

Family Affair

By Amy Florence Fischbach, contributing writer

Children's fitness facilities are also catering to parents by offering exercise programs and services for more than their young members.



At Funfit, parents are encouraged to exercise with their children, whether it's on the equipment or in fitness classes. Photo courtesy of Funfit.

A growing number of children's fitness facilities have opened to address the childhood obesity issue. However, many owners of these facilities are learning that to be profitable and retain their pint-sized members, they can't overlook the needs of parents. With kid-friendly names such as Funfit or Peekadoodle Kids Club, these facilities cater not only to the baby-toddler and grade school sets but also to busy parents leading hectic lives. Rather than sitting and waiting for their children to finish their classes, parents can squeeze in a short circuit workout, take an adult-only fitness class or exercise alongside their children at select family fitness facilities nationwide.

At movinNgroovin, a 4,500-square-foot center in Overland Park, KS, children spin the pedals on gaming bikes, shoot hoops in the youth sports court and tumble in the rainbow-colored gymnastics room during the day. On Tuesday and Wednesday nights, however, their moms work up a sweat in a cardio dance/boxing or hip-hop class in one of the center's two dance studios.

So far, about 20 women have participated in movinNgroovin's adult-only classes, which run \$40 for four classes or \$72 for eight classes, says David Katz, owner of movinNgroovin. He plans to expand his center's adult fitness offerings by adding a men-only class and a jazz dance class to the schedule.

“Our adult fitness classes are part of our selling point when people call us or come in for a tour,” says Katz, who opened his center last year and now has 110 students enrolled in classes. “They have piqued a lot of interest.”

Increasing profits and boosting retention weren't the only driving forces behind Katz's decision to shift his center's focus from child-only to family-friendly. Katz says his goal is to help everyone — from children to adults — to lead a healthy lifestyle. As the father of three children, he also understands the need for parents to have a central location for activities.

“We wanted to offer something for everyone in the family,” he says. “Our motto is ‘Any stage, any level, all under one roof.’”

Family Fitness

Although no organization has an exact figure for how many children-only fitness facilities exist, they make up a small percentage of the for-profit clubs, says Michael Scott Scudder, who operates MeetingZone, an online-based consulting and training service in Taos, NM. Defining a children's club has become more difficult because more club owners are adding adult programming to their facilities.

While some children's fitness facilities start out catering to kids and later add adult programming to increase profits and retention, the 10,000-square-foot Peekadoodle Kids Club, which opened in late January in San Francisco, started out focusing on families. Co-owners Ellen Park and Kayla Lee, both moms of young children, set aside 500 square feet and invested \$30,000 in nine pieces of circuit-training equipment for an adult-only fitness room. The former lawyer and schoolteacher considered buying four treadmills, three bikes and two ellipticals, but in the end, they decided that a circuit-training model would work best for post-natal moms easing back into exercise.

“We had to find a balance between whether we wanted another classroom for the kids or a workout room for the moms,” Park says. “One of the things I missed in my non-mom life was being able to go to yoga classes, so I wanted other parents to be able to work out.”

Park concedes that moms may need a health club apart from Peekadoodle if they want a full workout. However, adults can exercise in the circuit room as well as through the facility's fitness programming while their children participate in a fitness or enrichment class. The co-owners hired Carmen Solla, the former fitness program director for the Olympic Club in San Francisco, to design the fitness programming for the center. Peekadoodle plans to offer 32 classes in the first quarter, including family yoga classes, a Baby Boot Camp, stroller exercise programs and outdoor fitness classes for moms, Solla says.

Celia Kibler, the founder and president of Funfit Inc. — and mother of a son, daughter and three stepsons — also has mixed adults and children together in her club's fitness programs. Twenty years ago, her sister and she launched the Rockville, MD-based family fitness club, which has grown into a \$350,000 business with programming and centers in New York, Louisiana, Maryland, Virginia and Colorado.

From the beginning of the program, parents have actively participated in the fitness classes with their children, says Kibler, a certified personal trainer, yoga instructor and sports nutritionist. Parents of average height can work side-by-side with their children on the hydraulic circuit-training equipment and get their hearts pumping in their children's fitness classes, which are geared to give both kids and adults challenging workouts. Families can bring their children of all ages — infants through teenagers — to the facilities.

The idea must be working. The club has an 85 percent repeat customer rate and 4,000

participants. Some of the adults in Kibler's Maryland center's Tai Chi class have been regulars for three or four years straight.

While Funfit encourages parents to exercise with their children, other kids clubs are adding adult fitness without mixing adults and children. At the 3,200-square-foot PowerKidz Youth Fitness Center in Indianapolis, co-owner Dennis McGuire focuses on children's fitness between 3 p.m. and 9 p.m. Parents drop off their children and return an hour later to pick them up.

“We want it to be a place where kids feel like it's their place, and there are not adults around to intimidate them,” says McGuire, who is the father of two teenagers. He started the center with a personal trainer from his health club. “During the day, when the kids are in school, however, our facility is empty, so parents have been asking for some fitness classes.”

By maximizing the usage of the facility, the club has increased its profits and retention rate, McGuire says. His club charges \$20 per person per session, and the participants can pay per class or per block. Currently, about 20 women are participating in the fitness classes, and he says he plans to continue having the adults and kids exercise at different times.

At movinNgroovin, the facility takes a similar approach by offering classes late at night when all the kids have already gone home for the day. Because the center does not offer a daycare room, moms need to find alternate child care arrangements when they're taking a group fitness class. So far, however, it has not caused a lot of problems, Katz says.

“Some parents want to work out and not have their kids with them,” he says. “We promote it as a time to get away.”

The Family Dollar

The concept of a family fitness center can work anywhere — in the suburbs, urban areas or even in rural parts of the country, Kibler says. When deciding where to locate a center, however, entrepreneurs should consider the area's demographics and average household income, Scudder says. By locating a center in an affluent area, owners can cater to families with a high level of discretionary income.

Katz says that income level doesn't matter because parents often spend more money on their kids than they do on themselves, he says.

“There is a lot of competition for the family dollar,” he says. “From our experience with our kids, however, when the money gets tight, parents will sacrifice for themselves before they take it away from kids.”

In Kibler's experience, the majority of child-only clubs are expensive to join. To reach a broader market, Funfit not only owns centers in Maryland and New York but also licenses its programming and offers classes in community centers, daycares, schools and health clubs. For \$70 a month, a family can sign up for three classes. For example, a mom can take a Tai Chi class, her 3-year-old can register for a music class, and her preteen can sign up for Kung Fu.

“It's very affordable for a family,” Kibler says. “If you took classes at various places, it would cost a lot more.”

PowerKidz also tries to make the membership affordable by charging \$49.95 per month for one child and \$10 per month for every additional sibling. Fifteen miles away in an upper-income neighborhood, the 3,700-square-foot Fitwize 4 Kids in Carmel, IN, charges \$85 to \$100 a month for memberships.

In San Francisco, which has the third highest median family income in the country, Peekadoodle charges families \$2,000 for an annual membership, which covers the primary member, a spouse, an extra caregiver and children ranging from newborn to 5 years old. Access to the indoor playground and fitness room is included in the membership, but parents shell out an additional \$400 to \$500 for eight-week child-development classes.

Payback

While high-end clubs that cater to families have the possibility for a fast return on investment with proper planning, business owners often need to invest a significant amount of capital in the beginning, Scudder says. For example, Lee, Park and their investors poured about \$2 million into the launch of Peekadoodle Kidsclub.

“We're shooting for a goal of one year to cover our overhead and our expenses on a monthly basis,” Park says. “When we're going to make a profit is a question mark.”

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