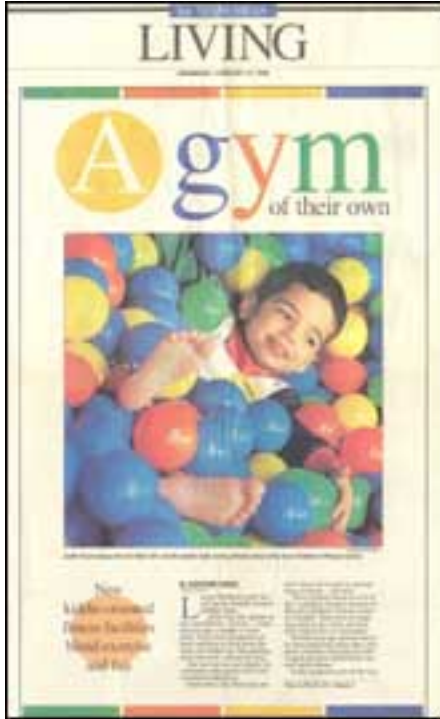


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### A Gym of Their Own by Stephanie Vozza



Lauren Matthews pulls herself up the brightly colored padded ramp.

At the top, she squeals as she considers her choices - climb down a rope, a ladder or slide down. The 2-year-old ignores all those and tries to slide down the ramp she walked up. The padding slows her down, but not for long.

She runs across the brightly colored mats, making her way to the miniature trampoline. Sound like a fun-filled play session? Sure, but Lauren is also getting a workout - kid style.

"We've hidden fitness in a lot of fun," said Kara Howell, director of My Gym Children's Fitness Center in Franklin. "Kids move to songs they hear on the radio, and they don't realize they're exercising."

Not that long ago, parents had to be more organized about their children's exercise. Boys played Little League and girls signed up for tap and ballet lessons.

Today, programs such as My Gym, which offer exercise hidden in play, are popping up everywhere.

The first My Gym Children's Fitness Center opened in 1983 in Los Angeles and was an instant hit. In 1994, with six thriving gyms, the company offered franchise opportunities. The Franklin location, which opened its doors in January, is Tennessee's only My Gym. Already, classes there are filling up quickly.

Gymboree, another local play program in The Mall at Green Hills, recently opened a second location in the CoolSprings Galleria in response to high demand.

Even family-friendly fitness centers, such as the YMCA, Westside Athletic Club and Let It Shine, are getting into the act.

While each program has its own special style, all are geared to get kids moving. And according to statistics, exercise is something children need more of.

While most adults would admit to a need for more exercise in their lives, parents should keep in mind that they aren't the only ones who could benefit from a healthier lifestyle.

"Television, computers and video games have done a lot to contribute to the sedentary nature of today's children," said Sharon Shields, professor of Health Promotion and Education at Peabody College at Vanderbilt. "Children's physical fitness levels are lower

today than they were in the 1950s. That's hard to believe when we're overwhelmed by health information and have athletic gear and equipment so readily available. Even in this so-called fitness environment, we still have embraced fitness as a value in our lives."

Exercise has all of the same benefits for children as it does for adults. "Think about when you take a nice long afternoon walk," said Shields. "You usually feel better and sleep better that night. Children receive the same benefits - and more."

Shields said programs like My Gym and Gymboree not only offer a way for your child to become more physically fit, but are important steps in a child's development.

"If you visit these facilities, they look like miniature physical therapy centers, only the colors are a lot brighter," said Shields. "Mats and balls are the same things used in rehabilitation programs designed to teach someone to walk again. For children, this equipment helps teach them motor skills, while developing good leg strength, eye-hand coordination, muscle tone and rhythm."

By refining motor skills, Shields said children will develop cardiovascular strength, flexibility, agility and balance, "the basic foundation for everything else a child will do physically. Children who do not develop these skills will have a hard time playing in sports. And if a child doesn't feel comfortable about their own body and movement, it can hinder their socialization. Think about the child who is always picked last for teams. These children might have less confidence and lower self esteem."

My Gym's Howell agrees. "The idea behind our program is to take children at various physical, emotional and intellectual levels and help them to help themselves," she said. "Fitness programs can help children develop confidence and self-esteem if combined with love, understanding and positive reinforcement. Everyone is a winner here. No one can fail as long as you try."

Kay Matthews, Lauren's mother, said she's noticed a difference in her daughter. "It offers an opportunity to play and cooperate with other children and make some new friends. Physically, I see her getting braver and stronger each time. She improves on the skills that are repeated and is more comfortable trying new things because the atmosphere is relaxed."

Shields said the key to making any fitness program work for your child is parental involvement; the family that plays together, stays together.

"Play breaks down barriers," said Shields. "Something done in a recreational setting creates a bond. If a parent engages in a physical activity, the children sense the value in it. It's important for a child to see the parent value something because it sets up a pattern for life. Physical activity shouldn't be something you do as a kid. It should be a healthy part of life." And Shields said it should become a part of your child's life at an early age. "If I can stress one thing it is that programs such as Gymboree are important in your child's development. The only drawback is that parents can only find this in a paid-for facility. It should be part of the education process for all children; it should be

found in day care centers and as part of the public school curriculum.

"The Greek philosophers wrote about the connectedness of the mind, body and spirit. Our bodies are integrated. The more physically fit and nutritionally sound your child is, the better learner he or she can be. And that's something we all can benefit from."

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