



By Linda Thorberg and Brant Lutska  
USA Gymnastics National Instructors for the Preschool  
Fundamentals Hands on Training Course and authors of  
FlippingEducation.com

# CHILDREN'S AGES & STAGES: WHAT CAN THEY UNDERSTAND? WHAT CAN THEY DO?

**E**ach and every year new students enter our gyms and fill up our classes and these children may never have spent time away from their parents or had limited interaction with other children. This can be a very difficult time for instructors so understanding the children's ages and stages of development can truly make your job much easier.

The number one reason that children quit any sport is because they are not having fun! Fun is how most kids evaluate their interest in participation. It's not how many goals they achieve or how many 10.0s they receive on balance beam, it's the pure pleasure of feeling good. When you understand the interest and abilities of children at various ages, you can create stations and appropriate challenges to allow them to be successful and have fun.

Listed below are developmental milestones and activity suggestions for various age groups.

## Age 2

### Physical Development Milestones

Walks well, goes up and down steps alone, runs, seats self on chair, becoming independent in toileting, uses spoon and fork, imitates circular stroke, turns pages singly, kicks ball, attempts to dress self, builds tower of six cubes.

### Age appropriate activities to include in your gymnastics class:

- Provide a running game each class, galloping, walking tiptoe, heels
- Play kick ball, parent rolls the ball, the child kicks it back
- Their head is the biggest part of

their body. Rolling usually requires a spot. Find ways to help them learn to tuck their chin.

- Create games to use fine motor skills, string beads, put plastic eggs together, stack pit cubes
- Throw bean bags overhand

### Social Development Milestones

Solitary play, dependent on adult guidance, plays with dolls, refers to self by name, socially very immature, little concept of others as "people," may respond to simple directions, possessive of objects and people.

### Age appropriate activities to include in your gymnastics class:

- Have enough activities, equipment, and/or props so no sharing is required (i.e., 8 kids = 8 stations).
- Parachute is a good group activity since they don't have to interact directly with one another.
- Make-believe activities are good since children are aware of imaginary characters, friends, etc.

### Emotional Development Milestones

Very self-centered, just beginning a sense of personal identity and belongings, possessive, often negative, often frustrated, no ability to choose between alternatives, enjoys physical affection, resistant to



change, becoming independent, more responsive to humor and distraction than discipline or reason.

### Age appropriate activities to include in your gymnastics class:

- Let them know when it's time for transition – "Let's take one more turn then we will go somewhere new."
- Have many of the same things/props, including items of the same color, so they don't feel that someone else has "their" item.
- Two-year-olds often do not want help and do not trust you as the teacher. That is why we have a parent attend to be his/her "safety net." Create an atmosphere of special time together with his/her parent.

### Intellectual Development Milestones

Says words, phrases and simple sentences, 272 word vocabulary, understands simple directions, identifies simple pictures, likes to look at books, short attention span, avoids simple hazards, can do simple form board.

### Age appropriate activities to include in your gymnastics class:





- Begins to understand size – uses different sizes of things to stack.
- Include puzzle activities with several pieces. Carry a piece across the beam, put in the puzzle at the other end.
- Match things that are alike, by color, by shape, etc. Use these stations as fillers when you are spotting bars or beam.
- Keep each station to two activities at a time (i.e. Jump to a carpet square and roll over). They can only understand two concepts at a time.
- Keep your instructions brief, using 3-4 word sentences.

### Age 3

#### Physical Development Milestones

Runs well, marches, stands on one foot briefly, rides tricycle, imitates cross, feeds self well, puts on shoes and stockings, unbuttons and buttons, builds tower of 10 cubes, pours from pitcher.

#### Age appropriate activities to include in your gymnastics class:

- Galloping, begin hopping on one foot, hopscotch
- Safety falls and rolls
- Hang on a bar and peddle bicycle legs. Jump down and land on your feet.
- Toss scarves to watch (track them) as they come down. Catch them.

#### Social Development Milestones

Parallel play, enjoys being by others, takes turns, knows if he is a boy or girl, enjoys brief group activities requiring no skill, likes to “help” in small ways, responds to verbal guidance.

#### Age appropriate activities to include in your gymnastics class:

- Parachute games work well
- Ring around the Rosey, all fall down and do a safety fall.

- Have the whole class hold a jump rope with one hand as they transition to a new station.
- Use music for warming up activities. They enjoy fantasy; use fairy tales to stimulate them.
- Keep your instructions brief, using 3-4 word sentences.
- Teach how to stay on a safe spot and take a turn when you call their name.

#### Emotional Development Milestones

Likes to conform, easy going attitude, not so resistant to change, more secure, greater sense of personal identity, beginning to be adventuresome, enjoys music.

#### Age appropriate activities to include in your gymnastics class:

- After each attempt at a game or turn on an apparatus, give the child a hug and words of praise.
- Give them an object and let them describe what it is and what they want to do with it.
- Setup three easy stations and let them decide what they want to do during that time frame. Let them explore their options.
- Talk about things they know, favorite television shows, movies, animals, etc. to make them feel part of the group.
- They start to enjoy humor, find ways to make jokes they understand.

#### Intellectual Development Milestones

Says short sentences, 896 word vocabulary, great growth in communication, tell simple stories, uses words as tools of thought, wants to understand environment, answers questions, imaginative, may recite a few nursery rhymes.

#### Age appropriate activities to include in your gymnastics class:

- Can understand 3 stations presented together.
- Matches like objects and will put things in a row, smallest to largest or by color.
- Sing “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” as you warm up, or “Row your Boat” with a partner. Easy to remember songs with simple lyrics will build their confidence as well.
- Quiz body positions and the names of equipment in the gym. “Tuck, pike, straddle, who knows how to do it?”
- They are learning to follow patterns. Set up your stations in a specific pattern.

Please understand that the second reason that children quit sports is because the teacher was not knowledgeable. Of course that is based on the child’s assumption. What it usually means is that the teacher was not able to successfully communicate the process to the child. Thus, the student takes the situation to mean that the teacher did not know what they were doing. By understanding child development, you will be able to plan activities that are more appropriate for each age level. The more tasks that a child can complete, the better their self-esteem will become. Take time to understand development and you will produce children that are happy, safe and willing to stay involved with gymnastics for years to come!

In the next issue of *Technique* we’ll publish developmental milestones for children ages 4 and 5. ✖

