

MAKING FITNESS & FUN

#1

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HOW LUCKY WE ARE!!

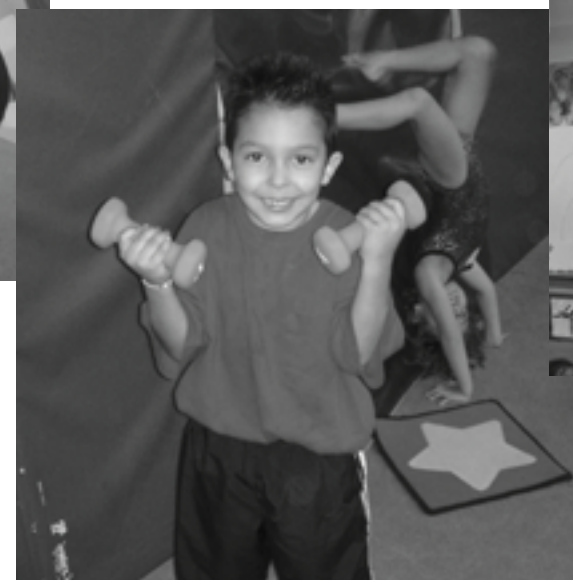
Of all the things kids love to do, jumping, swinging, climbing and tumbling are among their favorites. And if they are doing these activities for a sustained length of time, it can lead to improved fitness, strength and endurance. But often we get so distracted trying to make sure they are doing skills correctly that we lose sight of the more important issue – that they are having fun and getting fit enough to learn the skills we want to teach them.

We must all remember that kids will only learn skills that they are physically ready to learn (as well as mentally and emotionally ready to learn, but those are topics for another article). And in recreational gymnastics, if we focus on developing their physical readiness in a fun and exciting way, they will stay enrolled long enough to experience the benefits of their training.

It all comes down to designing your lessons so that when the class is over, the kids are exhausted and dripping with sweat, hate to leave, and can't wait for the next class. The challenge for many instructors is avoiding having them wait in line, listen to long lectures or hear about why they are not being successful in their performance of skills. Because most of us tend to teach the way we were taught and because most recreational gymnastics teachers were once competitive gymnasts (training many hours a week with a focus on winning), their coaching often resembles that model.

One has to remember that, in recreational gymnastics where the kids come one or two hours a week, waiting in line and listening to long explanations is not the style of "coaching" they enjoy or signed up for. Nor is it effective in achieving our goal of teaching them skills they need to practice many times to eventually learn.

It should be every teacher's goal to keep his/her students active and heart rate high for the entire class. To do so requires planning and organizational skills you may not have learned from being a gymnast. There are many teachers who do a great job with kids one at a time, but when you give them a group of six or eight kids to teach, they struggle and experience behavior problems that haunt them through their entire class. When this happens I think it's common to blame the kids for not listening or for being distracted. I believe a true professional should accept responsibility for the outcome of each lesson, for capturing and keeping the attention of his/her students. And if kids are waiting in line when they want to be moving, you can hardly blame them for acting out.



THE WARM-UP AND STRETCHING SETTING THE PACE FOR THE LESSON

From the moment the class begins, the kids should be actively directed with the goal of raising their heart rate and keeping it high for several minutes. Games involving running, skipping, jumping, etc., are great ways to achieve this goal. And, if the games are fun (non-competitive games are best so that no kids have to lose), the kids and parents will do their best to arrive on time so they don't miss a minute of the action. Look for the kids to be breathing hard and check their pulse for feedback. Is it working? Are they waiting for their next turn or are they in constant motion? Are any of them asking for a drink? If so, give yourself a pat on the back.

STRETCHING: This is a chance for the kids to catch their breath. It's important that during the stretching phase of your "warm-up" the kids are closely supervised so they feel your constant attention and direction. For example: tell them to straighten legs during straddle stretching, extend shoulders in their bridges, etc. This sets the tone of your class and reflects on your teaching style; they experience you in control at all times.

USING CIRCUITS, DRILLS AND STATIONS TO KEEP KIDS ACTIVE

I suggest you set up your stations before class, but understand that this is not always possible. When moving mats during class, I always like to ask the kids to help me instead of telling them to sit and wait while I move mats. They love being involved and appreciate being asked to help. You can teach them how to cooperate and "work like a team" when moving mats.



Always set up stations to keep kids in motion. By that I mean when a child completes a skill, there is always something to do with no waiting on the way back to where the station began. Below are a few suggestions:

- **Tumbling** – try having kids tumble across mats instead of down them so that every child can go simultaneously and there is no waiting. This works well for single skills (handstands, rolls, cartwheels, etc.) but will not work if running is involved. When running and tumbling down the mats, set up another line of mats for them to use on the way back to the starting point. If they arrive at the starting point and have to wait in line, create another station for them to use (handstand at the wall, weight lifting, etc.) that will keep them active until it's their turn again at the starting point.
- **Bars** – always have several bars close enough together for the teacher to supervise them all or make stations near the bars to keep kids active. Make sure the challenges asked of the kids are within their ability to perform safely without the need for a spot. This allows the instructor to move freely from one bar to another while the kids are kept moving. I suggest no more than two kids taking turns at each station so there is little or no waiting. By deconstructing skills into basic movements the kids can do correctly and safely, spotting shouldn't be necessary. You can always step in to assist/spot those having trouble or learning something new, but if you find you need to be spotting all the kids for them to do the skill correctly, the skill may be too difficult and should be broken down into something more basic.
- **Vaulting** – always provide a second station for the kids on the way back after they vault. A box to roll over or jump onto works great for recreational classes. Make sure that the wait for their next turn is short enough to keep their heart rate high.
- **Trampoline** – it is difficult to keep heart rates high when waiting for a turn on the trampoline. Since only one child at a time should bounce, you have to be creative. Depending on how the gym is laid out, you may have the ability to give kids something to do near the tramp while they are waiting for their turn like handstands at the wall, etc.

WATER BREAKS

While running your class with the focus on fitness and keeping your kids active for extended periods of time, you will need to plan for several water breaks. If you are in a large facility and the drinking fountain is a long way across the gym, have the class jog to the

water fountain to keep the heart rate high or provide a water cooler with a dispenser (like an ice chest with a water tap) close to the activity area so you don't have to waste time going to get a drink. It's important that the kids have adequate water when thirsty.

END WITH SOMETHING FUN & FIT

The last five minutes of class is what kids remember most and what parents notice. So make it a fun and fit experience that gets them tired and laughing. This is a great time for conditioning games with an emphasis on fun. Here are a few ideas;

- **Pass the foam (or ball)** – with a partner you lay on your back head to head and holding hands. You pass a pit foam (or soft ball) using your feet to your partner (leg lift action) who grabs it with her feet over your head. She then touches it to the floor and passes it back.
- **Partner log rolls** – lay on your back holding hands as above. Log roll keeping legs and arms off the floor but eyes on your partner.
- **Rope swinging** – (Titanic) – in my gyms we have a climbing rope suspended over our foam pit. We tell the kids to "abandon ship" by swinging over the pit and landing on a mat on the other side. As soon as they let go of the rope, it swings back and the next person must catch it and swing immediately. The person landing on the mat must exit the pit quickly and run back to the line because the line moves quickly and their turn is coming up again.

About conditioning - remember that the key to keeping kids excited about coming back (long term) is to make it FUN. So get away from just doing push-ups, pull ups, etc., and design games that use the same muscles. If you must do traditional exercise like pushups, do so during classes in your stations and keep the end of class for fun. ✕

Jeff Lulla earned a B.A. degree in Physical Education and has over 30 years of coaching experience. Lulla owns and operates two Fun & Fit Gymnastics Centers in Calif., and also contracts with private schools and their local city Park and Recreation Departments teaching gymnastics. Lulla also licenses a self-esteem building curriculum called the Fun & Fit Gymnastics Program. As a member of the National Preschool Committee, Jeff co-authored the KAT course, is a member of the National Safety Review Board and is a National Safety Instructor for USA Gymnastics.