



Issue Date: April 2005, Posted On: 5/31/2005

Gym Dandy

By Joan Tupponce

Kids need exercise now more than ever, say owners of local gyms for children

Each Tuesday when Jeanne Brooksbank tells her 17-month-old daughter, Addie, that she's going to Rompy's house, Addie squeals with delight. Rompy's House, part of the curriculum at Romp 'n' Roll, is home to Rompy the dog. The small room, where children start their classes, is decorated in Blue's Clues fashion with neon-green floors and lavender-gray walls that have been hand-painted with oversized chairs, photos and lamps.

The moment Addie gets to the gym, she scoots to the area where mom takes off her shoes and then darts toward Rompy's house. After a few minutes with Rompy and the staff, who discuss the theme for the day, the curtain on the backside of Rompy's house is pulled away and Addie and her classmates make a beeline for the gym. "Addie loves the air log in the gym, where she can sit and bounce," Brooksbank says. "She also sings songs on the air log. All of the equipment in the room is developmentally appropriate to the ages that the gym caters to."

The gym is a good fit for both Addie and her mom. "Addie gets to be with other kids and socialize," Brooksbank says. "And she knows this time is focused on her. She gets to learn about different equipment that, in turn, helps her develop her coordination skills. For me, I know this is 45 minutes that I get to focus on her. I love that mother-daughter time. I also get to socialize with the other moms. We really enjoy each other's company."

Jennifer Funk, whose 22-month-old daughter, Ali, attends the gym, agrees that these types of facilities offer benefits for both mother and child. "I'm a stay-at-home mom, and the greatest thing for me is that it serves the needs of my child — her need to learn social interaction, how to share and her need for exercise. For me as a mom, it's nice to be able to have a place to go where my kids are safe and working on their development skills. It's also nice to connect with other parents and develop play groups."

In the past year, several gyms that focus on children — such as Romp 'n' Roll, The Little Gym, River City Youth Fitness and My Gym — have popped up in the metro area. The sudden surge raises the question of why so many gyms have opened. Bob Bingham, CEO of The Little Gym International, believes there are several answers to the question. "There have been cultural changes that relate to safety and security issues," observes Bingham. "Twenty-five years ago, the world was different for a child. Parents felt comfortable about letting their kids go from house to house to play. Today too many kids are sitting in front of a video game or a computer screen. They're getting less physical activity than they used to."

These changes, he believes, lead to children who are overweight because of lack of exercise. In its November 2004 issue, the Journal of Pediatrics notes that more than 10 percent of all preschool children in the United States are overweight, up from 7 percent in 1994.

Bingham believes that parents are looking for a balance in their child's life. The Little Gym focuses on building motor skills through gymnastics. "We also focus on intellectual growth such as self-esteem and self-confidence," Bingham says. "They want to address the needs for a physical workout and start their children on a path to fitness."

This year, Bingham hopes to open nearly 50 new locations. "We're opening up at a rate of 40-plus per year in the

United States,” he says. “We’ve seen more growth in the last five years.”

Janet Delorme, program coordinator for the Teens Weight Management Program at the VCU Department of Pediatrics, agrees that children are living a different lifestyle than in previous years.

“Years ago kids would play outside when they got home from school,” she says. “Now kids are in day care or they are latchkey children because parents don’t want their kids playing outside when they are not at home or without parental supervision. The result is that kids are not getting the exercise they used to.”

Physical education programs in schools have also been streamlined. Even though she sees kids ages 11 to 18 in her program, Delorme receives lots of calls from parents with younger children, even toddlers who are overweight. “That’s why we have attention on the obesity epidemic and the resulting health effects like high cholesterol and type II diabetes,” Delorme says.

In infants and younger children, the way they move helps develop their brain. “It helps with coordinated movement,” Delorme says. “Being active has major importance. Exercise is a good bonding activity for parents with babies.”

Also a factor in the increase of kid gyms is the fact that regular gyms have little or no child-sized equipment or programs geared toward younger children. “Children feel more comfortable exercising with children,” she says.

Romp ‘n’ Roll

The minute you hear the E-I-E-I-O ring of the phone or see the blue, green, pink and purple whimsical wonderland-styled gym, it’s obvious that Romp ‘n’ Roll caters to young children. The gym’s slanted walls and odd angles could have been pulled from the pages of a Dr. Seuss story. Clouds hung from the ceiling drift about, and castles dot the landscape.

“We’ve created a stimulating environment,” remarks Michael Barnett, who owns the company with his wife, Babz. The facility offers gym and music classes to children from 3 months to 5 years old. Art classes are offered to children from age 2 through third grade.

Romp ‘n’ Roll, on West Broad Street, is locally conceived and developed. The Barnetts, who have two small children, wanted to build a place where they could take their kids. “We looked at franchises, but they are really just gymnastics,” Michael Barnett observes. “We wanted to expose children to art, music and movement. Our maximum class number is 12. We give a lot of individual attention.”

“We are our target market,” Babz Barnett adds. “As a mom, I know what I am looking for.”

Children start their class in Rompy’s Room, a small, nurturing environment. “Each class has a theme,” Michael Barnett explains. “This is where we introduce the theme. [In the gym], we use flexible vinyl-covered soft play equipment that’s very versatile.”

Toward the end of each gym class, children take part in a dance party, complete with disco ball and bubble machine. Each session ends with a lullaby.

When asked why so many gyms have popped up, Michael Barnett says that Richmond has been underserved. “Parents are busier than they have ever been. When can you spend one hour of quality time with your child? Also, there are so many new families moving in. This is a great place for moms to meet other moms. It’s great socialization for children and parents.”

Exposing children to music at a young age is also important, Babz Barnett says. “It’s like learning a language. It’s

important for them to have musical aptitude.” Art classes at the gym expose students to classic art. “We offer a different medium — from bookmaking to painting to puppets — each week,” Barnett says. Children recently studied Asian bamboo paintings. Next week it may be Vincent van Gogh or Native American crafts.

River City Gym

Bright colors lead River City Gym’s smallest students to The Otter Gym. Filled with cushioned mats and kid-friendly gym equipment, The Otter Gym caters to children as young as 18 months.

J. Fletcher Hamblen, who owns the facility with his wife, Holly, says there’s a purpose behind the otter name. He explains that otters have fun while teaching their young the lessons of life. The take-away lesson: “Working out should be fun, but make no mistake — it’s serious business.”

“Working in the gym helps them with their gross motor skills,” J. Fletcher Hamblen says. “We teach parents skills like how to spot.”

Each section of River City, located near Innsbrook, focuses on a particular sport or age group. The back of the facility is dedicated to gymnastics, a sport that Holly Hamblen, who used to be a collegiate gymnast, holds close to her heart.

The Hamblens, who have four children, ages 8 to 15, opened River City in September 2004. “Much of the reason we wanted to do this was for our four kids,” J. Fletcher Hamblen comments. “They are all very good athletes. We noticed that when they were working out and staying fit, their health was better, as [were] their grades. They also didn’t have time to get into trouble.”

The Hamblens believe that kids today are becoming sedentary and eating the wrong foods. “That’s a deadly combination,” J. Fletcher Hamblen says. “What we are trying to do is create a multiveneue, positive environment where kids can choose from programs such as karate, wrestling, dance or gymnastics. We want to teach kids that working hard and making progress is a lifetime skill.”

The two say they saw a need in the marketplace for this type of facility. “We want children to have good body awareness,” Holly Hamblen says. “It’s all about getting them acclimated with their bodies.”

Currently, River City offers recreational programs that include gymnastics, cheerleading, dance, beginner martial arts and aerobics and serves children from 18 months to 8 years old. “By the end of this year, we hope to have a competitive team for gymnastics and cheerleading,” Holly Hamblen says. “If children choose to and have the aptitude, they can move into the competitive environment.”

“We want to teach kids that fitness isn’t something that happens accidentally,” J. Fletcher Hamblen says. “One of the biggest challenges for this generation is relearning how to eat right, exercise and keep their bodies fit.”

The Little Gym

As a class of 5- and 6-year-olds gets started, moms and dads line up along the large picture windows in the lobby of The Little Gym, peering into the brightly colored gymnastic area.

At The Little Gym on Staples Mill Road, a motor-skills development program for children 4 months to 12 years old, it’s not about winning; it’s about trying. “We are noncompetitive,” explains Karen Tinker, who owns the gym with her husband. “We tell the kids, ‘You are the best because you are the best.’ ”

“A lot of parents don’t want the competitive environment,” adds Melanie Beach, program director. “We build kids from the inside out. We let them know that they can do it.”

Tinker was familiar with children's gyms before she and her husband opened their franchise. "My youngest son learned to walk in a My Gym program in Atlanta," she explains. "These types of programs are great for kids from a physical perspective."

When Tinker moved to Richmond from Atlanta, she saw a need for a program like The Little Gym. "We looked at every franchise and we thought that The Little Gym was the cream of the crop," she says. "After 28 years, the original founders are still active in the program. They developed the curriculum and the music."

Programs at The Little Gym help children integrate socially into a group. "Everything we do has a purpose," Tinker says. "We teach learning in a fun way. Everything is age-appropriate."

The school uses a three-teacher format, with students rotating from station to station — balance beam to tumbling to uneven bars and so on. In addition to movement, gymnastics and exercise, programs incorporate listening and cooperation. "We like to give the kids variety," Tinker says. "We want to provide a positive environment, to help instill confidence."

Gymnastics is the core competency at the gym, but students also learn sports skills and karate. "We teach self-defense skills, which helps self-esteem," mentions Tinker. This September, Tinker hopes to also offer dance classes.

"We love what we do," Beach says. "We want to be involved and have an impact on a child's life."