

Trading Crayons for Crunches: Kids Hire Personal Trainers to Stay Fit

by Emily Friedman

(ABC) - Children nationwide are tossing aside their toy trucks and Barbie dolls and replacing them with barbells, treadmills and hours logged with their very own personal trainers.

More than a million children ages 6 to 17 turned to personal trainers for their fitness fix in 2006, according to an annual survey administered by both The International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association and American Sports Data, making children 17 percent of the 6.3 million who employed private fitness instructors.

Hiring a personal trainer for your child may seem excessive sessions start, on average, at \$40 per hour but many parents are willing to fork over the money in an effort to curb their child's poor eating and fitness habits.



American kids as young as 6 are looking to personal trainers for fitness help.

Childhood obesity has been a hot button issue for Americans for some time now, and numbers show that there's little improvement in addressing the flagging fitness of American kids. Since the mid-1970s, the percentage of U.S. children aged 6 to 11 years who are overweight increased from 6.5 percent to 18.8 percent, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Similar percentages stand for kids tween and teen years.

Are Trainers Really Necessary?

Like the hundreds of fad-diets that exist today, personal trainers for kids may appear to be just another trendy way of addressing a very serious problem. Some argue, though, that private fitness sessions for children could be extremely beneficial.

"Personal trainers in general are able to give people a focus," said Rosemary Lavery, the spokeswoman for International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association, one of the non-profit organizations that performed the survey. "Trying to start exercise at an early age is so important,

especially because a lot of programs in schools throughout the U.S. have been cutting back physical education programs."

Organizations such as the National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity claim that schools' efforts to meet the standardized testing requirements of President Bush's "No Child Left Behind" initiative by dropping physical education courses for more textbook instruction, have made children less active during the school day.

Dr. Goutham Rao, clinical director of the Weight Management and Wellness Center at the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh and associate professor of pediatrics, disagrees with the idea that cutbacks in physical education is causing childhood obesity, and believes that most physical education classes provide little exercise for kids anyway.

"What typically happens is some students participate enthusiastically and overweight kids don't participate," said Rao. "What has really changed in terms of school environments is that very few children walk to school anymore and that food being provided is very unhealthy."

Selling Fitness to Kids

The business of fitness training for kids goes way beyond one-on-one sessions with trainers, the field has expanded to include weight loss camps and a new crop of exercise boot camps.

Camp Shane, a summer program dedicated to helping overweight kids lose weight and get fit, has approximately 800 kids enrolled each season. Camp Director David Ettenberg says that personal trainers can help ease some of the hesitation many kids have about working out.

"Going to gyms can be intimidating," said Ettenberg. "You have to be really motivated and disciplined and not many of us are. A personal trainer kind of forces you to do stuff."

Frank Bono is a trainer at the Reebok Fitness Club in New York. He trains children as young as 4- and 5-years old and charges between \$80 and \$90. While not all of his clients are overweight, many of them are. One 6-year-old he works with is 20 pounds overweight.

"Parents see there is a problem and they don't know how to fix it," said Bono. "Some of them really want to be here and want to learn, and some of them are forced to come. We try to push them in the right direction so that they start to like exercise."

Rodney Turnman is a personal trainer who runs a fitness boot camp in North Texas. Turnman believes that turning fitness into fun is the key to getting kids shape, especially when their parents are not physically active. Sessions at Turnman's camp cost anywhere between \$50 and \$75.

"The reason for the trend is because parents aren't good role models," said Turnman. "They are forced to turn to an alternative role model and we're starting to market to kids"

Kim Cox trains with Turnman, and even brings her 4-year-old son, Conner, along for the workout.

"He loves it," said Cox, referring to her son. "He sees me work out and I involve him and I think it's important that he sees my active lifestyle."

Carol Espel, national director of group fitness for the Equinox Fitness Clubs, says that Equinox offers an array of fitness programs, including personal training.

"I think it's a viable option for kids who don't necessarily play sports," said Espel. "Classes range from \$65 to \$100 and are required to be instructed by the top tier trainers."

Is It Worth It?

Whether personal trainers are really worth the money is still up for debate.

"I do recommend personal trainers to patients if they can afford it because having training with a fitness person is helpful to the child," said Dr. Susan Nunez of the Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. "They may not be motivated to be as intense if they are on their own, but at least they know how to do it."

Other professionals disagree though, and argue that while parents may think they're doing the best thing for their child by buying him or her personal attention, there are other more important and inexpensive steps that should be taken first to address weight loss.

"This is a family issue and the treatment has to be a family issue," said Dr. Ayoob, an expert in childhood obesity and an associate professor of pediatrics at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. "Sending your kid off to a trainer may be good but not necessarily. It's definitely not better than cleaning up the environment in the house and the home."

He says that whether you have a personal trainer or not, children should aim for 60 minutes of exercise a day, barring any other physical impairment. He adds that in addition to making sure your child gets enough exercise, making sure they cut back on sedentary activities such as watching television is just as important.

"What so many kids are doing is just a fraction above bed rest," said Dr. Ayoob.