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Parent Education is the Key to Increased Enrollment in Preschool Gymnastics

Good preschool gymnastics instructors know that gym schools have three customers; the mother, the father, and the student. Unlike school age programs where the students tell other friends about our programs, preschool classes survive on the parents telling other parents. If the parents aren't fully aware of the philosophy of the gym, the objectives of the lessons, the basic purposes behind the curriculum, they can't completely appreciate why they need to make an extra effort to get their child to class. The instructors know all the reasons why the program is so important to a child's growth and development, but do the parents?

Parent education doesn't stop with the information in your club brochure, that's just the beginning. In order to effectively educate the parents, you must plan on educating them before, during, and after their child participates in each gymnastics class.

Before Class

Make sure the parents have a parent handbook before they walk into class. The handbook should contain information helping the parent understand the following information:

- Philosophy of the gym
- Class objectives
- Class description
- Parent role

- Student role
- Basic child development
- Class/Gym rules

Parents will feel more involved if you provide them with this valuable information they can apply to their child's gymnastics experience. Sending letters to parents who enroll their child in your classes is another form of effective parent communication. You'll find the parent's role in a parent and tot class.

Prior to starting class, the parents need to understand that each child matures differently and some students in the class are older than their child. Even a few months make a big difference in a child's development. Don't allow parents to compare their child with another child in the class. Also, if one child has been in the program for any length of time they're going to recognize the names of skills and directions more easily than a new student. Help the parent realize at this age most children are self-directed and will take instructions from the parents before they listen to an instructor.

Explain to the parents the stations that are created are success-oriented. We do this by positioning handprints and other objects and use them as visual cues. By following the handprints, the children can succeed at the station by following the cues. Let the parents encourage their child to attempt the station at least three times.

Your aim should be to teach with comfort. Customers will return to businesses that make them feel comfortable. Often, parents expect too much out of a toddler preschool gymnastics class and will not feel comfortable if their child is running around while other students are participating. If you haven't explained the true benefits of your class, parents will expect you to teach their child actual gymnastics skills. A parent may think if they're coming to a gymnastics school, then why wouldn't their child learn gymnastics? You have to educate them to understand the realistic goals for the program. At my gym, we use the following phrases in our written material to explain our objectives: quality time with your child; promotes reading readiness through perceptual motor skills; teaches children to be a member of a line; enhances motor development, coordination, poise, and agility; increases self-confidence as a mover; makes new

friends for parent and child; improves listening skills; improves ability to move to vocal instruction; prepares them for kindergarten testing by teaching motor skills, and it's FUN! These are some of the benefits of the class that parents should know about. Always sell the benefits. In advertising it's called, "selling the sizzle, not the steak." Consumer education is the key to advertising this type of class. Promotion and advertising is an important component in the educational process.

Educating the parents is how you'll keep them coming back and telling their friends about your innovative, beneficial program for young children. Attached is a list of the different classes for preschool we offer and their explanations, so the parents knows exactly what to expect before their first class. The key to customer service is to exceed their expectations. But, if you don't even match what they expect, you'll never make them happy. Use written material to explain the program and then...deliver.

Before Class

It's easy to educate the parents during a parent and tot class because you have the parents as a captive audience. You can talk to the parents over the half wall of your gym during the classes for four and five year olds. Most importantly, you should talk to the parents particularly about their child's progress. Remember, parents LOVE to hear how their child is doing in class. YOU are the only one that provides them with feedback about their child's progress. We also use our "Teddy Tumblebear Says" sheets that we give out at the end of the class explaining what was accomplished and why the particular activities were chosen.

When you have the parents in class with you, use that opportunity to explain what you're doing. For example, we start every class with music. We explain to the parents it improves their child's motor coordination and helps them to understand the beat and rhythm of music and movement. And, it always seems to put a smile on the kids' faces. It's also a signal to everyone, even the late-comers, that class is starting.

Secondly, we do the positions. We explain that these static moves: squat, straddle, pike, bridge, butterflies, lunge, V-sit, and "Tada" are some of the basic body positions for all gymnastics moves, and then the parents realize the importance of why we review them weekly.

Animal walks are a great way to teach kinesthetic awareness to a child. Tell the parents if a child can understand how it feels to keep a straight leg extended in a camel walk compared to a bent leg in a bear walk, they'll have a much easier time when they're upside down and we tell them to straighten their leg in a cartwheel. Kinesthetic awareness is merely understanding where the body is in space. A young child once upside down has no clue where their legs are and where they should put their hands. A great drill for understanding where the legs are while the child is upside down is called "Straddle Switch". Have the child get in straddle stand with hands on the floor in front of them. With all the weight on the hands swing the legs right and left. As the child is swinging the legs side to side call point or flex and see if they understand what to do with their feet while they're upside down. Drills such as these help the children develop knowledge of their own position in space and it also helps the parents understand the reasons we're doing simple moves like animal walks.

After Class

Parent education doesn't just stop when class is over, it continues to build upon the already cultivated educational growth of the parent gained before and during class. You can continue to educate the parents in a variety of ways:

- Provide take-home information sheets.
- Send parent letters home with the students.
- Planned parent/instructor conferences.
- Provide skill review sheets.
- Conduct a parent group meeting.
- Review the child's progress.

Parent education is the key to increasing your enrollment. It's certainly worth the effort. Take time to talk to the parents, write them notes, send explanation sheets home with the students, have a welcoming-parent party at the beginning of the session, and personally explain the true reason why they need to continue to bring their kids to you. Don't be afraid of the parents. They are your biggest resources. They are your personal advertisers. It's your responsibility to make them aware of your philosophy, your objectives, your goals, and your hopes for your classes.

Patti Komara's Bio

Patti Komara has owned a gymnastics school in Dyer, Indiana since 1969 offering gymnastics, dance, swimming, and a fitness-based educational preschool called Gym-N-Learn. Patti began speaking at national seminars in 1981 and has led hundreds of training workshops. Patti's Tumblebear Connection has produced more than 80 instructional DVDs. She has written books on yearly lesson plans for The internationally known Tumblebear Gym Program, School-age Gymnastics, Dancing GymBears, YogaBears, CheerBears, Gym-N-Learn, and her very successful Swim Program. Patti co-authored the original USAG preschool KAT certification program. In 2003 she was named USAG Business Leader of the Year. In 2005 Patti was selected as Client of the Year by Action International and in 2006 was given the national service award by USAG. In 2009 Patti began formal consulting for those in our industry and in 2010 her gym, Patti's All-American, was named in her local newspaper as "Best of the Region" once again. Patti has over 6000 subscribers to her "In the Loop Monthly E-Newsletter" which she has published since February 2007.