



The 21st-Century Gym

New Ways to Move



From the moment their shoes and socks are off,
the children are ready and raring to go.

The gym at WSMS has undergone a dramatic transformation this year. Gone is the enormous cargo net, beloved by students for as long as anyone can remember. In its place is a wide and enticing array of brand-new gym equipment. Brightly colored, sturdy, and easy to assemble, these pieces are designed to serve multiple functions, all to facilitate imaginary play, social interaction, and creative approaches to gross motor development.

“In the past, kids would spend most of their gym time running around,” recalls Katherine Fordney, head teacher of 4Wpm. “And some of the kids would move the tumbling mats around to create obstacle courses, but that always took a lot of time and effort. Now, everything is ready to be utilized immediately, and the kids get a much more satisfying workout.”

It all began when Head of School Mimi Basso invited Arlene Baily, MS, OTR/L, PC, to be this year’s visiting scholar. Arlene is the founder and director of Leaps And Bounds (The LAB!), a pediatric occupational therapy (OT) practice with a sensory gym on the Upper West Side. Arlene brings to WSMS more than 30 years of OT experience and a wealth of knowledge about sensory integration and its impact on learning.

“Babies receive a lot of sensory input even before they’re born, and it is from this stimulation that they begin to learn,” Arlene explains. “When infants are being rocked, they experience a

sense of movement that is both calming and organizing; they gain a sense of where their body is in space. Young children continue to develop this awareness throughout their day, but particularly when they’re playing and moving around.”

Mimi enlisted Arlene to select and acquire those pieces of gym equipment that would promote this sensory integration as well as gross motor development, but that would also be open-ended enough to offer children multiple options for creative problem-solving and the building of social skills. Early in the school year Arlene taught workshops to the WSMS faculty, teaching them how to use the equipment safely and how to reap the greatest benefits from it for their students. Arlene has consulted with the teachers in the gym as well.

The equipment that Arlene selected for WSMS includes the Jump & Play Island, a large rubber inner tube with long poles rising from the center that offer support while children bounce or jump; the In-FUN-ity Climbing System, consisting of a wall ladder, monkey bars, and the ever popular steamroller ramp; the Water Lily system, an assortment of low balance beams and water lily-shaped islands that can be endlessly reconfigured; and the Play Loft, featuring a ladder, a top deck, a cozy padded foam pit underneath, and a “bumpy” slide. There are many smaller pieces of equipment as well, such as the Balance Arch, which can be used as a climbing bridge or a rocker; the Roller Tunnel, a large

padded nylon hoop that can serve as a crawl-inside treadmill; and the Roller Racer, a seated scooter propelled by the rider's hands and arms.

Every gym session begins with the teachers

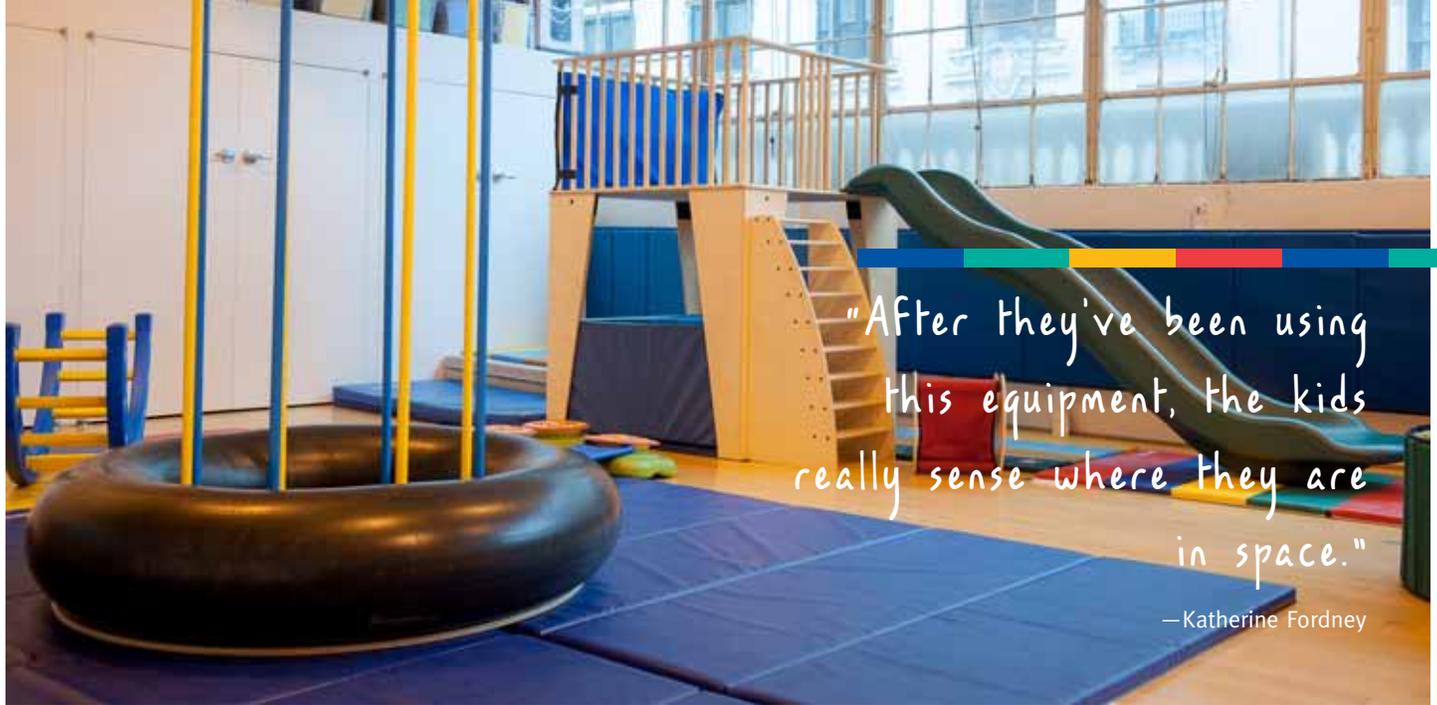
go down the slide feet first, etc. The children use the equipment barefoot; doing so gives them better footing and heightens their body awareness. Beyond the safety parameters, students are free to experiment and explore.



Not only are the children having a blast and getting a terrific workout, they are performing important sensory work. According to Arlene, our senses allow us to experience and interact more readily with the world around us. The three senses that normally develop in early childhood and have a fundamental impact on body awareness are the *tactile*, *vestibular*, and *proprioceptive* senses. The tactile sense, or the sense of touch, is the most familiar concept; it is one of the traditional five senses of the body. The vestibular sense, controlled by sensory organs located in the inner ear, permits perception of the orientation and movement of one's head and body. It is strongly linked to one's sense of equilibrium. Proprioception is the ability to sense the position of the parts of the body in relation to one another, and the ability to perceive body position, personal boundaries, etc., based on stimuli transmitted to the muscles and joints. It is proprioception that enables us to perceive where parts of our

reminding students of the various safety rules: children may run around the room, but only in one direction (counterclockwise); they may not climb on top of the climbing system; they must





"After they've been using this equipment, the kids really sense where they are in space."

—Katherine Fordney

body are in space, even with our eyes closed. It also helps us feel calmer and more focused.

"One of the things that's really unique about this equipment is that it takes so many different senses into account," Katherine observes. "The children are having more adventurous experiences with their bodies now. When kids are rocking on the Balance Arch with their heads closer to the ground than their feet, you can see that they're discovering something about their bodies. When kids slide down the steamroller ramp, they're putting positive impact

"After they've been using this equipment, the kids really sense where they are in space. They've done work that makes their core as accessible as possible, so they're more coordinated. They've discharged all this frenetic energy, so now they can settle down and concentrate on their work. When they're with their friends in the classroom they can truly connect, because they aren't distracted by the need for physical exertion. They're more present; they make better eye contact. And because their bodies are relaxed and at attention, the children have a bigger threshold with which to deal with the unexpected."

on their joints, which lets them really feel the ground beneath them and make tangible contact with the environment. Other children need a quiet space that offers fewer stimuli; they might visit the cozy pit. This equipment accommodates that spectrum."

In addition to the many physical benefits children gain from using this equipment—stronger muscles, greater flexibility, improved posture and balance—Arlene frequently reminds teachers of the less obvious benefits that are just as important: higher body and spatial awareness, improved motor planning, and increased self-regulation.

"If children spend half an hour running around aimlessly, many of them can get worked up and have difficulty settling down afterwards," Arlene points out. "If, on the other hand, those children perform concrete intentional movements such as climbing a ladder, catching a ball, pulling a rope, or pressing up against a wall with their hands, that activity is ultimately calming."

Arlene knows from her experience working with children that this kind of calming, centering activity has a positive effect that lasts long after the kids have left the gym. Katherine concurs:

On those days when the gym is not available to a class, the teachers make a point of including gross motor development activities in the classroom, many of which have been recommended by Arlene.

"We frequently take 'body breaks,' during which everyone can stretch and move around using yoga mats, Therabands, jumping squares," Katherine explains. "Kids can now recognize that need in themselves and can say, 'I think I need a body break.'"

It is this awareness of self that Arlene and the faculty at WSMS have been working together to nurture. Katherine offers an anecdote about a girl in her classroom who for months was reluctant to go down the slide in the gym. Over the course of a few weeks she would sometimes climb a couple of rungs of the ladder leading up to the slide, then go back down. Eventually she would make it to the top deck, then climb back down the ladder. One day she decided she was ready. She zoomed down the slide, jumped up with delight, and ran straight to the ladder to do it again. It was her personal victory, unhurried and unheralded. And it's a perfect example of the personal victories and discoveries happening every day in the WSMS gym this year.