Students find the fun in science

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With goggles over their eyes and lab coats covering their clothes, fourth-graders at Tavelli Elementary School listened intently as a teacher explained how to take DNA samples.

"The more you swish, the more dead cells you take off, and the better DNA sample you get," said Art Campfield as he demonstrated swabbing DNA cells from the inside of their cheeks. Campfield is a professor and researcher at Colorado State University in the Food Science and Human Nutrition Department.

He and Francoise Smith, a research scientist at CSU, and nearly a dozen CSU undergraduate and graduate students visit Tavelli, Dunn and Bennett elementary schools every other week to lead projects that promote a healthy lifestyle and might spark an interest in science.

Smith and Campfield take the students to CSU on field trips, which all include activities centered on nutrition and healthy living.

The DNA workshop gave the students a chance to participate in a simplified scientific procedure to better understand how their DNA and genetics can be linked to diseases in their families.

"The main idea is to have the child actually experiment themselves," Smith said. "The DNA procedure is something scientists do throughout the world and to get them excited about science."

"We are introducing them to the genetic risk of diabetes," Campfield said. "They can see how their body works and how to prevent disease.

"Plus, we want to show them that science is fun."

Fourth-grader Cole Glaser said the interactive projects made him think more about a science career.

"I want to be a scientist," he said. "All I watch is science (on TV). There are lots of things I can do with it."

Classmate Emily Tomasini said the program gave her a new appreciation of the subject.

"It's made me like science," she said. "I never knew what was discovered, or about DNA, or all these different types of things they taught us."

As for his DNA, Glaser knew what he was looking for under the microscope.

"Lots of big, gloppy stuff that swims," he said.

The program is funded by the National Center for Research Resources, the National Institute of Health Science Education and the Community Foundation of Northern Colorado.

Tavelli Elementary School fourth-grader Molly Gesick transfers her DNA from a large tube to a small tube during a project led by Colorado State's Program Energy at the school Friday. About 100 Tavelli fourth-graders participated in the project.