

Organized Chaos: There's an Anaconda in our Class!

The Use of Redirection in Class Management

by Beth Gardner, Acrotex Gymnastics Preschool Director

"Coach Beth, Coach Beth! Come here QUICK! There's an anaconda under our tramp!" I was recently coaching a 3 & 4 year old class at the trampolines when Ryan, one of the little boys, came running up to me with a dire expression on his face. He was intent on showing me the anaconda he had inadvertently spotted lurking beneath our trampolines. It was clearly evident that he was very concerned, so I followed him back to the spot where he had been sitting as he had awaited his turn.



By the time I got there, he had already planted his face between the springs of the trampoline and was staring into the tramp pit, searching for the anaconda. The other children, upon hearing the news of the snake slithering around beneath them, were also interested in seeing this zoological wonder we kept in our gym.

The next thing I knew, I had a line of kids, faces wedged between the tramp springs, staring into the tramp pit. It occurred to me that I might have lost their attention for the moment. Split jumps would have to wait. After all, it isn't often that one can view an anaconda in the gym.



So, down I went to join the fantasy! I lined up with them, buried my face between the springs and became fully involved in THE GREAT ANACONDA HUNT. Ryan had EVEN seen its EYES! As we searched, we continued to talk through the springs. We discussed the fact that OUR anaconda was a NICE anaconda and it should have a name if it was to be member of our class. So, we took a class vote and named our anaconda "ANNIE."

We, of course, never saw Annie because she was OBVIOUSLY hiding from us at the time. By ALL accounts, however, Annie was HUGE! Once we had settled on her name and the fact that Annie was a friendly snake, the children tired of the search and one by one went back to their trampolines and back to their split jumps. Such is a 3-year-old class.

One of my greatest joys in life is working with my "gymbabies." As Preschool Director for Acrotex Gymnastics, I am known as "Coach Beth," a role I cherish because I gain so much, personally, through watching the children grow as individuals as well as gymnasts. Their little imaginations and perspectives are gold mines for both humor and truth.

Why Should We "Join The Fantasy?"

Their young minds and hearts, open to the world, are ready and willing to "soak in" everything around them.

As a gymnastics coach, I am certainly interested in teaching them gymnastics skills,

coordination and comfort in movement. In addition to that, however, I must attempt to teach these children, ages 2 to 5 years old, effective group interaction and the concept of class-participation. In many cases, the preschool gym class is the first experience outside of the home environment in which they participate.

Above all else, it is my job to provide them a safe, fun and loving environment in which to learn. It is my responsibility to treat them with respect and as individuals, meeting their individual needs as much as I possibly can within the one hour I see them each week. It is also my job to give each child success, regardless of talent or potential. No matter what his or her behavior, I must remember that each child is someone's most cherished baby.

With all these goals in mind, I face each class, some more daunting than others, with a clear plan. Lesson plan laid out, set-up in place, I walk onto the floor with the goal of teaching my students the best skills with the best form possible for their tender ages. Inevitably, however, they have their own agendas for that hour. They would much prefer to run amok, jumping into the pit or on the trampolines or hanging from the bar of their choice with little regard for skill-mastery. I would venture to say that anyone who has attempted to coach preschool gymnastics could relate to the chaos of which I speak.

The trick to running a successful preschool gymnastics class, then, hinges on my ability as the coach to capture and maintain the children's attention, keeping them on-task and focused on the skills. This requires the use of discipline, a gymnastics skill in its own right.

When I think of discipline or the "redirection of behavior," the word "time-out" immediately comes to mind. It is the most commonly used form of discipline in most of the preschool classes I have had the opportunity to observe. Unfortunately, it is a tool that is, perhaps, over-rated as well as over-used. It is a negative form of discipline, taking away from productive class time.

While I do use "time-out," I try to limit its use only to the most drastic of times when a child becomes violent toward another child or completely irrational, needing time to calm down. If nothing else works, it is my fallback discipline. Its use is a topic all its own.

With the limited class time we all have with our students, however, we must ask ourselves if there might not be a better way to keep the children on task rather than sitting them out every time they lose concentration. Further, given the impact we have on our students' lives, it is important to strive to be as positive as we possibly can be, giving to each child rather than taking from them.

Accepting their limited attention span due to their developmental stages, how can we punish them for being children? How can we penalize them for being normal in their stages of development? We should be nurturing them rather than taking the easy way out by simply removing them any time they do the "kid-thing," straying out of the gymnast order of focused work.

One way I have found to answer this issue is the use of their own imaginations to turn their attentions, or "redirect" them, toward the activities at hand, as described in the anaconda story. Giving the children ownership of the class by allowing their imagination and curiosity to become a positive part of the class gives them reason to feel good about themselves. It helps them to feel accepted and validates them as full-fledged and

contributing members of the class. It also gives each class its own dynamic and personality and allows the children to explore group interaction.

...And Why Does It Work???

The beauty of this technique is that, since they have limited attention spans, it doesn't take long for them to tire of the distracting activity. They can be just as easily drawn back toward the skill work as they were drawn away from it. It doesn't take long for one of them to head back to their tramp to resume jumping.

Then, with a simple, "HEY! Susie is doing her split jumps! Those are BEAUTIFUL split jumps! Susie, I am so proud of how hard you are working," the other children, wishing to be praised as well, run back to their tramps and begin split jumping "to beat the band."

If there is one child still distracted, I point out Susie's hard work to that child specifically, "Johnny, can you believe that Susie is doing her split jumps ALL BY HERSELF?" Hmmm...does Johnny want to be outdone? NO WAY! Johnny will tend to run back to his place anxiously waiting his turn to prove that he too can split jump ALL BY HIMSELF.

As for the anaconda hunt? Class resumed until the next major distraction, everyone happy with its outcome. Ryan was pleased at having his snake acknowledged. The other children were pleased to have been a part of a snake-safari and it provided a brief respite, or "brain-break" as I call it, from the concentration on the skill work.

Hey!! Not many children can boast at having an anaconda as a gym pet...but WE CAN!

Beth Gardner is the Preschool Director at Acrotex Gymnastics and her email address is: beth@bga.com

This article appears in the May 1998 issue of *Technique*, Vol. 18, No. 5.