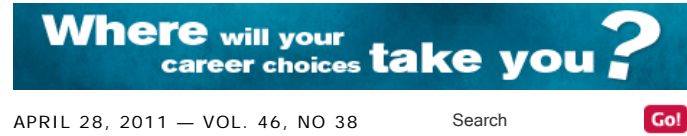




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Local program urges families to stay fit

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Kendra Graves

On Saturday mornings, the Madison Park Community Center gym is the very definition of organized chaos.

Toddlers crawl through tunnels and scoot down a plastic slide. Grade schoolers bound through obstacle courses and kick, hit and throw balls. Some parents play games with their kids, while others gyrate their way through a Zumba lesson.

The room buzzes with sound: jump ropes clacking against the hardwood floors, children laughing and shouting, Justin Beiber songs blaring in the background. The gym is full of energy and excitement. Healthy Kids, Healthy Future's (HKHF's) Open Gym is a free, year-round community-based physical activity promotion program that offers Boston families the opportunity to have fun, stay fit and learn how to incorporate exercise and healthy eating habits into their everyday lives. Each session runs from 10 to 11:30 a.m. on Saturday mornings at the Madison Park Community Center and features a variety of play activities for families with preschool and school age children.

Open Gym's fun and friendly atmosphere shrouds its more serious purpose: to decrease childhood obesity among preschool age children living in Boston's Roxbury, South End, Mission Hill, Fenway and Jamaica Plain neighborhoods. Families from these communities experience childhood obesity at higher rates than those from elsewhere in the city.

"When you look at health data for the city of Boston, Roxbury residents experience some of the most disproportionate outcomes in terms of chronic disease," says Tara Agrawal, HKHF program manager.

Led by Northeastern University and sponsored by The Red Sox Foundation and Children's Hospital of Boston, Open Gym enables the three institutions to address a critical issue impacting the people who live in the neighborhoods near their establishments.

The need for childhood obesity prevention programs is nothing new. The number of overweight or obese school age children has tripled over the last 40 years; now, one in three American youth are obese. What's more, childhood obesity disproportionately affects children living in communities of color. As the obesity rates rise, health care providers are urging caregivers to teach youth the importance of regular exercise and good nutrition.

They also note that preventive measures save lives and money. Dr. Jessica Hoffman, one of HKHF's principal investigators, says that while there's always been concern about children's health, people are also anxious about the financial costs associated with obesity. "The cost of all the different medical conditions that are associated with obesity is quite alarming, and given our health care system and [the increasing] attention to rising costs in [the] system, there's been a big focus on obesity prevention to help reign the costs in," she says.

In recent months, politicians, activists and everyday people have all been advocating for health care that's more accessible and affordable. Low-income communities of color in particular have a need for inexpensive programs and services that both heal existing health problems and prevent future ailments. Held in the heart of Roxbury on a weekly basis at no cost to caregivers, Open Gym is a prime example of a high-quality health care program that uses innovative approaches to help improve the health of those living in urban communities.

Bridget Shenk, who lives in Roxbury's Fort Hill area, recently began bringing her two sons to Open Gym. "It was in the neighborhood, so we figured we would at least go check it out," she says. "We thought maybe it would just be a big gym for the kids to run around in, but it was so much more than that."



While families spend most of the session enjoying free play, Open Gym frequently includes group activities. Group game time is a family favorite, and both the young and young at heart enjoy playing with parachutes, grooving during freeze dance and playing old-school games like Red Light Green Light, Simon Says and Duck Duck Goose. At the end of every session, families gather for circle time, where they stretch into animal-like yoga poses to cool down after all the pulse-pounding activity.

Kids can also participate in “mini-clinics,” where they get brief tutorials on sporting technique. Open Gym Student Engagement Coordinator Helena Kenny says the clinics are often some kid’s first introduction to sports they play in the future.

“Because our target age group is 3 to 8, we get kids and their families in before they actually start partaking in a sport,” she explains. “They get exposed to different sports, and often, families come back and say [the child has] taken up [a sport] because they loved it here at Open Gym.”

Another feature that makes Open Gym unique is the resource table, a component of the program that’s just as important as playtime. Here, families can gather information, get free goodies and participate in activities that support families in developing and maintaining healthy lifestyles. The resources, which revolve around a season and a theme, have included family-friendly event listings, fact sheets, dental screenings, books, food samples, bike helmets, recipes, farmer’s market coupons, free fruits and vegetables. These take-homes are simple yet meaningful reminders of ways families can increase fruit and vegetable intake, be safe while staying active and spend more quality time together.

Though Open Gym’s main focus is promoting healthy lifestyles, it also helps strengthen familial bonds. “The intent is not just for parents to bring kids and for kids to be physically active, [but] for caregivers and kids to be active together,” says Hoffman. In this way, caregivers model positive behaviors they want children to adopt while increasing the amount of quality time they spend with their kids.

What’s more, the program boasts significant participation by male caregivers: Hoffman says a third of children who participate in Open Gym are brought by their fathers. “The fact that we’ve created a program that dads show up at is pretty interesting,” she points out.

Kirk Womack brings daughter Kyla-Journey because he wants her to have a healthy start in life. “I boxed in the Army, so I try to stay healthy myself,” he says. “I work out at home myself, so I try to inspire my kids to do the same.”

Open Gym also allows families to connect with each other, which in turn fosters unity and cooperation within the community. Agrawal said she thinks part of the program’s appeal is that it uses non-traditional approaches to build community bonds. “Our program is really [about] bringing people out together to socialize and create a community around children in ways that might not necessarily be available in other structured settings, such as school-based or healthcare settings,” she says. “It’s a more informal, loosely structured, yet safe program that provides an opportunity for play, interaction and communication amongst families.”

Letease Guilderson, who brings her daughter Melanie and son Grant to Open Gym, agrees. “We’ve met a lot of wonderful families and shared a few laughs,” she says. The upcoming summer cycle, which begins Saturday, May 28, marks Open Gym’s second year in operation. As word continues to spread about the program, Open Gym has slowly gained respect from caregivers who say they often have to look high and low for affordable, accessible activities to entertain and educate their children. “I’m always searching for things for the kids to do in the city,” says Sandra Neves, who’s been bringing daughter Geanna to the Gym since it first began. “[We] don’t have that much money to be able to send [our kids] off to ballet or classes at the Y.”

Shenk says, “I can’t believe what a gem it is. I want more parents to take their kids there. To find a quality program that’s also free to the community — that’s almost non-existent. I just think parents would love it if they go.”

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