early set a child up for a lifetime of improved physical and mental wellbeing.

Kim says this is something that has become even more important as kids have become used to long stints schooling from home over the past few years.

Participation in the Virtual Adventure is free thanks to the support of partners like Zespri and ASICS, with The Young and Healthy Trust ensuring teachers in participating schools have the resources and support they need to encourage kids to succeed.

"The programme has been perfected for the digital generation with each child designing a unique avatar which they'll see interacting with their classmates and the sports stars at every stop."

"Better still, every real-world healthy choice – like moving their body, eating a piece of fruit or drinking water - comes with the instant reward of digital points to add to their class total. Over a five-week period, these actions start to become ingrained so the likelihood of continuing them is much greater than from a one-off lesson," says Kim.

The 2022 Zespri Young and Healthy Virtual Adventure runs until November 24.

**Rotorua schools taking part**

- Galatea School
- Horohoro School
- Mokoia Intermediate
- Murupara Area School
- Otonga Road School
- St Mary's Catholic School
- Waikite Valley School
- Western Heights Primary School