

Success in business is simply child's play

by Linda Whitney

THERE are more than 11 million children in the UK, so businesses offering childcare and children's activities have plenty of scope for growth.

Many of them are franchises, and they particularly appeal to parents. Nigel Toplis, who runs the children's activity franchise ComputerXplorers, says: 'Franchises which are children-based often offer the opportunity to work from home. So you can fit the job around your family, and operational costs are lower than franchises requiring premises.'

ComputerXplorers franchisees run classes in local schools and venues offering Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in which children improve their academic and computer skills through subjects such as rocketeering, film-making, robotics, crime scene investigation and clay animation.

You do not need an ICT or teaching background, as the £24,500 franchise fee includes training, technology and lesson plans.

If you have no childcare experience, it might pay to get some before you start and think hard about how many hours you can spare. 'You can run a Go-Kart Party franchise part-time, but most of the work is at weekends,' says Gerry Usher.

His franchisees run a mobile Go-Kart track, which can be set up at events such as fetes, carnivals, corporate days and sports events,



Picture: MARK RICHARDS

which the franchisees find for themselves. Investment is £25,000 (the VAT is being waived at present), for which you get training and all the equipment, including

four karts. Franchisors will expect you to be committed to building a business, and you will need to put in a minimum number of hours in order to make a profit. 'To be

HELPING CHILDREN TO LEARN NEW SKILLS IS SO REWARDING

'I FEEL we got into the ComputerXplorers franchise at just the right time,' says Nicola Petty. She started the franchise in Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire, in September 2008, and now provides educational and fun ICT classes for children aged three to 13. 'The recent Rose review of primary education said that ICT should be one of the core parts of the school curriculum by 2012, and by 2010 all schools have to provide extended activities covering 8am to 6pm year-round, so when we are selling our service to schools we are knocking on an open door,' says Nicola, 43.

The business now offers ICT sessions for children in schools and community centres throughout the Cotswolds, aided by 12 teachers. The children use interactive

software featuring film and television characters such as Nemo (from the film Finding Nemo) and Bob the Builder, to boost literacy and numeracy, and they also learn basic computer programming by instructing Beebot the robot. The business took off quickly. 'Demand was phenomenal, so my husband Andrew has now joined the business,' says Nicola, (pictured with Andrew and one of their many props).

'I would advocate working with children — they are such a source of enjoyment and we can bring fun into education,' says Nicola, a former head of telephony and web at Lloyds TSB registrars, who took redundancy two years ago. 'Helping children develop and learn new skills is so rewarding and at the same time you get the sheer joy of building a business.'

successful, you should put in 25-30 hours a week at least,' says Fenella Lindsell of Yoga Bugs, a franchise that offers yoga classes for children. 'They could be playing at meeting dinosaurs or talking to mermaids, while boosting the agility, strength and capacity for relaxation,' says Mrs Lindsell.

You do not have to be a yoga teacher yourself, as you can employ qualified yoga teachers, mostly in schools as part of government-funded programmes to reduce obesity. The £15,000 initial fee includes free training for yourself — plus your first three yoga teachers — to Government-recognised standards.

Research the franchise carefully

to check exactly how much you need to invest. Pop Stars Academy franchisees run children's dance classes and parties, so you have to set aside money for equipment.

'Our franchise costs £9,995, plus £4,000 for equipment such as microphones and music systems, and working capital to tide you over the first few months — about £16,000 to £17,000 in all,' says Jo Franks of Pop Stars Academy.

Potential franchisees can employ professional dance teachers to run their activities while they run the business.

CHILD fitness franchises are doing well, on the back of concerns about obesity and Government targets for increasing children's activity.

The FitKid franchise involves running fitness sessions for children in venues you find for yourself. You do not have to have a family to get involved, but if you are already part of a community of local parents, it will be easier to make the right connections,' says Nicky Kay of FitKid.

In September, FitKid is launching a new venture in partnership with Magnús Scheving, the man behind the children's television show LazyTown, which features sports fans Sportacus and Stephanie.

Franchisees will deliver LazyTown Sports Club classes and parties, with specially designed lessons, including LazyTown music and branded parachutes, space hoppers and balls.

The FitKid franchise alone costs £7,500; with the LazyTown Sport Club franchise, it is £15,000.

■ ComputerXplorers 01530 513308; Yoga Bugs 0208 772 1800; Pop Stars Academy 0870 850 6018; Go-Kart Party 0870 116 2000; FitKid and LazyTown Sports Club 08700 851 000

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN INTO SPORTS

'I HAD never worked with children before taking up a FitKid franchise in January this year,' says Phil George, from Islington, North London, who was made redundant from an information technology job in the City.

'I find it fascinating because each child has his or her own personality.'

Phil and wife Amy, 28 (pictured with Edward, 14 months), are currently running fitness sessions for children aged six to nine in a local school, but have also put on sessions at parties, and are shortly running a session for pre-school children at a local café aimed at mums and toddlers.

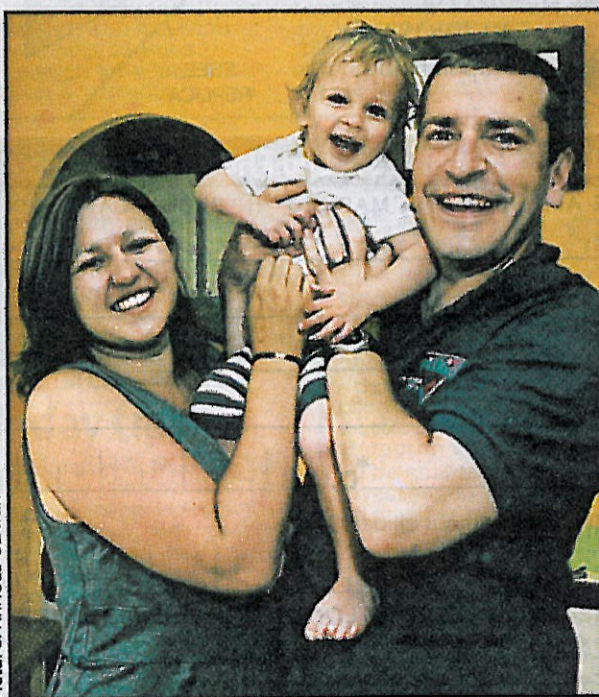
'I chose the franchise because I have always been keen on sports and I wanted to be my own boss so I could spend more time with Edward,' says Phil.

The franchisor provided training, including the use of control words to bring children back to focus on what

you are saying. 'If you find the children are getting too boisterous or going outside boundaries, you can call out a pre-arranged phrase such as "dead ants!" which means they have to lie on their backs and kick their legs in the air, and a new game starts,' says Amy. The couple also have to market their business. 'I have contacted local schools' extended schools coordinators, who are trying to ensure schools meet their targets of achieving five hours of physical education for children a week, so they are looking for opportunities to supply that,' says Phil.

He and Amy are both looking forward to offering the new LazyTown Sports Club classes when FitKid launches them in September.

'All the young children know about LazyTown because it is regularly on TV, so we are keen to get involved,' says Phil.



Picture: ARNOLD SLATER