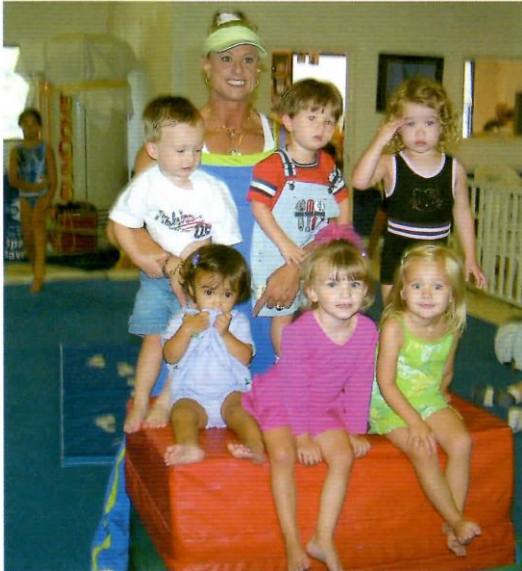


## Starting baby off right



Bev Dizenzo with her group of tumbling tots at Intense Gymnastics

By Erin Harrel

When our youngest was 2-1/2, I decided it was time to find some type of formal activity. I had taken her to plenty of play groups, and although we thoroughly enjoyed those morning outings, I wanted something a bit more structured for Maggie.

We tried dance lessons, but that seemed a bit TOO structured; while the teacher instructed the little ones to *plié* and then turn in circles, Maggie turned and ran straight for the ballet bar where she picked up her feet and be-

gan to hang (that was a big NO-NO). My search continued.

We decided to give gymnastics a shot. My sister (along with her two toddlers) and I checked out several gyms in the area. We searched for ones that were close, clean, and most important, friendly.

After visiting several gyms, we happened upon Intense Gymnastics in North Fort Myers. While most places insisted the 2- and 3-year-olds line up and wait their turn, owner and coach Bev Dizenzo ("Ms. Bev" to her little charges) simply let them run amok — all while gently ➤

encouraging them to try all the different stations.

As the children became acquainted with the small gym and all it had to offer, Ms. Bev would attend to them individually on the different activities. There were no lines to wait in or rules to follow.

I was a little skeptical at first. How could she possibly teach them anything if they were all running in different directions? She allowed each of them to do what they enjoyed most.

Evan loved the floor maze, and Kelsea just ran from activity to activity, beaming from ear to ear. Wyatt and Reece took to the balance beam, and Mary

bounced from one end of the trampoline to the other.

Desiree had all the moves (she had a slight advantage, since she spends three days a week at the gym while an older sibling trains for competitions). Maggie's favorite was the bars, where she enjoyed hanging upside down until she flipped off (without getting in trouble).


I soon realized that my doubts of Ms. Bev's "unor-

ganized" gymnastics class were unfounded. She wasn't unorganized at all — she knew exactly how to get these kids involved without having them kicking and screaming. Her kind and gentle demeanor allowed the kids to let their guard down and just have fun.

I suppose the fact that she's a first-class body builder (former Ms. Florida Fitness to be exact) gave her

an advantage with this group of over-active toddlers.

These days we can't drive by the gymnastics facility without Maggie screaming, "Let's go to 'nastics, Mommy!" and clapping her hands. Then, "Please, please, Mommy."

I have to say I'm a little excited, too, that we've found a structured exercise activity that she enjoys so much. I firmly believe if we teach our children the benefits of eating healthy and exercising at a young age, they'll have one less battle through their adolescent and teen years. 

— Erin Harrel lives in Cape Coral with her husband and three children.

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