

Pitching fitness to kids

Exercise industry markets products for tots and toddlers as way to combat childhood obesity

Sunday, April 24, 2005

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The radio was blaring and the kids on the bus were going wild. They were jumping, punching and wiggling on the floor, the bus was rocking with activity.

Not to worry. This was the FunBus, a school bus fitted out as a mobile gym, and the 4-, 5- and 6-year olds from the KinderPrep preschool in Westfield were getting their weekly workout session. At the end of a half-hour, bus manager Brianne Welsh, a 24-year old health education student at Montclair State University, opened the back of the bus and the kids zipped out on the slide.



"The slide's my favorite!" said Jack Caherty, 6, as he flew down.

FunBus is a franchise that is taking off, just one of dozens aimed at kids from tots to teens as their parents worry about the rising rates of overweight and obese children. The market has also responded with certification courses for personal trainers specializing in children, home exercise DVD's for children from well-known fitness gurus like Denise Austin, cardio classes for kids at private gyms and Y's. Even interactive video games like DDR, or Dance Dance Revolution, are promoting themselves as ways for kids to lose weight and stay in shape.

Sales of DDR units reached 1 million last year, said a spokesman for its producer, Konari. "Children's Fitness" is now a category featured at the Club Industry Conference, one of the largest annual events in the fitness industry.

Many experts applaud any efforts to entice kids to get more active, while others question whether private and sometimes expensive, programs will have any significant effect on childhood obesity rates. They call for more physical education in the schools, building safe play areas in urban spaces, and attracting the other culprit in the calorie count, the marketing and consumption of junk food.

"Given the magnitude and severity of this problem, it's a positive trend," said Cedric Bryant, chief exercise physiologist of the American Council on Exercise. "Anything we can do is welcome, but it isn't wise to treat children like adults. If you think you can take them through a weight circuit, you're being a bit naive."

To Kelly D. Brownell, a psychologist and director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight disorders, these programs are merely window dressing for a much deeper societal problems.

"I think it's a shame our environment has come to this, where one of the few ways for kids to get exercise is to have special programs made for them," he said. "Kids used to get plenty of exercise during their day, riding their bikes to and from school, taking physical education and playing outside. Will these programs help kids? It may help a small number, but it will have no overall effect on the total population. It's irrelevant from a public health perspective."

Most of the adherents of the boom in exercise programs for kids insist, however, that their classes, tapes or programs are not a cure-all but a way to increase the amount of time kids are moving around and to instill lifelong habits of exercise and health.

"There's a hole in the school system. If they're not involved in sports, the school systems are not teaching exercise for life," said Tom Williams, senior wellness director of the Somerset Hills YMCA in Basking Ridge.

While personal trainers have been available to kids for years, this is the first year the Somerset Hills facility offered a workout class for preteens, 8 to 13 years old.

"Parents are signing them up. Some of these kids are just sitting around, some are overweight, some are out of shape," said trainer Amy Margaret, who leads the class. They work on increasing aerobic capacity and developing gross motor skills, balance and agility, she said.

During the week, they also have homework" 1,500 crunches or 330 jumping jacks.

The Y is a nonprofit, but the boom is benefiting many an entrepreneur. Prices for 10-to 12-week classes run into the \$200 range, prompting criticism but those who say the market is merely exploiting the problem.

"This is only for rich kids," said critic Susan Linn, a psychologist and co-founder of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood.

Bill Parisi started his business, fitness training for young athletes, out of a van in 1990. Fresh from the Olympic trails - he was an NCAA Division 1 track and field All-American - Parisi felt there was a niche for a training program for high-end athletes who were looking to bring their game up a few notches, to qualify for a college scholarship or a berth on a professional team.

Now he owns four gyms in North Jersey that each offer Parisi's Speed School, a program he developed for athletes aged 7 to 21 increase their speed, agility and strength. In the past few years, Parisi has identified another market: kids who don't play sports and/or are out of shape whose parents are looking for a way to get them moving.

"This is coming down now into a much bigger mass market. They can lose body fat and enhance their performance. It's based on hard work, self-esteem, and we try to make it fun," he said. "Parents initially bring kids in the door, but after one or two times, they love it."

Parisi is partnering with a major manufacturer of gym equipment to sell Speed School franchises to gym owners across the country, and he says contracts are in the works.



FunBus, based in Tinton Falls, is the brainchild of a mother-daughter team. Dawn McGarrity and Kari Denton, former day care center owners who decided that the kids' fitness trend was a sure bet.



"We're pretty big into fitness, and we could see that the preschool teachers are limited in what they can do with the kids in the centers. We offer a structured fitness program for children 18 months to 7 in a carpeted, mobile gym on wheels," she said.

FunBuses are school buses stripped of seats and filled with equipment like a mini-trampoline, parallel bar and balance beam, and space for jumping, climbing and dancing to music. Since 2001, Denton said, they have sold more than a dozen franchises, half in New Jersey, and they expect to grow.

Preschool director, Lara Pallant, the co-owner of KinderPrep, said parents pay for the \$10 session as a way to get the kids out, especially in bad weather.

My Gym, a California-based franchise with 140 gyms, is adding 30 new gyms within the next year, according to the company. Alyse and Ed Rudin, co-owners of two My Gyms, in South Brunswick and a new one in Westfield, said the trend isn't definitely growing. While the original target for My Gym participants is up to age 9, the company began offering a cardio kids class for children ages 9 to 13 a few years ago.

Jon and Nicholas Karsen of Franklin Park have been taking the class at the South Brunswick My Gym for two years.

"We knew we needed to get the children into some kind of fitness program," said their mother, Jeanette. "They were laying around watching cartoons and playing Play Station and not getting enough exercise." Neither Jon, 10, nor Nicholas, 9, liked team sports, so doing an hour of exercise in a noncompetitive atmosphere was a good choice, she said. "They love it. They feel welcome, and it builds self-esteem. I've seen that Jon has gotten stronger."

"Children spend too much time on computers, videos," said Alyse Rudin, a self-described "soccer mom" of two. "They are not getting out of the home enough."

But getting out of the house might not be a barrier to exercise anymore: Exercise DVDs and videos for kids are hitting the shelves, offering kiddie versions of the aerobic, strength-building and stretching routines of their parents. There's Tae Bo and yoga, and even programs for infants and toddlers, including a Sesame Street Healthy Happy Monsters version in which Grover leads the kids in jumping 'exercises, a tie-in to the program's emphasis on health this season.

Denise Austin, the well-known fitness expert whose own DVD for kids was released earlier this year, readily acknowledges that doing routines at home won't conquer the problem of overweight kids.

"I feel this is one more option" for kids to get exercise, said Austin, a mother of two and a member of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. She hopes at-home fitness programs might help address the decline in school gym classes and the lack of activity for kids who come home from school to an empty house.

"What it comes down to is being an aware parent. Find out what the school has for the child, start to do family activities. If the kids don't like sports, look at dance or go to a Boys or Girls Club, anything to help them keep their bodies moving and instead of sitting in front of a TV or computer," she said.

Austin said her workout could also be used in physical education classes at school. The workout includes 12 minutes of aerobic exercise, as well as strengthening movements and yoga moves to enhance balance and flexibility. "It's not like going out for a 3-mile jog," she said of the DVD, which also contains a workout for families to do together.

Even interactive video games, many of which are being blamed for childhood obesity, are now being touted as weight-loss aids. DDR is being studied by exercise physiologists in several universities. A

group of children in West Virginia are participating in a pilot program using DDR workouts to help them lose weight.

Bryant, the exercise physiologist, said a good feature of games like DDR is that different levels of intensity allow players to increase their endurance. Other games mimic sports like soccer or baseball.

These programs raise questions about whether or not turning to a screen is the answer to the problem/

"Any fitness video for children is totally ridiculous. Children should be in front of the screen less." said Linn, the psychologist and author of "Consuming Kids." "Given the opportunity, young children love to run around and play actively."

Linn also dismissed exercise routines for kids as "prepackaged and rote," instead of letting kids play creatively.

More importantly however, she said, is that the whole children's fitness boom fails to target the most important cause of overweight kids: high-fat and high-calorie foods marketed to them.

"We create a problem by plopping them down in front of screens, feeding them high-fat, high-calorie junk food, and then we're going to have a video or franchises to have them exercise? We need physical education back in the schools and safe places to play.

She pointed to an example she called "phenomenally hypocritical."

"Ronald McDonald is now going into the schools to promote fitness. They had a whole big public relations splash about promoting salads and fruit in Happy Meals, and at the same time they are paying rap singers to promote Big Macs in their songs."

With the rise in children's fitness programming, it can be a workout to find the one best suited to your child. Here are some tips by fitness experts:

What's your child like?

Does he thrive on testing himself and competing against others or does that tend to discourage him?

Parisi's Speed School, for instance, measures kids' performances and awards them points, while KidFit in Fairfield and My Gyms throughout the state emphasize a noncompetitive environment.

Variety is the spice of life.

Just like adults, kids will be bored by the same routines over and over, said Tom Williams, senior wellness director at the Somerset Hills YMCA in Basking Ridge. Short, ever-changing routines work well with children. Younger children won't really care or understand that they are exercising to stay in shape, so the emphasis should be on having fun, said JoAnn Leccacorvi, the program manager and instructor at KidFit in Fairfield. "As they get older, you can explain what's happening but with kids you have to make sure it's playful. Even at home, they'll enjoy watching a Wiggles tape and moving instead of someone saying, "We're going to do 10 reps of this," she said.

What are the qualifications of the people designing and teaching the workouts?

They should have some kind of fitness background and like to work with children. Amy Margaret of the Somerset Hills Y has a certification in working with young people, while many instructors at gyms and clubs have degrees in exercise physiology.

Realize that a class once a week or doing an occasional exercise DVD or video is a good part of a fitness routine, but that it's not enough.

Fitness expert Denise Austin advises parents to exercise together as a family biking, hiking or playing athletic games. Also, exercise is wonderful, but eating a healthy diet is important, too.