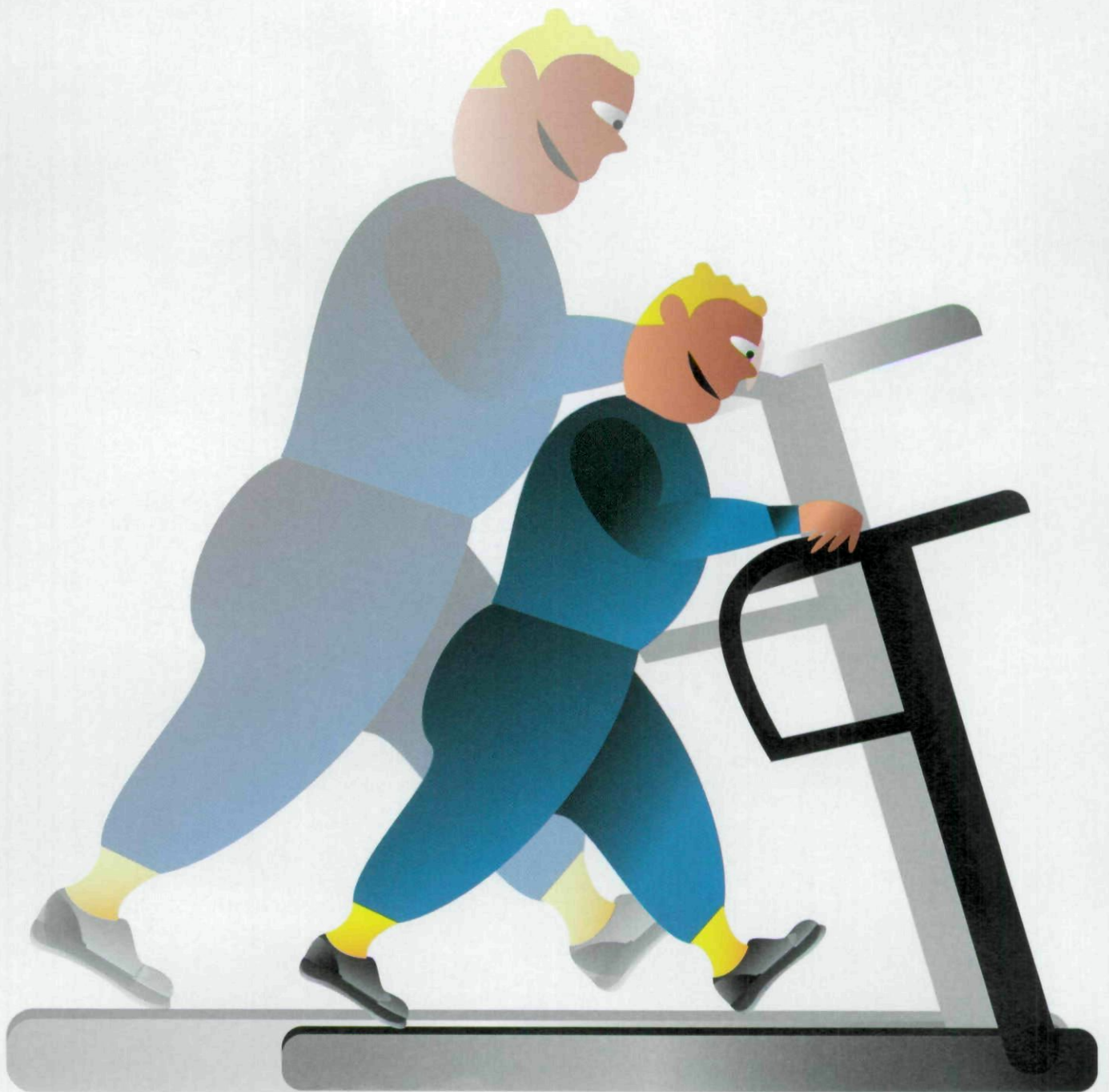


FUN Size



fitness

Gyms begin to target a new group of clients ... children.

By Heather Braswell

In 1995, Brandy Cruthird was a girl with a dream. She looked around the community where she grew up and had returned to live after college, and she noticed something missing. Like many urban communities, Cruthird's hometown of Roxbury, Mass., lacked the fitness facilities that most suburban communities enjoy. Cruthird also recognized the need for a pioneer who could help deliver her community from the effects of unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyles.

Cruthird opened the Body By Brandy fitness center in 1996, but during the next 10 years she began seeing another crisis in her community. Through her work as a physical education teacher in the local school system, she became very aware of the epidemic of childhood obesity. She also witnessed many schools cutting the physical education programs that have been a staple in most schools for years.

"No one was paying attention to the burden this is going to put on the healthcare system and the impact it's having on children's psychological development," Cruthird says. Once again, she knew that she could offer her much-needed skills to the future of her

community—the children.

Through her relationship with Blue Cross Blue Shield, which had funded a fitness DVD she created, Cruthird was able to secure partnerships with the United Way, Children's Hospital of Boston and Good Sports, Inc., a regional non-profit organization that distributes sports and fitness equipment in low-income, urban areas. These partnerships funded Body By Brandy 4 Kidz, a gym aimed at teaching school children about nutrition and exercise.

But don't let the kid focus fool you—the gym is not a playground. There are serious strength-training and cardiovascular machines, appearing to be the same as adult gym machines but in miniature.

The equipment, designed by Pro-Maxima Fitness, at Body By Brandy 4 Kidz is designed especially for children ages seven to 16. Each machine uses resistance training—rather than weight training—to help strengthen muscles and burn calories without the risk of injury. They also feature kickplates for adjusting the seats so the kids do not pinch their fingers.

Josh Kuklak, who runs Fitwize 4 Kids in Carmel, Ind., says that the equipment in his gym, made by Hoist, is also

stringently made to be safe for children's use. "You can stick your hands inside the machines when someone's using the kickplate. Even if they let go and let it slam down, there's no way it can pinch you—it's pinch-proof." He also explains that users won't get in over their heads with weight. "There's no way that a kid can get into a predicament where 'oh my gosh, it's too heavy, I have to let it go.'"

Safety is just one extra consideration for gyms that emphasize the use of strength-training and cardiovascular equipment for children. Growing bones require different considerations, as well. For this reason, the machines encourage compound movements, Kuklak says, which reduces force on any one joint. The machines don't allow for isolation exercises.

The concept has been well thought out since the initial popularity of children's gyms. British newspapers tracked the trend in the United Kingdom in 2001, saying that parents were signing children up at these facilities in high numbers as 30 percent of Britain's children were overweight at that time. There are now about 80 children's gyms in Britain.

And the United States is catching up.

The Childhood Obesity Epidemic

It has become more apparent in recent years that childhood obesity in the United States is a troubling problem. The statistics point to issues of epidemic proportion. A 2003-2004 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) estimated that 19 percent of children ages six to 11 and 17 percent of adolescents ages 12 to 19 were overweight. This dwarfs early 1970s numbers—only four percent of children ages six to 11 and six percent of children ages 12 to 19 were overweight.

According to Children's Hospital of Boston, experts believe there are three main factors that have contributed to this increase in childhood obesity—diet, activity levels and family structure.

Children today have easy access to fast food and sugar-filled beverages. Children's Hospital suggests that with every serving of soda each day, a child's chances of becoming obese increases by 1.6 percent.

Children today also spend much more time inside watching television, playing video games, or surfing the Internet than they spend outside playing. Many times the kids are eating junk food while participating in these sedentary activities, bolstered by the 10,000 food ads they see per year on average (95 percent of which are for fast food, soft drinks, candy or cereal). The addition of more school systems eliminating physical education classes only exacerbates the problem.

Fewer families cook and sit down to eat healthy meals together on a regular basis. As children and parents have more demanding schedules, parents often buy fast food on the run, contributing to poor diet. Many families no longer play outside together, hike together, ride bikes together, or participate in any other physical activities together, contributing to the activity level problem.

Being overweight is more than just carrying extra pounds. The American Obesity Association says that occurrences of Type II diabetes in children have skyrocketed in just the last 10 years, and more children are being diagnosed with hypertension and high cholesterol than ever before. Obesity in children also has orthopedic implications as growing bones and cartilage are not strong enough to bear excess weight. Perhaps more compelling than the health effects are the psychological effects obesity has on children. Many overweight children report being teased, the object of jokes, called names, and feeling that they do not fit in with their peers.

The CDC indicates that overweight children are more likely to become obese adults. If left unchecked, this epidemic will begin to affect life expectancy and will begin to tax the American health care system as it attempts to treat two generations of people—Baby Boomers and young adults—with chronic health problems.

Children's gyms are making their way into many communities nationwide. Backing the claim of popularity, *The Tennessean* newspaper reported in May that the number of people under the age of 18 joining gyms has increased 200 percent in the last 15 years nationwide.

Kuklak, who opened his branch in September, says that kids are interested

because it gives them an extra option. He says it is important to offer children activity choices to keep them interested. "General play is great and I encourage that," he explains, "And there are a lot of kids that just may not be good at a particular sport so they don't get the exercise that they need. Going to the gym, whether they're doing cardio or strength training, is a great source of

getting rid of energy in a constructive way rather than sitting in front of a Nintendo and pushing buttons with their thumbs."

John Rutigliano agrees that activity is best off the television screen. He's the chief operating officer at ProMaxima. Rutigliano believes that youth activities are less accessible because they now revolve around more organized sports and playing fields are often surrounded by fences with locked gates.

"We have to encourage them to develop better habits as children by sending them to after-school programs at fitness centers," Rutigliano says. Rutigliano, who also holds a master's degree in exercise science, feels that being healthy increases children's confidence and self-respect, and "Just because you're not an athlete doesn't mean you can't be healthy." Like Cru-third, Rutigliano believes in the mission of helping kids create good habits that



Online registration system FREE for Parks and Recreation.

No catch. Seriously.

Sign up today at <http://ParksandRec.EventQuick.com>
Questions? (Toll-free) 888-648-4462, eqinfo@eventquick.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION CIRCLE READER SERVICE NUMBER 16

The Tennessean newspaper reported in May that the number of people under the age of 18 joining gyms has increased 200 percent in the last 15 years nationwide.



HEATHER BRADSWELL

Fitness equipment at Body By Brady 4 Kidz is specially sized to its smaller users' growing bodies.

will carry on into adulthood.

The City of Anaheim, Calif., is under the same mission, educating its youth while it provides a venue for working out. The city opened the Youth Fitness Zone in its Downtown Youth Center in 2005, complete with a set of kid-sized Hoist strength-training machines.

Lynn Smith, with the city of Anaheim's Community Services department says that it was important that they city be proactive in opening the Zone. "We felt that our organization would take a stand in helping our young people improve their health through increased physical activity and healthy eating," she says.

The Zone, open to children age six to 17, is supervised by a trainer during working hours. The center pairs its strength training with educational sessions about obesity, nutrition and daily workout routines.

Cruthird, too, knows all about making the strength training experience interactive. She was determined to make the concept of children's fitness work at her gym by integrating fitness into the kids' lifestyles through technol-

ogy and creative, fun programming. She secured donations of Sony PlayStation Game Bikes, which allow the children to play video games as they pedal, and Dance Dance Revolution game systems, popular fixtures at children's gyms that allow users to compete against each other and build self-confidence as they exercise. Computers in a dedicated computer lab allow children to track their progress and learn about healthy eating while a trampoline, dance studio and boxing ring make exercising fun.

The fun factor fits in well with Cruthird's health philosophy, which includes three important components for helping children become healthy: movement, moderation and motivation. When asked how she motivates the children, Cruthird responds simply that she gives 125 percent. "I make the program exciting for them," she says, "I make them feel the impossible is possible. It's important to be consistent and to be a coach, a friend and a motivator."

She also knows the important role parents play in the process and says that persuading the parents to keep their kids motivated is not as difficult as

DISC GOLF ASSOCIATION

THE COMPANY THAT BROUGHT YOU **DISC GOLF**

831-722-6037

DGA
DISC GOLF ASSOCIATION

DISCGOLFASSOC.COM

CIRCLE READER SERVICE CARD NO. 12 AND SEE US AT THE NRPA CONGRESS IN BOOTH 1218



**Swimming Pool Operations
A Framework for Action,
produced by Sandy MacIntosh**

This is an educational video that is widely used in the training of swimming pool operators. It addresses many of the key chemical, physical and biological issues in the pool environment. It visually illustrates many day-to-day problems encountered by pool professionals. The program assists instructors in addressing these issues by showing specific examples that are difficult to explain verbally. \$75.00

For More Information Contact
Sharon Mannion, Aquatic Manager
smannion@nrpa.org

some think. "I remind them how important it is that the parent should be the role model and that they should set an example," she says.

Cruthird encourages parents to view this as an opportunity to bond with their children by taking a walk or playing with them outside. Many times, she says the kids actually motivate their parents to become healthier, which helps Cruthird work toward her larger goal of creating a complete healthy family environment. After all, she originally got into this business to improve the health of her whole community.

Even though the kids program just began in May, Cruthird already counts many successes, like Crystal Bonner's eight-year-old daughter, Chakara. After only two months, Bonner has witnessed a huge change Chakara, who loves going to Body By Brandy and never misses a day. "She is more active, she eats better, and she loves to work out," says Bonner.


Computers in a dedicated computer lab allow children to track their progress and learn about healthy eating while a trampoline, dance studio and boxing ring make exercising fun.

But she has also noticed another, perhaps equally important change. "She's more outgoing now," Bonner says. "She's usually very shy, but I've noticed her self-esteem has improved."

Cruthird wants all kids in her area to

have the kind of fitness opportunities that Chakara has. Cruthird is setting an example by partnering with the non-profit group Fitness in the City to offer children who are medically challenged a comprehensive fitness program twice a week at Body By Brandy 4 Kidz at no cost.

Doctors from Children's Hospital and seven other community health centers prescribe children in danger of developing what are usually thought of as "adult" health problems like high blood pressure and diabetes to participate in exercise and health education programs at Body By Brandy 4 Kidz. Every 12 weeks, the doctors receive reports on the children's progress in the program.

While Cruthird has dreams of expanding her business one day, for right now she says, "I just want kids to feel good about who they are." If there are more children like Chakara, it seems that Cruthird has already realized her goal. 

Aquatic Facility Operator Course



The AFO certification course is a training program specifically designed to meet the needs of those working in public, semi-public, and municipal pool or waterpark facilities.

The AFO program offers a unique discussion of risk management, not usually directed towards operations personnel.

The course is designed to provide information and training for both supervisory and operations personnel.

Go to www.nrpa.org to find a course in your area or contact Sharon Mannion, Aquatic Manager at smannion@nrpa.org.



"LEADING THE INDUSTRY INTO THE 21ST CENTURY"



PREMANUFACTURED GOLF CART • PEDESTRIAN • BICYCLE • 2-LANE VEHICULAR BRIDGES AND OVERPASSES, SINGLE SPANS TO 250' IN MOST OF OUR STYLES

1-800-749-7515

FOR FREE BROCHURES AND PRICING



A CONTECH COMPANY

256-845-0154 • FAX 256-845-9750

www.steadfastbridge.com

e-mail: sales@steadfastbridge.com



CIRCLE READER SERVICE CARD NO. 38

Copyright of Parks & Recreation is the property of National Recreation & Park Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.