

Step into the circus

When Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi was a child, the circus was her playground. The daughter in a family acrobatic act, the Hernandez Troupe, she knew how to unicycle, swing on the trapeze, juggle and climb the Spanish web by the time she was 7. Today the former Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus performer is sharing her expertise with kids at the Actors Gymnasium Circus and Performing Arts School in Evanston.

"Traditionally, circus is not taught," says Hernandez-DiStasi, the artistic director of the Actors Gymnasium and head circus arts teacher who helped found the school in 1995. "It's handed down in the family. But now with Cirque de Soleil and other classes, it's not as much of a family tradition. Now anyone can try it."

The nine-week classes for 8- to 19-year-olds cost between \$140 to \$170 and rotate through different skill sets each week, beginning with tumbling then working up to movements on the trapeze and Spanish web. Children are also taught how to walk on stilts and juggle. Two four-week-long day camps are also offered throughout the summer for \$780 per session. The camps culminate in a performance for parents.

"It's the best way for kids to get into shape because it builds strength in parts of the body that you wouldn't normally use," Hernandez-DiStasi says.

With parent-tot circus classes for 2- and 3-year-olds, even the little ones won't be left out.

"Parent-tot classes are really important because there is a lot of social development going on like taking turns and listening," says Sarah Goeden, the parent-tot circus instructor. "Parents can help socialize their children and help them become more comfortable in a class with other kids."

For Laura Glenn and her 2-year-old daughter Mary Lister, the parent-tot class offers a 40-minute break from their normal routine. "We both look forward to Thursdays," Glenn says. "I'm getting exercise, which I wasn't really expecting, and her physical abilities are accelerating."

And according to Jared Kling, the general director of The Actors Gymnasium, class enrollment sizes are accelerating, too. The number of classes has more than doubled since 1995 and more than 300 kids are currently enrolled.

"We're certainly seeing a growing need (for circus classes)," says Kling. "It's a fulfilling activity for kids and something they can get excited about."

For more information visit www.actorsgymnasium.com or www.circesteem.org.