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Early to the Gym

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Gripping handlebars, Nick Piro positions his legs against a metal plate and pushes - back and forth, back and forth.

A dozen reps later, he dashes from the seated leg press to the shoulder press, the next stop on his circuit of resistance-training machines. His goal is "to get a workout, to get strong," he says, without breaking stride.

Nick, of Woolwich Township, isn't a flabby cubicle drone hitting the gym to make good on a New Year's resolution. At 6 years old, the trim first-grader and his two brothers, age 8 and 11, are regulars at the Swedesboro, Gloucester County, Fitwize 4 Kids - a growing breed of health clubs that cater exclusively to the pint-size set.

Correction: With juvenile obesity an epidemic nationwide, that would be the pint- and quart-size set.

Open since March, the club offers 6- to 15-year-olds of all shapes and sizes Curves-style circuit training, Weight Watchers-type nutrition classes, and incentive gifts (footballs, diaries) for continued attendance. Membership is \$50 a month.

"We're not just an activity, like a karate studio," said Warren Gendel, founder of the California-based Fitwize franchise, which has expanded to 15 locations in the United States and Australia since 2004 and plans to add dozens more this year. "My vision is to create a lifestyle for these kids."

First, entrepreneurs mined parental angst and struck gold peddling sophisticated goods and services - Baby Einstein videos, computer "lapware" for infants, preschool tutoring centers - to rouse super-young minds. Now the rush is on to rouse super-young bodies.

"The real buzz is childhood obesity. It's a land of opportunity... a completely new, untapped market," said business consultant Merilee A. Kern, a bodybuilder who has tapped into the trend herself with a self-published children's book, *It's Not Your Fault That You're Overweight*.

While backyards and playgrounds are free, parents say that kiddie clubs offer noncompetitive, all-weather activity. And with their mothers and fathers also going to a gym, the notion of paying to exercise seems natural to today's tightly scheduled children.

Health-club memberships for 6- to 11-year-olds reached 1.8 million nationwide in 2004, up more than a third since 1999, according to the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association.

Related fat-fighting enterprises, including kiddie fitness videos, portion-control plates, and toys that encourage movement, are also gaining ground.

The impetus is the ballooning concern over ballooning children at ever-younger ages.

More than 10 percent of American 2- to 5-year-olds and 15 percent of 6- to 11-year-olds were obese in 1999-2000, according to the most recent statistics cited by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's 44 percent more severely overweight preschoolers and 35 percent more elementary-aged children than in 1988-'94.

Like other physicians, Dallas-area pediatrician Carolyn Ashworth routinely sees overweight children. (One 5-year-old weighed 70 pounds, double the average weight for his age.) Ashworth has also seen an increase in youngsters with "adult" conditions such as Type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol, and bone and joint problems.

For the first time since the early 1900s, experts say, a generation of U.S. children is in danger of living shorter and less-healthy lives than their parents.

That prospect prompted Ashworth to write the 2005 book *Defeating the Child Obesity Epidemic*. A professor at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School, she welcomes anything that encourages activity and healthy eating, even as she bemoans a culture that creates the need for youth health clubs. "It's a sad statement," she said. "We don't have kids out there just playing and running around."

Children are getting less activity than ever. Many schools are cutting back gym classes and recess. Kids up to 6 years old average two hours of screen time - TV, computers, video games - daily, according to studies. (For older children, screen time nearly triples.) Parents fearful for their children's safety, often without reason, discourage outdoor play.

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends that toddlers to 12-year-olds get at least an hour of physical activity daily. Yet even children with schedules full of sports can spend more time on the sidelines than on the playing field.

"Our society today has changed to the point where it's easier to be overweight than to be fit," said Beth Trapani, spokeswoman for the Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Activity, a statewide coalition. "We've engineered walking out of our lifestyle. We give our kids door-to-door service everywhere."

The folks at Youth Movement Fitness in Bryn Mawr would agree. The club, which has been open since October, offers classes, trainers and a nutritionist for clients ranging from tots to teens. A family membership is \$50 a month, plus a \$95 initiation fee and charges for classes.

On a recent afternoon, 3- and 4-year-olds jumped, ran and tossed balls in a "Mini Movers" aerobics session. "You can never start too early," general manager Josh Weisman said.

Nearby, 5- to 8-year-olds warmed up on treadmills, then climbed a moving rock wall. Fourth and fifth graders balanced on oversize balls to develop core strength, as sixth graders hefted free weights with the encouragement of trainer-coaches.

"They can do it and feel like Mom and Dad," said Madeleine Weiser, one of two suburban pediatricians who started the club after seeing increasing numbers of overweight children in their practice.

Fitness is hot even for the extremely young. Companies such as athleticBaby are producing golf DVDs - soon to be joined by soccer and basketball DVDs - for viewers who can barely crawl.

"If a young child has to watch TV, better they watch an athleticBaby video that inspires them to be physically active," said Karen Foster, chief executive officer of the Texas-based company, who acknowledges that actually playing would be better still.

Other child-fitness companies focus on nutrition. Grandma's Healthy Kids Club sells 4-ounce "Yum Yum" snack bowls: Eat the contents and you'll reveal the message "Yum Yum time is... OVER."

At Fitwize in Swedesboro, children attend nutrition classes, but the real draw is the workout. Owner Karen Shannon holds a stopwatch as a dozen kids pump iron on scaled-down machines, do jumping jacks on trampolines, step to the beat of Dance Dance Revolution, and shoot hoops as music blares. Shannon offers tips - "Nicky, head straight" - and after each minute shouts, "Switch!"

At the ab-crunch machine, Chelsea Duerstock, 10, does sit-ups while tossing a weighted ball to her trainer. Several children make it clear that Mom signed them up, but Chelsea took the step herself "because I'm bigger."

"I fit into clothes I couldn't before," said the Woolwich Township fifth-grader, who lost 12 pounds in three months. "They're learning very early the importance of fitness, working out," said Lori Simmons, also of Woolwich, whose daughter, Iyana, 10, uses the club.

There are less extravagant ways to raise an active, healthy child, of course. They don't all require expensive sports equipment, either. Just go to a park, dietitian Jule Anne Henstenburg, director of La Salle University's nutrition program, tells parents. "There are so many free open spaces in Philadelphia."

Besides, as every resolution-breaking adult knows, gym membership alone rarely works. "There's got to be more," warned Trapani, of the health coalition.

Without a holistic approach to child fitness - physical activity throughout the day, healthier food at schools and on dinner tables, good parental role models - "we're not going to see lasting change."

A Menu for Child Fitness

Make weight loss and exercise a family project. And don't single out one child. Involve children in the purchase and preparation of food. Encourage your children to eat fruits and vegetables, starting as toddlers. Shoot hoops, ride bikes, or hike a nature trail. Exercise doesn't require a health-club membership. Walk it out! When you go to the mall, park as far from the door as possible. Bring gym and recess back into schools.

Persuade your child to ride a stationary bicycle while watching TV or to work up a sweat with the video game Dance Dance Revolution. Be patient. Your family didn't get overweight overnight.

SOURCE: "Defeating the Child Obesity Epidemic" (PSG Books), by Carolyn Ashworth.