DONNA HECK
Sabes JCC fitness director
Kid-friendly, state-of-the-art exercise and interactive gaming equipment offers boys and girls in the JCC’s KidsFit Club an opportunity to move their bodies without thinking about exercise. “They’re constantly jumping, ducking, moving side to side and running,” Donna Heck says. “They’re getting their heart rates elevated and moving their muscles and joints. But the kids only care that they are having fun playing the game. They are having a blast!”
That’s just one of the ways Heck works to make exercise enjoyable for the roughly 400 kids who participate in KidsFit each month. The Sabes JCC opened KidsFit last year, a fitness center designed specifically for children ages 5–12. Kid friendly fitness equipment replaces weight stacks and pulley systems often used in adult equipment with hydraulic based systems.
The focus is low resistance, low impact and controlling the body with fresh exercises and drills. “The key is to always change it up,” Heck says. “One activity for five minutes and then something that is totally unrelated. An activity might be for balance, the next for strength and the next for hand-eye coordination.”
Some activities also come with food for thought. One game involves throwing a ball and then naming one healthy food and one junk food. “It’s amazing what we can get the kids to think about with a game as simple as that,” Heck says. “They already have a very good idea of what is good for them and what is bad for them. It’s just instilling it in a fun way.”
According to Heck, the goal is “to build self-esteem, stronger bodies and to empower these kids to be fit and happy.” The Sabes JCC offers kids’ programming in boot camp, yoga and get-moving classes, as well as in traditional sports like basketball and tennis.
“They can participate in as many days as their parents want to sign them up for,” Heck says. “We want to make sure that these kids, who are seated in school all day and only have a limited time for recess, are also getting the physical activity they need.”

FOOD FOCUS

Experts Donna Heck, Hamish Ganga and Susan Prince all agree: Fitness is first, but it’s all for naught without proper nutrition.
Prince subscribes to the message of Michael Pollan, author of The Omnivore’s Dilemma: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” That’s three small meals and two small snacks, she says. Ganga adds that we should refrain from eating after 7 p.m.
Heck offers several great healthy suggestions: for breakfast, whole grain cereal, low fat yogurt with fruit and granola, pita with egg, cheese and veggies; for an afternoon snack, whole grain waffles with a little bit of reduced fat cream cheese (or peanut butter) and jelly, low fat cheese and fruit. Drink plenty of water throughout the day.
All three suggest avoiding fast food and cooking at home when possible. “What I do know,” Ganga says, “is what you put in your body is what comes out.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION FROM THE EXPERTS:
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