

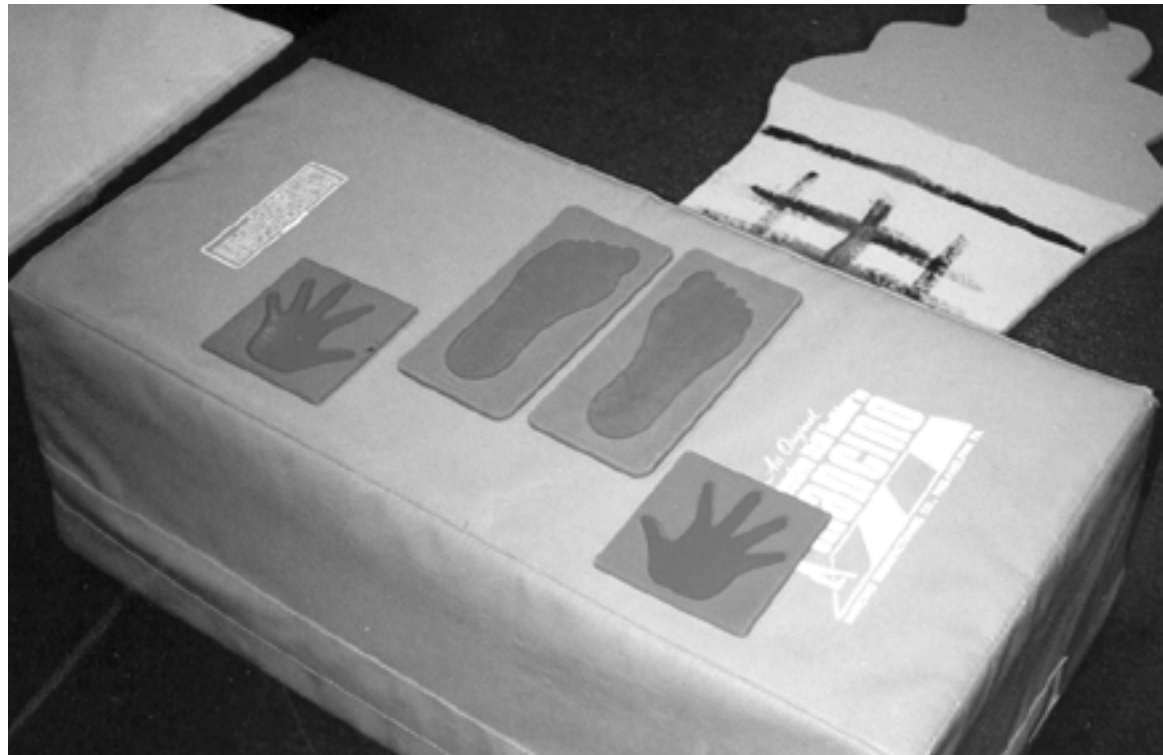
Incorporating Nutrition into your



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Preschool Gymnastics Program



Teaching Nutrition to All Gymnastics Students

As we are becoming more aware, childhood obesity is a real problem in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control, almost one out of six children over the age of 6 is overweight.

Armed with information so readily available today about children's nutrition, gym owners can help fight the battle of childhood obesity while instilling the value of a healthy lifestyle in their students. Nutrition can be incorporated into gymnastics and dance lesson plans for children of all ages. It is imperative that children learn that health doesn't come from exercise alone. Students must learn that in order to excel at gymnastics or any other sport, diet, nutrition, and ample rest are extremely important. What children put into their bodies has a direct impact on their performance whether they are a competitive or recreational gymnast.

Television Characters and Lesson Plans

Thankfully, these alarming statistics about childhood obesity have raised some red flags in the entertainment industry. In an effort to clean up their image, television networks launched campaigns last

year devoted to teaching the importance of good nutrition. The most notable of these efforts can be found on PBS. Cookie Monster admitted that his addiction to cookies was unhealthy and the idea of "always foods" and "sometimes foods" was introduced. Themes like "Too many sweets can make kids feel sick" and "It's important to exercise" have appeared in shows like "Clifford," "Barney," and "Dragon Tales."

"Food for Fun"

At my gym, the Tumblebear Preschool Program spends the first two weeks in January teaching lessons of nutrition. From our warm up to our good-bye song, healthy foods are infused into the lesson. At that time of year, many parents start dieting, so it is a perfect opportunity to talk to kids about food.

The children warm up to the songs "Chicken Fat" (Kimbo), "Lemon Twist" (Melody House), or "Meat the Beat" (Melody House). As the children begin their activities, the teacher discusses "always foods" or foods that the children can and should eat anytime. Fruits, vegetables, and whole grains are "always foods." Taped to an upright mat, we have a food pyramid so students can visually learn about the



foods they should be eating. The children share what their favorite fruits and vegetables are while the teacher explains why these foods are so good for the body.

Through the remainder of class children continue to think about fruits, vegetables, and good nutrition. "Vitamin stations" are set up to teach children about nutrients as they exercise. Station Vitamin A is at the beam, where the students do attitudes. At the next station, Vitamin B, students do a backward roll. While at Vitamin C, the children catch bean bags using the foot launcher. Station Vitamin D is at a trampoline, where the students work on their seat drops. Also on the tramp, kids lie on their tummy as the teacher jumps. The child flips just like a pancake. Discuss how some pancakes, like those made with whole grains, are an always food. Be sure to remind the children that chocolate chip pancakes with whipped cream are a sometimes food! Lastly, Station Vitamin E stands for exercise and may include mini-exercise equipment or a mat for children to practice forward rolls.

At each station, encourage the children to think of "always foods" that start with the appropriate letter. For example, at station Vitamin A, students should talk about apples and avocados. Additionally, the teacher should take time to explain where children can find the vitamins their station is named for. For example, at station Vitamin C, the teacher should remind the children that oranges and broccoli are full of Vitamin C. Finally, the teacher should also mention why the vitamins are so good for the students' bodies. For example, Vitamin D builds strong bones and helps prevent injuries.

We also use various pieces of apparatus to continue teaching nutrition. On the pommel horse, students practice L-supports and hold toy vegetables between their ankles. From the high beam, children do a round-off into a "soup bowl," a donut mat. On the floor beam, children stop and pick up foam vegetables. At the end of the beam, they throw the vegetables into a bucket to make vegetable soup. Students can even add a foam noodle to the bucket for vegetable noodle soup! On one set of uneven bars, the children do glide swings, dropping plastic bananas into a bucket. On another set of uneven bars, students bring their legs up to kick the cherries (red balloons) hanging from the high bar. At each apparatus, be sure to explain the importance of the food or food group being used. For example, "Vegetable soup is nice and warm, plus it provides our bodies with many different vitamins." Or, "Bananas and cherries taste great and give us energy!"

The theme of your lesson plan could be "5 a Day" for the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables. Alternately, use "3 a Day" based on the 3 servings of dairy products the body

requires. Using these numbers throughout the lesson will reinforce the importance of the theme. For example, have the children do three cartwheels, jump in three hoops, hold the splits for three seconds, or put three skills together.

Certainly gym owners can use these ideas or create similar activities for their students. The main goal is to reinforce which foods are "always foods" while showing the children that good foods are fun, too! Practicing healthy eating habits should not seem like a chore to young children. Teachers should enthusiastically talk about different types of fruits and vegetables and why they not only taste good but also make our bodies strong, especially for gymnastics class.

Other ideas for around the gym

Nutrition education should not be limited to a lesson or two each year. Healthy eating habits need to be reinforced throughout the year. Gym owners can create posters that emphasize the benefits of good nutrition. These posters should be hanging where parents and students will see them. We put information about children's nutrition in every monthly newsletter. Include motivating statistics for parents. Many parents are not aware of how severe the childhood obesity problem is in the United States. Others are not clear on the health risks that are created by obesity. Share this information with the parents at your gym. A healthy recipe that is quick and easy to make could be included as well.

At camps and parties, try to avoid serving "pizza and pop." Serving small bottles of water or juice is often just as inexpensive as cans of pop. While pizza is cheap, easy, and most kids love it, gym owners need to consider if the pizza they're serving meets the nutritional values they are trying to teach their students. If you do serve pizza, explain the benefits that pizza provides (carbohydrates, dairy, protein, etc.). Additionally, explain that pizza is a "sometimes" food and encourage the children to include fruits, vegetables, and less fattening foods into their diet that day.

While alternatives to pizza may be more expensive, owners may find that parents are willing to pay more for a camp that offers quality nutritional food. Some alternatives to pizza may include veggie hot dogs or veggie burgers with pretzels. Submarine sandwiches with whole wheat bread may also be a hit with your students.

During class, teachers can talk about nutrition without making it the focus of the lesson. Simple questions like, "What did you eat for breakfast?" can create a teaching opportunity. Parents of kids coming from school can talk about snacks that are healthy to eat before class. Encourage the parents in your gym to give their kids a healthy snack before class and not to conveniently drive through a local fast food joint!

The opportunities for gym owners to incorporate nutrition into their programs are endless. These opportunities must be seized. We, as gym owners, work hard to teach the value of physical exercise. However, a child's health cannot be improved by exercise alone. It is our duty to teach a healthy lifestyle, and that lifestyle includes good nutrition. ✕



Patti Komara's Tumblebear Gym Program and 50 other products for gymnastics schools can be purchased online at www.tumblebear.com; or call (219) 865-2274 to receive Patti's latest catalog.