

Preschool Gymnastics

Preschool Gymnastics: Make It Educational, Not Recreational

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Your lessons should be the most expensive in town. If they aren't, you're short-changing yourself and your staff. If you don't have the money to pay your staff top wages, purchase the latest equipment, and buy products to improve your curriculum, your program will become stagnant. In order to charge competitive rates and stay in business, you have to deliver the goods. When preparing to write their monthly check to the gym club, each parent wonders, "Is this worth it?" Every lesson, you must make those parents say, "WOW!" With your exceptional staff, facility, and curriculum, you can do this. The easiest way, however, to make parents appreciate your program is to show them that you are more educational than recreational.

Parents are willing to pay more for education than recreation. They'll pay more for their child to learn than to play. Now, how do you demonstrate the educational value of your program? First of all, you must educate the parents on the benefits of the program. This starts with their first contact with you-usually a phone call. Prepare your office staff to know exactly what you want them to say. Prepare out a "cheat-sheet" containing all the vital information. Place it near the phone, so whoever answers the phone can give intelligent, informative answers. At my gym, we have an the "over the phone registration form." This is a checklist to ensure that the office person relays all necessary information. When the customer first brings their child into the gym, take time to give them a tour of the facility-use this visit to explain what the class will be like and the main objectives of this type of class.

From their first contact with your gym, use vocabulary that reminds them of an educational setting such as: tuition rather than class fees; institute, academy or school rather than club; teacher not instructor; semester instead of session, report cards instead of evaluations; student not child; and administrator not director. Use words such as school secretary, curriculum, lesson plans, school policies, or teacher's open house rather than open gym.

Gear your advertising to suggest a school, not gymnastics club, setting. At the bottom of my print advertisements, I use "your educational gymnastic experts since 1969."

I recommend your preschool program has its own name such as Tumblebear Gym, Tiny Tumblers, Tiny Tot Fitness, or Kangaroo Kids. Create a name that best describes what you'll be doing in class. Make sure the curriculum reflects the selected name. "Tumblebear Gym Program" is the name our preschool program and my gym name is "Patti's All-American Gymnastics." The special name gives the program its identity. Our mascots are Tina and Teddy Tumblebear. Instead of me (Patti) writing notes to the parents about upcoming events etc., and signing my name-I sign it, "Love, Teddy." The word Tumblebear indicates that tumbling will be involved and bears connotes young children. I didn't name it Tumblebear Gymnastics Program, because I knew I would be doing other activities in class

than just gymnastics. For instance we use a parachute occasionally. We do hand/eye coordination drills as well as have music and use props such as ropes, hoops, sticks, scarves, and balls. If you're going to do creative movement, then call it "American Academy's Creative Movement Program." But, if your customer comes in expecting straight bars, beam, floor, and vault and you have them do a lummi stick routine and throw bean bags into laundry baskets, they'll be disappointed. You have to give the customer what they expect. If your office manager educates them during the initial phone inquiry as to what their child will be doing in class, they won't be disappointed.

It is important to develop a mission statement and/or a philosophy. Post this on the lobby wall and in the gym-then, live by it. Be sure all employees are aware of, and agree with, your Mission.

If you allow parents to watch the classes, talk to them during or after the class about what you and the teachers are doing and why. When teaching a parent/tot class, you have a prime opportunity to explain the program within the class period. Use phrases such as, "child directed," "teachable moment," and "success oriented" to enhance credibility. Explain to the parents that learning some basic movements at a young age helps the children learn regular gymnastics skills more easily later on-for example, learning animal walks will later assist their child to learn a cartwheel. This is accomplished by having the child understand the difference between a bent knee and a straight leg in a camel walk and a bear walk. Explain that going sideways down a balance beam improves the child's laterality-one of the functions of reading readiness. Getting into kindergarten and passing the pre-kindergarten testing is a big deal to these parents. Get a copy test(s) used in your school district to determine children's readiness for kindergarten. We selected four of the twelve areas from the test used in my school system (which is standard for the state of Indiana). These areas are:

- gross motor skills
- rote counting
- identification of body parts
- follows verbal directions

If parents believe that participation in your program better prepares they are helping their preschool child to better prepare them for school, they won't quit your program. And, if they really believe in your program they will spread the word to their friends.

In your lesson plans you can introduce a word of the week, or color of the week, or letter or number of the week. Incorporate items like this in your teaching even if it isn't structured on your lesson plan. Put on your lesson plan a section entitled, "Educational Aspects". When preparing your lesson plan, take a few moments to jot down those important reasons and relay them to the parents.

When preparing literature about your preschool program, use those familiar buzz-phrases of the 90's such as "developmentally appropriate skills" and "age appropriate activities." Developmentally appropriate skills are those that a child could be ready for according to their physical or mental capacity rather than by age they are. For example, a hot-shot five-year-old could be ready for back handspring drills because she/he has been in the program for three years and has demonstrated sufficient shoulder flexibility and arm strength, etc. Most gymnastics skills appear to be somewhat age-related, not age determined. Age-appropriate means just that-activities that are appropriate for a particular age. For example,

a Barney song for warm-up would be appropriate for a parent and tot class for two-year-olds, but it would die in a class of five-year-olds.

With all the education the children are getting (and don't realize it), they need to have fun, too. One of the easy ways we create super excitement is with themes. I have included an example of a Power Rangers' lesson plan. Notice the educational opportunities involved in this lesson. The major educational aspect is color identification. Other great examples of educational lesson plan themes include: dinosaur week, outer space week, Hawaiian week (we talk about all the islands and customs), fire safety week, traffic safety week, and physical fitness week.

I suggest that you repeat the lesson plan two weeks on a row, especially the theme weeks. There is so much to do and children need repetition. The only people who get bored with repeating the lesson plans are those teachers who teach 20 classes a week. Which means they get to do the limbo 40 times during Hawaiian Week!

Utilize all of the preschool staff to assist with lesson planning-this creates ownership and makes them understand the reason behind the lesson. They will be better able to effectively relate (and sell) the plan to the parents.

The integrated components of a successful lesson plan are: a well-rounded, solid curriculum, movement concepts and motor skills, affective development (social skills), fitness, dance and rhythms, educational aspects, games and music, and safety. Each of these components make up an effective lesson plan. To make a successful program you have to add a clean, bright gym, and an enthusiastic, caring staff. With these three keys, you can be a success!

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