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PARENTING: Class Action by Heidi Knapp Rinella

All of those researchers out there who are becoming ever more concerned that we're raising a nation of blimpy butts ought to be heartened by places such as My Gym Children's Fitness Center and Gymboree Play & Music.

They're designed to be refuges where tiny tots and their parents can spend time together, and there's not a couch in sight. No TVs. No video games. Just space to run, time to do it and things to climb on, under, over and through.

OK, so we used to call it play. But life is different these days.

Michelle Wells brought son Austin, 2½, to My Gym after a friend recommended it. A recent morning visit was their first, and Wells said her motivation was to give Austin a chance to interact with other kids his age and pick up some of the socialization skills that will smooth the way as he slides into the school years.

Parker Debreuil brought Spencer, also 2½, for similar reasons. Since most of the Debreuil's friends work full time, Spencer doesn't get to spend time with other kids much during the day. But Debreuil also likes the fact that Spencer's getting ample opportunity to burn up some energy.

"I think kids need a certain amount of physical activity every day," she said.

Dubreuil's opinion is backed by research, including guidelines issued this month by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. The association, which is made up of fitness and physical-activity professionals, warns that being confined to strollers, playpens and similar items at length could adversely affect a small child's cognitive and physical development. The guidelines stress the importance of parental interaction and a certain amount of unrestricted physical movement for babies: 30 minutes a day of structured physical activity for toddlers and 60 minutes a day for preschoolers, and 60 minutes to several hours of unstructured physical activity for both toddlers and preschoolers.

That's not much of a problem for a child who attends either My Gym (where programs are designed for kids from 3 months to 9 years old) or Gymboree (for kids from birth through age 4).

Joyce Ruud, owner/franchisee of the Gymboree at 7995 W. Sahara Ave. (there are also Gymborees at 1550 Horizon Ridge Parkway in Henderson and at 7450 W. Cheyenne Ave.), points out that a session represents "45 minutes of uninterrupted parental interaction. That's a long time."

"You can take your child to a park and have the same equipment," Ruud acknowledged. What makes a difference is the interaction and the structured activities.

A recent morning session at My Gym, 4451 E. Sunset Road in Henderson, proved the point. The place is simply an expanded storefront tucked away in the corner of a shopping center. But inside, the walls are lined with brightly painted murals -- an extended desert scene with anthropomorphic animal characters -- and the room is filled with pint-sized padded mats, trampolines, climbing apparatus in several sizes and styles, a springboard to a horizontal bar, gym bars and rings suspended from the ceiling, a hanging trolley on a cable and a wave-shaped structure that enables kids to hone their sense of balance.

As Wells helped Austin crab-walk along the parallel bars, she explained that, as a former gymnast, she especially appreciates the pint-sized gymnastic equipment at My Gym.

Other kids found pure joy on a simple climbing structure of the type toddlers have enjoyed for years. One tousle-headed free spirit patiently made his way up a set of padded climbing blocks, up a ladderlike set of bars and down a slide into a deep padded pit filled with brightly colored plastic balls. Repeatedly.

When play period was over and it was time to return to the structured activities, Mr. Free Spirit did one of the things 2-year olds do best: He threw a tantrum. But My Gym owner/franchisee Alexa Shore and her assistant, Lori Wodka, and the other moms and kids moved on to the next activity, undaunted and apparently unhearing.

The tots were going to learn to jump on a small trampoline: one, two, three, stop. Austin went first, with his mom joining in to lend some guidance. Each child had his turn, then watched as the others did, too, Pampers peeking out of waistbands as they bounced. Wild applause accompanied each performance, with shy looks on some tiny faces, beaming pride on others.

Little hands and feet did their best and little minds took things literally. During a pull-up exercise on a trapeze suspended from a ceiling, Spencer was antsy to get back to the ball pit.

"You can go in the ball pit after you go on the rings," Dubreuil told him.

Spencer took his turn and sure enough: beeline for the ball pit. In a blink, he was buried so deep that only his eyes showed, until Dubreuil hustled him back to the activity area.

At Gymboree, the activities are continuous during the 45-minute sessions and children who don't want to get with the program are free to play at will on the periphery of the

brightly colored room.

"It has to be fun for them," Ruud said.

And she said the free-will approach allows some children who may tend to be more solitary in their pursuits to take the socialization process at their own pace.

"Sometimes, they're up on the bridges and we see them watching," she said.

As Ruud spoke, instructor Meagan Maly was leading several activities geared to the session's "down on the farm" theme, including a "hayride" on a wheeled sled and a parent-interaction game in which the kids take on the role of frogs, plopping from their parents' laps onto the mat.

A big padded ball on top of a big padded cone became an apple tree in the kids' imaginations. They climbed the steps to pick Wiffle ball "apples" from under bands on the ersatz tree. One at a time, they stiffened their tiny toes, stretched their tiny bodies and wiggled tiny fingers like tiny worms into the balls' holes.

Shelly Friedman was watching as her daughter, Ann Sussman, took part with 2-year-old granddaughter Allison Sussman. Son-in-law Mitch Sussman snapped pictures. The Sussmans, who live in Bloomington, Ill., were visiting the Friedmans for an extended stay that enabled Allison to get in some Gymboree time.

"I think it's fabulous, because our granddaughter is shy and she just dove into the activities," Friedman said. "When I was raising kids, we didn't have it."

Ruud said she makes an effort to accommodate visitors such as the Sussmans, who signed on for six weeks. Other visitors, she said, stop by during shorter stays.

"Sometimes, they'll call if they're down on the Strip and say, 'I've got to get my child into a class,'" she said.

Fees at Ruud's Gymboree run from \$104 for an eight-week session of one 45-minute session per week, to \$519 for a one-year membership of unlimited sessions. There's a \$25 enrollment fee. Music classes are also available.

Fees at My Gym are \$120 for an eight-week session of one one-hour class per week (45 minutes for children 3 to 11 months old) and one one-hour free-play session per week. There's a \$50 family membership fee.

Michael Seiff's daughter, Samantha, 2, is a regular member at Gymboree, but Seiff gets in less frequently, usually leaving it to his wife, Cathy. Seiff said that as a neurosurgeon, his hours are long, so spending time with Samantha during her waking

hours can be nearly impossible. He plans Gymboree time whenever he can, usually two or three times a month.

"If I want to spend time with her, I have to make that time," he said. "It's easier in a structured environment. I'd rather spend it doing activities where she's being stimulated."

Dubreuil said she also liked the idea that structured physical activity at such a young age could build healthier habits.

"It's like adults with a gym," she said. "Once you get started,

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