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Long Island youth soccer program aimed towards children with disabilities expands into Syosset

⌚ November 7, 2018 🚩 Wilko Martínez-Cachero 🏃 Sports 🗣 0



By Wilko Martinez-Cachero and Sara Schabe

Wearing an all-black Adidas tracksuit with an orange logo reading "Soccer Shots" over his heart and dirt-ravaged fluorescent blue cleats, coach Jose Rivera jogged onto a small makeshift soccer field in Syosset and cheered on one of his players. The kid, no older than four

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struggle with otherwise. It is difficult to quantify mood and happiness in autistic kids who are non-verbal, but there are parents who report an increase in positivity.

Soccer Shots offers three different types of programs, starting with kids who are 2 years old. 2-to-3-year olds enroll in the "Mini" program, 3-to-5-year olds participate in the "Classic" program, and 5-to-8-year olds are in the "Premier" program.

A typical practice run will have the kids learn a new skill each week. On the flipside, the Empower program will see coaches spend multiple weeks helping the kids learn the same skill.

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"You can't have your expectations so high up," Rivera said. "It's a different pace and the skills are a little more basic."

Soccer Shots enrolls about 2500 children per season across Long Island, but only about 100 in Empower. The lesser number of students in a class is part of their policies to aid autistic children.

or five years old, merely kicked a soccer ball a couple of feet ahead of him, but Rivera was ecstatic.

"It's the only class I think that's made me cry seeing their progress and how happy they are," Rivera said.

Rivera is the program director of Empower, a branch of the youth soccer program Soccer Shots, designated to teach physical and cognitive skills to kids on the spectrum. Empower is expanding from just being offered at the **Brookville Center for Children's Services** into the **Variety Child Learning Center** in Syosset. This will be Variety's first physical education program.

A small kick like the one Rivera witnessed on the field has large implications for a child with autism. It's a breakthrough and a big feat.

"It goes beyond [teaching someone how to kick a ball]," Randy Horowitz, the associate executive director of program development for **Nassau Suffolk Services for Autism**, said. "It helps with those kinds of lifelong skills that kids with autism need to learn outside of sports—everything from staying hydrated and drinking water to tying your sneakers."

Long Island soccer program expands program...



Sports such as soccer can teach kids with autism more than just athletic abilities, Horowitz explained. They are able to boost independence and physical fitness, reduce the occurrence of problematic behavior, and teach kids real world skills that they might

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"It's still growing," Alex Gallego, executive director and owner of Soccer Shots Long Island West, said.

Empower is relatively new to Long Island, having only started about two years ago. The program originated in Texas and has spread nationwide, becoming a mandate for franchises of the business headquartered in Pennsylvania. Soccer Shots is currently in partnerships with Adidas, the **U.S. Soccer Foundation**, and **U.S. Youth Soccer** among others.

The program has become an extremely successful way of reaching kids who are typically excluded from team sports.

"That look of seeing their confidence rise is great," Nancy Thorne, director of operations at the **Long Island West** location, said. "Their parents will be so excited like 'wow, they did that all on their own and I didn't even have to help them.'"

In the case that Empower kids require assistance, parents are allowed onto the fields in order to allow for a more one-on one learning experience. It is not unusual to see parents chasing their children clad in orange during a session.

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