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"I like working out," says 10-year-old Marisa Garguilo, left, as she exercises recently on a seated bench press machine at the Deltona YMCA alongside 9-year-old Jianna Green, center, and 8-year-old Ciara Harris.

YMCA targets evolution from rug rats to gym rats



Nicholas Crane stretches recently at the Deltona YMCA. "(Parents) have to show a healthy lifestyle is important to them," said Nicholas' mother, Tracy.

By JEANNINE GAGE
STAFF WRITER

DELTONA — Marisa Garguilo is like a lot of 10-year-olds. She enjoys school, sports and spending time with her friends.

Now, the Timbercrest Elementary fourth-grader has a new hobby, one most of her young friends do not share. She hangs out at the gym.

Since January, when the Deltona YMCA became the first Y in the country to get Hoist KL Fitness equipment — a line made specifically for smaller bodies — Marisa has been a regular.

"I like working out," she said. "It makes you stronger and helps you lose weight."

Even though Marisa is of average weight, more and more children are not. Some experts say as many as 27 percent of children in the United States are considered obese. This fact has several consequences and not only for children.

And it's not just the physical effects that can be devastating — obesity leads to higher risks of

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diabetes and heart disease. Sometimes the psychological and social effects lead to depression and even suicide.

Volusia County health and school officials have growing concerns about the effects of obesity in children and plan to have a public discussion on it next week.

"The impact on the community of pediatric obesity is great," said Health Department spokeswoman Stefany Strong. "We want to make sure we provided as much information and advice to the public about it as possible."

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CHILDREN: Schools' budget cuts can result in lack of exercise

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Experts say the reason for such an increase in overweight children is varied, but obvious.

"Kids used to spend their time outdoors playing," said Cindy Heroux, a registered dietitian and author of health and fitness books. "Now they come home and play video games and watch TV."

But children aren't only sedentary after school. Physical education programs often are the first cut under budget constraints, Heroux said, and children lose not only the exercise but the idea of its importance.

"That's such a dangerous message we're sending when we cut P.E.," she said.

Restaurants that cater to children also play a role in making them obese. "Portion control is out of control," Heroux said, "and the options they give kids are hardly ever healthy."

Parents need to set an example to help a large child shed weight with a better diet and plenty of exercise, Heroux said.

"You can't ask a kid to eat healthy and then you go get a burger and fries," she said.

Tracy Craney, whose sons Nicholas and Mark work out on the new equipment at the Y, agrees.

"(Parents) have to show a healthy lifestyle is important to them," she said.

Craney also said parents share the blame for their obese children. "It's a lot easier for parents to plop them in front of a TV or video game," she said.

Hoist Equipment owner and developer Randy Webber said he was worried about the state of children's fitness when the National School Fitness Foundation asked the company to develop a children's line of fitness equipment.



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Working out his leg muscles recently, 9-year-old Nicholas Craney of Deltona pushes an exercise machine designed for kids at his hometown YMCA.

"We jumped at the chance," Webber said. "We were aware of the terrible health condition of our children and we wanted to help."

The fitness foundation is a private, not-for-profit organization that puts fitness equipment into middle and high schools. The foundation wanted to expand its program into elementary schools, but knew it couldn't do that with adult equipment.

"We wanted to get kids started earlier," said Cris Rees of the foundation. "We put out a call for equipment and what Hoist came up with was the best for us."

In the nine months it has been out, the Hoist KL (kids' line) Fitness equipment has been placed in more than 100 elementary schools, including 26 in Florida. No elementary school in Volusia or Flagler counties has the equipment.

Webber said the equipment — which fits children from 4-foot 2-inches tall to 5-foot 9-inches tall —

is specifically designed for young people, not just downsized adult equipment.

"There are no pinch points — there's no way a hand or foot can get caught in between moving parts," he said. "And most importantly, we made these machines like rides. When you pull on something, something else, like the seat, moves."

"Hey, most adults don't like working out," he said. "Why would we assume kids will? So we tried to do something that will entertain them as much as possible."

Nutrition expert Heroux said it's important for adults to start thinking more about children's health.

"When you have a large proportion of unhappy people in your community — which obese kids generally are, it affects the whole community, from medical costs to depression and suicide issues," Heroux said.

"Our kids' health is everyone's health."