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Family fitness is good for business

Long barred from health clubs, children are becoming more visible as gym owners find that providing activities for all ages boosts membership.

By **COURTNEY PERKES**
The Orange County Register

ANAHEIM - Maria Rodriguez used to skip her workout on weekends. She spent sedentary Saturdays watching her daughters play soccer and practice gymnastics.

Then she discovered her gym offered quality time drenched in sweat.

Rodriguez, 37, and her girls recently stretched into yoga poses, tossed plastic balls back and forth, and stomped and swayed around the aerobics room at **Bally Total Fitness** in Anaheim.

"I like to encourage my kids to have physical activity," said Rodriguez, whose daughters are 10, 9 and 7. "They really love it."

While youngsters traditionally



BRING THE KIDS: Bally's instructor Lynne Shapiro leads a class that features fitness activities for both adults and children.

SANG H. PARK, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

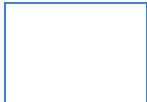
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While youngsters traditionally have been welcomed only in gym day cares, Bally hopes to gain more members by melding fitness and family. Another company, **FitWize for Kids**, will open a gym in Rancho Santa Margarita exclusively for kids 6 to 16.

The reasons come down to changing lifestyles.

Kids are growing heavier. Schools have scaled back P.E. in favor of academics. Children play inside more, whether on video games or the computer.

Additionally, working parents want to spend more of their precious free time with their kids, even squeezing in an hour at the gym.

Nationally, children make up the second-fastest growing segment of fitness-club memberships after adults over 55, according to the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association. About 4.6 million kids under 18 belong to gyms and account for 11 percent of the market.

Fitness companies - from equipment manufacturers to DVD-workout producers - are designing products just for kids.

But some caution that growing children can get hurt in gym-style workouts without proper supervision.

"They have to have appropriate training if they're going to have success and avoid injury," said Dr. Ralph Gambardella, an Anaheim orthopedic surgeon. "A 6-year-old or an 8-year-old doesn't know what's best for him in terms of how much training."

Bally's "BFit Family Fitness" class began in January as a nationwide experiment.

Company officials said the Saturday program has taken off at five clubs in Orange County and will be permanent.

"The company for years and years has always been an adult club," said Richard Kim, general manager of the Anaheim club. "We've missed some business due to not allowing children in the gym."

In a highly fragmented industry, gyms seek ways to distinguish themselves. Clubs now offer classes just for seniors. Some have valet parking. Others appeal to young, single professionals and make a point of excluding kids.

Gyms also hope to cultivate brand loyalty, not unlike a preference for Nike.

"(Kids) gravitate toward those brands once they get older and have the ability to make those purchasing decisions," said Matt Messinger, spokesman for Bally.

Pat Buchan, 30, brought his 7-year-old daughter, Katelynn, to the Bally class. Father and daughter grinned while swinging their arms like an elephant's trunk and marching around the room like a band.

"It's a way to get her out of the house and exercise," Buchan said.

Gym policies on kids

Bally Total Fitness: Seven local clubs. Must be at least 14 to work out. Saturday class for parents and kids age 6 and up.

24 Hour Fitness: 31 local clubs. Kids 12 to 15 can work out with parental supervision. Teens 16 and 17 can have own membership with parental consent.

LA Fitness: 11 local clubs. Must be 12 or older to work out with parental supervision.

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"She likes me to participate with her."

A few gyms accept only underage members.

Lourdes Alberto and her husband, John, will open FitWize in May in a Rancho Santa Margarita shopping center.

She describes the gym as "Curves for kids." Children can earn prizes for working out, like backpacks and school supplies.

Unlike gyms for adults, there are no mirrors or scales.

"It's an absolutely fun way, especially for children who are not used to doing a lot of the team-oriented sports," Alberto said.

Parents can drop their kids off for an hour of circuit training on equipment designed for smaller, still-growing bodies.

The equipment is made by **Hoist Fitness Systems** of San Diego.

"I get calls every single day from people who want to open kids fitness centers," said Bruce Kaplan, national sales manager. "It teaches them a lifestyle of fitness."

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