

# Parents and tots have 'own' time with Gymboree

By Sue Mason  
staff writer

He gives a playful look at the swimming pool, then with the grace of a toddler can muster, dives into the pool, which is filled with beach balls. There's no splash, just a laugh from 2-year-old Andrew Vitale as he rolls around among the balls.

The inflatable pool sits in the corner of the community room at Livonia Mall and is just one of many playthings that are within his reach. This is Gymboree.

"It's the type of class you don't tell them about until two minutes before you leave because they get all excited," Andrew's mother, Colleen, said. "It's a chance for them to come and play and without someone yelling no all the time and not getting hurt."

The name probably best describes Gymboree. Around the room are balance beams, slides, a tunnel to crawl through, barrels to roll in, floor mats — the things you'd find in a gymnasium. But no muscle builders are here, just youngsters and their parents having fun.

"I like to think that it's as much for the parents who participate as for the children who are enrolled in it," said owner Kathy Cornell of Farmington Hills. "The nice thing is that it's a special time for both the parents and the children, a one-on-one time with no interruptions."

Gymboree, founded in 1976 by Joan Barnes, is an organized play movement program for children 3 months to 5 years of age. Her idea was to help children build their self-confidence through play.

BARNES LAUNCHED her program in San Francisco. By 1979 there were eight centers and by 1980, the first franchise was sold. Today there are Gymboree centers throughout the United States, Canada, Australia and France.

Fifteen centers are in the Detroit metropolitan area. Cornell, with the help of her husband, Jim, operates four centers — in Plymouth, Livonia, Farmington Hills (in the Mercy Center complex) and Northville —

and hopes to open a fifth one in West Bloomfield in January.

Cornell came across Gymboree after the birth of her first child. She signed up for a Gymboree program in Farmington and liked it so much, she decided to "get into it."

"I left a full-time retail management job and after the birth of our first child, I really didn't want to leave my child for a 50-plus-hour job," she said. "I figured it was something I could do part time, but now it's grown into a full-time job."

Cornell does her administrative work at home, but visits each center each week. Her husband helps out, keeping the books, doing payroll — she has eight teachers — handling publicity and buying equipment.

"Jim is really a big help because this can get to be too much at times," Cornell said.

**GYMBOREE ISN'T** a nursery program. Children aren't dropped off at the center and picked up a few hours later by their parents.

The sessions are 45 minutes long and held once a week. Twenty minutes are set aside for movement and exploration. Another 15 minutes are set aside for circle time (sitting in a circle on the floor mats) that can include finger plays, singing, lap rides and the like.

Class size is 10 to 18 parents and children. The cost is \$75 for 12 weeks of classes.

**THE SESSIONS** are broken down by ages. There's a baby Gymboree program for children 3 to 12 months old, Gymboree I for 10- to 18-month-olds, Gymboree II for 16-month-olds to 2 1/2-year-olds, Gymboree III for 2 1/2- to 3 1/2-year-olds and Gymbograds for 3- to 5-year-olds.

The program focuses on developing the children's gross motor skills, but according to Cornell, it touches on all the senses. It features music to hear, songs to sing, bright colors to see and fur, foam and hard woods to touch.

"It's a yes environment," Cornell said. "There's no right and no wrong way of doing things. It's made to be

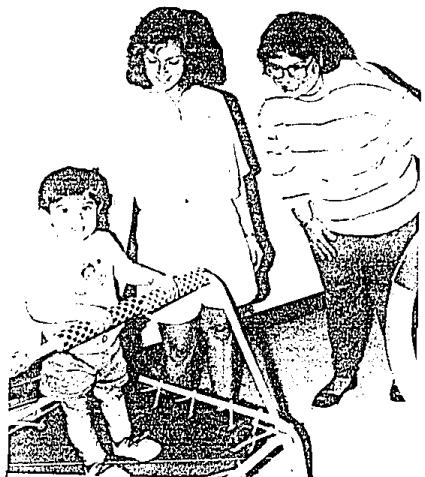
a fun time, so it's non-competitive and there's no pressure on the children.

"We do a lot of praising here."

The specialized equipment is developed by Gymboree as is the mascot, Gymboree the Clown, a hand puppet that is in evidence during circle time when he offers individual

farewells to each child at the end of a class.

"This mirrors society in that parents today are interested in their children and want to do special things with them," Cornell said. "It's also a place for parents to come and meet other parents and learn things they can do with their children at home."



ART EMANUELE/staff photographer

Words of encouragement for 21-month-old A. J. Russo to tackle the pint sized trampoline come from Kathy Cornell (in center), a Farmington Hills resident who is owner of four Gymboree centers, and the youngster's mother Tammy.

THE LIVONIA program started out at St. Timothy Lutheran Church, but quickly outgrew the available space, so it moved to Livonia Mall in July. Word-of-mouth and flyers mailed to 8,000 homes in the area attracted 90 families for the summer session. Another big jump in enrollment came in the fall session that started in September.

"For being a brand-new center, it took off like crazy," Cornell said.

"And there's a tremendous interest for the fall program."

Joyce Tellitocci of Farmington

Hills enrolled her 20-month-old daughter, Nicole, in the summer session and was relieved to find out about the fall program.

"I was wondering what we would do this winter," she said, offering her daughter a hand every once in awhile on the balance beam. "I really enjoy it as much as she does."

"I tried to do this at home, but I didn't have any idea how to do it. Now I can get the ideas here and take it home."

For more information about Gymboree, call Kathy Cornell at 661-9570.

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