

Safety

Psychology and Safety in Gymnastics

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Many beginning coaches and instructors study long, hard hours to master the technical complexities of gymnastics coaching. Terminology, spotting techniques, basic safety "thinking," and organization (i.e., physical layout, mat use, and other aids) are critical components in the preparation of professional coaches.

An important area that often does not always receive the attention it deserves in coach readiness has to do with the relationship between principles of psychology and safety education. This brief article is designed to introduce a higher level of psychological and safety awareness which not only promotes a happier gymnastics environment but also one that is safer for young athletes on several levels.

Coaches and instructors eventually develop an individual philosophy about their interaction with youngsters as well as a personal style for approaching the task of coaching. Hopefully this methodology contains a high degree of understanding about child growth and development both physically, and of equal significance if not more so, the stages of emotional and psychological growth associated with different chronological ages. This type of knowledge is indispensable in establishing and maintaining an overall productive and healthy learning environment for gymnasts. Professional coaches should be concerned with the whole child not only with their physical progress. This attitude has a direct relationship to the psychological factors associated with safety in the sport.

First and foremost, is the development of both performance feedback (information about what needs to be physically done in order to accomplish the skill) and continuous positive reinforcement (+CR). This combination of communications in a mutually respectful climate motivates the gymnast to continue to strive for mastery. This coaching approach not only provides rewards for efforts on an on-going basis but at the same time enhances positive self-esteem. What is the connection between this psychological model and safety? Children who feel good about themselves are usually focused when training and more apt to feel personally "safe" in such a setting. This feeling of well being in a gymnast can contribute to physical safety. Such athletes are attentive, more open to corrections, and generally more in tune with what is going on around them. Gymnasts who train in a negative training atmosphere and who are constantly subjected to put-downs, ridicule, sarcasm, and demeaning interactions are more distracted and potentially in emotional stress. These youngsters are accidents waiting to happen because they are focused on the emotional messages they are receiving rather than on the physical instruction. Athletes who don't feel good about themselves may be prone to punish themselves on a pre-conscious level. What better way than sustaining a physical injury?

Recommendation - Always attempt to maintain a positive learning model where gymnasts receive self esteem enhancing feedback.

Another important area which is psychological in nature but has a direct connection to physical safety involves the openness of communication between the coach and student. Gymnasts who are inhibited in their ability to tell the coach what they are feeling need to be encouraged to do so. A dictatorial approach on the coach's part may close the avenue of needed communication where the gymnast feels he or she cannot approach the teacher. Many times a gymnast may not feel ready to perform a particular skill or is aware of that physically uncomfortable feeling called fear. Some are afraid to tell their coach that they are experiencing that emotionally loaded response. Often the non-verbal signs will be evident but the coach must be open to seeing these indicators in addition to being willing to hear this kind of information directly from the youngster. If communication is open and encouraged coaches must be sure they are, in fact, truly "listening." This means that when the athlete is leveling with you about their feelings you should not be working out your response in your mind while they are still speaking. If you are doing so you are not really listening. Your goal is to try to understand how the gymnast makes sense to him or herself, not to negate their thinking. This does not mean you need to make decisions solely on this feedback from your athletes but at the same time this information should not be ignored. Gymnasts who are not able for whatever reason to discuss their fears are candidates for injury and are safety risks. When your athlete is discussing this matter of fear avoid saying, "what are you afraid of?" or worse, "no you're not."

Recommendation - Be open and willing to accept feedback from your gymnast about their personal feeling concerning readiness and apprehension. Never invalidate these expressions of an inner psychological state.

A third point for this discussion has to do with the importance of physical preparation and safety. This may seem like a given, but the critical place that physical readiness plays from a psychological point of view in terms of safety is sometimes overlooked. All coaches know the excitement that a talented and quick learning gymnast can bring to any program. We all have egos and the temptation with gifted children when we are anxious to show competitive results is to take a short cut and perhaps by-pass important building blocks. The psychological position that focuses on a "step at a time" learning model is, in the long run, the sensible way to go. Skipping steps in the didactic process can not only result in a safety hazard, but can mitigate against the gymnast realizing his or her full potential. It is much more difficult to go back to correct a missing link than it is to stay longer with the progressive basics until mastery is achieved. This results in carry over to other skill learning while the sin of omission often leads to a regression later in the athlete's career. Remember, overall, your physical preparation is your best mental preparation.

Recommendation - Load the deck in the favor of safety by adapting a psychological philosophy that guides the gymnast along a continuum which emphasizes progressive learning where safety is not compromised.

Summary

It is not possible in a brief article such as this to discuss the linkage between psychology and safety in an exhaustive manner. The points made here are designed to encourage

beginning and even experienced coaches to pay greater attention to this more illusive aspect of coaching. The fundamental message is that not only is it crucial to keep the training setting physically safe but also to believe that a responsibility of a professional coach must include an effort to keep a budding gymnast mentally safe from harm and perhaps irreversible damage. Further information concerning this topic can be found in Chapter VII of the 1994 Edition of the *USA Gymnastics Safety Handbook*.

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