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On the ball and energized

May 08, 2011 | By Kristin E. Holmes, Inquirer Staff Writer

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(Page 2 of 2)

In Gittings' and Giuliano's classes, students alternately shift positions on the ball and sit still. They bounce on them when allowed, and one boy even manages to sit upright with his feet tucked under him.

Giuliano, who practices meditation and yoga, got the idea to use the exercise balls from her husband, who works for a company whose employees sit on exercise balls. The bosses found that the chair replacement helped raise productivity.

Giuliano thought she'd try it with her students.

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She introduced the idea at a back-to-school night in September. Parents had to buy the balls on their own for about \$5. Within three weeks, all the students had them.

"I wasn't sure about the idea at first," said Ellen Chan, whose son Michael, 11, is in Giuliano's class. "When you think yoga balls, you think exercise and the YMCA, but it sounded interesting."

A month after Giuliano's class got the orbs, Gittings' class wanted them, too. The teachers' classes are pen pals, and when Giuliano's students mentioned the balls in their letters, Gittings' students wanted their own.

It took about a week to get used to the balls, the students said, and there were a few tumbles, but no one was hurt. Ryan Richardson, 11, was sitting in a chair last week because he had fallen and decided it was time for a break from the ball.

Teachers in U.S. classrooms started introducing the practice about 10 years ago, Ratey said.

Lisa Witt started sitting on one at her desk and then introduced the practice to her students. In 2004, she started WittFitt L.L.C., a Wisconsin company that has since supplied exercise balls, training, and instructional materials to teachers in more than 600 schools.

"I believe we should invite movement into the classroom in a safe and effective manner," Witt said. "The body is not meant to be still."

In ancient Greece, lessons were often conducted while students and teachers were standing up and going on walks, Kilbourne said. The practice of sitting to learn emerged in the Middle Ages with its strict codes of behavior, he said.

Gittings and Giuliano have established rules about the use of the balls in the classrooms.

Students are allowed to bounce up and down only at certain times. Throwing the balls and rolling them around as toys is prohibited. Students must help store the balls each day, piling them up on top of desks in what they call a "yoga mountain."

Gittings and Giuliano concede that the exercise balls might not be for everyone. There's the constant

rubbing rubber noise on the floor - and the bouncing.

Next year, Penn Wood Elementary School in Westtown Township will use the balls in its reading room. Gittings and Giuliano hope the practice spreads. So does Abby Gaskill, 11, who will be entering sixth grade.

"It's going to stink next year," Gaskill said. "I'll ask the teacher if we can buy one, and they'll probably say, 'No.' But I'll deflate one and put it in my locker - just in case."

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