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Turning Rug Rats into Gym Rats by Lynn Smith



Because his family has a tendency to put on weight, Brian Schlaff of West Los Angeles began working out last summer at the gym. A recent weekly routine started with group aerobics ("Reach! Reach! Twist, twist, twist!") followed by individual bar work and the batting of balloons on a multicolored parachute. Afterward, a trainer helped him cool down with puppets and a bye-bye song.

Ate age 1, he's the youngest member of his class at Santa Monica's My Gym. But his mother, Beth, who helped him reach and twist his little arms, thinks it doesn't hurt to start exercising early. "You hear so many studies about cardiovascular disease and the increase in childhood obesity," she said. "If you start young - and it's fun - it becomes a lifelong thing."

Children's indoor exercise programs began in the 1970s and after a brief decline have recently become popular again. In addition to established giants like San Francisco-based Gymboree, which continues to expand its 375 international play programs and retail clothing stores, smaller storefront operations are popping up with names like the Little Gym and Tumble Time.

Some adult gyms in Los Angeles have opened children's branches, and even the trendy Westside boutique Fred Segal has a children's exercise program. Featuring security wristbands and snack bars, some facilities, like Discovery Zone, have come to resemble private indoor parks.

Despite the expense - My Gym charges \$125 for an eight-week session - many parents say they prefer the indoor activity centers to old-fashioned public parks. Some say that parks have become too dangerous and that they cannot keep track of more than one child there at a time.

"A lot of twins come here," said Hillarie Dietz of Pacific Palisades, who brought her 19-month-old son, Griffin, to My Gym, which welcomes children ages 3 months to 8 years. Some parents also believe that with the right program, they can more readily provide their children with the social skills that help prepare them for later life - in preschool.

Parents today don't want their children to waste any time, said Michael K. Meyerhoff, executive director of Epicenter Inc. (Education for Parenthood Information Center), a consulting firm in Wellesly Hills, Mass. "In this day and age people feel pressure to prepare a child for school and life, to give their child a competitive edge."

Originally, he said, baby gyms were "just the idea of a few people to do something fun for babies, infants and toddlers and their parents. They started out simply and expanded very rapidly," said Meyerhoff, a consultant for Gymboree, which now has more than 300 centers worldwide.

About 10 years ago, he said, more academically oriented programs for babies became popular. But because they turned out to be too stressful for young children, parents are now returning to more simple and fun programs.

Meyerhoff, a former researcher with the Harvard Preschool Project, an extensive study of early educational development, said there's no evidence to support the popular notion that babies need to spend a lot of time in group situations to develop social skills. But his research did confirm that young children learn fundamental skills, concepts and principles through play that lay the foundation for academic skills - especially when children lead the way and parents provide esteem-building emotional accompaniment to their achievements, he said.

Most programs are careful not to claim to product little Einsteins or Schwarzeneggers. And Meyerhoff acknowledged that children without organized exercise programs won't be disadvantaged as long as parents allow children some kind of free-form supervised play - exploring, running and climbing in playgrounds or jumping on sofa cushions at home.

Neither will participants become physically advantaged, said Dr. Steven Anderson of Seattle, chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics committee on sports medicine and fitness. "It's not clearly necessary to have some structured program," he said.

Using the programs to improve later sports ability is inappropriate and futile, he said. "Some of these programs are fighting against nature," Anderson said. "Certain developmental milestones need to be reached before [kids] can do these things. Kids will walk when they're ready to walk, run when they're ready to run and throw a ball, balance and tumble when they're ready."

When parents or coaches with unrealistic expectations pressure or force children to perform or win, the effort may backfire, he said. As long as programs are limited to creating a fun environment to do activities children are ready to do anyway, there's no harm and they may indeed set a pattern for lifelong exercise, he said.

Doctors worry more about the consequences of entire childhoods spent watching TV and eating pizza; the AAP advises that all preschool children regularly engage in some form

of physical activity. If children younger than 6 attend classes, the AAP recommends that the programs devote no more than 20 minutes to structured activity and allow 30 minutes of free play.

In evaluating programs, parents can also check to see if operators understand child development, if they have policies restricting children with potentially infectious illnesses, a low trainer-student ratio and whether the children appear to be having fun. Weightlifting is not appropriate for children, physicians said.

Sometimes, those who benefit the most from the classes turn out, not surprisingly, to be the parents.

"Opportunities for young parents to socialize with each other are few and far between these days. They don't hang out on the fire escape like they did in my neighborhood," Meyerhoff said.

Patrick Drovineaud, a real estate agent from Long Beach, said he takes his 1½-year-old daughter, Nia, to the Discovery Zone in Lakewood once a week on his day off because "it gives me a chance to interact with her." The center's brightly colored and padded equipment - including tunnels, walkways, slides and rings - is build large and sturdy enough to hold his 305-pound frame so that he can crawl around with her, he said.

Several parents said they were grateful to find an outlet for their child's energy. Beth Schlaff said taht after her baby's first exercise class, he took a three-hour nap. "I said, 'Thank you [to the owner.] I should bring him here everyday.'"

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