

Understanding the Preschool Child

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Photos by Chase the Light Photography

developing Your teaching Philosophy: Why are You Coaching Gymnastics anyway?

Before we get into the developmental stages of the children with whom we work, let's talk about us. I query any coach who is in my gym about why they are in this field. Likewise, I query the reader, *"What makes you tick as a coach? What is the driving force that guides you as you work with the children in your gym?"*

Is it the BIG BUCKS we all make? Probably not. So, why are you here?

This is an important question because it leads each of us toward developing our teaching philosophy. A teaching philosophy is the core belief system that guides us each day as we coach our classes. It defines each of us and develops who we are as

coaches. Some of us may be driven to produce Olympians. If we are, then our teaching philosophy would reflect that and our training techniques would follow. Some of us may be driven to teach children that activity is fun. If that is the driving force for a coach, it would probably be reflected through games and activities that are designed to keep class fun.

For me, my coaching philosophy is very simple: *"To do whatever is best for the child."*

My philosophy guides me as I confront difficult moments, or as I train a child through fear, or even as I deal with a difficult parent. All I have to ask myself is, *"What is best for this child?"* Then, I can put my ego, the parent's ego and any other mitigating factors aside and simply make the decision I feel is best for the benefit of the child.



Within my teaching philosophy, there are implied goals:

- ▶ Gaining my students' trust
- ▶ Staying within their comfort zones
- ▶ Being honest
- ▶ Listening to them
- ▶ Setting ego aside
- ▶ Never being afraid to say, "I'm sorry"
- ▶ Putting THEM first

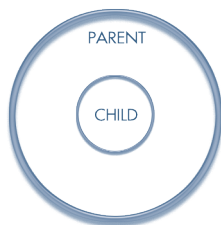
With these goals in mind, I must make it a priority to understand each individual child with whom I am working. I need to know his or her developmental level, skill level, learning style and other things that make him or her "tick." These things provide the foundation from which I can work and give me the guidelines I need as I work with each child. So, when I am coaching a preschool child, it is important to understand early childhood development and the quirks that come with it.

The Key to Coaching Preschool Children is Understanding their Developmental Stages

If we understand the child's perception of self and stage of physical and mental development, we will better understand children's behaviors. Preschool behavior is oftentimes directly related to their stage of self-understanding.

Given a strong understanding of these concepts, we can step out of the moment and watch their development in action. Rather than becoming frustrated because a 2-year-old won't stand in line, we can develop our lesson plans according to the 2-year-old developmental stage, making our lives easier and class time much more pleasant for all concerned: child, parent and coach.

Birth to One Year



This diagram represents the child's perception of self from birth to 1 year. During this time, the child perceives himself as one and the same as his parent. There is no break between the two. They are one unit in the child's mind.

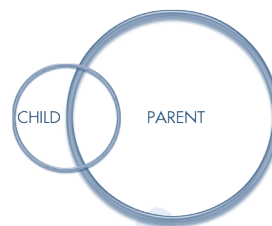
During this first year, the child's level of thought is at the NAMING stage. They are learning the names of objects, people and things. For example, "Mommy," "Daddy," "car" and "tree."

Songs like "Tony Chestnut" and "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" are appropriate for this age group because they help the children name their body parts. Teaching the names of body positions such as straight body, tuck, pike, straddle, hollow body, arch, scale, stick and finish are also appropriate because it is simply naming or labeling.

Other topics that are appropriate to include are colors, shapes, numbers and letters. Flash cards, puzzles and educational toys designed to help in the naming process are great to add to the Parent and Child class because they can provide busy stations between skill stations, adding to the overall value and experience of the class.



Around Two Years Old



Around the age of 2, the child is starting the gradual process of developing a stronger individual identity. They are still very closely attached to the parent or guardian, perceiving themselves as inextricably linked. This is why a 2-year-old has no fear. They perceive their parent as being omnipresent—always there to protect them. It explains why a 2-year-old will shotgun out into a street or dash across a busy gymnastics floor. They have no fear because in their mind, "Mommy is always there, and Mommy will always keep me safe." The 2-year-old is very self-directed. Much of that comes from the belief that they are always safe, and they can, therefore, venture out into the world unaffected by danger. To them, "Mom" is like their guardian angel or the tail that follows

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them wherever they go. That's why parental participation is so important to the class. Keeping the parents involved is extremely important. Otherwise, a 2-year-old class can be compared to herding cats since they are always ready and more than willing to dash out into the world.

Because the child is still "linked" to the parent, this is a good time to introduce separation games. This allows the child to learn how to leave his or her parent for brief periods of time, knowing that they can return to the parent quickly and prepares them for the next step: class without "Mom."

One of my favorite separation games involves placing a bucket of balls on one side of the floor and having the parents sit on the other side of the floor. The children take a ball from the bucket and run to their parent or guardian to take the ball to them, then return to the bucket for another ball. The kids always love taking something to "Mom". We often empty a full laundry basket of balls during this game.

I like this game because it not only teaches the children to tolerate short separations from the parent, but it also provides a "brain break" from class. We use "brain breaks" when it becomes obvious that the children are hitting saturation point with structured activity and need to romp and stomp for a few minutes, and simply enjoy being 2.

At this point, they are in the DESCRIBING stage of thought development, i.e. "pretty Mommy," "strong Daddy," "blue car," "tall tree." So, as the children take the balls to their

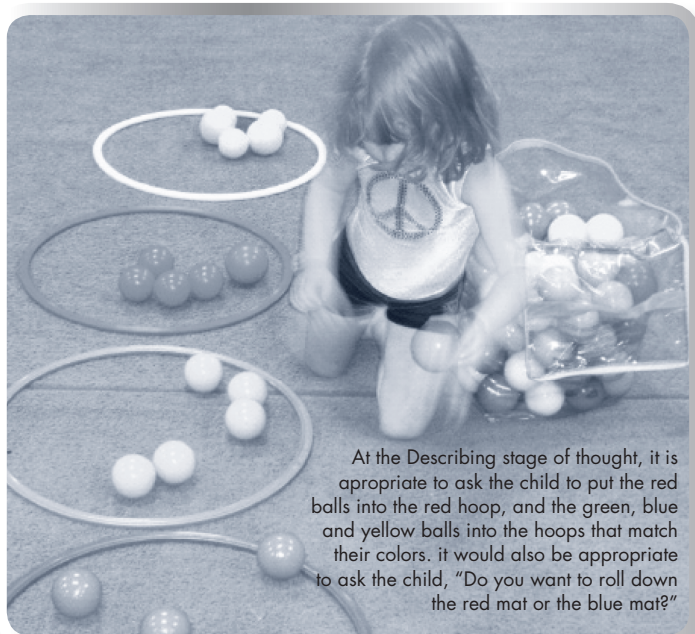
big person, they can also define the ball as "red ball," "green ball," or "yellow ball."

During this time, it is also very important to educate the parents about the developmental levels of their child. Children, unfortunately, do not come with owner's manuals. Parents are not always fully equipped to understand the developmental stages their children are experiencing, mentally and physically. So, explaining the activities to the parents and helping them understand why the particular activities are important will also help the parents to understand their own child better.

One of the most common questions I hear from the parent is, "Oh my gosh, my son can't jump on both feet on the trampoline. Is there something wrong with my kid?"

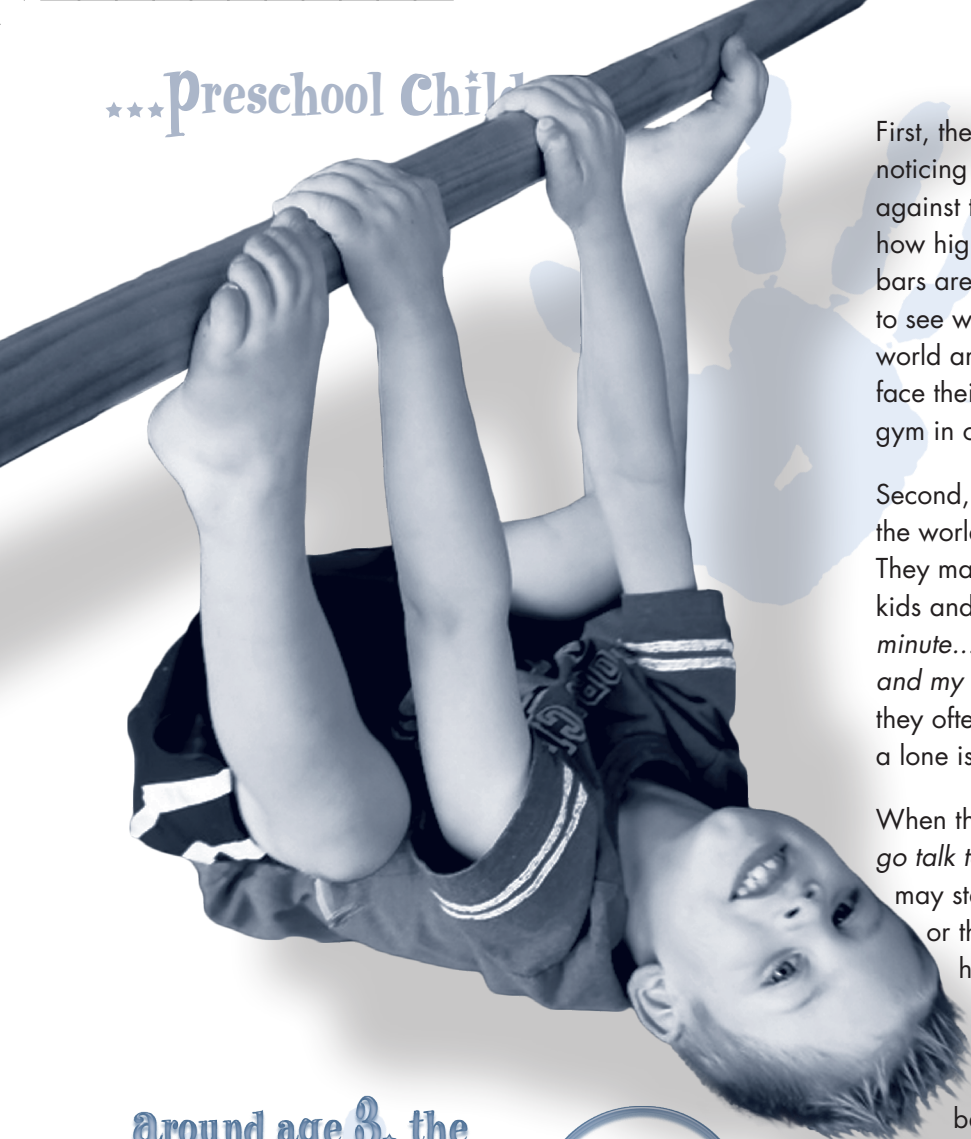
I actually LOVE it when the parents ask me that. It gives me the opportunity to explain to them that myelination, the sheathing of the nerves, does not complete until around age 5. Myelin insulates the nerves, creating direct pathways for neurological activity. This affects coordination. Until myelination is complete, there will be slow neuro-response times and spastic movement.

There is no fighting physiological development like myelination. It happens when it is supposed to happen. We cannot change that. We CAN, however, give the children activities and movement to help them coordinate their movement as their bodies are ready for the movement. In other words, we can prepare them, and they will be better able to learn movement when their bodies are actually able to do the movement.

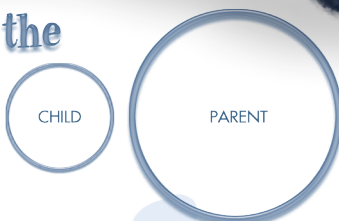


At the Describing stage of thought, it is appropriate to ask the child to put the red balls into the red hoop, and the green, blue and yellow balls into the hoops that match their colors. It would also be appropriate to ask the child, "Do you want to roll down the red mat or the blue mat?"





Around age 3, the child begins to separate from the parent.



the 3-Year-Old Child is at a fascinating developmental Stage.

At the age of 3, there are several things going on developmentally. This age group is absolutely fascinating to watch as they blossom into new little individuals. At the same time, since there is so much going on in the 3-year-old mind, it can be a challenging age group with which to work.

Around age 3, the child is starting to separate from the parent, mentally. They are beginning to understand that they are separate entities from the parent. At the same time, they are placing themselves into the environment, because they are reaching the COMPARATIVE stage of thought. All of this combines to create a whole dynamic unique to the age group.

First, they are very easily distracted because they are noticing the world around them as they compare themselves against this giant ocean of a world. So, they are noticing how high the ceiling is, how blue the floor is, how tall the bars are, and they are watching the other kids in the gym to see what they are doing. Essentially, they are noticing the world around them and outside of themselves. It is helpful to face their rotations and activities away from the rest of the gym in order to eliminate as many distractions as possible.

Second, as they are noticing their environment and how big the world around them is, they have moments of epiphany. They may be trucking along just fine, watching the other kids and looking at the gym, and suddenly realize, *"Wait a minute....I'm WAY out here in the middle of this HUGE gym, and my MOMMY is WAY over THERE!!!!!"* At that moment, they often experience panic with the realization that they are a lone island floating about this huge ocean of a world.

When the panic sets in, they tend to say things like, *"Can I go talk to my mommy? I need to talk to my mommy."* They may start waving at their mommy to get her attention, or they may simply shotgun away from the class to head straight to "Mom's" arms. These behaviors are all indicative that the realization of self and comparative stage of thought have combined to cause a hurricane of emotion. They are not "being bad" or "misbehaving—" they are simply being 3.

When we see the first signs of the 3-year-old meltdown happening in our gym, we stop, walk over to the parent observation area and take a "hug break." It's a very simple solution to the difficult class management problem of keeping the children on task. All they need to do is simply touch base with "Mom" in order to regain their confidence that everything will be okay. Once they have done that, they are ready to adventure back out into the world, and they are more willing to stay with the class.

At the start of the school year or session, we may have to take two or three hug breaks during a class, but as the year progresses, we generally only have to take one hug break during a class. We combine hug breaks with water breaks and head back to the planned activities.

Another really amazing aspect of the 3-year-old mind is how enmeshed in fantasy it is. A 3-year-old cannot separate fantasy from reality. To them, fantasy IS reality. When they tell their fantastic stories, they believe they are true.

Fantasy is a very important part of the 3-year-old world and, likewise, a very important part of a

3-year-old class. Allowing their imaginations to be a positive part of the class gives each class its own personality and dynamic. Role playing is a great activity for this age group.

LEARNING STYLES

Another important aspect of the 3-year-old mind is that around that age, children begin developing and refining individual learning styles. While there are seven different learning styles, as identified by Dr. Howard Gardner in his book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, during the early childhood development years, children generally fall into one of three groups: Bodily-kinesthetic, Linguistic (Auditory) or Visual Spatial.

Kinesthetic learners are particular to learning through doing, touching and feeling. They need body shaping, textures and activities in which they can be active participants. We are all kinesthetic by nature, and our sport is a very kinesthetic activity. So, kinesthetic cues are important to all of us.

Auditory learners learn through hearing, discussing and description. They learn best when they can talk things out with their instructors or peers and they take verbal directions very well. Girls tend to be predominantly auditory learners.

Visual Spatial learners need to see things and have a strong sense of visualization.

Cues such as targets for landing spots and hand placements, pictures and demonstrations are very good tools for teaching the visual learner. Boys are prone to be visual learners.

Since the 3-year-old child is starting to develop his/her learning style and these three learning styles are the predominant ones for this age group, it is important that we include cues that address each of these learning styles in our lesson plans for this age group.

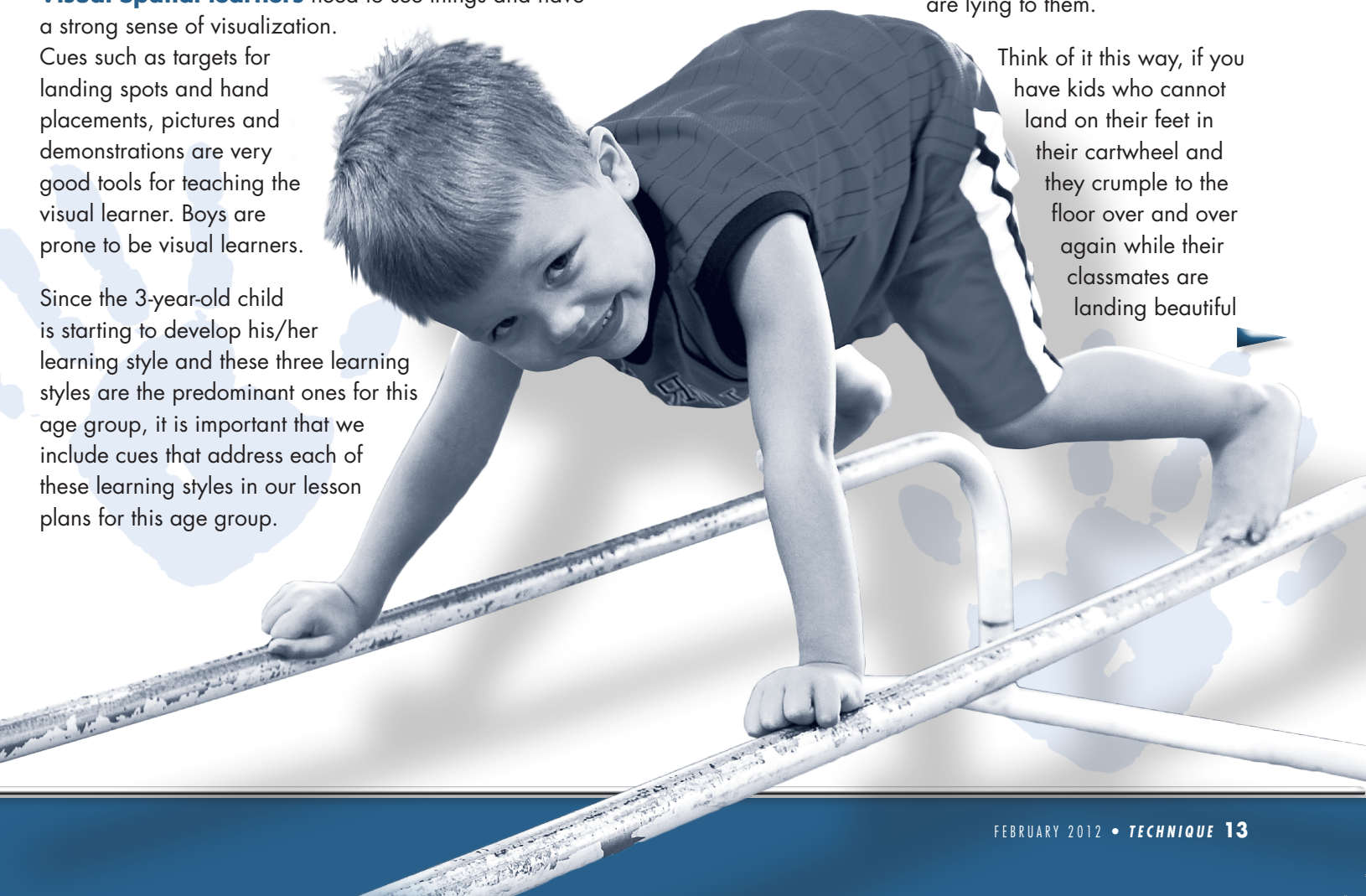
Around four to five Years of age, Children reach the Analyzing Stage of Thought

Between age 4 to 5, children understand that they are separate individuals from their parents. So, they are starting to develop self-esteem as individuals.

At the same time they are now able to perceive differences. They have hit the ANALYZING stage of thought. In their gym class, they can now discern when they are performing a skill well or if someone else is doing it better. In other words, they can look at a cartwheel and tell if someone's legs are bent or straight, and they apply this discernment to themselves, comparing their performance to that of others. So, they know if they are not as efficient at a skill as their peers. For this reason, it is very important that we never compare children to each other. They are doing a dandy job of that for themselves.

It is also important that we never underestimate the intelligence of our students. They know when we are being "straight" with them. With their cognitive development in mind, we have to be extremely careful and very specific with our praise. We must be honest with them in our assessments of their skills. If we aren't, they will know that we are sugar-coating the truth or even perceive that we are lying to them.

Think of it this way, if you have kids who cannot land on their feet in their cartwheel and they crumple to the floor over and over again while their classmates are landing beautiful



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cartwheels, how honest will they think you are if all you say to them is "GOOD JOB?" They have discernment. They know if their cartwheel is good or not; They know if their classmates are better than they are at performing the skills. So, if you simply say, "Good job," they will perceive that you are not being honest with them.

Still, coaches are caught between the proverbial rock and hard place because we want to be positive with our students, providing success and fun. This is the age group when we have to become even more vigilant in providing small windows of success.

WHY? SIMPLY PUT, FAILURE IS NOT FUN.

The number one reason children participate in sports or other extra-curricular activities is to have fun. Conversely, when an activity ceases to be fun, they quit and go to other activities that meet the criteria of "fun." We want them to be successful and perceive themselves as successful, because failure isn't fun. Still, we have to be honest with them because they have discernment. We have to give correction or we are not teaching. So, how do we achieve both?

THE COMPLIMENT SANDWICH

One of the best tools for achieving our goal is the "Compliment Sandwich." The Compliment Sandwich consists of a positive comment, a correction, and another positive comment. This allows us to find something the child has done correctly, providing a success for them. It also allows for correction in areas that need improvement, followed by a positive comment, providing encouragement for further improvement.

So, even if a child is crumpling to the floor as he lands his cartwheel, we might be able to say, "Wow, your arms were much straighter that time. Now, let's work on landing on your feet. I'm really glad you held your head off the floor that time. Good job on that!" Such a statement would be perceived as honest,

but positive. It also gives correction to guide teaching without the child perceiving attack.

SKILL DECONSTRUCTION

Another tool we can use to avoid failure and provide for success is skill deconstruction. If we break the skills into the fundamental elements and provide drills or activities to teach those fundamental elements, we give our students small pieces of the skill at which they can become proficient. Every time the child feels successful at an activity, he will start to raise the bar of self-expectation on his own. He will become more willing to try the harder activities once he feels successful at the fundamental activities.

PROVIDING CHOICE

Providing choice in skill difficulty also helps. For example, if the event rotation is beam, provide different heights of beam the child can choose from. If a child is not very confident, she may choose to use a velcro beam or floor beam. As that child gains confidence and raises the bar of self-expectation, she may want to use the medium beam.

Giving those choices to the children allows for them to feel successful at the level of difficulty where they are comfortable.

the last level of thought we will address is abstracting.

ABSTRACTING is the ability to envision. Sometime between the ages of 4 and 8, children gain the ability to use abstract thought. An example of using abstract thought in coaching might be, "Paint a rainbow with your legs as you cartwheel." Once a child has gained the ability to abstract, she can picture something in her head. So, she can imagine the rainbow painted with her straight legs while performing a cartwheel. It is appropriate to use abstract descriptions for this age group.

Compliment Sandwich

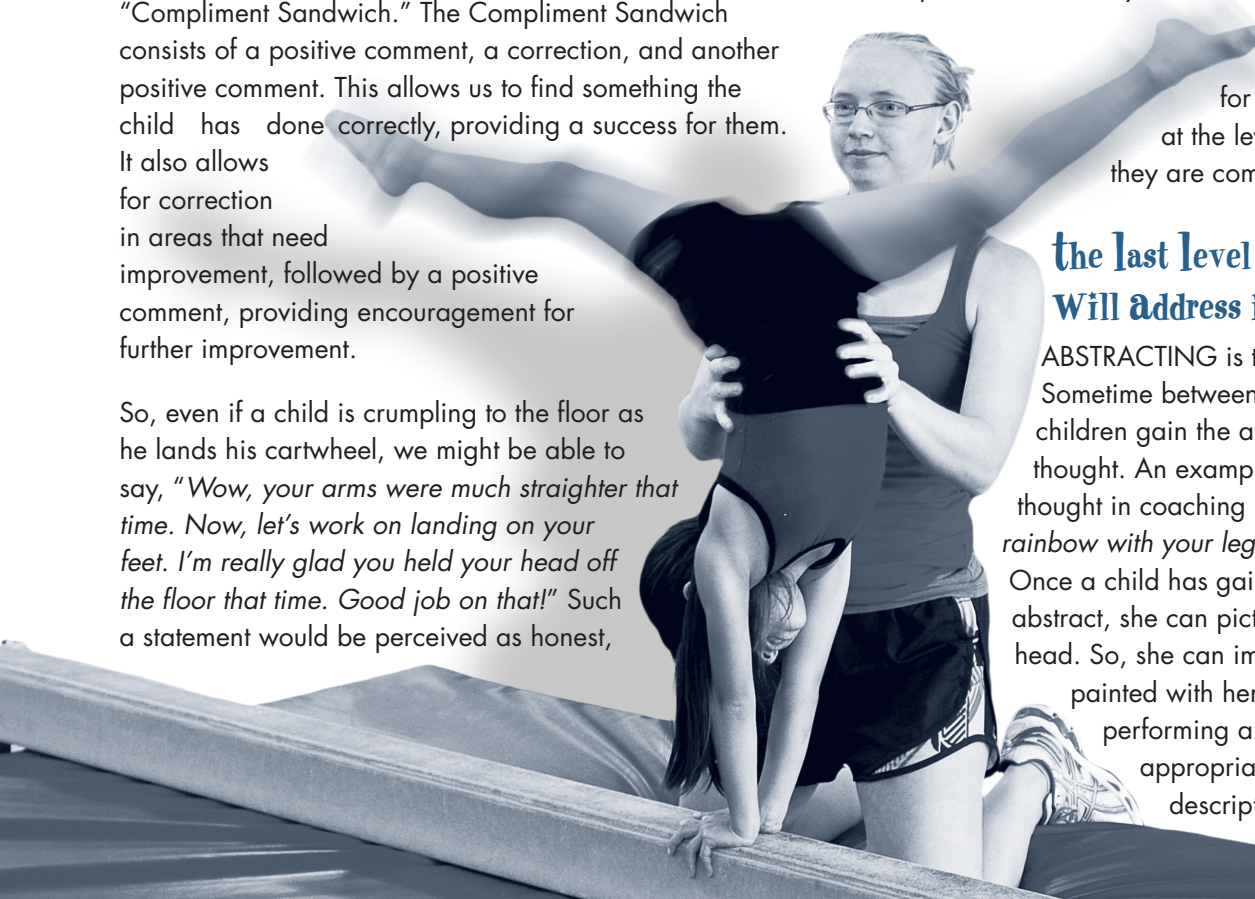
▶ WHILE YOU WANT TO BE SPECIFIC IN YOUR COMPLIMENTS, YOU WANT YOUR CRITIQUE TO BE POSITIVE.

COMPLIMENT

CORRECTION

▶ A COMPLIMENT SANDWICH CONSISTS OF:

COMPLIMENT



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HUMOR

This same age group, around 5 years old, is also developing a sense of humor. They love riddles and jokes. They are often very silly and they love laughter. Laughter is one of the keys to keeping them engaged. Allow for the children's sense of humor, and give them laughter. Make class FUN! Laugh with them. PLAY with them. Let them have moments of silliness.

LOL! humor LOL!

- ▶ THE NUMBER ONE REASON KIDS PARTICIPATE IN SPORTS AND AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES is to HAVE FUN!
- ▶ 4- and 5-year-olds love being silly and they love the use of humor.
- ▶ They will often tell jokes or riddles. They love to laugh. Give them laughter.
- ▶ Do NOT set them up to fail.
- ▶ Do NOT compete them in a closed peer group.
- ▶ Do NOT let their last memory of you be negative.
- ▶ Do NOT use conditioning as punishment.
- ▶ MAKE IT FUN!!!



frustrated by this stage, often called the "delayed terrible 2's," push their child too hard. The parent may know their child is capable of performing a skill or activity but may not understand the emotions their child is experiencing. So, they will often tell the child, "Just do it." This often creates a battle of wills between the parent and child.

The Emergence of Pessimism

While this age group loves humor, their level of development is also conducive to the development of self-doubt. Children around 5 years old have gained the sense of self, can analyze their own performances and realize that they can fail. This sometimes translates into a new emergence of pessimism. Signals that a child is experiencing emergence of pessimism are often the sudden expressions like "I can't."

When a child who has progressed well and seems well-adapted suddenly starts saying "I can't," falls into fits of tears unexpectedly, or refuses to participate, it's possible that they are experiencing the emergence of pessimism. In other words, they are fearing failure.

If this happens, it is more important than ever that they experience success. The more we provide small windows of success and positively encourage them to push forward, the sooner they will snap out of this stage of self-doubt. Using skill deconstruction, compliment sandwiches and unconditional acceptance are the best tools for helping the child regain confidence. Once they regain their footing, they will get past this stage and continue progressing.

It is incredibly frustrating to parents when their child suddenly loses their confidence to attempt things that they had previously been willing to try. I have seen parents who are

Helping the parent to understand that their child has developed the ability to understand failure helps the parent cope as well. Anytime I have a child going through this stage, I simply explain to the parent what I think is going on and the steps I am going to take to help their child get through it. Working in conjunction with the parent, the period of time the child experiences the emergence of pessimism can be cut shorter than it might otherwise last.

Turning "I Can't" into "I Can!"

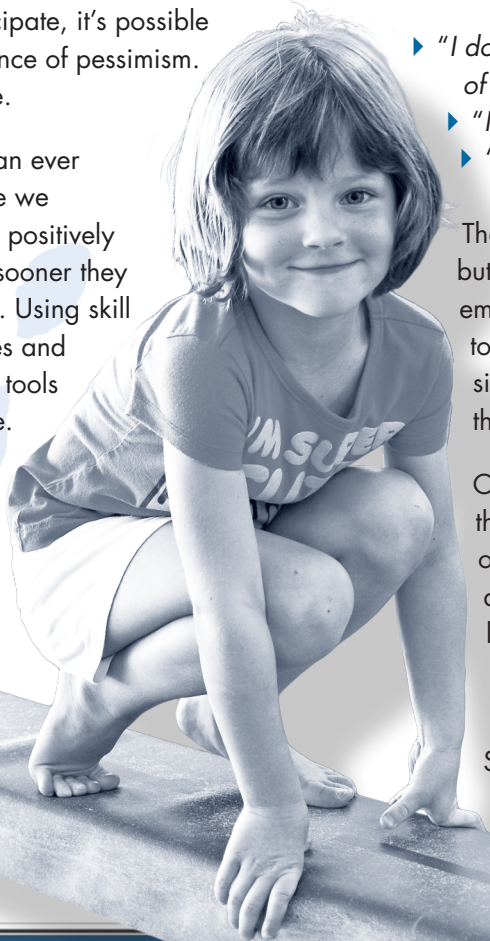
Generally speaking, I find that when a child says, "I can't," it means one of three things:

- ▶ "I don't understand what you are asking of me."
- ▶ "I'm afraid I'm going to get hurt."
- ▶ "I'm afraid I'm going to fail."

The child may feel one of these emotions, but they may not be able to verbalize their emotions. They may not understand how to tell their coach what is bothering them simply because they can't define it for themselves.

One of the ways, I have found to help them turn their "I can't" into an "I'll try" or "I can," is by giving them the words to define their emotions. It goes something like this, "Susie, I see that something is bothering you. Can you tell me why you don't want to try this skill?"

Sometimes she may be able to tell me, but if she stands there with a bewildered expression on her face, I will give her the words.



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"Do you understand what to do? Would you like me to show you?"

"Are you afraid that you may fall and get hurt? I can hold you the whole time and help you do it. You will feel my hands."

"Are you afraid that you may not be able to do it the first time? That's okay because that's why I'm here, to help you learn."

Once I give the child the words to define what is bothering her, she can pinpoint it for me. Then, I know how to address the problem better and help her get past the particular fear.

Remember Your Goal

As I step onto the floor each day, I have to remind myself of my goal. I want to be the best coach I can be for each child. I want them to love the sport of gymnastics as much as I love it. I want each child to leave my gym feeling better about themselves than when they arrived. So, there are a few things to remember:

- ▶ Always adhere to your teaching philosophy.
- ▶ Teach within the comfort zones of the children.
- ▶ Remember the developmental stages, design lesson plans to meet those stages and teach age-appropriate skills.
- ▶ Keep activities simple enough that they can achieve success, but provide opportunity for challenge so they can gain more.
- ▶ Laugh. Have fun. Remember how it feels to be a child. Play with them.
- ▶ **MOST OF ALL, LOVE THEM UNCONDITIONALLY.**

Additional Resources: Please visit the USA Gymnastics Online Store at usagym.sportgraphics.biz for the opportunity to purchase the *KAT and Movement Education Lesson Plan Development (MELPD)* work books.

You can also find more information like this by taking the R101 Preschool Fundamentals Theory Course. Visit usagymnasticsuniversity.org to register for this online course.

See experts' comments on pg. 20

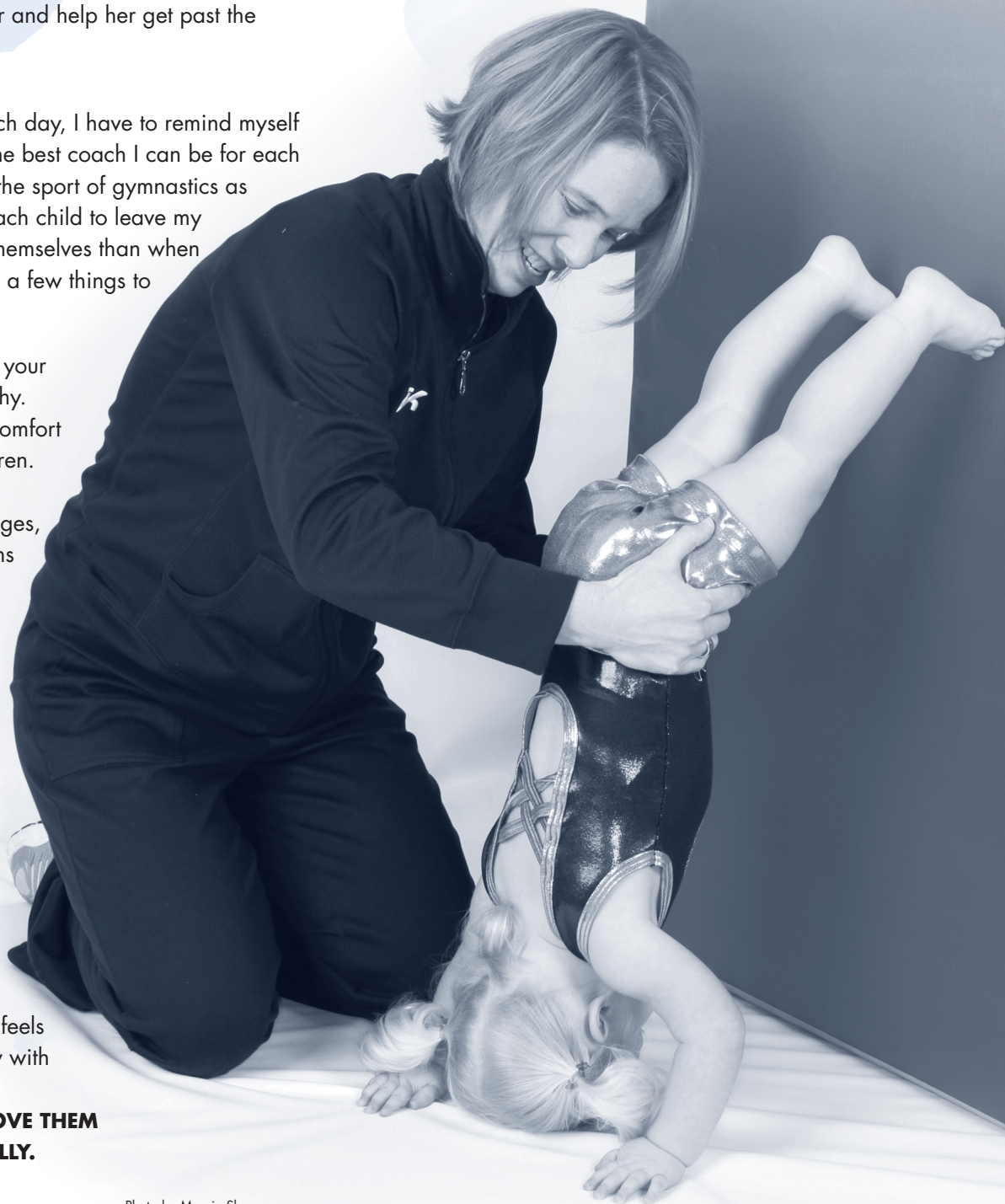


Photo by Marvin Sharp

let's hear from the preschool experts

USA Gymnastics University provides live and online courses. Let's get to know some of the National Instructors who teach these courses as they share additional gymnastics tips.



Linda Thorberg

National Instructor for R102 Preschool Fundamentals: Hands on Training (HOTPS)

All children learn differently. The most effective teacher will use several types of learning styles when instructing the class. The "Tell, Show, Do" method will give all children enough information to get started.

In as few words as possible, explain the activity (auditory learners will understand this). Next, demonstrate it yourself

or with another child (this will help visual learners). Finally, assist each child with spotting them through the action, or get them all started and circulate around to help each (Kinesthetic method for those who need to feel the action). Tell, Show, Do!

To review, ask them questions to see who was paying attention, like, "What do I do over here?" ✕



Michael Taylor

National Instructor for U101 Safety and Risk Management and R102 Preschool Fundamentals: Hands on Training (HOTPS)

Helping children in a gymnastics class learn life skills can be very rewarding. Two children racing for

Join the crowd.

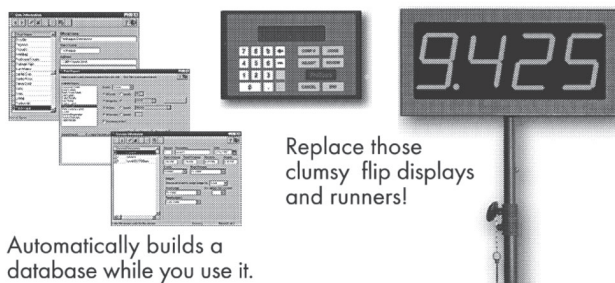


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the single yellow hoop is a teachable moment. Preschool instructors should always be looking for teachable moments. They reach it simultaneously and start pulling on it, yelling “MINE!” If there is a safety concern (i.e. the children begin to push or shove) it may be necessary to physically intervene immediately. However, you have just been presented with a very important “teachable moment” that could benefit everyone involved – you, the two children involved as well as the children and parents observing the situation. Resist the impulse to get involved and resolve the situation for the children. Provide them with guidance only when necessary. Remember that our ultimate goal is to help the children learn how to take care of themselves – give them the opportunity to figure things out for themselves!

FOLLOW THE 5 STEPS TO RESOLVE CONFLICT:

Approach – Be available, but don’t intervene too soon. If there is no further conflict, if the children are able to resolve the issue themselves, no further action is necessary. If the children are not able to reach a mutually acceptable solution, it may be necessary to help them understand their feelings. Give them the tools to articulate what they are going through, (*You look angry, You look sad...*)

Define the Problem – Describe the scene, reflect what the children have said, without judgement and without solutions, (*It looks like you both want the yellow hoop*)

Gather Data – Ask questions without blame or fault, open communication, (*What do you think would be fair?*)

Generate Alternatives – What are they going to do to solve their problem? Facilitate options; hopefully teach the bully compassion and teach the victim assertiveness.

Follow Through – Sometimes you just have to take charge, but you just demonstrated a model of conflict resolution. ★



Jeff Iulla

National Instructor for U101 Safety and Risk Management, R102 Preschool Fundamentals: Hands on Training (HOTPS) and R103 School Age: Hands on Training (HOTSA)

Safety while teaching gymnastics is always important, but more so when teaching preschool age students. Consider that for many preschoolers, their first gymnastics class may be the first lesson of any type in their young lives. They may not know how to take turns, follow teacher’s directions, or cooperate with other children in their class. Plus, there are other unique safety concerns pertaining to their small hands, large heads (in relation to their body), and soft bones that

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every preschool age instructor should know about. The USA Gymnastics Preschool Fundamentals courses (R101 and R102) provide the training and mentoring to help make learning fun and successful for the students, while enhancing the safety awareness of instructors. I highly recommend every instructor take this course. ✧



Lynn Moskowitz-Thompson

National Instructor for R102 Preschool Fundamentals: Hands on Training (HOTPS) and Director of Educational Services for USA Gymnastics

Good Communication is key with teaching children. Taken from the U100 Fundamentals of Gymnastics Instruction online course are tips for "Giving Clear Instructions."

- Gain athletes attention
- Get and keep good eye contact

- Speak clearly and slowly using understandable words (when working with younger children give only one or two instructions at a time.)
- Make statements, not questions where a child may have a choice in action
- Use demonstrations; have a student demonstrate (spot if needed)
- Verify that the children understand
- Say what you want the children to do, not what you don't want them to do. ✧

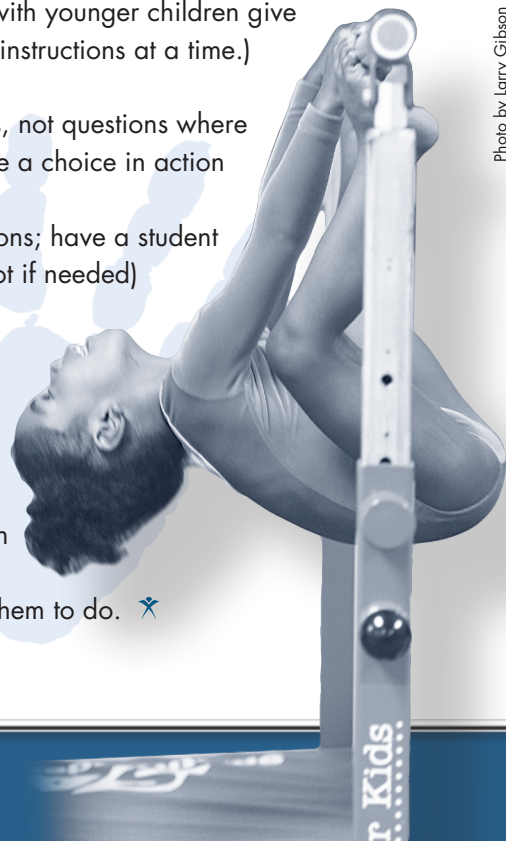


Photo by Larry Gibson