Small gestures with big impacts: How neighborhood connections improve community health

By Sophia Smith

Whether it is a wave to a neighbor as you take out the trash, a hello as you pass by on a walk, or a conversation at a neighborhood get-together, connecting with your neighbors is a simple step to creating a healthier, happier Yellowstone County.

Did you know a national holiday started in Montana? National Good Neighbor Day started in Lakeside, Montana in the early 1970s, and is celebrated each September by encouraging people to be good neighbors. Healthy By Design developed a Good Neighbor Toolkit to help all residents of Yellowstone County in this effort.

The Good Neighbor Toolkit is a free, all-inclusive guide to throwing neighborhood gatherings and block parties in Yellowstone County. The toolkit is designed to bring neighborhoods together to form meaningful connections, and promote strong starts for local families, all with health at the center.

The 2023 Yellowstone County Community Health Needs Assessment found that most community members feel that they have at least some impact on making their community a better place to live. The assessment also revealed that community members are looking for more social and neighborhood connections.

Neighborhood gatherings can promote safe neighborhoods, healthy eating, and physical activity. They can also connect children with caring adults, outside of their immediate family, who can serve as role models or mentors.

These gatherings can provide an avenue for neighbors to come together and get to know one another. Fostering social connection among neighbors is essential to ensuring all Yellowstone County residents feel a sense of safety and belonging in their neighborhoods.

This is especially important to families with young children. Children with a network of adult mentors outside of the home are less likely to experience Adverse Childhood Experiences, which can increase rates of toxic stress, and chronic health issues through adulthood. By increasing social interactions among neighbors, residents of Yellowstone County can help future generations of Montanans live long, healthy lives – all while enjoying fun-filled gatherings with neighbors.

The toolkit includes all the forms and templates to make your block party a success, including posters, petitions, and forms for City of Billings permits.

Tips for making your block party a success:

- Play some music: Bring instruments and encourage movement to make your event feel like a party.
- Use your resources: Encourage neighbors to bring lawn games like cornhole or spikeball, check out games from the library, or download activities from the toolkit.
- Make art: Use sidewalk chalk as a fun activity or a competition between neighbors. Consider themes like “Favorite activity” or “My friends and me”.
- Accept help: Don’t be afraid to invite help from neighbors and community members, especially for things like set up and take down.
- Involve the kids: Encourage neighbors with children to bring their whole family. Engaging in play promotes activity for everyone.
- Consider providing easily distributed fresh fruit like bananas or oranges.

The Healthy By Design Coalition of Billings Clinic, RiverStone Health and Intermountain Health St. Vincent Regional Hospital is working to make healthy living easy through neighborhood connections and developing community relationships.

Community members interested in hosting their own event can reserve a free block party toolkit from the Billings Public Library and can learn more from the Healthy By Design website, hbdyc.org.

Sophia Smith is a third year undergraduate student at the University of California-San Diego and was the student intern on behalf of the Healthy By Design Coalition. To learn more, visit Healthy By Design’s website at hbdyc.org.