

## **Starting Gymnastics as a Preschooler**

By Jeannie McCarthy

Parents often ask the question of when to start their young child in a gymnastics program. This is quite an important issue to address due to the knowledge that children develop their fundamental movement skills between the ages of 2 and 5. Each stage of a youngster's development presents critical learning periods.

In general, a child will benefit by their involvement in gymnastics regardless of the age that they begin! The magic is that they experience challenges and new skills as they mature. A 3 year old student's pride in being able to walk on a two foot high beam is as much a milestone as the 5 year old who learns a one-armed cartwheel.

The type of activities toddler's attempt in gym class is quite different from those performed by 5-year-old students. The class activities are guided by the developmental stages of the students. As musculature and skeletal strength develop during the formative years, children gain more confidence and a greater ability to perform physical skills. Child development specialists graph developmental stages by age. Children come in all sizes and shapes and have their individual timetables of growth. Therefore, the charted stages of development are used as a much-needed guideline for curriculum development.

Preschoolers are commonly placed in a specific gymnastics class by their age, not their ability. Preschool gymnastics directors and teachers develop their curriculum with age-appropriate activities in mind. Experienced teachers take into consideration the children's mental, physical and emotional maturity when presenting lesson activities. For those children who demonstrate an aptitude for gymnastics at a young age, advanced classes are offered.

In 1995 USA Gymnastics launched a course for instructors of preschool age children. The course title is KAT, Kinder Accreditation For Teachers. More than 3,000 preschool gymnastics instructors have proudly earned this teaching certification.

*"When should I enroll my youngster in gymnastics class?"* Read on to learn the approach of your local KAT instructor.

### **Parent/Tot Class Activities**

The tots group, ages 20-36 months, experience thrilling moments in the gym which range from rolling on mats to playing group parachute games. Their experience on the gymnastics apparatus is normally in the form of obstacle courses. The tots are encouraged to climb, crawl, and jump from station to station. The objectives at each station are basic motor patterns and therefore, simple to complete. Tot and parent share all of this excitement as they work through each class as partners.

An additional benefit of being involved in gymnastics at this young age is the opportunity to socialize with other children of the same age. Sharing, following simple directions and social

skill development are all-important aspects of a Parent/Tot Program. Long verbal explanations and demonstrations by the teacher are kept to a minimum due to the children's short attention span.

There is more than meets the eye going on with participation in gymnastics at a young age. Brain growth for one! The vestibular mechanism is located in the ear canal. This mechanism is responsible for balance. During gym class a myriad of opportunities exist for honing the skill of balance. When the vestibular mechanism of the brain is stimulated through gym class activities, it in turn stimulates other areas of the brain to grow, such as the ocular area of the brain. What an exciting outcome for being involved in a movement program at a young age!

### **Class Activities For The 3 Year Old**

At this age, the social skills of sharing, helping others, and listening politely are as important to learn as gymnastics skills. Gymnastics classes are typically youngsters' first experience with a "school" setting. Gymnastics classes for this age group caters to the children's need for social development as well as movement education.

Perpetual motion is the name of the game with 3 year olds. Learning by doing is their motto.

Teachers of this age group present the students with basic gymnastics skills such as rolling, swinging, jumping, and balancing. Body positions, which they will use month after month, are instilled through repetition. These positions include tuck, straddle, pike, and stretch (or layout). More difficult skills such as backward rolls, handstands, and cartwheels are attempted with the aid of the teacher. Mastery of these challenging skills is not expected at this age.

The 3 year olds are presented with combinations of skills to learn in order to improve their memory. The learning of proper gymnastics terminology is also an important element of the curriculum at this time.

### **Class Activities For The 4 Year Old**

Development of social skills is still of high importance at this age. Partner activities are introduced as well as relays and group games with multiple tasks.

Progressions of challenging skills for vault, bars, beam, tumbling, and trampoline are presented to the 4 year olds. The teacher may "spot" the child during skill performance for safety and learning purposes. Safety is foremost in the teacher's mind with all the age groups.

With an increased attention span and improved strength and flexibility, gymnastics skills are acquired more easily at this age. Improved listening skills accelerate the learning process.

Circuit stations at this age may involve three steps per task at each station. For example, pick a foam number out of a bucket, set it on the mat, perform a V-sit and count the number out loud, return the foam number to the bucket.

Throughout the class the teacher encourages problem solving and creative thinking. Longer skill combinations are introduced to this age group.

### **Class Activities For The 5 Year Old**

Many of the activities presented to the 4-year-old students are presented to this age group concurrently. The expectations of the teachers are higher for this group. Skills are not simply attempted for the sake of an interesting learning experience. True skill acquisition can be attained through proper progressions.

The 5 year olds have the benefit of physical maturity that enables them to perform skills more easily than a 3 year old. Through the presentation of proper progressions, spotting, and practice, 5 year olds are capable of mastering many impressive gymnastics skills and sequences.

Skills are easier for children of this age to learn in large part due to their ability to listen attentively, analyze others, and assimilate information given by the instructor.

Scholastic advantages exist for children who are physically active. Studies have shown a direct correlation between physical movement and reading readiness. Physical activity calls in to play ocular pursuit of the eyes. When the eyes follow patterns from left to right, cognitive skills are enhanced for reading. Additionally, gymnastics students experience numerous movement patterns during class (moving through a serpentine, traveling from station to station in a circuit) which also enhance memory development and vocabulary. Yes, gymnastics class can assist your child in his/her readiness to learn how to read.

As you can see, advantages exist for children to be enrolled in a local gymnastics program at any young age. Any age is a great time to start gymnastics! Preschool gymnastics programs specialize on meeting the needs of children by offering them activities that are appropriate for their developmental level. The main ingredient within preschool gymnastics classes is the element of FUN! Can you think of any youngster who wouldn't look forward to a fun-filled learning experience in a colorful gym full of apparatus and mats?

Call your local gym program today! Ask for a KAT certified instructor and plan to be thoroughly pleased knowing that the industry standards are being presented to your young child. Watch your child smile as he/she moves, learns and grows!

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