

Preteens finding exercise fits their lifestyle

by Jane Clifford

Kevin Spearman shakes his head when the subject of childhood obesity comes up. "It's a big problem," he says, with a sigh. Kids have to start eating more fruits and vegetables, he adds, and stop eating junk food. "Especially fast food," he says, in a very serious tone. "That's where the real problem is."

PUMPING IRON - Sydney Craven, 9, works out on a treadmill at the Cameron Family YMCA in San Diego, one of the few places with child-size exercise equipment. CNS Photo by Earnie Grafton. **KID WORKOUT** - Kevin Spearman, 10, has lost three pounds in a year and wants to play football in the same weight class as his friends. CNS Photo by Earnie Grafton. Kevin is 10. Over the past year, he has stopped eating junk, for the most part, and started exercising. It's a little after 4 on a Wednesday afternoon as he hops on one of three exercise bikes in the youth fitness center at the Cameron Family YMCA in Santee, Calif. This is the second of his three-times-a-week workouts. He finishes his warm-up and moves to a machine where he can do shoulder and chest and leg presses, biceps curls and work on the deltoid muscles of his upper back at the lat pull-down machine.

This first-of-its-kind Y youth fitness center in San Diego County is especially for children ages 7 to 12. "The plan is to do something similar at other YMCAs as funds become available to purchase the equipment," says Pattie Griffin, spokeswoman for the YMCA of San Diego County.

Other gyms in the area, like Gold's Gym, don't have child-sized equipment, says Ken Strickland, one of Gold's managers. But Gold's does allow members as young as 6 to use the gym's Keiser machines. These machines use hydraulics instead of weights and resistance is set by pushing a button. Kids can use the machines to "work out the chest, back, legs, shoulders and stomach," says Strickland, but only with adult supervision.

At most fitness clubs, 13 is the minimum age for using workout equipment. It's largely a safety issue, says Lisa Riehl, the Cameron YMCA's membership and marketing director. But kids' health was an even bigger issue to the Cameron staff.

"The former director of our wellness center was very interested in childhood obesity," Riehl recalls. So the Y

invested in a project to get more kids into the gym - in their own corner, with their own equipment. The scaled-down multi-trainer, from ProMaxima's BeeFit youth fitness line, is part of about \$20,000 in equipment in the center.

"It's been open for about a year and a half, and we get more than 100 kids a month in here," Riehl says. It's a small area, off to the side of the main workout area for adults, and is bounded by a chain-link fence.

Riehl laughs when yet another visitor does a double take at it. "We had adult exercisers over here trying to use this equipment," she explains. "So we put up the fence." That keeps adults out - and kids in; well, with the help of junior trainers Dani Lucie and April Wilkerson, who work in the youth fitness center. The two recent high school grads have been working at the Y for more than a year. They trained under the adult fitness trainers and now supervise kids in their workout area.

"We teach them proper warm-up and cool-down and how to use the weights, properly," says Lucie, 18.

Kevin's been coming here consistently for about a year. "My grandmother drops me off after school," he explains, "and my mom picks me up." Kevin heard about the Y program from his big sister Rachel and asked his mom to let him do it. "I became overweight," he says matter-of-factly, "and I couldn't be in my regular football league age group."

Because divisions are formed by weight, Kevin says, at 5-foot-3 and 130 pounds, he ended up playing with kids a lot older. The grief he says he took from teammates was the last straw. He quit the team and joined the Y.

"He's been coming so often, he's given kind of a leadership role," Riehl says. Kevin feels good about himself. He's lost three pounds. Dressed in workout clothes and athletic shoes, he proudly talks about how he eats so many more vegetables than he ever did - broccoli's a favorite - and fruit, especially peaches and nectarines.

"I used to eat lots of chips and those fruit pies and candy," he says, rolling his eyes. "Now I eat Subway. I want to keep losing weight so I can play football with my friends." Riehl says the physical improvements are only one part of the benefits for kids. There's the satisfaction that comes from self-discipline, self-improvement and improved self-confidence.

"Kevin didn't want to work out when he first came," Wilkerson says, "but when we showed him how to work out, he got into it."

Lucie and Wilkerson say they see changes in a lot of the kids, and it's not just weight loss. Take Claire, for example.

"When her mom brought her in here, she didn't want to let go of her hand," Lucie remembers. And when she did, the shy 7-year-old turned to Lucie or Wilkerson.

"If she was on the treadmill, you had to be on the treadmill," Lucie says, "holding hands with her." Today, Claire is on her own, enjoying the youth fitness center while her mom works out in the adult area.

"I looked in here and thought it was the perfect place," says Taylor Smith, 11, who has been working out for almost nine months. "It's a really fun place."

A child who sticks with it, helps others during workouts and works hard to improve gets a "character values rewards," a certificate stating he or she has exemplified the Y values - honesty, responsibility, caring and respect.

In addition to the youth fitness center, the Cameron Y also has aerobics, drumming and boxing classes for little ones. All this led to the facility receiving the 2007 YMCA of San Diego County Program Innovation Award.

"Even though some kids might not want to exercise," pronounced Taylor Mauzy as she walked briskly on the treadmill, they should. Best friend Sydney Craven, walking on the treadmill next to her, nodded.

The two, who will turn 9 during the summer, checked their progress on the screens in front of them. Moving at 4 mph, they had covered almost one-fifth of a mile. Luce explains that the red cords attached to the girls and to the machines are part of enhanced safety for children using gym equipment. Should one of them lose balance and fall, the cord would go down too and, once it's pulled from the machine in the fall, the treadmill automatically stops. Which brings up a discussion of whether such organized exercising is a good idea for kids this age, or even good for them.

"The former wellness director has a degree in exercise physiology, and she used that expertise to figure out what certain ages can do, and not do, when it comes to exercise," Riehl says.

"The national organization, YMCA of the USA, has a medical advisory committee that has stated that young people doing strength training is safe, and it's also stated by the American Medical Association," says Griffin.

All three of the girls in the gym this afternoon are active in sports - volleyball and soccer, cheer and softball, gymnastics and flag football. Like Kevin, they already appreciate eating healthy and getting exercise. And in some cases, kids like these are becoming role models for their parents.

"My mom changed her diet," Kevin says, grinning.

OTHER WAYS TO GET FIT

If a gym is not available, kids can work out without the equipment. There are simple ways for your kids to get in shape without specially sized workout equipment. Here is some advice from the Y trainers Lucie and Wilkerson on how to work the same muscle groups:

- Leg press: soccer or running. "Anything that uses your thigh and calf muscles," Wilkerson says.

- Lat pull-down: swimming, gymnastics, baseball and golf. "Anything that stretches your arms over your head," Lucie says.

- Chest press: push-ups, throwing a ball, even hand-walking the monkey bars. Shoulder press: basketball, wrestling and volleyball.

- Biceps curl: bowling, rock climbing, pulling yourself up on the monkey bars at the playground.

Classes offered for children ages 7 to 12 also can be replicated at home or school:

- Kids' cardio drums (30 minutes): Exercise to drumbeats using drumsticks and stability balls.

- Kids' step (30 minutes): Designed to provide a cardio-enhancement workout while learning basic step movements to high-energy music.

Kids' Boxercise: Fun, nonphysical-contact exercise that includes calisthenics and basic boxing drills.

The hard part isn't doing these workouts, the junior trainers say, it's getting started. And getting a good example from their parents when it comes to healthful eating and exercise.

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