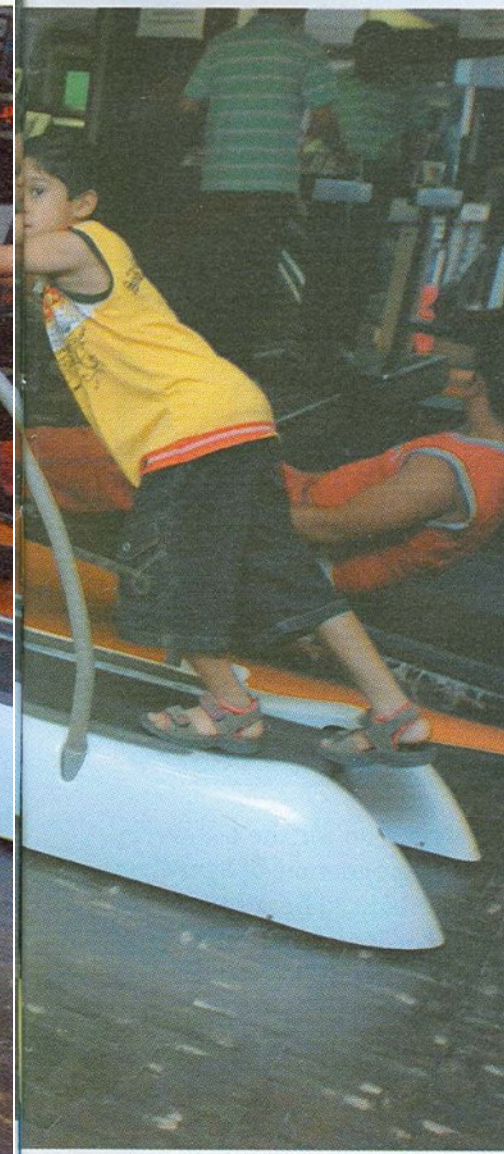




PHOTOS: SANJAY AHLAWAT



YOUNG MUSCLES

Parents enrol children at gyms for an early start

By Gunjan Sharma

Prakhar Nagpal is doing push-ups as his trainer, Vikas Nanda, corrects his posture. He then does some stretching and two rounds of jogging in the gym before Nanda

orders him to pack up. Clad in a Spiderman dress, Prakhar drinks from his Pokemon water bottle, picks up his dinosaur toy from the counter and waits for his mother, who is exercising in another part of the gym. Something doesn't add up? Well, Prakhar is just five

years old.

Prakhar has been working out regularly for the last seven months at the Power House Health Club in Vaishali, Ghaziabad. "It is my favourite activity. All the trainers are my friends. These days I drink a lot of *lauki* [bottle gourd] juice

made by my dad. He says it will make me stronger," says Prakhar, whose initiation into exercising happened by chance. His mother, Rashmi Verma, is a regular at the gym. "I used to bring him along to the gym," says Rashmi, assistant manager at Air India in Del-

hi. "Gradually, he mixed with the trainers and started doing some exercises. Later the gym owner planned a full-fledged exercise regimen for him."

Prakhar is the youngest of the 16 kids who visit the gym regularly. "The idea of a kids' gym was nurturing in my mind ever since Prakhar came here. But it took me six months of intense research to devise an exercise regimen for kids. To engage children there has to be an element of curiosity. So we keep changing it every day," says O.P. Yadav. A former police officer, Yadav has designed a fitness regimen for kids at Power House Health Club, which now has exclusive kids' equipment.

For Prabha Khukreja, a working mother who comes home only in the evening, bringing her 10-year-old daughter to the gym is a good way of spending quality time together without compromising on her need to stay in shape. "If I leave for the gym alone, I don't get to be with my daughter. At the gym we spend some 'healthy' time together," she says.

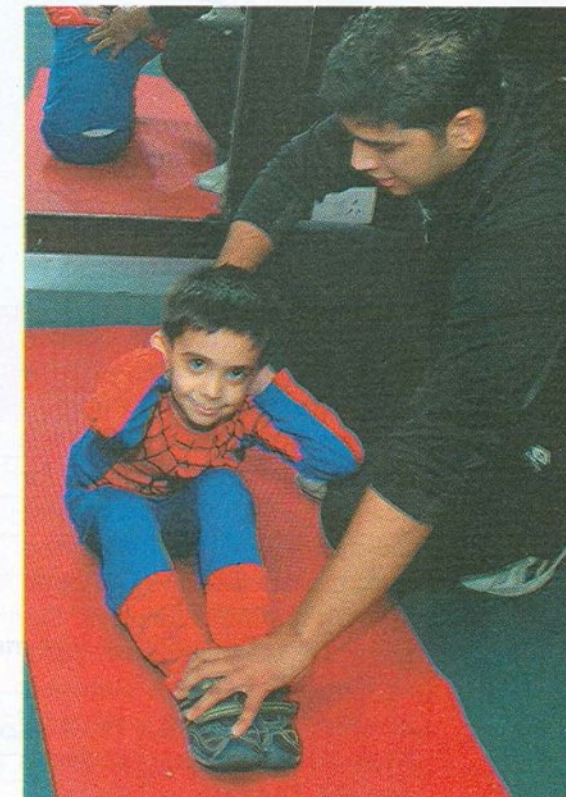
What perhaps began as a matter of convenience for many parents like Rashmi and Prabha has turned out to be an opportunity for the gyms. Many fitness centres are offering memberships to children, though the focus is on building core strength rather than bodybuilding. In many gyms, parents can be seen exercising with their children.

Diet regulation is a part of the fitness regimen at many gyms. The trainers monitor the children's eating habits. "If I binge one day, the weighing machine conveys it to my trainer the following day. So I have to stick to the diet plan given by my trainer," says Pranav Khaker,

13, a member of SAD Gyms, Delhi. "Though he hasn't barred me from occasionally treating myself to burgers and French fries, I have to stay away from cold drinks and ice-creams." Pranav has lost eight kilos in seven months.

Excess weight can be embarrassing for children, and losing weight improves overall health and makes kids feel confident. Says Kiran Sawhney of Fitnessolution, who trains about 20 kids, "Last year I had this boy who was 10kg overweight and was five feet at 14 years. He has lost 10kg and gained seven inches of height. He is now more confident, active and smarter."

To make the sessions exciting for kids, many gyms have a range of programmes, from dance to aerobics, pilates and yoga. Some gyms offer outdoor activities and adventure sports like rock climb-



No kids' stuff: Prakhar at the gym



WHAT PARENTS MUST KNOW

1. The kids' attire and shoes should be soft, stretchable and comfortable.
2. Ensure they start the workout with a glass of water and take fluids every 20 minutes.
3. Ask them to be careful with movements. Any jerk can fracture the spine—it may not hurt much but could create problems later in life.
4. Ensure supervision during weight training.
5. Never let them play with gym equipment.
6. Allow them to work out for not more than 3-4 days a week. Muscles need time to revive.
7. Outdoor games are the best source of physical activity.

ing, where kids go up a 24-foot and 44kg rock wall, with safety belts, harness, gloves and helmets. Aqua aerobics is done in a small indoor swimming pool with the water level not more than two feet. "Rock climbing, kickboxing and aqua aerobics are major hits with kids. Aqua aerobics is very safe as there is little chance of injury in it," says Smith Puri, general manager, Gold's Gym, Ludhiana, which has around 30 kids as members.

A young, growing body, being tender and vulnerable to injuries, needs to be handled with care. "At our gym we have two trainers who understand child psychology and anatomy. They know what to do at what age and for how long. With younger kids, we have to be especially alert as treadmill and other electronic equipment and weights can prove injurious," says Yadav. Trainers do not recommend treadmill to kids. "If at all we allow kids on the treadmill, we tell them to burn 400 calories in 10 minutes, and to stay alert and that, too, only to kids above eight," says Puri.

Power House Health Club has installed equipment designed for kids in the 5-10 year age group. Red and yellow treadmills and exercycles are fitted with computers with luminous displays. The interactive computers flash warning signals if the user's posture is incorrect. The trainer is alerted if the user does more exercise than is required. The seats and backrests of the exercycles are ergonomic, according to the curvature of the

spine and there are sensors in the backrest that enable the users to maintain correct posture throughout the exercise.

"These equipment have round edges and are safe for kids," says T.M. Rajiv, fitness instructor at Power House Health Club. "The treadmill for kids works at a maximum speed of 12km/hour, while the adult treadmill runs at 18km/hour. Similarly, the kids' exercycle has three levels of resistance as compared to 20 levels in an adult cycle. They are lighter, softer and shorter than adult equipment, and so are safer." More equipment like the rowing machine, chest press, twister and punching bag will be added to create a kids' corner.

Dumbbells are forbidden; most gyms prefer safer alternatives like resistance tubes, which are specialised equipment for strength training. Dumbbells involve greater risk of jerk and injury to the muscles.

The demand for physical training for kids has encouraged many gyms to expand their summer packages. More than 50 children

had signed up for the 6-8 weeks summer programme of Sykz Gym in Mumbai. "The programme focused on increasing the strength and agility of the kids. We are soon launching a regular programme," says M. Akbar, fitness consultant at Sykz Gym.

Fitness-wise parents may be pushy, but is it advisable to start early? Experts don't discourage, but insist on supervision. Says Dr S.K.S. Marya, head of department, orthopaedics, Max Hospital, Delhi, "The younger ones need 1:1 supervision for their delicate bodies. Even the older ones doing weight training need a trained eye to watch over them. A warm-up session before and a cool-down session after exercising are compulsory. Fluid replenishment and nutritious food are a must for kids doing strenuous activities."

Experts add that indoor exercises are not a substitute for outdoor games. They are the best source of physical activity. How about a judicious mix of indoors and the outdoors? ●