



Steve Rowe of Aerobic Table Tennis leads a session for young players. The sessions have been joined by athletes in Nunavik (Northern Quebec), which shows the power that community can have, writes columnist Thorsten Gohl. Photo courtesy of Thorsten Gohl

# The power of showing up: A tribute to community and connection

I wanted to share a very nice experience that has resonated with me over the years, and the most recent one truly stands out.

Table Tennis North is hosting virtual sessions on Aerobic Table Tennis, a fun activity that keeps youth active, teaches them about the sport, and incorporates physical workouts all to the beat of music. While these sessions are primarily for our Team NT athletes, we've opened them up to participants from coast to coast to coast. This week, we were thrilled to welcome Team Nunavik (Northern Quebec) to our sessions.

As we all know, hosting events and finding participants in small communities can



## GUEST COMMENT

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be quite challenging. The same issues we face in the NWT are mirrored in Nunavik. Yet seeing participants join us is nothing short of wonderful. It's a reminder of how we can bring the circumpolar world closer together. What fills me with gratitude is the commitment of individuals who show up to create opportunities for youth participation. We may not know the personal circumstances of each athlete, but we do know that a dedicated person named Khan is opening up the school gym for the Nunavik athletes on a Saturday morning.

Despite snowstorms, tough circumstances, or the everyday stresses they face, these athletes are well taken care of. Witnessing them seize the opportunity to participate makes

everything worthwhile. As my friend Steve Rowe says, #thatswhy.

Adding to this inspiring story, our national team athletes are facilitating these sessions. We are fortunate to have Joyce Xu from Ontario and Ivy Liao from British Columbia, who create a wonderful atmosphere for our participants. It's a win-win situation: these national team athletes empower our youth, while the youth, in turn, forge meaningful connections with them.

The essence of my message is simple, and if you're still reading, you likely understand where I'm going with this. We need you, and others, to open up those gyms, halls, and rinks. Turn on the lights during a snowstorm, cook some breakfast, but most importantly, just show up. If we all take a few minutes out of our busy lives and responsibilities to give an hour here or there, we can collectively make this world a better place.

If you're considering this right now, I assure you that many others are thinking the same way. I understand that it's not easy; there are obstacles. But just like taking that first step on your Walk to Tuk or heading to the territorial snowball championships team practice, it all begins with that initial move. And yes, that includes those dusty, neglected table tennis tables in the corner. Reach out to your youth centre, your recreation coordinator, or your local school, and see what you can do. Even better, bring a family member or a friend along and do it together.

It's all about showing up and taking that first step. Trust me - many good things will follow. Let's come together to create opportunities for our youth and strengthen our communities. Together, we can make a difference. Each of us has the power to make a difference and when we unite our efforts, we can inspire the next generation to reach their full potential.

# Focus on Parenting: Your baby's brain

When a new baby is born, everyone is excited. The parents are proud and even grandparents are quick to tell everyone about this new special addition to the family.

During these early days there isn't a lot of thought to the baby's brain. But as the new little one continues to grow, everyone is excited about her progress. Everyone is sure the baby is very smart. Everyone has a lot to learn.

Research on the brains of babies continues to teach us much. We know now that her brain is about one-fourth the size of the brain she will have as an adult. We also know that her brain cells are waiting to still be connected. Using them is what connects them and, most importantly, if they aren't used, they disappear. These facts about the brain are just from one scientific breakthrough that has changed what we know about the importance of the early years of a child's life. There are many more.

We also know the brain never stops changing throughout a person's life. The most intense period of growth of the brain is during the first three years of a child's life. Even at age three, the child's brain is twice as active as an adult's brain. (Just a note: Her brain will even still be changing when she is a teenager.)

The child's brain develops based on her genetics and her life experience. The quality of her relationships and experiences in the first years has a deep and lasting impact on how the brain gets "wired" and moves on. Even in these first years you are making a difference that sets the foundation for her development in every aspect of life. This is one more important way you are your child's first teacher.

Brain development and behaviour are bound together. They continually influence each other. Each brain can develop in many ways depending on genetics, experience, relationships, health, and nutrition. This means that what you do as her parent in these early days of her life are influencing her future.

The importance of what you do as a parent begins earlier than we used to think it did. This is not a cause for anxiety. It is an opportunity to make parenting more rewarding than ever while still being one of the most exciting and joyful opportunities a parent will ever have. You are in a position to make positive, long-lasting behaviours a part of her life. What you do as a parent today can make a difference in who your child becomes tomorrow.

Make sure she feels loved. Make sure she knows she is important to you. Be sure to open



The most intense period of growth of the brain is during the first three years of a child's life. Photo courtesy of Daniel Reche/Pexels

the world to her. Tell her about things around her. Let her learn about the world from you.

Read books to her even though she is a baby. Talk about the pictures in the books but even talk with her about the stop signs and the signals. Let her hear your voice and the voices of other important people in her life. Take her places and talk about the experiences to remind her of them.

You are introducing your new baby to the world. Enjoy your time together. Be open to learning about the things you will be teaching her. Be sure to include daily hugs and kisses.

—Cynthia Martin is the founder of the First Teacher program and former executive director of Parenting Matters Foundation, which published newsletters for parents, caregivers and grandparents.



Cynthia Martin