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WITH THE KIDS

They flip for gymnastics

Classes provide an outlet for kids with energy to burn, though parents may find the cost daunting.

By Brenda Rees, Special to The Times

Linda Potash knew she had to do something creative when her daughter Sarah, then 3, constantly used the bed as a trampoline and was forever doing headstands against walls.

"She would also line up toy trucks and cars, vault over them using a chair and land on the couch," recalls the Los Angeles mom. "I thought, 'There's got to be a safer way to do this.' "

Kids who are bouncing off walls can find the perfect outlet for their unchecked energy at one of the many local gymnastic programs around the Southland. The same types of all-ages programs that L.A. gymnast Cathy Rigby used as a springboard to the 1968 Olympics can provide children with a safe, structured way to develop muscles, coordination and determination.

About 5 million kids nationally attend a weekly gymnastic program, according to Indianapolis-based USA Gymnastics, the governing organization of the sport. An average gym will see nearly 600 students weekly for classes, practice sessions and one-on-one coaching. According to Potash--whose daughter is now 6 years old and a regular at the Los Angeles School of Gymnastics in Culver City--the sport has become an integral part of her life.

"Everyone knows her at [the gym], and she's happy to go there every time," Potash says. And there are side benefits to the times spent practicing. "She knows now that she has to work hard to achieve things. That's a great lesson to learn."

Indeed, visit any young gymnastic class and observe kids attempting a simple forward roll or a walk across a balance beam. Eyes are squinted, jaws clenched. Slow and steady movements. And then ... success! Pure joy fills their faces.

"I love her big smiles when [my daughter's] done something difficult," says Juanita Mera as she watches 3-year-old Nenequi join her classmates in a variety of relay races at Junior Gym in Van Nuys one Saturday morning. "We got her involved here because we wanted to improve her motor skills and get her physically stimulated," says Mera of Nenequi, who is small for her age. "This gets her up and going."

Gyms have been offering "Mommy and Me"-type classes for infants and toddlers as well as preschooler lessons for at least 40 years. Children get a chance to hone their pre-gymnastic skills while observing older kids and teenagers practice cartwheels on the floor, flips on the bars and swings on rings. But traditional gym environments that resemble spacious warehouses--with multiple classes going on--may be overwhelming to some youngsters. Today, new gyms specifically cater to the young set.

Created in 1983, My Gym focuses on children 1 to 7 years old, with 100 gyms around the country. In addition to teaching the basics of gymnastics, the classes involve puppet shows, songs and games. "Our goal is to have kids exiting the program happy, fit and ready for any other athletic program," says Cory Bertisch, My Gym president, adding that "gyms can promote physical along with emotional and social development for kids."

While many older kids are happy to keep gymnastics as a recreational sport, others choose to participate in competitive teams that could possibly lead them to the Olympics one day. Their numbers are small (only 2% of all gymnastic students), but for those who can put in at least four practice sessions per week at three hours per day, the rewards of being on a competitive team are great. "I like the challenges, and the people I have met at competitions are fun. I like to travel to the meets too," says 14-year-old Chelsea Higley of Long Beach, who is on the Lakewood YMCA competitive team. "It's fun to have the younger kids watch us. It's like we are little idols or something."

But plenty of kids enjoy gymnastics simply because it helps them with other sports. "Lots of boys come to our programs because they are in karate or martial arts," says Tanya Berenson of the Los Angeles School of Gymnastics. "And we see other athletes like cheerleaders, ice skaters and dancers taking gymnastics to help them."

Still, the cost of gymnastic classes can be daunting. On average, parents can expect to pay \$9 to \$12 for a weekly group gymnastic session. Private lessons range from \$35 to \$50 per hour on average, with team fees costing \$100 to \$200 per month for nine to 20 hours a week.

Alternatives to traditional gyms can be found at many local park and recreation boards, which often offer kids' gymnastic programs at a low price, though usually with less sophisticated equipment. (Most park programs also welcome students from all areas for a slightly higher fee.) Burbank Parks and Recreation, for example, offers a series of gymnastic classes for infants to youths that costs about \$30 to \$40 for an eight-week session.

Of course, whether the gym program is big or small, the parents' biggest role is as cheerleader. "Kids love to explain to their parents what they have learned and how they did it," says Loree Galimore of USA Gymnastics. "When a parent says, 'I can't wait to see your new move,' or 'Wow! Have you improved from last month!' kids are glowing, and that's what you want."

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Where to go for a little flex time

My Gym Children's Fitness Centers: Aliso Viejo/Laguna Niguel, Anaheim Hills, Beverly Hills, Encino, Huntington Beach, Newport Beach, Northridge, Pasadena, Rancho Santa Margarita, Thousand Oaks, Toluca Lake and Woodland Hills, (800) 469-4967.

Junior Gym/Lyon Gymnastic Academy: 14729 Oxnard St., Van Nuys, (818) 785-2177.

Los Angeles School of Gymnastics: 8450 Higuera St., Culver City, (310) 204-1980.

Lakewood YMCA Gymnastics: 5835 E. Carson St., Lakewood, (562) 272-4884.

City of Burbank Park and Recreation Department: Olive Park Recreational Center, 1111 W. Olive Ave., Burbank, (818) 238-5385.

City of Fountain Valley: The New Hope Academy, 17270 Newhope Street, Fountain Valley. (714) 556-8050.

City of Irvine: Baby classes at Gymboree Center, 1805 E. Dyer Road in Santa Ana; classes for children at Kid's Gym, Jeffrey and Irvine Center Drive, Irvine. (949) 724-6610.