Stephen Virgilio emerges from the basement of his East Williston home looking like a weekend warrior on a shopping spree. Cradled in his arms are golf clubs, pickleball rackets, a Nerf football, a kickball, pushup handles and other equipment. “Hi!” he says brightly to his 10-year-old niece, Faith Virgilio, who comes bounding into the backyard. “Ready to have some fun?”

Faith smiles and shakes her head up and down in vigorous assent as Uncle Steve arrays the sporting gear on the grass. They begin loosening up by tossing the football back and forth. Virgilio gently gives his niece, who lives in Sea Cliff, pointers. First, he shows her how to use her legs to get more oomph in her passes. “Step and throw,” he says, mimicking the overhead arc of a well-thrown forward pass. “Want to try?”

“Yes!”

Faith eagerly takes the ball and, following her uncle’s tips, uncorks a perfect spiral. “Good!” exclaims Virgilio, who, at 70 (a milestone he celebrated on Nov. 8) is old enough to be her grandfather. With the death of his younger brother, Nick — Faith’s dad — in March 2019, he has been spending more time with his niece. “We’re going to take an active role in her life,” he said.

BY JOHN HANC
Special to Newsday

Stephen Virgilio exercises with his niece Faith Virgilio in his backyard in East Williston. Virgilio is literally taking a more active role in her life.

TAKING HEALTH TO HEART
Professor dedicates his life to promoting physical fitness

See FITNESS on E30
“Active” would be the operative word here.

Virgilio has made physical activity for children — the study and teaching of it, the advocacy for more of it — his life’s work. He has a doctorate in physical education and has taught at Adelphi University since 1990.

Dr. Virgilio — as he’s known to his students — has published more than 75 papers during his academic career and conducted more than 150 presentations and workshops, mostly for K-12 physical education teachers. He is also the co-author of the Heart Smart Program, a cardiovascular health intervention program used in hundreds of schools around the country in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as lead author of the Society for Health and Physical Educators’ Active Start guidelines for young children, widely used by preschools nationwide. He is also author of several textbooks used by physical education teachers internationally.

Virgilio is teaching his last class Dec. 18, with his retirement taking effect in August 2021. And while he may be giving up teaching graduate students, he isn’t done teaching children how to be active.

As he shows with Faith, who has now moved on from throwing a football to doing pushups under his tutelage — “don’t arch your back . . . very good!” he says encouragingly. Faith’s eager participation in Uncle Steve’s backyard play session reminds us that this is generally not a hard sell to kids — even a generation growing up in front of screens.

“It’s indigenous in their makeup that children want to be active and play,” he said. “That’s how they express themselves. If that behavior is cemented in an early age, then as they get older, it’s natural for them to think about being physically active.”

“We’ve had more than a few conversations over the years about how to get young people to be active,” said Virgilio’s longtime colleague Chuck Corbin, professor emeritus at Arizona State University and a nationally recognized children’s fitness expert.

And, he emphasized, it’s not the off-derided idea of participation trophies for all, or the elimination of competitive sports in school curriculum. “There’s a place for competitive sports, and neither Steve and I would suggest they’re not important,” Corbin said.

“But physical education is not a competitive sport; it’s an educational tool, with the overarching goal of getting children active and knowing how to be active.”

What may give Virgilio added perspective in the national debate over the proper balance between competitive sports and participatory physical activities for youngsters is the fact that he himself was an outstanding athlete.

‘ALWAYS EXERCISING’

Born in Brooklyn, Virgilio moved with his family to New Hyde Park at the age of 10. Even in elementary school, he recalled, “I was always exercising, always running, doing pushups.” He played basketball and baseball at Herricks High School and was a starter on the school’s 1967-68 varsity basketball team that compiled a 16-3 record; one of the best teams in the school’s history, the ’67-’68 record is memorialized on his basement wall in a faded poster of the team’s schedule, with the mostly winning scores handwritten.

Even as he was sinking free throws for the Herricks Highlanders, though, Virgilio had a career in mind. “I thought what a wonderful thing it would be to coach,” he said, “to work with kids and help develop them.”

To that end, he pursued a career in physical education, first at University of Tampa as an undergraduate, then Adelphi for his master’s and, finally, at Florida State University for his doctorate. After an 11-year stint at University of New Orleans, he was hired at Adelphi in 1990 as a professor of physical education, in the Department of Health and Sports Sciences. He
Grandparents can help kids keep fit

The national guidelines developed by Adelphi University Professor Stephen Virgilio recommend that young children should accumulate at least 60 minutes each of structured and unstructured physical activity per day. Can grandparents help achieve these goals? Yes, said Virgilio, himself the grandfather of six. He offers these suggestions for his peers on how to help keep grandkids active:

Engage them on their level: “You can’t have a catch with a 5-year-old like you might with a high school student,” he said. “If you’re going to throw a ball around with a young child, make it a ball that’s comfortable for them, something easy to catch.” Virgilio recommends fluffy, soft yarn or Nerf-type balls. “If they hit you in the nose, they don’t hurt,” he said.

Add variety: “You have to mix it up with a younger child,” he said. “You need to change the activity.” That doesn’t require you to have a basement full of sporting goods and fitness equipment geared for kids (as Virgilio does in his East Williston home). Instead, you can just vary the activity so that after a few minutes of tossing the ball back and forth with your grandchild, he said, “you can say, ‘let’s see if we can toss the yarn ball into the waste paper basket.’”

No pressure! “Laugh a lot and don’t put any pressure on them to perform,” Virgilio recommended. “If you want to teach skills, that’s fine, just make sure you’re not putting pressure on them to perform. The process is more important than the product for children.”

Grandparents don’t have to be athletic to help grandkids appreciate the value of physical activity: “Even just walking the dog together counts,” he said. “The bond you’re establishing with your grandchild while doing that is also so important.”

— JOHN HANC

Stephen Virgilio, who has a basement full of sporting goods and exercise equipment, takes time to stay fit. He will soon retire from Adelphi University.