

May 2006

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## Jodi Levine

## The longtime owner of Jodi's Gym says it's about 'positive motivation'

BY JENNIFER LEVENTHAL



Todd Shapera Photography

Jodi and an eager gym participant.

**L**et your kids be kids," Chappaqua resident Jodi Levine said. "You can never recreate the spontaneity of childhood later in their lives, so why not let them enjoy it now?"

A nationally-ranked competitive gymnast from her preteens through college, Jodi Levine, who opened her first Jodi's Gym in Manhattan 24 years ago knows well of what she speaks. Throughout her years in college (she won an athletic scholarship to Indiana State University) and while pursuing her master's degree in psychology, teaching gymnastics to younger students was a big part of her life.

"I've always loved kids—even way before I had my own," Levine said. (She is mom to Marly, 13, and Will, 16.)

"Working with them is something I am good at, energized by and truly passionate about."

As a single woman living in Manhattan, Levine noticed that the gymnastics center where she was working was empty during school hours, so she set out to create what she said became the very first "Mommy and

Me" gym class in the city.

"I felt like I understood what moms and their preschool kids would love, so I printed some fliers, rented a small studio and began my first classes. The space was nothing fancy, but it was a clean and safe and a very fun environment. To my delight, the class was full with happy moms and kids in a matter of days."

Fast forward 24 years, and today Jodi's Gym has two thriving locations: East 84th Street in Manhattan and 25 Hubbels Drive in Mount Kisco.

"So many of the moms and kids that I used to see in the city have

now moved to northern Westchester—just like I did," Levine said.

Although her home and family are here in Chappaqua, she is constantly back and forth between her town and country locations.

"I love Chappaqua," Levine said. "It's a wonderful place filled with people who put their children as their top priority. But the transition from city to suburbs wasn't easy. New York City is still a very big part of my life and I enjoy maintaining that connection."

And how does it feel to have neighbors who are also clients? "We provide a service that I'm proud of and that my friends and neighbors love," Levine said. "So it's very flattering to have people I know bring their kids to Jodi's Gym. The only times that it is difficult are when I can't remember where I first met someone—from the city, at my kids' schools, from around town. All of my worlds are so closely meshed, but I like it that way."

While over the years the class offerings have changed and grown tremendously—from Mommy & Me classes that include music and art to Tumbling Tots, Kindergym, dance summer camps, birthday parties and gymnastics (from developmental through advanced)—what remains the same about Jodi's Gym is the philosophy that kids learn by playing.

"I don't believe in pushing skills too early," Levine said. "There is so much marketing out there about getting kids to learn things and know things earlier and earlier, but I'm skeptical about 'the sooner the better' when it comes to kids."

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## A Community Link

**B**esides running thriving businesses in Mount Kisco and Manhattan, Jodi Levine also devotes a fair amount of her time giving back to the community. "Right now we are developing a program for the children whose parents are served by Neighbor's Link," said Levine.

Neighbor's Link Community Center located at 27 Columbus Circle in Mount Kisco, is a collaboration of community agencies and groups offering a wide variety of programs including The Worker's Center, a day laborers hiring site, and Head Start, which services many local immigrant children.

Levine believes that the physical and emotional benefits children receive through gymnastics shouldn't be available only to those who can afford lessons. "We're offering this program to children who might not otherwise get the chance to come," she said. The Neighbor's Link staff is thrilled with the prospect, but no more than the children will be once they start tumbling and jumping.

—Jean Sheff

Inevitably, if they are pushed too soon, they will burn out and lose their love of exploring and discovery. I spent many years as a gymnast and many more as a teacher, so I truly understand positive motivation. When skills are introduced in a healthy way, children just feel they are having fun—they barely notice that they're gaining coordination, strength and comfort in the r bodies' movement."

So, what is the right time-frame for learning gymnastics skills? According to Levine, before age four it should be all about fun and pre-gymnastics skills. "When they're

babies, it's about gentle movement with moms and exposure to other kids. As toddlers, we provide a great environment and equipment to let them move and explore and discover what they can do." At about kindergarten age, Levine says traditional skills can be introduced as long as the goal is always to have happy, healthy, fit kids who love to move. "Even with the older children," she said, "our environment is never competitive with their peers. It's always about individual improvements."

These days, Levine says most of her time is spent on staff training and development. "Hiring the right people and training them is the most important part of my business. Of course all of the people who apply to work here understand and have experience in gymnastics. That's the easy part. But no one steps into the gym as a teacher here unless they have a working knowledge of child development and until they have gone through extensive training in the way that we run our programs."

Jodi's Gym continues to evolve in its programs and offerings. The teaching of skills is progressive and designed to change as the kids mature, so that it meets the needs of new-borns through age 12.

To listen to Levine talk about gymnastics is to really feel her lifelong passion for the sport. "I truly believe that gymnastics comes close to being the perfect sport for achieving balance, coordination, strength and confidence. I also think it can be wonderful as basic training for soccer, baseball and so many other activities that require these skills." But don't let her passion fool you. Even stronger than her love of gymnastics is her conviction that kids should be exposed to a wide range of different sports and activities.

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**Jodi Levine**

"I don't think parents should let their children decide what they absolutely love most before they go to middle school," Levine said. "Or they risk having them miss out on something they may have never even considered."

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