Tiny tots getting their outdoor fun indoors

Pre-schools facing lack of outside space build plush gyms for pupils

By MELODY ZACCHIUS and JANICE TAU

LEGIS pedalled furiously on cycling machines and feet pounded on treadmills. They belonged to gym rats at an adult fitness centre, but to pre-schoolers at ChildFirst Pre-school getting their weekly workout.

At the school’s Mountbatten and Dunbar branches, pupils aged four to six spend about 15 minutes each time doing a circuit of exercises at indoor gyms which opened late last year.

To engage each class of 24 children, a pair of teachers asks them questions, such as where they are cycling to.

Each gym is fitted with about $6,000 worth of equipment, including rowing, stepping and twisting machines.

ChildFirst Pre-school’s group principal Cynthia Lee said: “The pupils see their parents and other adults on such machines and are excited that they, too, have their own versions to try out.”

Parents still prefer outdoor play for their children, but they understand that the linear and Mountbatten branches, which are located in commercial buildings, lack outdoor space, she said.

The school is among a growing number of pre-schools and childcare centres which have invested in indoor gyms and play areas as a result of the space crunch.

Last year, the Government announced that it would add 200 centres, or 20,000 places, by 2017. This will mean full-day childcare slots for one in two children, up from one in three children now.

The space crunch has led operators to shift their centres in unusual locations, such as carparks, swimming complexes and hawkers centres, which lack open areas for outdoor activities.

The Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), which oversees pre-schools here, said that all childcare centres are required to have access to outdoor play space to help toddlers develop gross motor skills, that is, the abilities to move and coordinate the torso and limbs.

When evaluating the suitability of a site for a childcare centre, ECDA officers check whether there is a playground nearby where children can safely take part in outdoor activities.

If this is not available, ECDA works with centres to identify indoor space and activities which would enable gross motor development.

Mr Jin Lin Lee, director of pre-school chain Just Kids Learning Place, said: “The space issue has led to centres becoming smaller with no outdoor areas in recent years, so some have opted for indoor gyms or play equipment instead.

For instance, its childcare centre in Yishun is housed in a former town council building and has no void deck or playground in the vicinity.

So, it dedicated an indoor space the size of two squash courts to contain four playground slides and one playhouse.

Private school operator Enm-House launched its first pre-school with indoor play and fitness facilities last year.

The 20,000 sq ft campus in Mountbatten houses obstacle courses and tree houses within its 4,500 sq ft indoor play area, which is ringed by cycling tracks.

Enm-House recently set up a similar pre-school in Hong Kong, its group managing director Ng Chin Choo said: “In highly urbanised cities like Singapore and Hong Kong, it is difficult to secure premises with outdoor spaces, so we face the challenge of bringing the outdoor environment indoors.”

Professor Marjorie Anne Eiben, director of the National Institute for Research and Best Practices, said equipment in such indoor gyms “should engage and encourage gross motor skills, physical coordination and enjoyment in play”.

But indoor activity in isolation is not ideal, said Dr Mary Lim, an assistant professor at Singapore Institute of Technology who is a trained occupational therapist.

Children need the sun and a healthy dose of vitamin D to keep them healthy, she said. “Inadequate exposure to sun and sunlight can stunt physical growth, affect mood and mood disorders, affect immune system, even affect cognition,” she said.

Parents said having indoor gyms is better than nothing.

Mountbatten Velle LaMarche, 3, whose daughter, three, and son, two, are enrolled at ChildFirst Pre-school’s Mountbatten branch, said: “Like most parents, I prefer my children to get fresh air, explore the outdoors and get their hands dirty playing with caterpillars and other insects, like I used to with my friends and siblings. But it is hard for pre-schools to secure a site with sufficient outdoor space that is operationally cost-effective.”

The indoor fitness centre is a good idea and a “viable concept”, she said.

Pilot brand Yeo, 5, whose daughter, six, and son, three, are also pupils at the same pre-school, said its indoor gym is a good alternative, especially when the outdoor air quality is bad.

To complement his children’s indoor time, he takes them cycling and swimming on weekends.

“Children still need to have their outdoor time to run, play and scrape their knees,” he said.