

“The rewards for work are not limited to a paycheck; but extend to what we become as a result of our endeavors.”

- author unknown, from the Albert W. Daw Collection

Some of the Benefits of Gymnastics

It happens many times a day all across the country. A parent will call their local gymnastics club and ask questions about the program. The parents often say something like, “I don’t really want my child to be a gymnast but it would be nice if they could learn a cartwheel; I just think it would be really good for them.” The questions these parents have about the gymnastics program are typically, “How much does it cost?” “When are the classes?” and “What will they learn?”

Answering these questions can be an involved process. The cost per lesson is a few dollars. Classes are held at certain times on certain days. What a child learns in gymnastics can take more time to explain. Sure those gymnastics teachers are helping their young athletes learn cartwheels and back handsprings. Coaches are spotting giants and full twists but what else is being learned?

The parent who states that they think “...gymnastics would probably be good for their child” might be surprised to know just how good it is. With pediatric obesity at an epidemic level of 13% of children and adolescents in the United States, getting children away from the television or computer games and into the gym is a terrific first step toward a healthy lifestyle. The researchers at the Centers for Disease Control report that youth who undertake lifestyle exercise programs that increase physical activity, reduce the intake of high-caloric foods and involve parents have the best chance of preventing and reducing obesity over the long-term. Gymnastics is perhaps one of the most comprehensive “lifestyle exercise programs” available to children, incorporating strength, flexibility, speed, balance, coordination, power and discipline.

- Studies show that children learn cognitive skills more effectively in an environment that includes the body as well as the mind (Barrett, 1998). Gymnastics and early childhood movement education is directly attributed to developing neurological pathways in students and promoting reading readiness. While the preschool gymnastics teacher runs about and plays with the little kids in her class, she is preparing her students for successful experiences in school; children who have participated in movement education activities have longer attention spans, increased communication skills, general problem solving skills and improved self-esteem.
- Researchers at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School found a relationship between physical activity and children’s self-esteem. The more time children ages 10 to 16 spent being active, the higher their self-efficacy and self-esteem were to reported to be (Strauss RS, Rodzilsky D, Burack G, Colin M., 2001).

- European researchers found that physical fitness in children related to a reduced risk of developing asthma during adolescence (Rasmussen, Lambrecht, Siersted, Hansen & Hansen, 2000).
- Physical activity is instrumental in preventing certain cancers; from colon cancer and breast cancer to prostate cancer (Merrett, Theis & Ashbury, 2000). Increased exercise helped reduce the risk of developing diabetes by 58% (Yale University School of Medicine, 2001). Beginning a physical activity such as gymnastics at an early age is no guarantee but active children are more likely to grow up to be active and healthy adults.
- In a study of school-aged youth, researchers found that the risk of substance abuse by adolescents is decreased by physical training programs that incorporate life skills. Better school attendance, lower anxiety and depression, and decreased use of tobacco and alcohol were all reported after a twelve week physical training program (Collingwood, Sunderlin, Reynolds & Kohl, 2000). Recreational sports activities, including gymnastics is a key to balanced human development and has been proven to be a significant factor in reducing alcohol and drug use (Williams, 1994).
- The gymnastics team coach is directly responsible for reducing the crime rate in the city; statistics show that children actively engaged in organized "positive choice" extra-curricular activities such as youth sports are less likely to be involved in self-destructive and anti-social behavior and juvenile crime (Soenstrom, 1986).
- Physical activity has been proven to delay the development of high blood pressure and helps reduce blood pressure in adolescents with hypertension (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1999).
- Many studies have reported the benefits of moderate impact activities such as gymnastics has on the development of bone density and the prevention of osteoporosis. Plyometric exercises (also known as jump training) like tumbling and vaulting have been determined by the American College of Sports Medicine to be a safe, beneficial and fun activity for children.
- Healthy activities like gymnastics keep our kids off the couch and engaged in a healthy lifestyle. That intermediate gymnastics class teacher is contributing to lower health care costs in the United States; active children are more likely to grow to become active and healthier adults, reducing the burden on the health care system. Sedentary lifestyles have been linked to the development of coronary heart disease, diabetes mellitus and numerous other chronic ailments. Nurturing the enjoyment of movement and motor skill development at an early age will help to promote continued participation in physical activity. Long range, these active and therefore healthier adults are more likely to be more productive at work, take less sick days, and have fewer "on the job" accidents (Paffenbarger, 1986).

Gymnastics also contributes to the immediate economic vitality of your local community; gym owners pay rent, employ people, pay taxes and purchase goods.

In addition to all of the above, gymnastics provides children with an opportunity to meet with friends, make new friends and have fun! Now the next time a parent makes the “can you tell me about your gymnastics program” phone call – I hope they are ready for a little more information than bargained for.

About the Author:

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