

Organized Chaos: "The Great Cone Dilemma..."

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Cones provide a common distraction for the preschool gymnast. The first thing the children want to do is pick the cones up, look through the holes in the top, put them on top of their heads like hats or stack them on top of one another, rearranging the whole rotational set up. They love to explore the many possible uses of the cone. Their imaginations, once again, run amok with all the practical uses of the cone.

When faced with the cone dilemma, "joining the fantasy" is a very easy thing to do. I simply pick up the cone, mimicking the children's behavior. I put it on top of my head and then put it to my eye to look back at the kids through the hole like a telescope, "Hey, this is cool! I can see you! Can you see me?"

Then, the cone becomes a megaphone as I put it to my mouth; "Can you hear me now?" The children often stare at me incredulously, not believing that an adult can be as much taken with the ramifications of the cone as a toy as they are.

Once I have gained their attention with my own odd behavior, I continue to use it as a megaphone, "Hey, who can sit on the white line so I can show you what we are going to do today? ...OOPS! I need ALL the cones so I can do that! Could I borrow your cones, please?" The children, generally catatonic with shock, hand over their cones and we can proceed with the demonstration.

Another option is to allow each child a turn to wear the cone as a hat. Then they pass it on to the next child for their turn until the cone has made it to the end of the line.

Once each child has had a turn wearing the cone, I ask the child holding the cone to see if they can find the spot in which it belongs. This not only satisfies everyone's curiosity, but it also turns placing the cone back into the rotation into a guessing game. Often, if the child can't figure out where the cone belongs, the other children will help them replace the cone in its rightful place. Once the cone is replaced, we resume our class and everyone is satisfied at having had the opportunity to play with this marvelous and versatile object.

Monkeys See; Monkeys Do...Following The Leader

There are many ways to begin a rotation. It is hard for the preschooler to sit for prolonged periods of time watching the coach demonstrate a full rotation. I find that playing "follow the leader" through the rotation is a good way to begin.

The first time through the rotation, as the children fall in behind me, I don't concentrate on the details or form. My goal is to just get them moving as quickly as possible. This is

especially effective with the distracted 3-year-old class or the class with lots of little boys. Both of these groups tend to have special difficulty with remaining in one spot, keeping their hands to themselves and focusing on the coach's demonstration of an entire set-up.

We often sing as we go, "We're following the leader, the leader, the leader. We're following the leader, wherever he may go."

Once I have the children moving through the entire rotation, I stop at the first station, spot, and offer corrections or encouragement as they come through. Since I use skill-specific lesson plans, stations are often repeated on the same rotation. Once the child has received correction on the first station (which is usually the easiest and, therefore, the most repeated station) I am able to call across the rotation to her reminding her of the correction as she repeats it on subsequent stations.

After seeing each child through the first station at least once, I then move on to the next, repeating the process of spotting or encouraging each child as they come by and offering the corrections needed. Each time I move to the next station, the skills get a little more correction and the children become a little more adept at performing them. We continue this process until I have seen each child at each station at least once.

If there is a station on the rotation that is too difficult for the children to do without spot, I make sure they know to SKIP that station unless "Coach Beth" is there to help them. If they continue to attempt the station regardless of my warning to stay off of it, I move it away or in the case of vault or beam, where I can't move it easily, I block it with another mat. Another alternative would be to place another station in front of it to turn the traffic flow away from that station.

Add On Stations...One By One

Another variation to "following the leader" is the add-on technique. This is very effective with the younger or easily distracted classes.

While I typically like to have 9 or 10 stations on any given obstacle course or rotation to eliminate log-jams, it is impossible for some of the children to remember what they are supposed to do at each station if I demonstrate it at one time.

I try to keep in mind the "one, two, three rule" as put forth by the KAT teachings. It is a good rule of thumb that a 2-year-old can remember two directives, and a 3-year-old can remember three directives. So, I often start them on one, two or three stations and send them back to the first when they have completed the stations we have started.

This allows the children to become proficient at those first stations and gives them a clear understanding of what they are to do before they try to add any other activities. It also gets them up and moving so they are not waiting through the whole demonstration.

There are times when it takes the children a while to become adept at the skill work on the few stations with which we begin. Sometimes we run out of time before we are able to see all the stations on the rotation. As far as I am concerned, that's fine. I don't worry if we don't make it to all the stations on a particular rotation. They will have other opportunities to do the same skills in subsequent classes. I am more concerned that the children get the best

skill work on the stations they do attempt, than to develop poor skill habits by trying to cram in more than they are ready to do.

Further, for the Mom & Me classes, it helps "mom" understand what is going on at each station and gives me the opportunity to show her how to spot or what to correct as she carries her child through the rotation. It is important that "mom" understand how to spot safely and what constitutes improvement in skill-proficiency so she is correctly educated, therefore more comfortable and more willing to help in the class.

Listening Ears, Roly-Poly Eyes And In A Word – Magic!

Sometimes, I demonstrate the whole rotation before I "turn the kids loose" on the equipment. This is particularly appropriate after the children have participated in the class for a period of time and understand how to follow a rotational path. It also works well in the older preschool classes, generally, the 4-5 year olds. They have the ability to watch the demonstration and recall the activities at each station better than the younger children do.

Using consistent visual cues is very helpful. As the students learn the cues, they learn to "read" the set-up, recognize the stations and automatically know the activity they are to perform. This aids them in moving through the rotation, eliminating logjams. The more consistent the cues, the better the traffic flow.

Still, it's not an easy task for any preschooler to sit still for a prolonged period of time. It is therefore important that the demonstration be kept short and the details succinct. I try to make their wait, when they have to wait, as interesting as possible. My gymbabies and I have worked out a game:

As soon as we reach a rotation, I give them a definitive place to sit. "Hurry, hurry, who can sit on this white line?" (I sit on the white line.) Then as I stand up and face them to speak, "Turn on your listening ears" (make a gesture of turning a switch on each ear), "Turn up the volume" (verbally, "whoop, whoop, whoop"), "Give me your roly-poly eyes" (point to eyes), "Guess what my magic word is?" Each week we have a different "magic word."

The children love to guess at the word or make their own suggestions. I tell them the word of the week but if they want to choose a different one for their class, I let them decide **their** word for **their** class. They usually want to know my word anyway because it is like a secret password and they want in on the secret.

They lean forward to hear the word, and I lean forward to whisper it to them. "My word is... (dramatic pause)...LOLLIPOP!...What's my magic word?" They answer me, "Lollipop!"

Once they have said the magic word, it makes them responsible for remembering it and staying in their spots until I say "Lollipop!"...Or whatever the word may be for the week. If I forget to give them the word, they will even remind me, "Coach Beth, you didn't tell us your magic word this week." Once they know the game, they don't let me get away without fully informing them of our very important secret word. Once the word is settled upon, I run through the demonstration.

Occasionally a child will forget to wait for the magic word and will start to get up before I have said it. Then I simply have to say, "Ummmmmmmmmm! Did I say the magic word

yet? Hurry, hurry, get back to your spot before it runs away!" I cover my eyes with my hands and then say, "Tell me when you are in your spot and I can open my eyes! Are you in your spot? Can I open my eyes?"

If the child balks at returning to his or her spot, the other children will pull the stray child back into their seat so that I can open my eyes, "Yes, Coach Beth, you can open your eyes."...Snapping my fingers, "What was that magic word again?...I forgot." Again, the children tell me the magic word; "It's lollipop, Coach Beth." "Oh yeah...okay, stay right there until you hear me say lollipop."

Most of the time, they listen very carefully to hear the word. Once I finish the demonstration, I tell them they can line up behind me as soon as I say the magic word...then I pause...

"LOLLIPOP!"

BLAM! I have a line of children waiting behind me to start the rotation.

Uh, Mom...We're Over Here....

I love "Mom & Me" classes. They provide a great time to interact with the parents and to gain their confidence in my ability to teach their children. It is also a good time for the parents to relate to each other and share common experiences. Typically, these classes become social groups and often meet outside of class as a playgroup or to have lunch. Friendships are formed not only among the children, but also among the parents. I encourage this social interaction because it is beneficial to have camaraderie as we all work toward teaching the children.

Further, it makes my job MUCH easier to have eight additional "coaches" on the floor, making the class ratio better than 1:1. The key is in the education of the parent.

I explain to my parents that a limited attention span in a preschooler is to be expected. It is normal for their 2-year-old child to have a self-directed attitude and their 3-year-old to be easily distracted. We, therefore, allow the children to set the pace of the class; taking "brain breaks" when we need them or moving to the next rotation as they decide it is time. Sometimes, we are only on a rotation for a very short time. Other times, we end up staying on a rotation for double the amount of time allotted. This self-paced class technique is, of course, limited when there are other classes running concurrently. Then, we have to keep in mind that other people are waiting to use the same equipment.

Within the constraints of safety, I encourage the parent to go with her child as the child explores the gym environment for the first time. If the child is curious about other things, the chances are minimal that I will accomplish any real skill work until their curiosity is satisfied. Once this is accomplished, I draw the child toward the skill work by demonstrating the skill, "Hey Susie, look what I can do! Now, it's your turn."

I also teach the parents how to spot so they can carry their children through each rotation. It is a good time to explain safety issues such as spotting above the elbow or around the torso. I also demonstrate holding the child around the torso as they swing on bars to support their body weight and lifting their hips and supporting their neck as they roll. If the parent has

any concerns or doubt about spotting, I ask them to allow me to do it. Most parents get the hang of it and are soon very adept at spotting their children. This frees me to move among them, working with children at each station or placing myself at the most important spotting station.

The social aspect of these classes is a double-edged sword. As the children progress and the parents become more comfortable in their child's abilities, they tend to stand back more and chat with other parents. This is a common problem. I have come to believe the children sometimes train their parents well in the art of "attention span deficit." I don't mind it as long as the children are able to remain on-task and can do the skills on their own.

When I begin to see the children losing focus, however, I try to draw the parents back into the class by sending the child to "show mom" her skill or gently reminding the parents of their duty within the class.

"Hey Johnny, I LOVE the way you can walk on the beam all by yourself! Why don't you go get Mommy and show her how you can do that?" "Take mom over there and show her what you have learned." "Hey MOM! Come see what Johnny can do!"

These gentle reminders usually do the trick in pulling "mom" back into the class without offending her or sounding as if I am scolding. I want to maintain a strong relationship with my parents. The last thing I wish to do is offend them.

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