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URBAN ATHLETE

## Youth Movement, the Early Years



Eric Michael Johnson for The New York Times

A child playing with scarves used as exercise tools during a fitness concert at the Naumburg Bandshell in Central Park, led by Amy Otey, center onstage.

By SHIVANI VORA

MY 3-year-old daughter, Meenakshi, rocked back and forth to the catchy music coming out of the speakers in our living room. She followed along intently as the encouraging voice prompted her to raise her arms, shuffle from side to side and shake her body. She was engaged for almost a half-hour — quite an accomplishment for any toddler — before her attention shifted to another activity.



Skeptics out there (including me) wonder if it's really possible to excite young children about exercise. But Amy Otey is not among them. Ms. Otey, the creator of the ["Fitness Rock & Roll"](#) CD that Meenakshi was swaying to, has made it her mission to get kids moving.

### Arts & Entertainment Guide

A 49-year-old certified fitness instructor and early-childhood music educator from Ewing, N.J., Ms. Otey is known to thousands of children as Miss Amy. She has released five fitness CDs aimed at children 3 to 7, and she conducts roughly 100 interactive shows a year at schools and libraries in the Northeast, where she and four other members of her band lead countless kids in upbeat activities. She describes the hourlong sets as aerobics classes that are fun for the junior crowd. In 2010 she performed at the White House during its annual Easter Egg Roll.

“I think of myself as a singing fitness instructor,” Ms. Otey said. “But I like to call what I do performances instead of exercise classes, so that they don’t seem so serious.”

Her songs incorporate yoga, tai chi, aerobics and plyometrics in various ways and often with animal imagery. Children, for example, might pick up their heart rates by running to chase a dog named Joe. Or they might do the tree pose from yoga by standing like a flamingo with the sole of one foot on the side of the other leg’s shin. In the penguin dance they’ll jump up and down, slide from side to side, flap their arms and run in place.

“The point is to help kids celebrate their inner athlete by making moving fun and also encourage them to use their bodies for the rest of their lives,” she said.

Ms. Otey’s career in children’s fitness began 15 years ago when her first son was born prematurely after 30 weeks of pregnancy. He weighed just 2 pounds 5 ounces. While he was in the hospital’s neonatal unit, she sang him songs that she had created. She continued singing through his early years and saw him bouncing to the rhythm of her words. Using her background as a fitness instructor, she eventually created a structured routine for him to follow and was so inspired by his responses that she decided to spread her message beyond her family. (She has another son who is 12.)

These days gym classes for children as young as 6 months are big business. Chains like My Gym, Gymboree and the Little Gym offer up to a dozen classes a day.

I signed up my daughter for such a class when she was a year old, mostly to give both of us something enjoyable to do to pass the morning. The hourlong class at [74th Street Magic](#), a recreation center for children on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, was in a spacious gym with a balance beam, a trampoline and bars. Julie Flansbaum, the program director there, said that the center’s 80 weekly gym classes were meant to help children develop gross motor skills and coordination and to teach them to be active later in life.

Experts agree that these classes, and people like Ms. Otey, can have some impact in teaching youngsters to exercise.

“Children can benefit from moving in a structured way, like these programs provide, but the bigger picture is that kids need to move every day — be it running around the park, or dancing at home,” said Dr. Mary Lou Gavin, a pediatrician in Delaware who is the medical editor for [KidsHealth.org](#), a consumer site for children’s health information. “Taking a weekly class or going to a fitness show isn’t going to be enough.”

It remains to be seen if the gym class Meenakshi took as a baby or Miss Amy’s CD will instill a lifelong enthusiasm for fitness. For now, she’s happy to talk about jumping on the trampoline or to insist that I play the songs so she can do “animal dances.” And I’m satisfied enough to know she’s occupied and happy.