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Valley school using stability balls to help students focus

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First grader Atticus Rogers, front left, listens to instruction Friday while using a ball seat at St. John Vianney Catholic School in Spokane Valley. (Kathy Plonka)

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If you are looking to improve the attention span and concentration of an elementary school class, perhaps introducing a bunch of large, bouncy rubber balls for the students to sit on isn't the first thing that comes to mind.

But counterintuitive as it may seem, sitting on WittFitt stability balls – which look much like Kangaroo Balls but without the handles – may help students in many ways.

That's the experience at St. John Vianney School in Spokane Valley, where students from first through eighth grade have the option of sitting on a ball.

"I find that my boys like them more than the girls," said Principal Sonia Flores-Davis.

Flores-Davis said the idea for the WittFitt balls came from fourth-grade parents a couple of years ago.

The balls come in different sizes and cost on average \$40.

Flores-Davis said parents and the parish raised about 70 percent of the total cost for the first class, and the school's PE teacher got involved in the project.

"The students get instruction in how to sit on the balls correctly," Flores-Davis said, while peeking into a classroom on Friday.

And there are rules: Gentle bouncing or rocking is OK, but kangaroo-style jumping around or soccer moves are not allowed.

"You can tell they are really working on something when there's a lot of bouncing going on," Flores-Davis said.

WittFitt was developed by elementary school teacher Lisa Witt, who used the balls in her own classrooms in Colorado and Iowa starting in 2001.

According to the company's website, she soon after did a field study that showed what she suspected: the balls allow students to move more, which in turn improved time on task, attention span and concentration. Witt launched the company in 2004, and by 2009 the balls were in use in more than 200 schools across the country, Canada and Puerto Rico.

The large balls have four little feet that prevent them from rolling off, and they are inflated just like soccer balls.

The pressure inside the ball can be adjusted to help the student sit correctly and comfortably, with feet flat on the floor and elbows and knees at 90 degree angles.

“They have to use their core muscles to sit on the ball,” Flores-Davis said. “It can be tiring for some in the beginning because it requires more strength than sitting in a chair.”

Some children learn better if they can move around a little bit, and the balls help with that process.

“Our teachers have always been really good at incorporating movement and learning,” Flores-Davis said.

Older students are more self-conscious, and that sometimes keeps them from using a ball.

“They worry too much what they look like,” Flores-Davis said.

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