

Gym N Learn

A Fitness Based Nursery School You Can Start at Your Gym.

BY PATTI KOMARA

Every gym owner wants to know how to make more money during the daytime hours. Besides preschool gymnastics classes and preschool dance classes, what other opportunities are there to maximize profit during the daytime hours? At my gym, we recently introduced a fitness based preschool program called, "Tiny Stars Gym-N-Learn." This educational program teaches young children to be healthy and happy while preparing them for kindergarten. Since its inception last year, our Gym-N-Learn program has been a smashing success with parents and kids. This article will demonstrate the benefits of a fitness based nursery school program and how to create a Gym-N-Learn program at your gym.

Creating A Program

Integrating a nursery school into your gym can be completed quickly and relatively easy. The first critical step is to develop a name for your program. The name should sufficiently convey what the program is. For example, at "Tiny Stars Gym-N-Learn," our young champions are participating in gymnastics and receiving an education. While a cute name may sound catchy, remember that this program is about education. The program is not "play time" for young children. The name you choose for your program should tell parents that you are selling a fitness-based preschool educational program.

The second step in creating a Gym-N-Learn program is to establish a qualified staff. A successful program needs at least one main teacher who has a degree in elementary education with a kindergarten endorsement or a degree in early childhood education. Additionally, at least one aide is necessary, depending upon the amount of students enrolled. Look to hire people who not only have experience working with children, but also have experience in gymnastics or dance. If every teacher can teach the education part AND the gymnastics part, then each teacher can stay with her group the entire time. If you can't find nursery school teachers who can do gymnastics, then the teachers who can teach gymnastics might need to stay in the gym for another rotation.





Hiring a qualified staff is not as daunting as it seems. Retired or disgruntled teachers are great potential staff members. Many teachers are dissatisfied with the public school system and are looking for new opportunities. The Gym-N-Learn program allows these teachers to express their creativity, letting them incorporate their passion for fitness into the classroom.

Look for teacher's aides who have experience working in a daycare environment. At the very minimum, a teacher's aide should have some experience working with young children. The ideal candidate for this position is a person who is energetic and enthusiastic. Most importantly, teacher's aides must be able to work as a team under the direction of the main teacher and you, the gym owner.

The next step in developing your fitness based preschool program is to create a curriculum. Since almost 10% of children less than 5 years old are overweight, the fitness portion of the Gym-N-Learn program is critical. Gymnastics lessons include bars, beam, and tumbling on specialized preschool gymnastics equipment, the trampoline, the Tumb-trak, and they exercise to music. The children use props to develop skills such as hand-eye coordination, foot-eye coordination, gross and fine motor skills, and rhythmic patterns that help with reading readiness. In Glenn Doman's book, *Teaching Your Baby to Read*, he says that laterality, directionality, and many gross motor skills learned in preschool gymnastics help children to read. Bits of information like this should be included in your marketing material.

During the education portion of the program, use stories and group activities to involve the children in the lessons. Use your state's education department as a resource when developing your curriculum. Kindergarten students may be tested in your state. What lessons should you include based on these tests? At the very least, children should learn their address and phone number, practice counting, identify body parts, and learn to follow simple direction. Sell this class as a "kindergarten prep" class to the parents.

Education lessons should also incorporate activities that teach children about "sometimes foods" and "always foods." Children are familiar with these terms which are regularly used on Sesame Street and other PBS programs. When the students learn a new letter, have the teachers use that letter in the context of nutrition. For example, "A is for Apple. Apples taste good and are full of vitamins!" Or, "H is for

Healthy Eating!" Also when teaching the alphabet, talk to the students about exercises and gymnastics moves that start with that letter like "bridge" for "B."

While creating your curriculum, remember to include a discipline policy. The GNL director and the gym owner should work together to create a discipline policy that comports with the policies of other classes offered at the gym. The discipline policy should be in the Parent Handbook. Review the policy with parents at the beginning of the year, and with new parents who enter the program during the year. Informing parents about the policy before any incidents will save you time and headaches in the future. Additionally, telling parents about the policy, gives them a sense that you are working together. Let the parent offer suggestions about what types of discipline work best with her child. These suggestions may be helpful to the teachers.

Gym-N-Learn is two and one half-hours long two or three days a week. We offer a three day a week morning or afternoon program on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays 8:45am-11:15 and 12-2:30pm. Additionally, we have two and one half-hour classes that meet on Tuesday and Thursday mornings and afternoons for two and half hours. The two-day-a-week program is for three-year-olds and the three-day-a-week program is for four and five year olds. All of our classes sold out last year. Last year our gym grossed approximately \$6,600.00 additional income every month from the Gym-N-Learn program.

You can easily have this successful program at your gym. If you are a little nervous of the commitment of a regular nursery school, begin by creating a fitness based nursery school class that lasts 90 minutes and meets once a week. For the first 25 minutes of class, students work on letters and numbers. The next 45 minutes are spent doing gymnastics lessons. The final 20 minutes of class, the students do an art project and listen to a story. Before saying good bye, the teacher reviews the lesson for the week. Eventually, this 90-minute program can develop into a longer program that meets several times each week.

Marketing and Advertising

Develop a mission statement for your program before beginning to advertise. For example, we describe our Gym-N-Learn program in brochures with the following paragraph:

"This class is a fitness-based learning program that can help prevent childhood obesity with nutritional information and a 45-minute gymnastics class each session. Your child will receive a well-rounded educational experience to help prepare them for school – socially, mentally, and physically."

The mission statement of your program will sell the program. All parents would like their child to receive a well-rounded education. Physical development is as important as social and mental development.

When advertising the program, use direct mailings to families with children ages 3-5 years old. Distribute fliers to students in your current classes. Advertise in the local newspapers and include tuition coupons in these advertisements. With every marketing tool, remember that timing is everything! Most preschool programs in our community begin taking enrollments in February. Thus, January is the best time for us to do much of our advertising. We have an open house in January, April, and August. Prior to the open houses, we saturate the market with advertising. Don't forget, your best potential customers are the kids already enrolled in your preschool gymnastics classes.

Continue the Gym-N-Learn program throughout the summer. Not only do these classes keep your staff busy, but they provide some extra income for your gym during the slow summer months. Summer classes also allow parents to try the program without making a year long commitment.

Your nursery school program can be created in a small area. We're using only about 500 square feet for the program at our gym. We have three groups of six students. That is a huge plus for you, too. Keep the ratios small like that and it overshadows all the local nursery schools. Many schools have a 10:1 ratio. If you have more space available, you may be able to accommodate more students.

The best reason to have a fitness-based nursery school is because you will earn more money during the day when you need it the most. The program will build a base of preschoolers whose families will love your gym and pass on the good word about your business. Become known in your community for excellence at the preschool level. Bringing in more money to your gym allows you to have your teams, buy top-notch equipment, and pay your teachers top salaries that build employee loyalty. We know keeping staff means keeping students. Having a fitness-based nursery school program is a win-win for your gym. ✕



5 Tips for Marketing A Fitness Program

Planning to add a new fitness class to your gymnastics program? We'd like to help make your gym's program successful by offering some tips for marketing your program. Because this is a new type of program for a gymnastics school, you will probably need to market a bit more heavily than normal to generate full classes. Here are some tips to consider:

1

Make contact with pediatricians in your area. If you or one of your instructors has children start with their physician. This can help get you in the door since you may already have a relationship established. Physicians are aware of the obesity problem with our children today, but aren't always sure how to approach the issue with parents. If a physician knows of good options for safe, fun, physical activity in their area it can be a great opportunity to suggest solutions to a family.

2

Talk to reporters at the local newspaper. Don't be embarrassed to pick up the phone and call. Blow your own horn! No one will know about your new class unless you tell people about it. If you are lucky enough to have a student whose parent works in public relations, you may be able to trade some classes for press releases.

3

Contact your local Mom's clubs. Mothers of preschoolers are a good place to start! Many of these moms may have older kids who would be candidates for the program. You can also try organizations that offer Mothers day out programs. Anyone willing to pass out flyers to your target audience is worth contacting.

4

Work with your school district to get information out to students before summer break. Some schools are willing to distribute flyers to families for summer activities. Find key administrators who are concerned with rising rates of obesity and ask for his or her support. Approach physical education teachers for support as well. P.E. teachers see, on a daily basis, how unfit many children are and could be champions for your program.

5

Talk to other sports groups such as soccer, swimming, baseball, volleyball, track, basketball, football, cheerleading, etc., to see if they could use a fitness class to benefit their team. A fitness class could have positive benefits for all athletes and keep them active in their off season or during season on a night off.

You are part of an exciting opportunity to make a difference in the health and wellness of children in your community. Thank you for facing this challenge head on and being an advocate for kids.