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Burning off BABY FAT
by Theresa Agovino

NEW YORK - Lori Robinson was excited when she learned that her health club had another gym catering to children -- she thought it was an excellent idea for her two teenage daughters, who were slightly overweight.

"They are not overly involved in sports at school, so this is a good way for them to get exercise," said Mrs. Robinson of Fairview, N.C.

Her daughter, Brittany, 15, has become a fan of Cardio Kids, the gym where she takes kick boxing and step aerobic classes. Her sister, Kayla, has been sidelined by an operation, but hopes to get back to the gym, too.

"I had a weird feeling [at first] because I'd never done anything like this before," said Brittany, who has lost 15-to-20 pounds since joining the gym. "You have fun when you lose weight."

The childhood obesity epidemic combined with cuts in schools' physical education budgets have inspired commercial gyms and health clubs to start programs for those under 18. The idea appeals to youngsters, and also to parents wanting to help their children develop a healthy lifestyle or improve their chances of winning an athletic scholarship or a spot on a sports team.

The programs are a growing source of revenue for the health club industry. The number of gym members under the age of 18 rose 29 percent to 4.5 million in the five years ended in 2003, according to the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association.

My Gym Enterprises Inc., the Sherman Oaks, Calif., franchiser of My Gym Children's Fitness Center, has seen most of its growth in the past decade, said Chief Operating Officer Mike Chalovich.

The gyms have fitness programs for infants to 13-year-olds, ranging from \$110 to \$140 per child for an eight-week session.

With area locations in Columbia, Md., and in Alexandria and Burke, My Gym plans to add another 30 gyms this year, bringing the total locations worldwide to 175. The company, which earns revenue from royalties and franchise fees, expects to make \$4 million to \$5 million in sales this year, Mr. Chalovich said.

Additionally, My Gym has entered a contract with an undisclosed studio to produce fitness DVDs, books and CDs for children this year.

"The philosophy behind the program is learning through fun and giving children the idea that they can be successful in a noncompetitive environment," Mr. Chalovich said.

Health club executives say marketing to the young makes sense because hooking people on fitness early can create lifelong clients.

"We are in the membership business and we've been going about this backwards," said Lori Lowell, National Group Fitness Director for Gold's Gym International Inc. and owner of two Gold's franchises. "We should cater to young people."

Miss Lowell said all of Gold's 40 company-owned clubs and some of its 500 franchised gyms in the United States offer activities for youngsters. She is trying to develop children's programs that could be rolled out across the country.

But creating a program with nationwide appeal might be a challenge.

For example, the Gold's Gym in Bee Caves, Texas, started a tumbling and gymnastic program for children ages 3 to 7 in February that was successful, according to Tricia DeTurris, the company's group fitness director for the Austin, Texas, area. However, tumbling classes at three other locations haven't been as popular.

Miss DeTurris said Bee Caves' location, in an affluent community with a fair number of stay-at-home moms who can drive their children to classes, may account for the difference.

Timing classes isn't the only obstacle. Instructors must have the right mix of patience and energy, while classes must be tailored to children's needs. Children's yoga sessions tend to be more active and less static than those for adults, said Cheryl Jones, vice president for programs and services for Town Sports International, which owns 140 clubs in the Northeast and Washington.

"The key is to keep kids engaged," Miss Jones said. "Typically, your top adult instructor is not your top kids' instructor."

Miss Jones said 15 of her company's clubs offer activities for kids including swimming programs, soccer and various classes.

- Staff writer Marguerite Higgins contributed to this report.

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