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Rock On

Climbing the walls is a good thing at Earth Treks.

Elizabeth Schuman
Special to the Jewish Times

Once upon a time, a kid's climbing universe was limited to trees, fences and, ahem, furniture. But this is the 21st century and there are other mountains to scale — literally.

Welcome to indoor rock climbing, where artificial rocks make climbing a year-round endeavor. One of the most popular sites to finesse those climbing skills is at Earth Treks, which bills itself as the largest indoor gym in the United States.

For kids who may be put off by more competitive team sports, rock climbing is the ideal way to build skills, improve self-confidence and work toward personal goals, says Chris Jenkins, director of programming at Earth Treks, which has centers in Timonium, Columbia and Rockville. "Rock climbing is more about the individual challenge, combining the physical with the mental."

With 15,000 square feet of climbing surfaces, Earth Treks opened its first location in Columbia 10 years ago and boasts of teaching some 19,000 individuals since then. The centers are hubs of activity. Kids and adults scramble vertically up walls covered with textured cement, with handholds placed at various spots from top to bottom. Shorter walls are for "bouldering" or free-climbing, and the taller ones are equipped with ropes to secure climbers as they make their way upward. While climbing may seem to be second nature, learning the right way to do it is a science, requiring strict attention to proper technique, precise rope skills and sharp mental focus.

Not surprisingly, there are numerous physical benefits of using one's arms and legs to propel up the side of a mountain. To start, young people improve their balance, footwork and movement. Then, there is the mental exercise. "These kids are not competitive," says Mr. Jenkins. "What climbing does is allow these

kids to set a goal, see it develop and then go higher."

Further, young climbers build self-esteem, both by meeting personal challenges and learning how to help one another through the climbing course. That sense of responsibility and teamwork translates into valuable life skills, he says.

While Earth Treks offers year-round programming, classes and birthday parties (age 6 and older), about nine years ago the company began offering summer camps, in

response to child and parent requests.

Today, there are four camps, designed for all skill levels, from the newbie to the experienced adventurer. "Kids Kamp" is an introductory session for the younger climber, age 6 to 9. The one-week session includes basic climbing skills and team building. "Summer Climbing Day Camp" provides a blend of indoor and outdoor climbing activities. Campers spend two days climbing at the indoor center, then take their skills on the road with climbing at Great Falls in Virginia, or



Sydney Speizman scales a wall at Earth Treks.

PHOTO ANDY COOK

either Carderock Recreation Park or Rock State Park, both in Maryland.

For those seeking a bit more sizzle in their camp, Earth Treks works with Ultimate Watersports, an outdoor recreation company, to provide "Rock 'n' River" camp, a combination rock climbing and kayaking program. The first half of the session is spent at Earth Treks; the second half is devoted to kayaking on the Gunpowder River and learning the intricacies of recreational paddling. Certified

in the summer climbing day camp, splitting her time between the indoor course at Columbia and Great Falls. She's looking forward to honing her outdoor technical climbing skills.

As with many climbers, Sydney's interest was piqued during a birthday party. Her mother recalls how she kept talking about climbing and "pestered her" to sign up for a camp session. "Even now, she insists on returning each year. She's pretty adamant and driven about this.

"What climbing does is allow these kids to set a goal, see it develop and then go higher."

— Chris Jenkins

instructors also touch on sea kayaking, white water rafting, tides and currents, and water safety. Finally, Earth Treks recently initiated the "Advanced Rock 'n' River Camp," which ramps the session up with more emphasis on white water rafting.

The variety and skill building keep campers like Sydney Speizman, 12, returning. This summer will mark her fourth year at Earth Treks. In contrast to the idea of a climber who rejects other sports, Sydney is an active athlete, playing soccer, field hockey, lacrosse and swimming. But it's the lure of the climb that keeps her coming back.

"It's so much fun and I get a little better each time I do it," says this seventh-grader who lives in Fulton, Md. "I've learned how to climb, belay and tie the knots. I use all my muscles — arm strength to pull and my legs to push."

Her mother sees another perk. "Climbing was the earliest sport Sydney did and it has given her a confidence the other sports have not," says Faith Horowitz. "Because of climbing, she is very confident, especially in relation to her peers."

Ms. Horowitz takes pride in seeing how her daughter helps others on the course, teaching newer students and supporting experienced climbers as they scale the walls.

This year, Sydney will participate

Elizabeth Schuman is a local freelance writer in Baltimore.

She enjoys it so much that I don't think she will ever give it up," says Ms. Horowitz.

The best thing, says Sydney, a year-round athlete, is that the concept of climbing is not about winning. Rather "it's about getting to the top and pushing yourself through it." The lessons translate into academics. "When I do a project, I think about the goal and set about reaching it. I know that if I try, I can learn it," Sydney says.

When her school, Glenelg Country School, opted to hold an event at the center, Sydney was a natural leader, introducing the sport to her classmates. Further, when Glenelg partnered with an inner city school and invited students to the center, Sydney again took a leadership role and encouraged others to try it, says her mother.

"Climbing is a lifelong sport," says Dave Hudson, summer camp director. "It's not about being the biggest, fastest or strongest, it's about learning how to do a lifelong activity."

As expected, safety is a serious concern, but children are supervised closely and all advanced climbers must be proficient in belay techniques. "Safety concerns are taught throughout," adds Mr. Hudson, who adds that ropes and harnesses are standard equipment. "As the children get older, they learn the finer points of positioning and movement." □



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