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### Latest Gyms All Child's Play by Julie Gordon



Centers let kids keep fit without the competition

Sheila Williams has watched her 2-year-old daughter Madison blossom since she began the Gymsters class at My Gym Children's Fitness Center in Fort Collins.

Madison's physical, motor and social skills are improving, she's learning how to share and her personality is evolving, Williams said.

"(Coming to My Gym) brightens her whole day," Williams said. "It sets the tone for the whole day."

My Gym, 2561 S. Shields St., and Gymboree Play & Music, 1275 S. College Ave., both opened in September and offer a noncompetitive alternative for children's recreation.

Children's fitness centers are increasing in popularity because many schools are cutting back on physical education classes, said Cory Bertisch, chief executive officer of Gym Consulting, Inc., the franchising company for My Gym. Parks are not as safe as they used to be and neighborhoods often don't provide a place to play, Bertisch said.

Playtime has become a booming business.

My Gym, founded in 1983, started with locations in Beverly Hills and Van Nuys, Calif., and has grown to 88 locations, Bertisch said. Plans call for 30 more centers in the next year.

Gymboree has about 485 sites in the United States and 22 other countries, including Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, Puerto Rico, Mexico and Indonesia. "We certainly are planning on continuing domestic and international growth," said Bob Campbell, president of Gymboree Play Programs, Inc. "Gymboree has been successful in all the cultures in which we operate."

Campbell would not say how many children are currently enrolled in Gymboree, but said "millions" have gone through its program since its inception 26 years ago.

Local Gymboree franchisee Sara Hart said she was inspired to start the business after a neighbor told her she tried to enroll her son in Gymboree, but found the closest one was in Denver.

Prior to launching her Gymboree, Hart - who has two children, Mickey, 7, and Danielle, 4 - ran a child day-care business out of her home for six years.

She earned her degree in human development and family studies with an emphasis on child development and parent education from Colorado State University.

Lee Cord, who owns My Gym with his wife Kris, said he was inspired to start the business after talking to a friend in Illinois whose daughter and son-in-law were buying a My Gym franchise. "The more she talked about it, the more it seemed like a perfect fit," he said.

Cord, who used to work for Pederson Toyota, was looking for a career change and decided a children's fitness center would be good since he loves children. He visited the My Gym in Denver, talked to the owner and was impressed with what he saw.

About 30,000 children are enrolled in My Gym at any given time, Bertisch said. He estimated 200,000 children have been through My Gym programs since they started.

Earlier this year, My Gym opened its first international location in Korea, and that could pave the way for more overseas locations in the future, Bertisch said.

In addition to its play programs, Gymboree designs, manufactures and retails a line of children's fashion apparel, fashion accessories and play products that are sold throughout North America and Europe.

Gymboree was founded in 1976 by Joan Barnes, a San Francisco mother who was looking for an outlet for parents and children to participate in play programs. The centers are paradise for children: They can play in ball pits or with a parachute, swing, slide, walk on balance beams, jump on trampolines, tumble on mats and sing songs.

The activities increase children's self-esteem. They also can help children who are overweight.

Forty percent of all children in the U.S. between the ages of five and eight are obese or inactive, according to the National Association for Sports and Physical Education, which can lead to serious health problems later in their lives.

"What you're doing (by enrolling children in a fitness center) is you're planting the seed for the rest of their lives, starting good healthy habits early on," said Ruth McBride, director of Early Childhood Laboratories' Department of Human Development and

Family Studies at Colorado State University. "The early years are learning years ... research on development says the earlier you get kids involved in activities, and a variety of activities, the better."

Parents benefit from the fitness center experience because they can meet other parents and see how their children are developing physically and emotionally.

My Gym and Gymboree offer a variety of programs according to children's ages. My Gym programs range from Tiny Tikes for 3-month to 11-month-olds to Super Tumblers for 7 to 9 year-olds. Gymboree's programs range from Gym Babies, for newborns to 6 months old to Gym Kids for 3 and 4-year olds.

Lee Kaplan, who brings her daughter Leana, 2, to My Gym, said she likes that Leana can engage in unstructured play. "The staff is very supportive of experimenting in their (the children's) style," she said. "The staff encourages to try something new, but it's never pushed."

Kaplan said Leana is taking a music class called Kinder Musik and she wanted to find something for her daughter that would complement that class.

Fitness centers are especially important in the wintertime, when it's more difficult to go to the playground, Kaplan said.

Jeanne Oliver brings her son, Jack, who is almost 2, to Gymboree. "He gets very excited when he knows it's time to go," he said.

"When he gets here, he runs right in. He loves the music, slides, balls and trampoline. He likes being around other children his age. It's stimulating at so many different levels. It's visually stimulating, physically stimulating."

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