

Gymnastics Builds Brains and Bodies

By Debra Em Wilson, Reading Specialist, & Marcia Carter, Gym Owner/Coach

Smart phones became popular because they focused on the ever-evolving needs and wants of a diverse world. Smart phones were originally called converged devices because they brought multiple technologies together into one small package for one-stop shopping. Taking the lead from a multi-billion dollar industry, gym owners can create "smart gyms" that emulate the success of the smart phone.

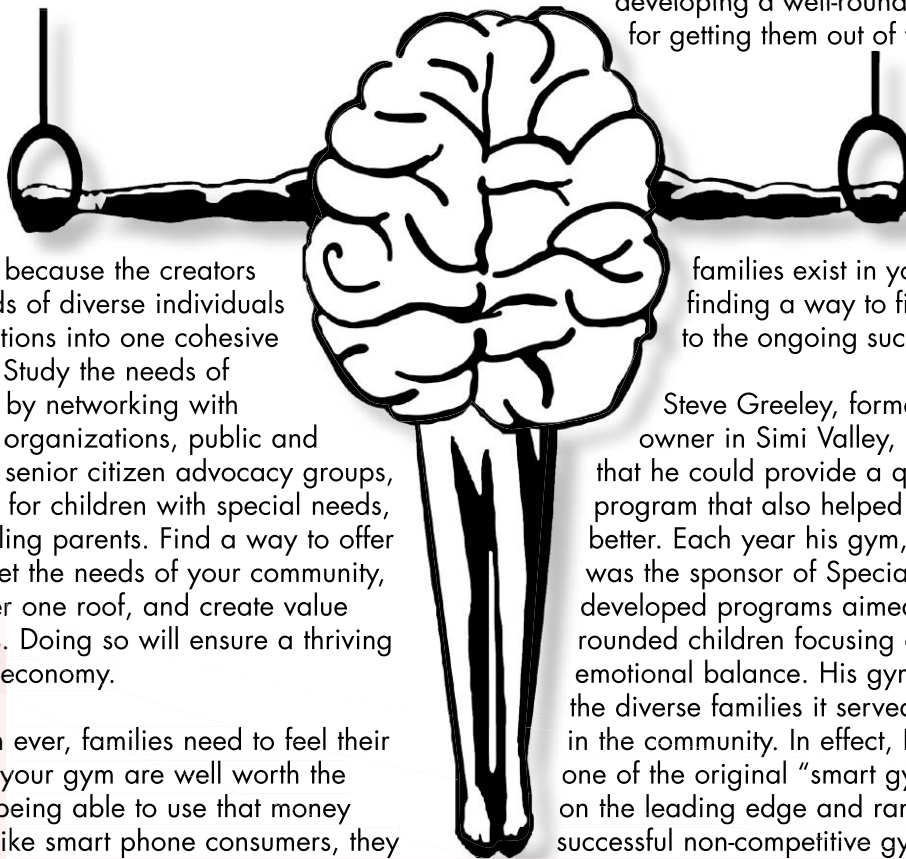
The smart phone is thriving even in this economy because the creators studied the needs of diverse individuals and put the solutions into one cohesive smart package. Study the needs of your community by networking with early childhood organizations, public and charter schools, senior citizen advocacy groups, regional centers for children with special needs, and homeschooling parents. Find a way to offer programs to meet the needs of your community, package it under one roof, and create value for your families. Doing so will ensure a thriving business in any economy.

Now, more than ever, families need to feel their dollars spent at your gym are well worth the sacrifice of not being able to use that money elsewhere. Just like smart phone consumers, they are looking for value and one-stop shopping to meet the diverse needs of their family members.

Even homes today are like smart phones with almost everything needed under one roof, including video games simulating real activities, online shopping reducing trips to the mall, and hundreds of television channels taking us anywhere we want to go.

Teaching parents the value of gymnastics for developing a well-rounded child is essential for getting them out of the house, let alone coming back to your facility once their child has taken a class for a test run. Knowing what service gap for families exist in your community and finding a way to fill that gap is critical to the ongoing success of your business.

Steve Greeley, former gymnastics center owner in Simi Valley, Calif., had the idea that he could provide a quality gymnastics program that also helped children learn better. Each year his gym, Imagymnation, was the sponsor of Special Olympics and developed programs aimed at creating well-rounded children focusing on body, mind, and emotional balance. His gym met the needs of the diverse families it served while filling a gap in the community. In effect, Imagymnation was one of the original "smart gyms." Greeley was on the leading edge and ran an extraordinarily successful non-competitive gymnastics program, while also providing much needed support for families of children with special needs.



If your gym is empty during the day, expanding your offerings to programs that build strong minds, as well as strong bodies, may help increase revenue and differentiate you from your competitors. Possible offerings include preschool foundation classes, homeschool elective courses, after-school enrichment, school-age tutoring, and senior Boomer programs. "Smart" is in. Parents want their children to be smart. Schools want their students to be smart. Aging Boomers want to remain smart. Savvy gym owners know exactly why their programs rank high in smartness factor.

Why "Smart Gyms" Raise the Smartness Factor

The more a child tumbles, climbs, creeps and crawls, the more densely wired the brain becomes for academic success. Movement is the architect of a child's brain. The two hemispheres of the brain are designed to constantly communicate with one another. The left side of the brain controls the right side of the body, and vice versa. Bilateral activities, common to all gymnastics programs, require both sides of the body to work together and separately. Coordinated movement patterns create efficiency in the brain. Efficient pathways create fluent readers who complete reading tasks with ease. For example, during reading,

the left hemisphere attends to letters and the sequence of words, while the right side of the brain focuses on comprehending what is read. Reading fluency depends on an intimate conversation between the two hemispheres of the brain— a clear signal, just like a smart phone.

Bouncing on the trampoline, tumbling down a mat, swinging from the bars – all of these activities help wire the brain and integrate the vestibular system. Located in the inner ear, the vestibular system is intricately connected with the brain. Its job is to make sense of all perceived sensory information from the environment and tell us where our bodies are in space. Like the integrative technology of a smart phone, the vestibular system integrates vision, hearing, balance, and skin sensations. If children have poor sensory processing skills, they may have a difficult time learning gymnastics skills or regulating behavior. Weaknesses observed in gymnastics classes may lead to discovering that the child is struggling in school as well.

The No Child Left Behind legislation prompts parents to seek programs that help children meet the mandated academic standards expected of today's youth. Without your assistance, parents may overlook

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Gymnastics

Brains Under Construction



Flip on the Focus

Any time a child participates in activities that require moving large muscles and the compression of joints, this is referred to as heavy work. Heavy work is a term used in the therapy world to describe the types of activities that help focus the brain. Vaulting, hanging, flipping, climbing, and leaping are examples of phenomenal heavy work opportunities for children. Focusing with ease leads to learning with ease.



Hang Ten for Handwriting

Observing children swinging on uneven bars seems as far away as one can get from observing a child trying to write a paragraph, but actually, the two require remarkably similar skills. For children to have good handwriting skills, they must have strong muscles that work together for a common cause. Mighty abs, back muscles, shoulder muscles, forearms, wrists, and fingers are essential for good writing skills. When children have poor upper body strength and weak core muscles, they have trouble sitting upright at a desk, holding a pencil, and writing legibly. Bar work strengthens all muscle groups responsible for writing with ease.



Roll Into Reading

Brain connections are made through the activation of an important system that lies deep within the inner ear. This system is called the vestibular system (ves-tib-u-lar) and is the Olympic gold winner when it comes to brain development. Working in tandem with the brain, the vestibular system integrates auditory, visual, and tactile input. Specific types of movement common to gymnastics help the vestibular system develop properly. These include the back and forth movement in swinging, the rotational movement as in twisting, and the up and over movement used for rolling.



Magnificent Moves for Math

Math is a spatial sport! The more children move in different ways, the more connections are made in the brain that improve spatial awareness. For children to be able to understand mathematical equations and geometric principles, they need good spatial skills. All gymnastics moves improve body awareness and wire the brain for math success.

your gym as a valuable resource. You can help them see the real value of gymnastics programs by linking these programs to academic benefits, which is the focus created by No Child Left Behind and standards-based education.

Duplicate this chart and hand it to every parent who enters your "smart gym." When parents are cutting corners and deciding what extracurricular activities



stay in their budgets, educating families is the key to ensuring your program remains when others may go. Dr. John Ratey calls exercise "Miracle-Gro" for the brain. Adding classes with a smart twist can also be "Miracle-Gro" for your business. See chart on page 9.

How Gym Owners Are Expanding Their Programs

Marcia Carter, director of the Feather River Recreation Activity Center and former owner of Oroville Gymnastics Learning and Sports Academy, began a program specifically designed to help children be more successful in gymnastics classes and at school. Meeting the needs of the families in her community, she offers specialized classes to build the foundational skills critical for emotional and academic success.

According to local educators, during the past four years they've noticed that the kindergarten children from Carter's preschool program achieve reading goals sooner and with more ease than ever seen before. The children from this particular program are always well-prepared for high state standards expected to be learned by kindergartners. The local educators

gave their congratulations for all Carter has done to help kindergarten students achieve these high expectations.

The Feather River Recreation Activity Center is expanding its classes to include Boomers, capitalizing on the need for more services for active seniors while bringing in increased revenue for the facility.

Dr. Nancy Bates, owner of Gym Magic Sports Center and Preschool in Las Cruces, N.M., offers classes focusing on building a solid foundation for learning. "We emphasize education and learning. The response from our staff, parents, and children has been incredibly positive."

Gym Magic created a program, titled Magical Moves (for 6 months to 3 years of age), which has led to partnerships with many early intervention groups. The response has been so positive that the early intervention groups have had to rotate families in and out of Gym Magic's program because so many families want to participate.

Look for Dr. Nancy Bates' article in next month's *Technique* magazine that explains how she began a successful tutoring program by networking with schools and integrating gymnastics with after-school reading tutoring. She'll discuss how the program was funded through federal grant money. It's a must read for all gym owners looking for ways to increase revenue and fund new programs.

For more information, visit S'cool Moves website at www.schoolmoves.com. ✖

