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TOTAL PRESCHOOL;  
KIDS USE BODIES AS WELL AS MINDS AT NEW **FRANKLIN  
ATHLETIC CLUB** PROGRAM

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For many parents, finding a preschool program can be a scary and nerve-racking experience, as Jamie Foster can attest. "I wanted to find a school that would be a good place for my daughter and make me feel comfortable with leaving her," said Foster, whose daughter Rileigh is 4. Then Foster found the **Franklin Athletic Club's** academic preschool program, which started in September. "I have seen her whole attitude toward going to school change and she doesn't cry when I drop her off," said Foster, who lives in Southfield. The preschool, which has about 24 students, offers a variety of academics, including math, science and language arts, as well as arts and music and recreation. It has drawn kids from the Birmingham-Bloomfield area as well as Southfield, where the club is located. In addition to learning the alphabet, numbers and basic conversational Spanish, the children are taught swimming, tennis and yoga. "They are learning, but through fun experiences," said Deanna Cortese, director of the program. A typical school day begins at 9 a.m. and ends at 12:30 p.m. for a child in the half-day program, or 4 p.m. for a child attending the whole day. Tuition for a full-time student is \$760 a month; it's \$720 a month for a child attending for a half day. The children rotate among activities such as academics, yoga, tennis, swimming, art, music or playtime, which gives them access to an inflatable house they can bounce around in, a rock-climbing wall and a rope for swinging. For 20 years, the **Franklin Athletic Club** has been nestled near the intersection of **Franklin** Road and Northwestern Highway. Originally known as a racquetball club, **Franklin Athletic Club** has a full gymnasium with fitness machines, swimming pools and exercise rooms. "The club underwent a \$2-million renovation two years ago," Cortese said. "The children have 200,025 square feet of space at their disposal." Physical activity is one of the reasons Jamila Steward sends her 3-year-old son, Blake Goodman, to the preschool. "When I looked into the program, I was just impressed with it, especially in terms of physical education," said Steward, who lives with her son in West Bloomfield. "It is \$40 more than the Kindercare program I sent him to, but he has gained so much more." For academics, lead teacher Heidi Buechler focuses on fun activities that have a purpose. "By the time they leave me they will know the alphabet and their numbers and some of them will know how to read," Buechler said. "They will also know how to dress themselves and put their shoes on. They will know how to use their words and they will be self-motivated." Buechler, who has been teaching the preschool age group for four years, also emphasizes socialization and sometimes pairs a shy child with an outgoing child for activities throughout the day. "Having them paired with a peer gives them social skills," said Buechler, who spends time observing the students and giving parents

feedback. In addition to socialization, Buechler also encourages discussions about making right and wrong decisions and allows children to work at a comfortable pace. "I also have a very high-energy classroom, which allows me to do a lot with them," Buechler said. "There's a lot of singing and dancing, which draws them in and makes them excited." According to Patricia Morandin, Buechler's style with the children is what made her 4-year-old son, Donovan Morandin, want to go to school. "She always greets them with a smile. She's very dedicated to the children and you can see it every day. You can never tell if she's having a bad day," said Morandin, who lives in Bloomfield Hills. "My son started out very reserved and he learned to play with other kids and be more social. He made a lot of friends there." Although preschool programs generally run on the cycle of a typical school year, Cortese said **Franklin** plans to have the program running year-round with a review during the summer of academic material and more emphasis on playtime and being outside. For more information about the preschool, call the **Franklin Athletic Club** at 248-352-8000 or visit [www.franklinclub.com](http://www.franklinclub.com). Contact MELANIE D. SCOTT at 248-351-3681 or [mdscott@freepress.com](mailto:mdscott@freepress.com) ILLUSTRATION: Photos by WILLIAM ARCHIE Detroit Free Press