

Troy Gym New Hire Training

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Note:

Much of the content of this book is presented from the context that the reader will be coaching competitive team gymnastics. However, almost all of the content still applies to recreational coaching, the exception being the content referencing competing and competitions. In most instances, you can replace the word 'team' or 'practice' with 'class' and not lose any of the information or the nuance in the concepts being presented.

Chapter 1: Stepping into Coaching

If you are like most gymnastics coaches, you have probably been recruited from the ranks of former gymnasts, gymnastics enthusiasts, coaches of similar sports, or even parents. Like many rookie and veteran coaches, you probably have had little formal instruction on coaching. But when the call from the local gymnastics club went out for coaches, you answered because you like children and enjoy gymnastics and perhaps because you want to be involved in a worthwhile activity. Your initial coaching assignment may be difficult. You may not know everything there is to know about gymnastics or about how to work with children. This training guide presents the basics of coaching gymnastics effectively. To start, we look at your responsibilities and what's involved in being a coach. We also examine five tools for being an effective coach.

Your Responsibilities as a Coach

Coaching at any level involves much more than just teaching a cartwheel or spotting a back salto. Coaching involves accepting the tremendous responsibility you face when parents put their children in your care. As a gymnastics coach, you'll be called on to do the following:

1. Provide a safe physical environment.

Participating in gymnastics involves inherent risks. As a coach you're responsible for minimizing risk, and one way to do this is to conduct regular inspections of facilities, apparatus, and equipment used for practice and competition. Providing a safe physical environment also includes offering proper supervision and instruction, educating the gymnasts regarding safety policies (see "Coaches' Safety Checklist" in appendix), removing or preventing known hazards, and ensuring access to first aid supplies.

2. Communicate in a positive way.

As you already know, you have a lot to communicate. You'll communicate not only with your athletes and their parents but also with fellow coaches, officials, administrators, and others. Communicate in a positive way that demonstrates you have the best interests of the gymnasts at heart (see chapter 2 for more information).

3. Teach the fundamental skills of gymnastics.

When teaching the fundamental skills of gymnastics, keep in mind that you want to make sure your gymnasts are always having fun. Therefore, we ask that you help all athletes be the best they can be by creating a fun yet productive practice environment (see chapter 3 for more information). Additionally, to help your young gymnasts improve their skills, you need to have a sound understanding of gymnastics skills, progressions, and technique. You should reassure gymnasts and parents that you will be teaching the safest techniques in order to help gymnasts prevent injury.

4. Teach the rules of gymnastics.

Introduce the rules of gymnastics, and incorporate them into individual instruction. Many rules can be taught in practice, including aspects of judging, proper skill execution and penalties, and general gymnastics etiquette. Plan to review the rules any time an opportunity naturally arises in practices.

5. Help your athletes become fit and value fitness for a lifetime.

We want you to help your athletes become fit so they can participate in gymnastics safely and successfully. We also want your gymnasts to learn to become fit on their own, understand the value of fitness, and enjoy training. **Thus, we ask you not to use conditioning (e.g., doing push-ups or running laps) as a form of punishment. Make it fun to get fit, and make it fun to participate in gymnastics so that your athletes will stay fit for a lifetime.**

6. Help young people develop character.

Character development includes learning, caring, being honest and respectful, and taking responsibility. These intangible qualities are no less important to teach than the skill of a handstand. We ask you to teach these values to athletes by demonstrating and encouraging behaviors that express these values at all times. For example, stress to young gymnasts the importance of encouraging their teammates, competing within the rules, and showing respect for their opponents. Be a positive role model for your gymnasts.

These are your responsibilities as a coach. Remember that every athlete is an individual. You must provide a wholesome environment in which every athlete has the opportunity to learn without fear while having fun and enjoying the overall gymnastics experience.

Five Tools of an Effective Coach

You most likely already have the traditional coaching tools—such as appropriate clothing and a clipboard. They'll help you in the act of coaching, but to be successful, you'll need five other tools that cannot be bought. These tools are available only through self-examination and hard work; they're easy to remember with the acronym COACH:

- C- Comprehension
- O- Outlook
- A- Affection
- C- Character
- H- Humor

Comprehension

Comprehension of the rules and skills of gymnastics is required. You must understand the elements of the sport.

In addition to having gymnastics knowledge, you must implement proper training and safety methods so that your gymnasts can participate with lower risk of injury. Even then, injuries may occur. More often than not, you'll be the first person responding to your athletes' injuries, so be sure you understand the basic emergency care procedures in the first aid training (link in your new hire email).

Outlook

The second coaching tool refers to your perspective and goals—what you seek as a coach. The most common coaching objectives are to have fun; to help athletes develop their physical, mental, and social skills; and to strive to win (winning competitions doesn't necessarily apply to recreational gymnastics). Thus, your outlook involves your priorities, your planning, and your vision for the future.

ASEP has a motto that will help you keep your outlook in line with the best interests of the kids on your team. It summarizes in four words all you need to remember when establishing your coaching priorities:

Athletes first, winning second.

This motto recognizes that striving to win is an important, even vital, part

of sports. But it emphatically states that no efforts in striving to win should be made at the expense of the athletes' well-being, development, and enjoyment. Take the following actions to better define your outlook:

- With the members of your coaching staff, determine your priorities for the season.
- Prepare for situations that may challenge your priorities.
- Set goals for yourself and your gymnasts that are consistent with your priorities.
- Plan how you and your gymnasts can best attain your goals.
- Review your goals frequently to be sure you are staying on track.

Assessing Your Priorities: Even though all coaches focus on competition, we want you to focus on positive competition—keeping the pursuit of victory in perspective by making decisions that, first, are in the best interests of the athletes and, second, will help them succeed. So, how do you know if your outlook and priorities are in order? Here's a little test:

1. Which situation would you be most proud of?
 - a. knowing that each participant enjoys participating in gymnastics
 - b. seeing that all athletes improve their gymnastics skills
 - c. watching your gymnasts win championships
2. Which statement best reflects your thoughts about sport?
 - a. If it isn't fun, don't do it.
 - b. Everyone should learn something every day.
 - c. Sport isn't fun if you don't win.
3. How would you like your gymnasts to remember you?
 - a. as a coach who was fun
 - b. as a coach who provided a good base of fundamental skills
 - c. as a coach who helped them win
4. Which would you most like to hear a parent of an athlete on your team say?
 - a. Nicole really had a good time participating in gymnastics this year.
 - b. Josh learned some important lessons participating in gymnastics this year.
 - c. Megan won every gymnastics competition this year.
5. Which of the following would be the most rewarding moment of your season?
 - a. having your team want to continue practicing, even after practice is over
 - b. seeing one of your gymnasts finally master her glide kip on bars
 - c. watching one of your gymnasts qualify for the national meet

Look over your answers. If you most often selected 'a' responses, then having fun is most important to you. A majority of 'b' answers suggest that skill development is what attracts you to coaching. And if 'c' was your most frequent response, winning is tops on your list of coaching priorities. If your priorities are in order, your athletes' well-being will take precedence over your team's success every time.

Affection

Another vital tool you will want to have in your coaching kit is a genuine concern for the young people you coach. This requires having a passion for kids, a desire to share with them your enjoyment and knowledge of gymnastics, and the patience and understanding that allow all of your gymnasts to grow from their involvement in sport. You can demonstrate your affection and patience in many ways, including the following:

- Make an effort to get to know each athlete on your team.
- Treat each athlete as an individual.
- Empathize with athletes trying to learn new and difficult skills.
- Treat athletes as you would like to be treated under similar circumstances.
- Control your emotions.
- Show your enthusiasm for being involved with your team.
- Keep an upbeat tempo and a positive tone in all of your communications.

Character

The fact that you have decided to coach young gymnasts probably means you think participation in sport is important. But whether or not that participation develops character in your athletes depends as much on you as it does on the sport itself. How can you help your gymnasts build character?

To teach kids good character, coaches must model appropriate behaviors for sport and life. That means more than just saying the right things. What you say and what you do must match. There is no place in coaching for the “Do as I say, not as I do” philosophy. Challenge, support, encourage, and reward every youngster, and your gymnasts will be more likely to accept—even celebrate—their differences. Be in control before, during, and after all practices and competitions. And don’t be afraid to admit that you were wrong. No one is perfect! Each member of your coaching staff should consider the following steps to becoming a good role model:

- Take stock of your strengths and weaknesses.
- Build on your strengths.
- Set goals for yourself to improve on those areas that you would not want your athletes to copy.

Humor

Humor is an often-overlooked coaching tool. It means having the ability to laugh at yourself and with your athletes during practices and competitions. Nothing helps balance the seriousness of a skill session like a chuckle or two. And a sense of humor puts in perspective the many mistakes your gymnasts will make. So don’t get upset over every bent leg or respond

negatively to a fall. Allow yourself and your athletes to enjoy the ups, and don't dwell on the downs. Here are some tips for injecting humor and fun into your practices:

- Make practices fun by including a variety of activities.
- Keep all athletes involved during practice.
- Consider laughter by your athletes to be a sign of enjoyment, not of waning discipline.
- Smile!

Chapter 2: Communicating as a Coach

In chapter 1, you learned about the tools you need for coaching: comprehension, outlook, affection, character, and humor. These are essentials for effective coaching; without them, you'd have a difficult time getting started. But none of the tools will work if you don't know how to use them with your gymnasts—and this requires skillful communication. This chapter examines what communication is and how you can become a more effective communicator. Coaches often mistakenly believe that communication occurs only when instructing athletes to do something, but verbal commands are just a small part of the communication process. More than half of the communication between people is nonverbal. So when you are coaching, remember that actions speak louder than words. Communication in its simplest form involves two people: a sender and a receiver. The sender transmits the message verbally, through facial expressions, and sometimes through body language. Once the message is sent, the receiver must receive it and, optimally, understand it. A receiver who fails to pay attention will miss part, if not all, of the message.

Sending Effective Messages

Young athletes often have little understanding of the rules and skills of gymnastics and probably even less confidence in their ability to perform. So they need accurate, understandable, and supportive messages to help them along. That's why your verbal and nonverbal messages are important.

Verbal Messages

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” isn't true. Spoken words can have a strong and long-lasting effect. And coaches' words are particularly influential because youngsters place great importance on what coaches say. Perhaps you, like many former youth sport participants, have a difficult time remembering much of anything your elementary school teachers told you, but you can probably still recall several specific things your coaches at that level said. Such is the lasting effect of a coach's comments to an athlete.

Whether you are correcting misbehavior, teaching proper technique for a back handspring, or praising one of your gymnasts for good effort, you should consider a number of things when sending a message verbally:

- Be positive and honest.
- Speak clearly and simply.
- Say it loud enough, and then say it again.
- Be consistent.

Be Positive and Honest

Nothing turns people off like hearing someone nag all the time, and athletes react similarly to a coach who gripes constantly. Kids particularly need encouragement because they often doubt their ability to perform in a sport. So look for and tell your gymnasts what they have done well.

However, don't cover up poor or incorrect technique with rosy words of praise. Kids know all too well when they've erred, and no cheerfully expressed cliché can undo their mistakes. If you fail to acknowledge errors, your athletes will think you are a phony.

An effective way to correct a performance error is to first point out the part of the skill that the gymnast has performed correctly. Then explain—in a positive manner—the error that the gymnast has made, and show her the correct way to do it. Finish by encouraging the gymnast and emphasizing the correct technique. This is called the “compliment sandwich”. Make sure you don't follow a positive statement with the word but. For example, you shouldn't say, “You kept your head in well, Kelly, but your legs are still bent in your handstand.” Many kids will ignore the positive statement and focus on the negative one. Instead, you could say, “You kept your head in well on your handstand, Kelly. And if you focus on straightening your legs, it will be beautiful. Way to go.”

Speak Clearly and Simply

Positive and honest messages are most effective when expressed directly in words your gymnasts understand. Beating around the bush is ineffective and inefficient. And if you ramble, your gymnasts will miss the point of your message and probably lose interest. Here are some tips for saying things clearly:

- Organize your thoughts before speaking to your athletes.
- Know your subject as completely as possible.
- Explain things thoroughly, but don't bore your athletes with long-winded monologues.
- Use language your athletes can understand, and be consistent in your terminology.

However, avoid trying to be hip by using their age group's slang.

Say It Loud Enough, and Then Say It Again

Talk to your team in a voice that all members can hear. A crisp, vigorous voice commands attention and respect; garbled and weak speech is tuned out. It's okay and, in fact, appropriate to soften your voice when speaking to a gymnast individually about a personal problem. But most of the time your messages will be for all of your athletes to hear, so make sure they can. An enthusiastic voice also motivates athletes and tells them that you enjoy being their coach. A word of caution, however: Avoid dominating the setting with a booming voice that distracts attention from athletes' performances.

Sometimes what you say, even if stated loudly and clearly, won't sink in the first time. This may be particularly true when young gymnasts hear words they don't understand. To avoid

boring repetition and still get your message across, you can say the same thing in a slightly different way. For instance, when explaining a drill, you might first tell your gymnasts, “Use your arms!” If the gymnasts don’t appear to understand, you might say, “Arms by your ears!” The second form of the message may get through to gymnasts who missed it the first time around.

Coaching Tip: Remember, terms that you are familiar with and understand may be completely foreign to your gymnasts, especially younger children or beginners. Adjust your vocabulary to match the age group. Although 12-to 14-year-olds may understand expressions such as “drive your heels” or “keep your legs tight,” 8-and 9-year-olds may be confused by this terminology. In some cases, you may need to use demonstrations with the gymnasts so they can “see” the term and how it relates to gymnastics.

Be Consistent

People often say things in ways that imply a different message. For example, a touch of sarcasm added to “Way to go!” sends an entirely different message than the words themselves suggest. You should avoid sending mixed messages. Keep the tone of your voice consistent with the words you use. And don’t say something one day and contradict it the next; athletes will get their wires crossed. You also want to keep your terminology consistent. Many gymnastics terms describe the same or similar skills. Take one popular skill, for example: One coach may use the term back extension roll to refer to this move, while another coach may use back roll to handstand. Although both might be correct, to be consistent as a staff, the coaches of a team should agree on all terms before the start of the season and then stay with them.

Nonverbal Messages

Just as you should be consistent in the tone of voice and words you use, you should also keep your verbal and nonverbal messages consistent. An extreme example of failing to do this is shaking your head, indicating disapproval, while at the same time telling an athlete “Nice try.” Which is the athlete to believe, your gesture or your words? Messages can be sent nonverbally in several ways. Facial expressions and body language are just two of the more obvious forms of nonverbal signals. Keep in mind that as a coach you need to be a teacher first, and any action that detracts from the message you are trying to convey should be avoided.

Facial Expressions

The look on a person’s face is the quickest clue to what the person thinks. Your gymnasts know this, so they will study your face, looking for a sign that will tell them more than the words you say. Don’t try to fool them by putting on a happy or blank “mask.”

They’ll see through it, and you’ll lose credibility. Serious, stone-faced expressions provide no cues to kids who want to know how they are performing. When faced with this, kids will just assume you’re unhappy or disinterested. Don’t be afraid to smile. A smile from a coach can give a great boost to an unsure athlete. Plus, a smile lets your gymnasts know you are

happy to be coaching them. But don't overdo it, or your gymnasts won't be able to tell when you are genuinely pleased by something they've done or when you are just putting on a smiling face.

Body Language

What would your gymnasts think you were feeling if you came to practice slouched over, with your head down and your shoulders slumped? Would they think you were tired, bored, or unhappy? What would they think you were feeling if you watched them during a competition with your hands on your hips, your jaws clenched, and your face reddened? Would they think you were upset with them, disgusted at an official, or mad at a fan? Probably some or all of these things would enter your gymnasts' minds. And none is the impression you want your gymnasts to have of you. That's why you should carry yourself in a pleasant, confident, and vigorous manner.

Coaching Tip- As a coach, you need to be aware of your body language. Athletes of all ages will pick up on your actions and habits, so you must be sure to provide a good example for your gymnasts to model. All it takes is a few eye rolls or wild hand gestures to send a message that this type of behavior is acceptable, even if that is not your intent. Additionally, sitting while coaching sends the message that you are uninterested and don't value their efforts. If you ask the kids you are coaching to be moving and working on skills, you should also be moving, spotting, and giving corrections.

Improving Your Receiving Skills

Now let's examine the other half of the communication process: receiving messages. Too often, very good senders are very poor receivers of messages. But as a coach of young athletes, you must be able to fulfill both roles effectively.

The requirements for receiving messages are simple, but receiving skills are perhaps less satisfying and therefore underdeveloped compared with sending skills. People seem to enjoy hearing themselves talk more than they enjoy hearing others talk. But if you learn the keys to receiving messages and make a strong effort to use them with your athletes, you'll be surprised by what you've been missing.

Pay Attention

First, you must pay attention; you must want to hear what others need to communicate to you. That's not always easy when you're busy coaching and have many things competing for your attention. But in one-on-one or team meetings with athletes, you must focus on what they

are telling you, both verbally and nonverbally. You'll be amazed at the little signals you pick up. This focused attention will not only help you catch every word your gymnasts say but also enable you to notice your gymnasts' moods and physical states. In addition, you'll get an idea of your gymnasts' feelings toward you and other gymnasts on the team.

Listen Carefully

How you receive a message from another person, perhaps more than anything else you do, demonstrates how much you care for the sender and what that person has to tell you. If you care little for your athletes or have little regard for what they have to say, it will show in how you attend and listen to them. You need to check yourself. Do you find your mind wandering to what you are going to do after practice while one of your gymnasts is talking to you?

Do you frequently have to ask your athletes, "What did you say?" If so, you need to work on your receiving mechanics of attending and listening. But if you find that you're missing the messages your athletes send, perhaps the most critical question you should ask yourself is this: "Do I care enough to be a coach?"

Providing Feedback

So far we've discussed separately the sending and receiving of messages. But we all know that senders and receivers switch roles several times during an interaction. One person initiates communication by sending a message to another person, who then receives the message. The receiver then becomes the sender by responding to the person who sent the initial message. These verbal and nonverbal responses are called feedback. Your gymnasts will look to you for feedback all the time. They will want to know how you think they are performing, what you think of their ideas, and whether their efforts please you. You can respond in many different ways, and how you respond will strongly affect your gymnasts. They will react most favorably to positive feedback.

Praising gymnasts when they have performed or behaved well is an effective way to get them to repeat (or try to repeat) that behavior. And positive feedback for effort is an especially effective way to motivate youngsters to work on difficult skills. So rather than shouting at and providing negative feedback to gymnasts who have made mistakes, you should try offering positive feedback and letting them know what they did correctly and how they can improve. Sometimes just the way you word feedback can make it more positive than negative. For example, instead of saying, "Don't take steps on your landing," you might say, "Land with your legs slightly bent, chest up, and arms level with your heart." Then your gymnasts will be focusing on what to do instead of what not to do.

Positive feedback can be verbal or nonverbal. Telling young athletes, especially in front of teammates, that they have performed well is a great way to boost their confidence. And a pat on the back or a high five communicates that you recognize a gymnast's performance.

Speaking to Parents

Parents want to be kept in the loop with their child's performance during class; they want to hear that their child is learning, having fun, and making progress. When class is over, making general announcements about how class went goes a long way. It can be hard to speak to every parent individually if you have a large class and only have a five minute window before your next class. By standing at the door for a minute or two, any parent that wants to speak to you has the opportunity to do so. If a parent asks a question you're not sure how to answer, you can always direct them to a supervisor (Cub, Jen, the staff in the office).

You should always speak to the parents if any of the following occurs:

1. An injury that results in sitting out for more than five minutes or leaving early (use your discretion).
2. A recurring behavioral issue that cannot be solved in class.
3. Difficulties in class that result in sitting out, emotional outbursts (becoming angry, sullen, crying, etc), or disagreements between classmates. Remember to be understanding, when speaking with the parents it best to pull them aside rather than announce it in front of a group. Discuss with the parent what set off the episode and what steps you can take in class to avoid issues in the future.

Chapter 3: Making Practices Fun and Effective

Before you begin, consider why your athletes decided to become involved with gymnastics. Children choose to play sports for many reasons, but two of the most common are to have fun and develop skills. So that's exactly what your goal should be while teaching your athletes. This chapter will provide advice on how to maximize the learning environment for your gymnasts while also allowing them to have an enjoyable experience. In addition to planning for the entire season, it is important to plan for each practice. The more organized the class, the better the gymnasts learn. What you plan for each class must be reasonable for the skill level and maturity of the gymnasts. Teach novice gymnasts the basic body positions and movements. Move on to specific progressions for more difficult skills only after the gymnasts have mastered these basics.

Planning the Lesson

Lesson planning includes identifying the specific skills you will teach your gymnasts; developing lead-ups, progressions, and drills related to those skills; and then organizing them into the various practice sessions. As important as it is to have a lesson plan, it is also important to be flexible. If your gymnasts are having a difficult time learning a particular skill, take some extra time to practice the skill—even if that means moving back your overall schedule. After all, if your gymnasts cannot perform the fundamental skills, they will not be able to execute the more difficult skills properly or safely. Select skills for each lesson that will incorporate tasks in all three developmental domains: psychomotor (physical), affective (social and emotional), and cognitive (mental). Often, coaches focus solely on the physical benefits of sport, but young athletes are at a critical stage of learning cognitive and affective skills, which they will use for the rest of their lives. Take the opportunity to enhance your gymnasts' skills in each developmental area.

Psychomotor:

Strength, Coordination, Agility, Flexibility, Endurance

Cognitive:

Concentration, Memorization, Comprehension, Visualization, Vocabulary

Affective:

Respect, Responsibility, Teamwork, Patience, Self-image

Coaching Tip- Ways to incorporate affective and cognitive skill development into your lesson plans involve adding new skills and progressions, rotation patterns, or equipment configurations to create unique teaching and learning environments. By adding such new elements, gymnasts can increase their gymnastics vocabulary and feel the achievement of accomplishing a new task.

Lessons should be structured to maximize the gymnasts' on-task time and their success rate. Keep the gymnasts busy during class and they will learn more, have more fun, and likely have fewer behavior problems. It is helpful to establish performance goals for each class and include a variety of activities to help the gymnasts accomplish these goals. As you plan your lessons, keep in mind your gymnasts' learning styles, and vary your teaching methods to optimize learning for all the participants. Stations are set up in TG1 and TG2 bi-weekly. You do not need to follow the lesson plan exactly- students will have different skill levels within a class, modifying the stations to best fit your class ensures the students are challenged appropriately, thus having more fun and a higher degree of success. If you move or modify the stations, reset them for the next group.

Guided Discovery

The guided discovery, or cooperative, method of teaching is often an effective teaching style. It allows kids to discover what to do, not by your telling them but by their experiencing it. It empowers the gymnasts to solve problems that arise by themselves, which is a large part of the fun in learning. Here are four steps to using the guided discovery approach in your classes.

Step 1: Stage a Modified Activity

Modifying the activity or task lets you emphasize a limited number of technical aspects. This is one way to guide your gymnasts to discover certain methods that will improve performance. In gymnastics, we often call a modified activity a lead-up or drill (see appendix).

For instance, when teaching a back extension roll, you could set up several stations that allow the gymnasts to practice parts of the skill. At one station you may have them practice a backward roll to candlestick position then back to stand. At another station the gymnasts could try a backward roll to a pike stand. And a third station could allow the gymnasts to practice a handstand with a step-down. The goal of these stations is for the gymnasts to feel and understand the required body movements and positions that will transfer to the back extension roll. The drills should be at a level where the gymnasts can safely attempt them without a spotter. This will allow the gymnasts to think about what they need to do in order to perform the skill.

Activities Checklist

When developing activities, or drills, for your youth gymnastics program, here are a few questions you should ask yourself:

- Are the activities fun?
- Are the activities organized?
- Are the gymnasts involved in the activities?
- Do the activities require the gymnasts to use creativity and decision making?
- Are the spaces used appropriate for the activities?
- Is your feedback appropriate?
- Are there implications for other gymnastics skills?

Step 2: Help Athletes Understand the Activity

As your athletes participate in the modified activities, or drills, you should look for the right spot to freeze the action, step in, and ask questions about errors you're seeing. When you do this, you help the athletes better understand the objective of the drill, what they must do to achieve that objective, and also what technique they must use. Asking the right questions is a very important part of your teaching. Essentially, you'll be asking your athletes—often literally—“What do you need to do to succeed in this situation?” Sometimes athletes simply need to gain more experience, or you may need to modify the task further so that it is even easier for them to discover what they need to do. It may take more patience on your part, but it's a powerful way for athletes to learn.

For example, let's say your gymnasts are participating in a drill in which the objective is to hurdle onto a vaulting board and perform a straight jump onto a raised mat. Ask the gymnasts the following questions:

- What are you supposed to do in this activity?
- What do you have to do to jump and land properly on the mat?
- How do you respond after failed attempts?

Coaching Tip- If your athletes have trouble understanding what to do, you can phrase your questions to let the athletes choose between two options. For example, if you ask, “What's the best way to correct your hurdle to allow you to rebound off the board?” and an athlete responds, “Circling my arms,” then ask, “Do you circle your arms before the hurdle or during the hurdle?”

At first, asking the right questions might seem difficult because your athletes might have little or no experience with the sport. You must resist the powerful temptation to tell your athletes what to do. Instead, through modified activities and skillful questioning on your part, your athletes should come to realize on their own that technical awareness and appropriate fundamentals, intensity, and emotional control are essential for success. Just as important, instead of telling them what the critical skills are, you have led them to this discovery.

Step 3: Teach the Skills of the Activity

Only when your athletes recognize the skills they need in order to be successful do you want to put those parts together into a complete skill or sequence of skills. This is when you use a more traditional approach to teaching sport skills, the IDEA approach, which we describe in chapter 4. This type of teaching breaks down the skills of the events. It should be implemented early in the season so that your gymnasts can begin attaining skills, which will make gymnastics more fun.

Step 4: Practice the Skills in Another Activity

As a coach, you want your athletes to experience success as they're learning skills, and the best way for them to experience this success early on is for you to create an advantage for the athletes. Once the athletes have successfully practiced the drills, as outlined in step 1, you can then have them participate in another activity—this time slightly more challenging (e.g., back roll with straight arms to push-up position) and maybe with aid from a piece of equipment (e.g., back extension roll using an incline mat). Practicing these additional drills will make your gymnasts more likely to reach the goal. Keep in mind that not all gymnastics skills easily lend themselves to modified activities; such skills may be best taught with individual attention to each gymnast. The key is to set up situations where your athletes experience success yet are challenged in doing so. This will take careful monitoring on your part, but having kids participate in modified activities as they are learning skills is a very effective way of helping them learn and improve.

Activities, conditioning, and games

(See appendix for additional games, conditioning, and activities)

➤ Cookie Monster

Goal

Promote cardiorespiratory exercise; good for inclusion in warm-up or group activities.

Description

Have the children stand in a straight line against the wall, with one child standing some distance away. The children in line are cookies, and the other child is the cookie monster. The children chant, "Cookie monster, cookie monster, what time is it?" The cookie monster responds with a clock time of her choice. If she chooses eight o'clock, for example, the cookies count together as they take eight large steps toward the cookie monster. The cookies repeat their chant, and the cookie monster continues to respond with times until she decides to answer "Cookie time!" At that time, the cookie monster chases the cookies back to the wall.

Variations

- Change cookie monsters often.
- Instead of walking forward, vary the activity the athletes do to move forward (e.g., lunges, animal movements, skips, or hops).

➤ Hoopers

Goal

Work on locomotion as well as cardiorespiratory fitness and strength.

Description

Place half as many hoops on the floor as the number of children. Have the children stand outside the hoops. On the command "Run," the children run around the area without touching

each other or the hoops. On the command “Hoopers,” each child must try to jump inside the nearest hoop. The children without hoops must perform an exercise, such as push-ups or jumping jacks.

Variations

- Instead of running, vary the actions outside the hoops, such as galloping, turning, jumping, or skipping.
- Vary the exercises done by the children without hoops.
- Have all the children participate in the exercises, instead of just the ones outside the hoops.

➤ Fitness Race Track

Goal

Promote cardiorespiratory exercise and strength; good for inclusion in warm-up or cool-down activities.

Description

Use a large, open area that can be made into a 40-foot (12 m) square. Place cones with signs that have a list of 7 to 10 exercises at the corners of the square. These should be basic, such as sit-ups, push-ups, or cartwheels; the exercises chosen can be related to whatever skills you’re teaching or working on that day. The gymnasts form groups of two and go to a corner of the square. Make sure the pairs are distributed evenly among the corners. One partner will be the runner, and the other will be the exerciser. When the high-energy music starts (or on your signal), the runner will run around the square while his partner does the first exercise on the list. When the runner gets back to the corner he started from, he does the first exercise on the list, and his partner becomes the runner. The teams continue until each partner has performed all the exercises on the list. The pair that completes the list of exercises first wins the game. Have the students who are finished walk around inside the square until the other teams have finished the activity.

Variation

This activity can also be done without winners. Each team must complete all of the exercises. When they are finished, the athletes move on to additional stretching or cool-down activities.

➤ Stick Contest

Goals

Practice proper landing positions and sticking dismounts.

Description

In one or two lines, the gymnasts practice jumping off a 2-foot (24 inch) block and landing in a safe landing position and freezing (i.e., holding this position without taking a step). As long as the gymnast sticks the landing, he can continue in the game, returning to the back of the line. Designate another activity (such as stretching) for those who are out.

Variations

- Vary the jumps from the block—straight jump, tuck jump, jump with a half turn, straight jump backward, and so on.
- Jump off different surfaces or from different heights. The jumping surface should be a stable piece of equipment or apparatus.

➤ RELAY RACES

Goal

Promote conditioning and fitness development as well as team building.

Description

Divide the gymnasts into teams of three to five. Each team forms a straight line at one end of the floor exercise mat. Make sure there is sufficient room between each line. On your command, the first member of the team performs the requested skill or activity (e.g., cartwheels or round-offs) down to the other end of the floor and then back. After returning to the line, that gymnast tags the next teammate in line, and that team member performs the skill down and back on the mat. Continue until all teammates have completed the skill. The team who is the first to finish the activity wins.

Variations

- Vary the activities. Use locomotor activities, basic skills and tumbling (e.g., rolls or cartwheels), handstand walks, and so on.
- Vary the reward for the winning team, such as reduced conditioning or names added to a jar for a weekly drawing.

Drills and Routines

(see appendix for additional drills and routines)

Following are some drills and routines to help you maximize both your practice time and gymnast participation. Drills and routines help to encourage proper form and better replicate competition settings.

➤ Line Drills

Goal: Maximize participation and practice time; especially useful for floor exercise training.

Description: Gymnasts line up along one end of the floor exercise mat. There should be sufficient room between gymnasts (greater than arm's length). If the number of gymnasts warrants, form short lines along the edge of the floor. The gymnasts move across the floor, performing the designated activity. Direct the activity and give feedback as the group performs the skill. This is a great way to incorporate locomotor and tumbling skills into every practice session. This drill can also be helpful as a warm-up for intermediate and advanced skills. This time allows gymnasts to practice previously learned skills.

Variation: Vary the activities performed during this time. Each trip across the floor can be a different activity. Activities may include locomotor movements, rolls, leaps and jumps, handstands, or basic tumbling.

➤ Hit Routines

Goal: Encourage gymnasts to make their first routine of the practice, applying additional pressure to replicate competition setting.

Description: Each gymnast must make (successfully complete) seven routines on the given event (this works for any event). If she makes her first routine, she can reduce the number of routines to six. Therefore, if the gymnast hits her first routine (i.e., successfully completes all

the skills), then she would have five more routines to hit for a total of six. If the gymnast has a fall or misses a skill in her first routine, then she would have seven more routines to hit.

Variations:

- Vary the number of routines the athletes must hit. Keep in mind competition level, age, and skill level.
- Vary the reward for hitting the first routine.

➤ No Knee Bend Bar Routines

Goal: Encourage proper form and successful completion of an uneven bars routine.

Description: The gymnast must make a bar routine with no more than five knee bends. As the gymnast performs the routine, count aloud each time she bends her knees, breaking form. Once you reach six, the gymnast stops the routine. That routine does not count toward the goal of the lesson.

Variations:

- Vary the number of knee bends to be accepted.
- Instead of bent knees, consider other form or execution deductions.

➤ Heads Up Routines

Goal: Encourage good posture and presentation during a floor routine.

Description: The gymnast must make a floor routine, concentrating on keeping her head up throughout the routine, especially in the choreography. As the gymnast performs the routine, you count aloud each time she puts her head down. If the gymnast puts her head down more than five times, this routine does not count toward the goal of the lesson.

Variations:

- Vary the number of acceptable “head downs.”
- Instead of “head downs,” consider other form or execution deductions, such as flexed feet.

Stations

Stations are a group of fitness-specific activities for gymnasts to rotate through and practice various assignments. They are meant to maximize participation and practice time on a given event. Stations should be set for one event or apparatus at a time. Ideally, there should be no more than two gymnasts per station. Gymnasts continue to practice the activity at the given station for a short time. They are directed to rotate between stations in the assigned path on your command. For a class of 10 gymnasts, set up at least five stations. Stations can include the following elements:

- Main skills for the lesson (this may be where you are stationed)
- Lead-up skill or drill 1 (component of main skill)
- Lead-up skill or drill 2 (component of main skill that builds on lead-up skill or drill 1)
- Practice of learned skills
- Conditioning activities
- Match the skills, drills, or conditioning to the objective for that lesson.

There should not be more than one station that requires spotting; athletes should be able to perform the other activities on their own. Depending on the design and the skills included in the stations, you may choose to stay at one station to assist gymnasts or may move among the stations providing help and feedback. Either way, be sure all gymnasts on all stations are supervised. You should be in a position to see all the gymnasts. **Do not have your back to any of the stations.** Numerous variations are possible. Change the number of stations, the rotation order, or the activities being performed. For each station, identify an easier and more difficult variation to allow the gymnasts to work at a level that is comfortable for them. Be sure to provide feedback to the gymnasts regarding all the stations.

Chapter 4: Teaching and Shaping Skills

Coaching gymnastics is about teaching skills, fitness, and values to kids. It's also about coaching gymnasts before, during, and after competitions. Teaching and coaching are closely related, but there are important differences. In this chapter, we focus on principles of teaching, especially on teaching technical and tactical skills. But these principles apply to teaching values and fitness concepts as well. Armed with these principles, you will be able to design effective and efficient practices and will understand how to deal with misbehavior. Then you will be able to teach the skills that are necessary for success in gymnastics.

Teaching Gymnastics Skills

Many people believe that the only qualification needed for teaching a skill is to have performed it. Although it's helpful to have performed the skill, teaching it successfully requires much more than that. And even if you haven't performed the skill before, you can still learn to teach successfully with the useful acronym IDEA:

- I- Introduce the skill.
- D- Demonstrate the skill.
- E- Explain the skill.
- A- Attend athletes practicing the skill.

Introduce the Skill

Athletes, especially those who are young and inexperienced, need to know what skill they are learning and why they are learning it. You should therefore use the following three steps every time you introduce a skill to your athletes:

1. Get your athletes' attention.
2. Name the skill.
3. Explain the importance of the skill.

Get Your Athletes' Attention

Because youngsters are easily distracted, you should do something to get their attention. Some coaches use interesting news items or stories. Others say the gymnasts' names or a key phrase. And still others simply project enthusiasm to get their athletes to listen. Whatever method you use, speak slightly above your normal volume, and look your athletes in the eyes when you speak. Also, position gymnasts so they can see and hear you. Arrange the gymnasts with ample space between them, facing you. (Make sure they aren't looking at a distracting activity.) Then ask whether all of them can see you before you begin to speak.

Name the Skill

More than one common name may exist for the skill you are introducing, but you should decide as a staff before the start of the season which one you'll use (and then stick with it). This will

help prevent confusion and will enhance communication among your gymnasts. When you introduce the new skill, call it by name several times so that the athletes automatically correlate the name with the skill in later discussions.

Explain the Importance of the Skill As Rainer Martens, the founder of the American Sport Education Program (ASEP), has said, “The most difficult aspect of coaching is this: Coaches must learn to let athletes learn. Sport skills should be taught so they have meaning to the child, not just meaning to the coach.” Although the importance of a skill may be apparent to you, your athletes may be less able to see how the skill will help them become better athletes. Give them a reason for learning the skill, and describe how the skill relates to more advanced techniques.

Coaching Tip- You may want to write out in detail each skill you will teach. This can help clarify what you will say and how you will demonstrate and teach each skill to your gymnasts.

Demonstrate the Skill

The demonstration step is the most important part of teaching a sport skill to athletes who may never have done anything closely resembling the skill. They need a picture, not just words, so they can see how the skill is performed. Ask one of your gymnasts to demonstrate the skill.

These tips will help make your demonstrations more effective:

- Use correct form.
- Show the skill several times.
- Slow the action, if possible, during one or two performances so athletes can see every movement involved in the skill.
- Show the skill at different angles, if possible, so your athletes can get a full perspective of it.

Explain the Skill

Athletes learn more effectively when they're given a brief explanation of the skill along with the demonstration. You should use simple terms and, if possible, relate the skill to previously learned skills. Ask your gymnasts whether they understand your description. A good technique is to ask them to repeat your explanation. Ask questions such as “What are you going to do first?” and “Then what?” If athletes look confused or uncertain, you should repeat your explanation and demonstration. If possible, use different words so your gymnasts get a chance to try to understand the skill from a different perspective.

Complex skills are often better understood when they are explained in more manageable parts. For instance, if you want to teach your gymnasts how to perform a handstand forward roll, you might take the following steps:

1. Show your athletes a correct performance of the entire skill.
2. Break down the skill, and point out its components.

3. Have athletes perform each of the component skills you have already taught them, such as the forward roll and kick to handstand.
4. After athletes have demonstrated their ability to perform the separate parts of the skill in sequence, re-explain the entire skill.
5. Have athletes practice the skill in a sequence with other steps or skills. Young athletes have short attention spans, and a long demonstration or explanation of a skill may cause them to lose focus. Therefore, you should spend no more than a few minutes altogether on the introduction, demonstration, and explanation phases. Then involve the gymnasts in drills or games that call on them to perform the skill.

-How to Run Your Drills

Before running a drill that teaches technique, you should do the following:

- Name the drill.
- Explain the skill or skills to be taught.
- Demonstrate the drill.
- Explain what the drill will accomplish.
- Tell the gymnasts how many repetitions of the drill to complete and if they should practice other drills intermittently.

Once the drill has been introduced and repeated a few times in this manner, you will find that merely calling out the name of the drill is sufficient; your gymnasts will automatically know what to do to run the drill and practice the skill.

Attend to Athletes Practicing the Skill

If the skill you selected is within your athletes' capabilities and you have done an effective job of introducing, demonstrating, and explaining it, your athletes should be ready to attempt the skill. Some gymnasts, especially those in younger age groups, may need to be physically guided (e.g., spotted) through the movements during their first few attempts. Walking unsure gymnasts through the skill in this way will help them gain confidence to perform the skill on their own.

Your teaching duties, though, don't end when all your gymnasts have demonstrated that they understand how to perform a skill. In fact, your teaching role is just beginning as you help your gymnasts improve their skills. A significant part of your teaching consists of closely observing your athletes' hit-and-miss trial performances. You will shape athletes' skills by detecting errors and correcting them using positive feedback. Keep in mind that your positive feedback will have a great influence on your gymnasts' motivation to practice and improve their performances.

Remember, too, that some gymnasts may need individual instruction. So set aside time during practice to give individual help.

Helping Athletes Improve Skills

After you have successfully taught your gymnasts the fundamentals of a skill, your focus will be on helping them improve the skill. Athletes learn skills and improve on them at different rates, so don't get frustrated if progress seems slow. Instead, help them improve by shaping their skills and detecting and correcting errors.

Shaping Athletes' Skills

One of your principal teaching duties is to reward positive effort or behavior—in terms of successful skill execution—when you see it. A gymnast properly performs a back walkover on the balance beam, and you immediately say, “Beautiful back walkover! I especially like your lunge at the end. Great job!” This, plus a smile and a thumbs-up gesture, goes a long way toward reinforcing that technique in that gymnast. However, sometimes you may have a long dry spell before you see correct techniques to reinforce. It's difficult to reward athletes when they don't execute skills correctly. How can you shape their skills if this is the case?

Shaping skills takes practice on your athletes' part and patience on yours. Expect your gymnasts to make errors. Telling the gymnast who performed the proper back walkover that she did a good job doesn't ensure that she'll have the same success next time. Seeing inconsistency in your athletes' technique can be frustrating. It's even more challenging to stay positive when your athletes repeatedly perform a skill incorrectly or show a lack of enthusiasm for learning. It can certainly be frustrating to see athletes who seemingly don't heed your advice continue to make the same mistakes.

Although it is normal to get frustrated sometimes when teaching skills, part of successful coaching is controlling this frustration. Instead of getting upset, use these six guidelines for shaping skills:

1. Think small initially.

Reward the first signs of behavior that approximate what you want. Then reward closer and closer approximations of the desired behavior. In short, use your reward power to shape the behavior you seek.

2. Break skills into small steps.

Before performing an entire skill, a gymnast needs to understand how to do each step within the skill using correct form. For instance, in learning a proper back walkover, one of your gymnasts has good flexibility and completes the skill nicely, but she doesn't keep her body tight and fully stretched at the end, which affects the ending of the skill and makes it difficult for her to stay on the beam. Reinforce the correct techniques of the back walkover, and teach her how to keep her muscles contracted throughout the entire skill and keep her arms tight against her ears at the end so that she stays on the beam. Once she masters this, shift the focus to getting her to finish in the proper lunge position while remaining on the beam.

3. Develop one component of a skill at a time.

Don't try to shape two components of a skill at once. For example, in vaulting, gymnasts must learn to run and hurdle onto the board, rebound from the board, and perform a skill over the vault table. Gymnasts should focus first on one aspect (run and hurdle), then on another (rebound), and then on the remaining components of the skill. Gymnasts who have problems mastering a skill are often trying to improve two or more components at once. You should help these athletes isolate a single component.

4. Use reinforcement only occasionally, and only for the best examples.

By focusing only on the best examples, you will help athletes continue to improve once they've mastered the basics. Using only occasional reinforcement during practice allows athletes to have more active time instead of having to constantly stop and listen to your instructions. Gymnastics skills are best learned through a lot of repetition, such as drills and competitive activities, and you should make the best use of team practice time by allowing the athletes to have as much training time as possible.

5. Relax your reward standards.

As gymnasts learn a new skill or learn to combine two or more skills into one action, a temporary deterioration of previously learned skills may occur, and you may need to relax your expectations. For example, a gymnast who has learned how to perform a rebound straight jump off the vaulting board is now learning a jump to handstand (onto a raised mat surface). While learning the new skill and getting the rhythm down, the gymnast's execution of all components may be poor. A similar degeneration of skills may occur during growth spurts while the coordination of muscles, tendons, and ligaments catches up to the growth of bones. As a coach, you need to remain patient as a gymnast is learning something new.

6. Go back to the basics.

If, however, a well-learned skill degenerates for long, you may need to restore it by going back to the basics. If necessary, have the athlete practice the skill using a low-pressure activity. For example, let the gymnast practice with a lower mat stack, and raise the height only when the gymnast is comfortable with the technique.

Detecting and Correcting Errors

Good coaches recognize that athletes make two types of errors: learning errors and performance errors. Learning errors occur because athletes don't know how to perform a skill; that is, they have not yet developed the correct motor pattern in the brain to perform a particular skill. Performance errors are made not because athletes don't know how to execute the skill but because they have made a mistake in executing what they do know. There is no easy way to know whether an athlete is making learning or performance errors; part of the art of coaching is being able to sort out which type of error each mistake is.

The process of helping your athletes correct errors begins with observing and evaluating their performances to determine if the mistakes are learning or performance errors. Carefully watch your gymnasts to see if they routinely make the errors in both practice and competition

settings or if the errors tend to occur only at meets. If the latter is the case, then your gymnasts are making performance errors. For performance errors, you need to look for the reasons your gymnasts are not performing as well as they can; perhaps they are nervous, or maybe they get distracted by the meet setting. If the mistakes are learning errors, then you need to help the gymnasts learn the skill, which is the focus of this section.

When correcting learning errors, there is no substitute for your own mastery of the skill. The better you understand a skill—not only how it is performed correctly but also what causes learning errors—the more helpful you will be in correcting your athletes' mistakes.

One of the most common coaching mistakes is providing inaccurate feedback and advice on how to correct errors. Don't rush into error correction; wrong feedback or poor advice will hurt the learning process more than no feedback or advice at all. If you are uncertain about the cause of the problem or how to correct it, you should continue to observe and analyze until you are more certain. As a rule, you should see the error repeated more than just occasionally before attempting to correct it.

Correct One Error at a Time

Suppose Megan, one of your more experienced gymnasts, is having trouble with her pullover on bars. She does not pull her chin close enough to the bar, which makes it difficult to lift her hips and legs over and around the bar. What do you do?

First, you must decide which error to correct first—athletes learn more effectively when they attempt to correct one error at a time. Determine whether one error is causing the other; if so, have the athlete correct that error first because it may eliminate the other error (which is the case with Megan). However, if neither error is causing the other, athletes should first correct the error that is easiest to correct and will bring the greatest improvement when remedied. Note that improvement in one area may even motivate the athlete to correct other errors.

Use Positive Feedback to Correct Errors

The positive approach to correcting errors includes emphasizing what to do instead of what not to do. Use praise, rewards, and encouragement to correct errors. Acknowledge correct performance as well as efforts to improve. By using positive feedback, you can help your athletes feel good about themselves and promote a strong desire to achieve.

When you're working with one gymnast at a time, the positive approach to correcting errors includes four steps:

1. Praise effort and correct performance.

Praise the gymnast for trying to perform a skill correctly and for performing any parts of it correctly. Praise the gymnast immediately after he performs the skill, if possible. Keep the praise simple: "Good try," "Way to hustle," "Good form," or "That's the way to follow through." You can also use nonverbal feedback, such as smiling, clapping your hands, or using any facial or body expression that shows approval.

Make sure you're sincere with your praise. Don't indicate that an athlete's effort was good when it wasn't. Usually an athlete knows when he has made a sincere effort to perform the skill correctly, and he will perceive undeserved praise for what it is—untruthful feedback to make him feel good. Likewise, don't indicate that an athlete's performance was correct when it wasn't.

2. Give simple and precise feedback to correct errors.

Don't burden a gymnast with a long or detailed explanation of how to correct an error. Give just enough feedback so that the gymnast can correct one error at a time. Before giving feedback, recognize that some athletes readily accept it immediately after the error; others will respond better if you slightly delay the correction.

For errors that are complicated to explain and difficult to correct, you should try the following:

- Explain and demonstrate what the athlete should have done. Do not demonstrate what the athlete did wrong.
- Explain the cause (or causes) of the error if it isn't obvious.
- Explain why you are recommending the correction you have selected if it's not obvious.

3. Make sure the athlete understands your feedback.

If the gymnast doesn't understand your feedback, she won't be able to correct the error. Ask her to repeat the feedback and to explain and demonstrate how it will be used. If the gymnast can't do this, you should be patient and present your feedback again. Then have the gymnast repeat the feedback after you're finished.

4. Provide an environment that motivates the athlete to improve.

Your gymnasts won't always be able to correct their errors immediately, even if they do understand your feedback. Encourage them to stick with it when they seem discouraged or when corrections are difficult. For more difficult corrections, remind gymnasts that it will take time, and that the improvement will happen only if they work at it. Encourage those athletes with little selfconfidence. Saying something like "You're getting your chin closer to the bar today; with practice and conditioning, you'll become stronger and be able to perform your pullover without a problem" can motivate an athlete to continue to refine her strength and skills on the uneven bars.

Other athletes may be very self-motivated and need little help from you in this area; with these athletes, you can practically ignore step 4 when correcting an error. Although motivation comes from within, you should still try to provide an environment of positive instruction and encouragement to help such gymnasts improve.

A final note on correcting errors: Sports such as gymnastics provide unique challenges in this endeavor because you might be working with several athletes simultaneously. How do you provide individual feedback in a group setting using a positive approach? Instead of yelling (and embarrassing a gymnast) during the middle of an activity, you should pull aside a gymnast who is having trouble and then provide one-on-one feedback. This type of feedback has several advantages:

- The gymnast will be more receptive to one-on-one feedback.

- The other athletes are still active and still practicing skills, and they are unable to hear your discussion.
- Because the rest of the group are still practicing, you'll feel compelled to make your comments simple and concise—which is more helpful to the gymnast.

This doesn't mean you can't use the group setting to give specific, positive feedback. You can do so to emphasize correct group and individual performances. Use this group feedback approach only for positive statements, though. Keep any negative feedback for individual discussions.

Dealing With Misbehavior

Young athletes will misbehave at times; it's only natural. Following are two ways you can respond to misbehavior: through extinction or discipline.

Extinction

Ignoring misbehavior—neither rewarding nor disciplining it—is called extinction. This can be effective under certain circumstances. In some situations, disciplining young people's misbehavior only encourages them to act up further because of the recognition they get. Ignoring misbehavior teaches youngsters that it is not worth your attention.

Sometimes, though, you cannot wait for a behavior to fizzle out. When an athlete causes danger to herself or others, or disrupts the activities of others, you need to take immediate action. Tell the offending athlete that the behavior must stop and that discipline will follow if it doesn't. If the athlete doesn't stop misbehaving after the warning, you should use discipline.

Extinction also doesn't work well when a misbehavior is self-rewarding. For example, you may be able to keep from grimacing if a youngster kicks you in the shin, but even so, the youngster still knows you were hurt. Therein lies the reward. In these circumstances, it is also necessary to discipline the athlete for the undesirable behavior. Extinction works best in situations where athletes are seeking recognition through mischievous behaviors, clowning around, or grandstanding. Usually, if you are patient, their failure to get your attention will cause the behavior to disappear. However, you must be alert that you don't extinguish desirable behavior. When youngsters do something well, they expect to be positively reinforced. Not rewarding them will likely cause them to discontinue the desired behavior.

Discipline

Some educators say we should never discipline young people but should only reinforce their positive behaviors. These educators argue that discipline does not work, creates hostility, and sometimes causes avoidance behaviors that may be more unwholesome than the original problem behavior. It is true that discipline does not always work and that it can create problems when used ineffectively; however, when used appropriately, discipline is effective in eliminating undesirable behaviors without creating other undesirable consequences. You should consider

using discipline because it is difficult to guide athletes through positive reinforcement and extinction alone. Discipline is part of a positive approach when these guidelines are followed:

- Discipline athletes in a corrective way to help them improve now and in the future. Never use discipline to retaliate or to make yourself feel better.
- Impose discipline in an impersonal way when athletes break team rules or otherwise misbehave. Shouting at or scolding athletes indicates that your attitude is one of revenge.
- Once a good rule has been agreed on, ensure that athletes who violate it experience the unpleasant consequences of their misbehavior. Don't wave discipline threateningly over their heads. Warn an athlete once before disciplining, then just do it.
- Be consistent in administering discipline.
- Don't discipline using consequences that may cause you guilt. If you can't think of an appropriate consequence right away, tell the athlete you will talk with him after you think about it. You might consider involving the athlete in designing a consequence.
- Once the discipline is completed, don't make athletes think they are "in the doghouse." Always make them believe they are valued members of the team.
- Make sure that what you think is discipline isn't perceived by the athlete as positive reinforcement; for instance, keeping an athlete out of doing a certain activity or portion of the training session may be just what the athlete wanted.
- Never discipline athletes for making mistakes when they are performing.
- Never use physical activity or conditioning—running laps or doing push-ups—as discipline. To do so only causes athletes to resent physical activity, something we want them to learn to enjoy throughout their lives.
- Use discipline sparingly. Constant discipline and criticism causes athletes to turn their interests elsewhere and to resent you as well.

Appendix

Coaches' Safety Checklist

Dress code (recommendation)

- Staff shirt neat, clean
- Athletic pants or shorts (professional in length)
- Minimal or no jewelry

Properly plan the activity.

- Written daily lesson plans are important!
- Provide several stations to maximize activity time per event.

Provide adequate and proper apparatus and equipment.

- Before teaching an event, double-check the following:
 - Hardware used to tighten the apparatus is secure.
 - Mats are properly placed and secured (no gaps).
 - Obstacles are not in the vicinity of the activities.
- Ensure personal equipment fits properly and is used appropriately.

Know your students.

- Name
- Medical conditions
- Length of time in program

Provide proper instruction.

- Regularly review falling and land-ing drills on each event.
- Review basic skills and positions.

Supervise all activities.

- Keep all your students within your field of vision.
- Reposition yourself or the piece of equipment or apparatus so you can oversee all students and activities.
- Use direct and indirect supervision as needed.

Keep adequate records.

- Lesson plans
- Progress reports
- Individual file per student
 - Incident report forms
 - Notes from parent or guardian
 - Medical information

Teaching Gymnastics Skills

When teaching the basics of gymnastics, there are a few ways to approach each skill. You can adapt the training method based on the skill being taught, the competitive level, and the experience of the gymnast. The three methods described here—lead-up skills, drills, and progressions—are effective ways to teach gymnastics skills. By properly teaching gymnastics skills, you can foster greater learning opportunities, more success, and a safer environment. This is also discussed in chapter 5.

Lead-Up Skills

Lead-up skills involve breaking a skill into manageable parts. The gymnasts practice the parts of the skill and then progress to putting the parts together to complete the full skill. This is also referred to as the part-whole method. Lead-up skills help gymnasts learn how to break down difficult skills into smaller parts and learn each part before trying to master the entire skill all at once. An example of a lead-up skill for a backward roll is rocking backward.

The gymnast begins in a squat position and rolls backward, with the legs in tuck position and the head tucked forward (chin to chest). She rolls back until her shoulders touch the floor and her buttocks is raised off the floor. The gymnast should also practice placing her hands on the floor by her shoulders with the palms down and fingers pointing toward the shoulders. This lead-up skill is the beginning of the backward roll.

Drills

Drills are activities that mimic certain actions of a skill. They are important in teaching gymnastics because they help the gymnast develop strength, flexibility, and body awareness to better perform the complete skill. Drills allow for greater repetition, which is important when teaching a new skill because it can help develop proper technique by focusing on the raw elements of a skill and also creating good habits when executing a skill. To illustrate the concept of a drill, consider a backward roll on an incline (wedge) mat (figure 7.2, a-c). Using an incline mat makes the skill easier for the gymnast and allows her to feel the complete movement and develop coordination and strength before doing the skill on the floor.

Progressions

Teaching skills in a step-by-step fashion is called a progression. This allows athletes to learn and master basic skills first before moving to more advanced skills. Use of progressions also allows for maximum development, advancement, and success of athletes. For example, gymnasts should learn how to consistently perform a backward roll before learning a back extension roll. The backward roll is a critical component and therefore serves as a skill progression for the back extension roll.

Landing and Falling

Landing properly and knowing how to fall are both key aspects of injury prevention in the sport of gymnastics. These are prerequisite skills for gymnastics performance, and gymnasts should be continually educated in these areas. Education and reminders should be built into lesson plans and used for each apparatus.

Landing Properly

Landing properly should be automatic and a natural position for all gymnasts. Proper landing technique helps reduce the forces of landings. Safe landing technique includes the following:

1. Knees slightly bent to absorb the impact of landing
 - No straight legs on the landing
 - No squat position on the landing
2. Straight spine to keep the neck stable and prevent falling forward
 - No arch in the lower back
 - No bending forward at the waist
3. Arms extended to the front, straight and level with the heart in order to keep chest up on the landing

Learning how to Fall

Falls are commonplace in the gymnastics environment, especially as athletes learn new skills. Teach your gymnasts how to fall properly by demonstrating and practicing safety rolls. Safety rolls allow gymnasts to absorb the impact of a fall over a greater area of their bodies. A safety roll, also known as a recovery roll, should be performed if a gymnast is off balance). The gymnast should roll in the direction she is traveling—forward or diagonally (shoulder roll), backward, or sideways—instead of trying to immediately stop her momentum.

Tell your gymnasts to do the following when falling:

1. Make fists with the hands.
2. Pull the arms in toward the body and across the chest.
3. Roll in a tucked position.

Note: Rolls can also be done with the arms overhead (i.e., halo shape).

Additional Activities, Conditioning, and Games

(This section is under construction, new ideas will be incorporated as we go)

Games-

Four corners- Four cones go in the corners of one of the floors. One player is 'it' and stands in the middle of the floor. The other players disperse among the cones. There is a five second count down when the players can select a cone to stand at while the 'it' player closes their eyes. After the countdown, before looking, the 'it' player calls out a color matching one of the cones. Whoever stands at that cone is safe, the other players must evade the 'it' player for ten seconds (while remaining in the field of play). If caught, that player becomes 'it'. If no one is caught, the 'it' player starts the next round by initiating a new five second countdown.

Octopus tag- Unfold two panel mats, one on each corner of the floor opposite each other. One player is it and stands in the middle, the rest stand on one of the panels (all players start on the same side). When the 'it' player calls go, the other players must reach the opposite panel mat without being tagged. If they are tagged, they become seaweed (sit in one spot on the floor to tag passing players), or crabs (must crab walk on hands and feet to move around and tag passing players). Players who have been tagged can switch from seaweed to crabs at the start of each round, but not during. The game is over once all players have been caught.

Alien, alien- One player is 'it' and starts in the middle of the floor, all other players must line up on the side of the floor. The players start a chant "alien, alien, can we come to your planet", to which the 'it' player will reply "only if... (input a requirement, ie 'only if you wear glasses). If any player meets the requirement, they have safe passage to the other side of the floor; all other players must wait for the 'it' player to call 'blast off', and run to the otherside while evading capture. If tagged, the players join the 'it' player in the middle of the floor. 'It' players can take turns creating requirements.

Great Wall of China- Two mats are set up on either side of the floor, on one of the lines. One player starts on the line, the rest on one side of the line. When the 'it' player calls 'go', all other players must cross the line without getting tagged. If tagged, they join the 'it' player on the wall ('it' players cannot leave the line, other players cannot go outside the mats on the end of the line). For any round in which no players get tagged, the mats are moved closer together. When a player is tagged, the mats are reset to the ends of the line. The game continues until all players are tagged.