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More and more, parents pay so children can play

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K. SCOTT KREIDER

In the dead of winter, Brigid Gatchell needs to get out of her Mount Joy home almost as

badly as her 4-year-old daughter, Izabella.

“I’m always looking for stuff to do where it’s not super expensive and it’s warm,” Gatchell says on a recent visit to Lancaster’s Go ’N Bananas, where Izabella stacked oversized foam animals with a new playmate.

Mom and daughter also head to the food court play area at Park City Center, Universal Athletics’ Kidmazium and Tumble Time in York to build Izabella’s strength and social skills.



“My goal is for her to learn to play independently,” says Gatchell. “I want her to climb on things, to run around, to take risks within reason.”

An increasing number of entertainment facilities are designed to let kids run themselves ragged, many of them capitalizing on parents’ desires to promote physical health.

It used to be that families relied on free recreation — a neighborhood park, bike rides around the block, whatever the date or the weather — to entertain their children. But as society has become more suspicious, more litigious and ever-attached to technology, more are paying for their kids to play.

An entrance fee is a cost many are willing to absorb, knowing their kids are in a controlled setting where they believe they are less prone to injury and more protected from strangers.

“Kids aren’t climbing trees and getting up on top of things anymore,” says Bernie Hershey, an occupational therapist with Schreiber Pediatric Rehab Center. “The risk-taking has decreased, and so kids are not

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developing independence and problem-solving skills.”

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Cultural change

There’s also been a cultural change that discourages some basic childhood rites of passage like muddy clothes and broken bones. Conditions have to be nearly perfect for many families to venture outside, says Cindy Hess, a retired physical educator for the Ephrata Area School District.

“Kids don’t want to sweat and they don’t want to get dirty anymore,” she says. “On a sunny day, they huddle in the shade. We’ve put that on them.”

Indoor play spaces can help fill a void by encouraging physical activity and providing clean monitored environments that appease parents and appeal to kids.

Mark Legenstein spent nearly a decade studying indoor play options before opening his family-owned Go ’N Bananas in December. The 22,000-square-foot facility houses an arcade, but more than half its space is devoted to active entertainment, including a ropes course, a soft play area for toddlers and mini-bowling.

A star attraction is Ballocity, a kind of modern ball pit on steroids, its steel structure wrapped in layers of high-density foam that provides a safe space for imaginative adventures.

“In certain ways, kids are more active today (with sports). But the opposite is true, too, with technology and things,” Legenstein says. “As a dad, I like doing stuff with my kids and not just sitting them somewhere.”

Free and affordable

The Lancaster Recreation Commission offers 400 neighborhood-based programs emphasizing free and affordable play. But executive director Sue Landes says the organization faces increasing competition from more expensive alternatives.

Over her 29 years in charge, Landes has seen the time kids spend in unstructured play drop significantly.

That’s the type of play Fran Cleland, a kinesiology professor at West Chester University, says is most important, especially for young children testing physical limits and social boundaries

But increasingly, says Landes, children come to a park for soccer practice, then head home

without even a quick stop at the playground.

“It’s such a loss,” she says. “Play is the first way kids learn ... As a public entity, we can provide those opportunities.”

The rise of costly organized sports and admission-based indoor parks leave some children out of the action, cut off either by cost or the strategic location of indoor facilities near affluent communities.

On a Tuesday late last month, the action at The Works at Wyomissing was as brisk as the weather outside. For \$6.95 most weekdays, parents can send their children into the three-story Ballocity tower to run, climb, slide and shoot their way among thousands of soft foam balls.

The Works began as a massive restaurant-bar-arcade combo, but added its Ballocity feature in 2009. It was one of the first local entertainment venues to offer gym-like attractions for kids.

After a couple hours spent at Ballocity, kids are “a little hot, a little sweaty, very happy — and probably not ready to leave yet,” says general manager Michael Keener. (The brand name and type of equipment is the same at Go ‘N Bananas, but the layout differs).

Heart rates

Researchers in 1995 found that a group of kids playing on so-called soft play structures had a mean heart rate of 77 percent of their max (The American Heart Association urges most adults to exercise at 50 to 85 percent).

Many popular indoor play spaces challenge customers in novel ways —albeit with daily safety inspections, like a rope-climbing belay system or grippy socks for safety.

At Spooky Nook Sports, a 30-foot Clip ‘N Climb wall accommodates climbers 30 pounds and up. Spokeswoman Alyssa Matangos says it provides a great workout, especially for underused forearms.

Some indoor attractions require beneficial mental focus, too.

Legenstein says some youngsters struggle on their first attempt on Nano’s Sky Trail, a ropes course that lets guests crisscross the building. Most are able to conquer their fear and build confidence along with balance skills.

Other attractions are also promoting the idea that it’s OK to sweat.

Sky Zone, the trampoline park in Greenfield Corporate Center, hosts five “skyrobics” classes each week, where adults can burn up to 1,000 calories. There are also dodge ball leagues for youth, high schoolers and adults.

A five-week youth session runs \$60.

At a public playground, a pick-up game would be free.

Keener says The Works discounts summertime admission to Ballocity for schools and accredited camps and day care. Legenstein’s prices start at just \$3 for toddler activities. He says he also plans to build partnerships with Lancaster-based parenting groups and children’s organizations.

In an ever-more-competitive industry, Go ‘N Bananas must also remain mindful of fitness and entertainment trends. Legenstein says the best facilities add new elements every three years or so. He’s already thinking of incorporating a zip line.

The Works plans to open its own trampoline component by early summer.

Novelty might be just as important to outdoor parks. A 2015 study found that recently improved or renovated parks saw their number of visitors double, and that children and adults who spent time there expended substantially more energy.

Some school districts paint asphalt with maps or letters to inspire creative play, but those same spaces might be off-limits after hours. In some cases, they’re posted with no trespassing signs — a casualty of liability concerns.

Limited access contributes to physical decline. Early childhood experts can spot a child who doesn’t have the opportunity or environment for physical play.

“It’s a serious issue,” Landes says. “All kids deserve the chance to play.”