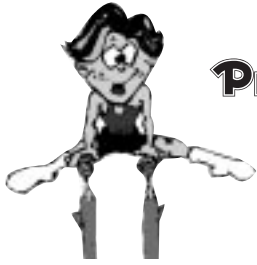


# RECREATIONAL GYMNASTICS

## Programming Philosophy & Development



By Jeff Lulla, President  
Fun & Fit Gymnastics

While much attention is focused on the "sport" of gymnastics, it is the "activity" of gymnastics that sustains our industry. Without those children who enroll in recreational gymnastics classes just to have fun and improve their skills, our industry would be reduced to non-profit programs struggling for donations to keep their doors open. With that in mind, knowing how to make it fun becomes an important job skill for gymnastics instructors.

Is it fun to fail? Of course not. But in our competitive culture, where it is the nature of competition to produce more losers than winners, most kids will lose most of the time. And, since young children are not able to distinguish losing from being a loser, we must become very good at creating success for every kid in our classes. The more success they experience, the more fun they have.

### RECREATIONAL DOES NOT = NONCOMPETITIVE!

Making Preschool and Recreational gymnastics successful for all kids requires removing all contests from the environment and never comparing one student to another. This includes eliminating statements like "Who can be the first to line up?" or, "Who can do the best cartwheel?" Instead, teachers need to learn to use non-competitive language like, "Line up as fast as you can," or, "Everyone show me your best cartwheel." PERSONAL BEST should become what is celebrated instead of better than others.

A learning environment that defines success as "personal best" doesn't guarantee that everyone "will" win. But it does guarantee that everyone "can" win.

### REDEFINING WINNING SO THAT EVERYONE CAN WIN

Imagine your child is in a race, a 100 yard dash, with 12 other children. He trains for weeks prior to the race and improves his time. On the day of the race he finishes in last place but runs the distance faster than he ever had before. Did he win or did he lose?

Your answer to this question is important because it will help define values to your child. If you say he won because he performed his personal best, regardless of how fast the other kids in the race ran, you are defining winning as his current performance compared to his own previous performance. This is not the typical definition of winning. This definition places value on effort, self-improvement and skill mastery, which are all within the control of each individual.

Now imagine your child is in another race the very next week, a 100 yard dash, with 12 other children. But this time he comes in first place - faster than everyone else. You look at the stopwatch, however, and see

that he ran much slower than his personal best. For him, it was a poor performance.

The only reason he was in first place was that everyone else in the race that day was much slower and less skilled than he was. Did he win or did he lose? Should he place value on the gold medal being placed around his neck or should he value his performance above the medal?



If you tell him "Congratulations on winning" what will he think of what you told him last week when he ran so much better yet came in last? Consistently placing importance on personal performance and effort is not always easy in the competitive culture we live in. We have to

choose what we really want our kids to value. And we must be clear and consistent when teaching values. So, instead of praise, a question like, "How did it go?" can open the door for honest discussion of the child's perceptions of the performance. If the response is, "Look! I won the gold medal!" you can respond with, "Yes, I see that, but how did you perform?" again reinforcing your attention to the performance instead of the contest.

Once the child recognizes the mistakes that caused his performance to be less than he is capable of, you can reward and praise that recognition, "Congratulations on learning from your mistakes - that is what helps you grow so you can do your best performance more consistently and when it's important to you. Let's go celebrate what you have learned!"

Very often, the outcome of a contest does little to reward effort, improvement, fairness and other values we hold dear. It should be noted that having control over the outcome of your efforts is a key component to building self-esteem (Dr. Nathaniel Brandon, "The Six Pillars Of Self-Esteem").

Research makes two things very clear:

- The main reason kids play sports is to have fun
- The main reason kids quit their favorite sport is an over emphasis on winning.

By redefining winning to allow every student the opportunity to achieve a victory, self-esteem is raised, the environment is much more positive, and kids stay in sports longer deriving greater benefits and skill from the activity.

## **YOUNG CHILDREN CAN'T DISTINGUISH LOSING FROM BEING A LOSER**

Confidence can be defined as an expectation of future success based on a history of past successes. As adults, we have our past experiences to help us to believe we are capable of a certain level of achievement. If we fall below that level, we can experience it as a failure and reflect on it as a lesson to learn by. Some young children lack the experience and maturity to make the distinction between failing and being a failure. In essence, their self-concept is conditional on the outcome of their efforts. In our programs, challenges and skills must be adjusted to the ability of the individual so that success is assured. The learning environment must be structured to provide challenges that are achievable, while defining winning in the context of task mastery and self-improvement.

## **YOUNG CHILDREN CAN'T RECOGNIZE AN UNREASONABLE REQUEST BY THEIR TEACHER.**

Very young children, (approximately ages two to four years), are also unable to distinguish the difference between their ability level and the difficulty of the tasks they are exposed to. They tend to judge themselves as failures even if a task is inappropriate for their level of development. The words we use when challenging them are very important because they communicate the expectations we have of them. For example:

"Joey, can you lift your feet to the bar?" vs. "Joey, how high can you lift your feet towards the bar?"

If Joey has the ability to lift his legs only half way up towards the bar, the first request to put his feet on the bar will be perceived by him as a failure. He will know he didn't do what you asked him to do. With the second request asking how high he can lift his feet towards the bar his experience would be that he could go half way. The same skill, the same action, but two completely different experiences for Joey.

## **YOUR TEACHING PHILOSOPHY**

In general, a teaching philosophy can be described as "a set of personal beliefs and principles that guide the actions you take with your students. It also involves the goals of teaching and the manner in which a teacher plans to reach those goals." Your success and effectiveness as an instructor will depend more on your teaching philosophy than any other factor. It provides you with a framework for all the decisions you make as a teacher of children. And it gives you, your co-workers, your students and their parents a base of values to work from.



In most gym clubs, former athletes are hired as preschool and recreational gymnastics teachers, and in many cases they have little experience with young children. Understanding the contrasting philosophies of recreational vs.

competitive sport is critical. Since the word "coach" differs from the word "teacher" (whereby coach is usually linked to the idea of competitive activity), it is important that instructors recognize that recreational gymnastics classes are focused on teaching.

## **WHY PROGRESSIONS ARE IMPORTANT**

The importance of teaching with progressions is well recognized in the gymnastics industry. The most commonly understood reasons are for safety and proper technical learning. But when dealing with the young child, additional considerations become imperative, those being their developing sense of self (self-esteem) and the concept of fun or play in the program. Why are these considerations important? So that young children remain in the sport long enough to receive:

- The benefits of training
- The experience of success
- A sense of relationship with their instructor, classmates, facility and the sport.



## **"TIME" - THE KEY INGREDIENT TO REMEMBER REGARDING PROGRESSIONS**

Everyone learning a new skill must experience some level of success within a certain period of time or they will quit. TIME is the key ingredient to creating success. And it is this TIME factor that must be considered when developing a progressive curriculum. Whether it be tennis, golf, or gymnastics... once you begin attempting the skill, there is a limited amount of time you're willing to try unsuccessfully before giving it up. If, for example, you are swinging at tennis balls and continually missing, after so many attempts, you will put the racquet down and probably never try tennis again. The important thing is for you to make contact with the ball soon after you start swinging. The length of time one is willing to continue swinging and missing varies with age. Younger children must experience success within a much shorter period of time than older children or adults.

Breaking skills down into ACHIEVABLE steps is the focus of a progressive teaching system. Each step should be easily passed or learned within a short enough period of time to maintain motivation, excitement and a feeling of success.

*(continued on page 8)*

## CHILDREN MUST BE IN CLASSES WITH ABILITY PEERS

Placing children in peer group classes by age, developmental level and skill level is necessary if we are to provide an appropriate teaching environment that creates success opportunities often and fosters a positive sense of self. Parents, however, not understanding the importance of this concept, usually consider "convenience" in enrolling their children in classes with friends or siblings first, with little consideration of proper group placement. As professional educators we need to teach parents to appreciate the importance of ability peer classes for their children. Once they understand how their child's experience can be completely different based on the group he or she is in, the value of the class placement decision can be better appreciated.

## UNDERSTANDING LEARNING READINESS



Prior to advancing students to the next level of skill, a teacher must determine the students learning readiness. The student must show "task mastery" of the prerequisite skill or movement pattern, meaning the prerequisite skill can be performed both proficiently and consistently.

There are four aspects of learning readiness we must consider and address in teaching progressions. They are Physical, Mental, Emotional and Social readiness.

- **Physically**, the students must have the strength, flexibility, balance, coordination and power to perform the skills properly to develop a sense of competence.
- **Mentally**, children need to be able to concentrate and focus their minds long and deeply enough to successfully and safely perform the skill.
- **Emotionally**, children need to be capable of controlling their emotions

to perform and behave properly. Young children, while in your preschool age classes, are learning how to manage their feelings including fear, excitement, anger and joy. We need to make sure they are expressed in safe and appropriate ways.

- **Socially**, children need to be able to work together, keep their hands to themselves and cooperate as a group. Taking turns and showing respect for others is important in any class situation.

## DEVELOPING YOUR OWN TEACHING PHILOSOPHY AND PROGRESSION

The impact your behavior has on the young lives you touch is so profound it represents one of the greatest responsibilities that you can ever accept.

We as adult leaders play an important role in helping kids develop their opinions of themselves in the world. We must remember that every effort should be made toward developing programs that cultivate each individual's sense of self-competence.

As we grow to understand that children have different needs, learning styles and abilities based on their age, we are challenged with having to adjust our teaching style to accommodate them. Accordingly, we must create a positive experience for youngsters where they have fun, feel confident and in control of their personal successes.



Jeff Lulla is a member of the USAG Preschool Advisory Board and co-author of the Kinder Accreditation for Teachers (KAT) program. He is also a USAG National Safety Instructor, and serves on the USAG Safety Review Board. Jeff is an industry consultant and owns two Fun & Fit Gyms in California and and both contract with private schools and local city Park and Rec. Departments,

teaching recreational gymnastics both on and off site. Jeff licenses a self-esteem building curriculum developed at Fun & Fit to other gymnastics schools and fitness clubs.