

FITNESS FOR TECH-OBSESSED KIDS IN DUBAI

WITH CHILDHOOD OBESITY IN THE UAE PROJECTED TO REACH MORE THAN 14% FOR THE NATION'S UNDER-20S BY 2020, PARENTS ARE LOOKING FOR EASIER WAYS TO HELP THEIR KIDS GET ACTIVE.

The discussion around poor levels of physical activity among UAE's children was high on this year's agenda at the Arab Health conference. Rocketing childhood obesity rates rising in parallel with sedentary pastimes among kids – only one in five children in the UAE are active for more than an hour a day – has brought the topic to the forefront of conversations, as well as the top of government agendas.

Little Gladiators is a fitness facility dedicated to children in Dubai. It is the UAE's first home-grown of its kind, joining the likes of US imported franchise brands such as My Gym, The Little Gym and most recently, 'We Rock the Spectrum' which opened in December 2017. The proliferation of facilities dedicated solely to this demographic reflects a changing mindset that prioritizes new ways to engage kids in health and wellness.

Little Gladiators

Opened in August 2017, Little Gladiators offers a diverse range of fitness classes centered on cardio, flexibility and strength specially designed for children ranging in ages 3-14. As well as traditional swimming, gymnastics and kickboxing, the facility also offers more innovative forms of exercising such as Kung-Fu Yoga – a martial art-stretching hybrid, and VR Gaming- a 10-minute session that utilizes the latest VR and AR sports technology to get kids moving. A key differentiator is the holistic approach to health and wellness that Little Gladiators takes, offering a kid's spa and kids hammam in its 7,400 sq ft space. Founded by Dubai-based expats Javed and Shanna Gani, the gym's mission is 'to improve the health and wellbeing of the UAE's citizens and residents' (1)

We Rock the Spectrum

We Rock the Spectrum Kid's Gym accommodates children as young as 1 years old. It was started by chiropractor, Dr. Nashila Farrah Jaffer, spurred by seeing more and more cases of children having developmental delays such as gross motor weakness, postural weakness and back. It is equipped with swings to help with spatial awareness and movement as well as soft play toys, role play and arts and crafts to encourage fine motor skills, as well as social skills interacting with other children. Children are able to partake in classes for fitness, dance, drama as well as a math enrichment program. There is an emphasis on children's mindfulness with kid's yoga and a

'Calming Room' made available for children who may need a break from the excitement of the gym.

Story

A key insight into the early success of these gyms are that they directly address what the World Health Organization dubs as one of the most pressing public challenges of the 21st Century- childhood obesity.

The rate of childhood obesity is one of the UAE's most unrelenting health issues, surpassing the international averages. Obesity in male children is 1.8 times more in the UAE than the international level, and for females it stands ever higher at 1.9 times more. [2]

Curbing this epidemic is at the top of the agenda for the local government and health authorities. In 2015, the UAE ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum launched 'Healthy Children 2021', a campaign to raise awareness of healthy lifestyles for Emirati children, quantified by a goal to reduce the levels of childhood obesity levels by 17%, to reach 12%. [3]

Context

Children's fitness is by no means a new industry. The US industry for children's fitness centre franchises is valued at US\$332 million and further growth is forecast, with major players such as My Gym, The Little Gym and We Rock the Spectrum, some of which date as far back as 1983 in the US. [3] Yet, rocketing childhood obesity rates rising in parallel with sedentary pastimes – only one in five children in the UAE are active for more than an hour a day [4] – among kids has brought the topic to the forefront of conversations and the top of government agendas. In 2015, the UAE ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum launched 'Healthy Children 2021', a campaign to raise awareness of healthy lifestyles for Emirati children, quantified by a goal to reduce the levels of childhood obesity by 17%, to reach 12%. [5] The rate of childhood obesity is one of the UAE's most unrelenting health issues, surpassing the international averages. Obesity in male children is 1.8 times more in the UAE than the international level, and for females, it stands ever higher at 1.9 times more. As the epidemic is predicted to reach 14.6% for the UAE's population of under-20s by 2020, initiatives like Little Gladiators are operating in the midst of an obesity epidemic, but are providing children with inspiring and engaging ways to incorporate more exercise into their regular lives. [6]

In other countries, brands are trying to provide children with opportunities for exercise: Prama is an interactive fitness experience by Spanish brand Pavigym, whereby families run and jump as part of a high-energy dance routine. Originally trialled in a school to tackle Britain's rising childhood obesity rates, it has since been rolled out to commercial gym chain David Lloyd in the UK due to the rising demand for families to be more active together, with plans to expand further. "The goal

with the Prama classes is to transform the fitness experience and inject fun into training sessions with an arcade-style environment,” says Sinead Johnson, group family manager at David Lloyd Clubs. [7] Hangzhou Bootcamp is another example of an initiative to get more kids into exercise and better their health. The boot camp is pioneered by one of China’s leading weight-loss companies, Jian Fei Da Ren and consists of a daily routine of four hours of physical exercise, controlled meals and limited phone use in a bid to help tackle China’s childhood obesity that currently affects 15 million children. [8]

Closer to home, one primary school in Dubai introduced daily mini-boot camps for pupils and additional physical activities to the curriculum, pioneered by headteacher Karen Davies in response to the low levels of fitness among the kids: *“As a new headteacher in Dubai, I found quite a lot of the children were unfit and had a weak core that affected their ability to sit properly at a table or to write for a period of time.”* Davies continues: *“We noticed their stamina was shocking.”* Fellow Gulf state Bahrain saw a similar concept to Little Gladiators introduced in 2014. Jump Gym, a fully-fledged gym dedicated to kids aged between five and 13, was launched by husband and wife team Nofa Hamza and Othman Janahi to lure kids away from their screens. [9] However, it’s not just physical health that is placing emphasis on children’s fitness. In August 2017, a study by the University of Auckland in New Zealand explored the effects of short, intense bursts of exercise on the cognitive development of children. The study found high-intensity interval training (HIIT) could in fact help boost a child’s brain power, putting forward a case for the mental health benefits (7). *“From birth to age 5, a child’s brain develops more rapidly than at any other time in life. Scientific research has shown that the quality of a child’s experiences in the first few years of life shapes how their brain develops”* echoes Dr. Nashila Jaffar (12).

Insights & opportunities

Products and services lending themselves to child-friendly fitness have seen a notable rise over the past few years, with no signs of slowing. An enhanced understanding on the holistic health benefits of exercising for children has pushed educators, child carers and parents alike to re-prioritize physical education and seek active pastimes for their children, living in the so-called ‘Generation Inactive’ (8). *“In a day and age where we’re exposed to gadgets, computers, ipads; movement is key. All kids need to move and be active to promote health and wellbeing. I know it [Rock the Spectrum] will help thousands of families and children in the UAE”* slates Dr. Nashila Jaffar. (12).

Coupled with a rising per capita disposable income in the country, the future outlook of children’s fitness facilities looks rosy: *“With success and great support we have received from the first location, we plan to open another 5 locations [Little Gladiators] in and around Dubai over the next 24 months”* cites Gani, *“We will be selling franchises to all other areas outside of Dubai as well as*

the Middle East. We currently are in negotiations with a few different countries in the Gulf" he continues. (13)

The impact of the shifting focus onto children's fitness has equally caused ripples in the tech sector. Although it is not without its controversy; the market for tracking devices that monitor children's health vitals is slowly becoming crowded. 30% of total smartwatches shipments in 2021 are set to be devices that target children aged between two to 13 years old (9). In January 2018, Bloomberg reported that is looking to develop a smartwatch for children (9). A round-up of the top 10 fitness trackers for kids released in December 2017 cites household names such as Fitbit, Adidas and Garmin, while indirectly demonstrating the potential in gamification for providers to target kids though making counting steps fun (10)

The return from tapping into this fitness trend and this vital demographic is clear- children under 15 currently make up 26% of the global population (11). The potential for brands is not restricted to those in the leisure or tech space. There is a solid platform for any provider that adopts the mission to provide children with a newfound love of exercise in the name of health – albeit from entertainment, education, wellness, tourism or hospitality.

Sources

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