



## The Great Outdoors

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Morgan O'Connor, 7, center, climbs toward the summit of a giant rock wall April 26 during an outdoor education experience at Northridge Elementary in Highlands Ranch. Descending the 25-foot climbing wall is 7-year-old Joshua Manis. The program is meant to teach children about noncompetitive outdoor activities such as rock climbing, kayaking and more.

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Eleven-year-old Grady Howe does his best to steer a bright red kayak in a portable pool April 26 at Northridge Elementary in Highlands Ranch. Students at the school were treated to the outdoor education experience put on by avid4adventure, a Boulder-based outdoor education company. In addition to kayaking, students also got to climb a rock wall, ride mountain bikes and participate in nature skits.

# Outdoor: Program introduces kids to noncompetitive activities

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Dave Secunda, the program's founder, said the program tries to introduce kids and their families to non-competitive outdoor activities they can do for the rest of their lives.

"We're looking at how to combat a sedentary childhood lifestyle; childhood obesity, drops in competitive sports and an increase in video games are all things we're trying to change," Secunda said.

More than 20 million kids register each year for youth hockey, football, baseball, soccer and other competitive sports. But the National Alliance for Sports reports that 70 percent of these kids quit playing league sports for good by the time they're 13.

"The No. 1 reason they quit is that it stopped being fun," said Michael Pfahl, executive director of the National Youth Sports Coaches Association.

And for many kids the reason why it stops being fun is because the focus shifts to winning, Pfahl said.

By eliminating team competition and positively reinforcing individual competition against nature and oneself, Secunda hopes kids will develop new interests.

"This provides a different focus on staying active. Sports become so specialized, especially when they get older," said Kent Wilmes, a parent who came after school to watch his daughters show off their new skills. "For kids who don't excel at team sports this is something they might be great at and be able to feel good about," he said.

But Avid4's Outdoor Intensive isn't just playtime. Pupils also learn material meeting Colorado's standards for reading, writing, science, physical education, language arts and geography.

"We take something teachers do in the classroom and save them an hour by doing it out here," Secunda said.

Required material for first-graders is the water cycle. Kids spent more than an hour learning about evaporation, precipitation and what makes a good river running year. After the classroom portion, conducted in or out of tent depending on the weather, the kids popped into kayaks and on to the water.

"The idea is to teach them about water and then get them out here and expose them to it first hand," said Maury Gage, a group instructor.

They also learn Leave No Trace principles - guidelines for preserving the outdoors that include "trash your trash" and "leave what you find."

Tailored by grade level, pupils spent a half-day Tuesday dipping into outdoor experiences that for many,

were brand new.

"I love the rock climbing," said 6-year-old Marissa Antoucci. "It's just like you're climbing a mountain and it's really fun. I want to do it more."

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