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**Living**

## Program aims to give pre-teen girls a healthy self-image

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Annie O'Neill, Post-Gazette photos

**Victoria Kipiller, who's 6,** stretches out during an intermediate gymnastics class for preteen girls at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh earlier this week. The class is taught by Andrea Paganie, who will lead the fitness portion of Growing Strong Girls.

**By Linda Wilson Fuoco, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette**

It's not always easy being a pre-teen girl.

As hormonal changes start to kick in, so does a host of other challenges, such as peer pressure and media messages about appearance and weight.

A pilot program starting next month hopes to help 8- to 12-year-old girls achieve the healthy self-image that will strengthen their ability to meet those challenges.

"Growing Strong Girls" is an eight-week course that will be held on Thursdays at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh in Squirrel Hill, March 23 to May 25, 5-6 p.m. in the Kaufmann Gym.

Guest speakers and exercise programs will be used in the program.

"The female guest speakers have expertise interacting with young girls," said Andrea Paganie, who will be coordinating the program. She's the JCC's program coordinator for sports and recreation. "Growing Strong Girls has the potential for making an impact on how girls view themselves and how they relate to their peers and surroundings as they experience the challenges of maturing."

Topics will include nutrition, hormones, media influence, women in society, drugs and alcohol, peer pressure and volunteerism. The fitness portion of the program, led by Ms. Paganie, includes yoga, aerobics, power walking, sporting games, weight training and muscle conditioning.

The program is supported, in part, by a grant from the Jewish Women's Foundation of Greater Pittsburgh.

"We wanted to reach girls before they reach puberty," Ms. Paganie said. By exposing them to positive messages and positive athletic activities, it is hoped the girls will gain strength to avoid negative behaviors such as eating disorders and use of tobacco and alcohol.

Ms. Paganie was a competitive gymnast from the time she was 7 until an injury sidelined her when she was 14. She has been a gymnastics coach for years, in addition to teaching a broad range of sports. She has worked with pre-teen girls for over 15 years.

Competitive sports -- once an almost-boys-only bastion -- have become a great avenue for girls. "But that can also be another source of pressure," Ms. Paganie said. Growing Strong Girls emphasizes physical activity as an outlet for fun, good health and building self-esteem.

"I want them to experience different things," including a one-mile power walk, she said.

Rhonda Hartman, a former police officer who now counsels at-risk teens, will be handling the anti-drug, anti-tobacco and anti-alcohol message.

"Many students have already tried some or all of those substances by sixth grade," Ms. Hartman said. "The younger we can reach them, the better."

Young students try alcohol, drugs and tobacco "often because of peer pressure. Their friends do it, or an older sibling."

"We hope to educate them to make better choices," said Ms. Hartman, a former Butler County deputy sheriff and a former Chatham College police officer. She has a psychology degree from Duquesne University and works in the Knoch School District in Butler County.



**Andrea Paganie, who will be coordinating the Growing Strong Girls program at the JCC in Squirrel Hill, gives Victoria Kipiller, 6, center and Dana Edelman, 9, smiley face stamps after a girls gymnastics class there earlier this week.**

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

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### More info

Cost of the eight-week

Other speakers include:

- Carla Addison, a registered dietitian whose background includes child nutrition and sports nutrition.
- Susan Merenstein, a registered pharmacist who advocates for women to be "aware, educated and proactive" in their own healthcare.
- Sheila May-Stein, director of the JCC's Children, Youth and Family Department.
- Erika Gold, who has a Ph.D. in education and social justice, who is director of the JCC Early Childhood Development Center.
- Mayda Roth, JCC director of development, who will speak to the girls about volunteering in the community.

program is \$48 for JCC members and \$58 for non-members. For more information or to register for Growing Strong Girls, email Ms. Paganie at [apaganie@iccpgh.org](mailto:apaganie@iccpgh.org) or call her at 412-521-8011, extension 220.

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