



## CURRICULUM & LESSON PLANNING

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In gymnastics the standard for teaching is based on progressions. When listed, we call these progressions “curriculum”. And when progressions are properly utilized, learning becomes easier, safer and within the boundaries of the legal duty professional instructors are required to follow.

But, when teaching children, “how you teach” is at least as important as “what you teach” if you want to keep kids enrolled. Instructors are challenged to use creativity to create exciting lesson plans – recipes for how we teach with curriculum skills as key ingredients and teaching methods (games, drills, themes, props, etc.) as the spice that flavors our lessons.

### **APTITUDE = READINESS TO LEARN**

Everything we learn is supported by what we have already learned. Crawling before walking. Walking before running. And, for each step in learning to succeed, the learners must be ready.



In gymnastics, readiness or ‘aptitude’ is defined in the following areas;

- Physical – having the strength, flexibility, power, balance, coordination, agility and fitness to perform the required challenge.
- Mental – able to focus attention clearly, correctly and without distraction long and deeply enough to accomplish the challenge from start to finish.
- Emotional – capable of managing the emotions associated with the challenge. In gymnastics, experiencing fear is a healthy response when perceived risk is present. Being able to feel the fear and proceed without allowing the fear to interrupt the performance is important to minimize injuries. And teaching students how to respond when scared, communicating their fear and asking for help is an important responsibility of teachers.

If creating success for all students is to be our goal, the teacher needs to know her students enough to recognize if they are ready to perform challenges before they are presented. And, if not, she must be skilled enough in understanding those challenges to be able to DECONSTRUCT them into more easily achievable steps. We call these steps PROGRESSIONS.

### **TIME – A KEY FACTOR TO LEARNING WITH PROGRESSIONS**

When deconstructing skills into more easily achievable progressions, the teacher needs to consider how small the progressive steps must be for success to be experienced quickly. The younger the child, the less time he/she will continue to try before giving up if not successful. So, if the teacher notices a

student struggling more than a few attempts, instead of asking the student to try again, the teacher should provide another challenge that is more easily achievable and will build the students aptitude for the next step.



## CURRICULUM – WHAT WE TEACH

Most of us recognize many gymnastics ‘skills’ as very specific and common movements that are easily recognized. For example, here is a list of 3 tumbling skills most parents would expect their children to learn in a gymnastics class;

- Forward Roll
- Cartwheel
- Handstand

An unskilled teacher may attempt to introduce these skills to children in a beginning level class. And, typically, there will be some children that will easily perform these skills with their first attempt successfully. If the teacher is only interested in identifying talented students, she will immediately notice and acknowledge those students with praise and continue to challenge them with more advanced skills. But those students who are struggling with these skills, falling or landing incorrectly, even if encouraged to “Try Again”, often continue to struggle and fall until, after a short time, they will get frustrated, believe that they are not good at gymnastics, and give up, quit, and most likely never want to try again. And sometimes, if they are not ready for these skills, they will get injured.

A skillful and caring teacher will only ask students to attempt challenges that they are prepared to learn safely and successfully. Using the above 3 common skills as examples, a teacher wanting to see students succeed might introduce these skills with the following simpler progressive steps;

- Forward Roll
  - Rock & Roll: sitting on the floor roll back and return to sitting with the hands in the air
  - Rock & Roll to a stand on the end of a folded mat: perform the above challenge sitting on a fold mat with the feet on the ground and finish standing instead of sitting (being on the folded mat makes standing easy)
  - Rock & Roll to a stand on the floor
  - Forward Roll standing on an incline mat rolling down hill and finishing in a stand.
- Cartwheel
  - Donkey Kicks with the hands on a folded mat: this helps introduce the concept of arm support of body weight
  - Step or kick over the low beam or mat: with the hands on the ‘beam’ the student steps or kicks one leg over at a time learning to support with the arms while moving the legs sideways across the ‘beam’
  - Cartwheel over a folded mat: place both hands on the mat and kick the legs over one at a time
  - Cartwheel over a folded mat with arms up: beginning with arms up the student places hands on the mat and kicks the legs over.
  - Cartwheel Canyon between two walls requiring legs are straight and vertical.
- Handstand



- Walk feet up the wall: place the back against the mat on the wall. Bend forward placing the hands on the floor and walk the feet up the wall to waist height before returning them to the floor.
- Headstand in a corner: place two foam boxes together creating a soft corner. The student places the head on the floor in the corner, hands against the two walls forming a triangle, and walks the feet close to the head lifting the hips and placing the weight on the head and hands. The feet then straddle and walk up the walls.
- Kick to ½ handstand on panel mat: From a lunge the student bends forward placing the hands on a folded mat and kicks slightly ½ way to vertical, then steps down into a lunge.

It is advised that a teacher begins with a challenge that is simple for the student creating a successful experience, and then increase the challenge in small steps. But if the first challenge isn't easy enough, a skillful teacher should immediately replace it with a simpler challenge. And, teachers should provide equal praise and attention to every student regardless of the difficulty of the challenge being attempted.

### **LESSON PLANS – HOW WE TEACH**

Lesson plans are like recipes that teachers follow to create a fun and successful class for their students. But like a chef in the kitchen, some of us are better suited to follow the recipes of others with more creativity, experience or imagination if we want our results to be successful. These creative and experienced people exist in some gyms, but for many, acquiring curriculum and lesson plans from others outside our gyms is necessary and can be like shopping for software.



Regardless of writing your own lesson plans or using one someone else provided, there are some important things that need to be included;

- Greeting – collecting your students before the class begins
  - Verify Students are enrolled; making sure all of your students are listed on your attendance or roll sheet is an important first step before any activity begins. There may be a friend or sibling who is not and should not be doing gymnastics with you. The legal liability of working with a child if the parent has not authorized it or signed the required Waiver and Release form prior to participating is significant. It is your legal duty to make sure that all requirements of participation are fulfilled before the class begins.
  - Safety Check – hair out of the face, nothing in pockets, proper attire, etc.
  - Proper clothing is essential. Loose fitting cloths can get in the way or blind a child going upside down if it covers their eyes.
  - Nothing sharp that may injure the student or instructor. No belts, zippers, buttons or snaps that can cause an injury or damage equipment.
  - Introduce New & Make-Up Students to the Class - the first lesson can be an uncomfortable experience for children who don't know anyone, have never done gymnastics before, or are shy and worried about being embarrassed if they are not successful.
  - Taking time to welcome children, introduce yourself and introduce the other students.
  - Ask your class, “How many of you remember your first class? Did you have fun?” I'm sure your students will respond that they enjoyed their first class and that too will be comforting to the new student.

- Warm-Up – preparing the students for the class can reduce the frequency and severity of injuries and helps set the tone for the lesson. There are 4 areas of focus during warm-up to prepare the class for learning;
  - **Physical;** prepare the body by raising the heart rate and thereby the core body temperature with aerobic/cardio activities. Running and jumping are effective, but it is important to incorporate these activities in imaginative and creative ways that make it fun and successful for the students fitting their age and developmental readiness. Playing games is a great way to warm up your students, but they need to be in constant motion and keep their heart rate high for several minutes to achieve the desired increase in temperature. After they are warmed up it is advised that they participate in stretching activities that remind them of the terminology (straddle, pike, etc.) and put them through an ‘appropriate’ range of motion and into body shapes they will be performing during classes. NOTE: When teaching recreational gymnastics classes to once a week beginner students you should not be trying to increase their flexibility with painful stretching or increase strength with conditioning. It’s just not effective or fun. Instead educate their parents on the importance of attending more frequently if improvement in strength and flexibility is their goal.
  - **Mental:** prepare their minds for gymnastics class. You don’t know if they just woke up from a nap, were playing in the park running without direction from an adult, or just had a candy bar full of sugar. You need to observe their Mental State and manage it effectively before having them perform gymnastics skills. Early in your lesson you should provide them clear directions and observe the results. Are they tuned in and paying attention? Are they distracted? If so, you may need to modify your lesson to get them focused. Or, if one of them is not capable of following directions, you might ask the parent for help or reschedule the lesson offering a make-up.
  - **Emotional:** it is important for teachers to observe the students emotional state for joining the lesson. Are they scared about being there? Did the parent bring them reluctantly? Or perhaps they are upset about something having nothing to do with gymnastics. For example; that morning their dog was lost or hit by a car and they are grieving. The parent hopes that once the lesson starts the student will forget about this grief. But it also might make it difficult or impossible for the child to participate.
  - : is the student ready to participate in group activities working with others? Waiting for turns, sharing mats and equipment, and following directions are all important considerations for managing a safe and successful class. Including group and partner activities during warm-up can help get your students connected and cooperating.
- Event Rotations – following a structured warm-up the class will move to an event station to work on specific activities and progressions appropriate for the students. Having an organized rotation schedule both allows for the teacher to know in advance how to prepare for the lesson and can avoid possible conflicts where other classes want the same station at the same time. Important considerations include;
  - Keeping students moving: there are two common ways to work with students at event stations, circuits and stations. But regardless of which you use, the students need to be moving. Waiting for a turn creates distraction and behavior problems for



young kids. Staying active and occupied maintains their attention and keeps their heart rate high adding to the fitness experience they get from the class. They should leave tired, thirsty and sweaty.

- Circuits vs. Stations: After you set up equipment for specific activities for the students at the event rotation you are working there are two ways to proceed;
  - Circuits: the students continue moving through the circuit from one activity challenge to the next. NOTE: it is crucial that the challenges in the circuit all take equal time to complete to prevent one station from causing a ‘traffic jam’ where the kids must wait for turns.
  - Stations: the students are assigned to a specific activity challenge to perform and remain there repeating it until the instructor tells the class to ‘rotate’ to the next activity station. There may be 2 students per station (keeping the wait time short) and they will alternate taking turns at that station until they ‘rotate’ when told. NOTE: because the students are performing the same challenge at each station over and over until told to ‘rotate’, the teacher must keep an eye on the clock to make sure they are not getting bored or exhausted on the same station and making sure all stations receive equal time.

- Fun Finish – the last 5 minutes of a recreational gymnastics class are important because that is usually what students remember first when asked “How was gymnastics class today?” We want to end the lesson in a positive and fun way and avoid reminding the students of any problems or challenges we had during class. (Problems are best handled immediately when they occur). Here are a few tips for managing Fun Finishes;

- Do something you know the kids love – play a game or use equipment that you know is popular and requested.
- Involve everyone in a positive way – avoid competitive games that eliminate students and produce only 1 winner.
- Partner Games help kids connect with others building relationships that increase enrollment retention.
- Make it a big event – join with another class that is ending at the same time and play a game that takes up a large area.



- Dismissal – the way you say Good Bye to your students is important. It is best that you use this time to remind them of things they did well and distribute any rewards earned in a way that ‘anchors’ them to the behavior or skill. For example.
  - Stamps or stickers earned during class – if during the class you tell a student “That was the best cartwheel you ever did! I’m going to give you a stamp for that cartwheel” or “I’m giving all of my good listeners a stamp at the end of class today” then now is the time to deliver. Instead of just placing the stamp on their hand and saying “good bye” use this opportunity to make the stamp an EMOTIONAL ANCHOR for that skill or behavior. The way you do it makes the difference. For example,
  - ‘Today you did the best cartwheel I’ve ever seen you do. This (as you apply the stamp) is your OUTSTANDING CARTWHEEL stamp. And when I look at it I remember how fantastic it was. I’m proud of you. Great Job!’”
  - Marketing - Remind of upcoming Special Events
  - Hand out flyers and talk about events that are happening. If you are also attending tell your students. Say it in front of the parents and loud enough for them to hear.

- Send them out the door excited to return: Create a ‘cliff hanger’ – something to look forward to - by telling them, “Next week we will do (their favorite thing) first!! See you next week!! Bye”.
- Special Recognition – select one of your students when dismissing class and ask her to go get her mom because you want to speak with her. When the parent arrives let her know how much you enjoy working with her child, that she listens so well and tries so hard that it makes teaching her a real joy. And thank her for doing a great job parenting! Need I say more?

Following a progressive curriculum that is taught using organized and creative lesson plans conforms with the standards of safety and professional responsibilities expected of gymnastics instructors as expressed in the USA Gymnastics Risk Management Safety Handbook. Your curriculum should be used to train staff and educate parents and students as to the proper way gymnastics should be taught. Those who ask to learn skills without following proper progressions should be informed that doing so violates safe teaching practices, puts them at greater risk of injury, and you will not teach that way.



## RECORD KEEPING

Lesson plans should be kept as a record of what was taught in class and verifying what progressions were taught. In the event a student is seriously injured resulting in a lawsuit, being able to produce lesson plans showing best practices had been followed can be very helpful in disputing claims of negligence.

Jeff Lulla is a USA Gymnastics (USAG) University Instructor, member of the USAG Business Advisor Ambassadors, a National Safety Instructor for USAG, co-author of the USAG Kinder Accreditation for Teachers (KAT) Course, an industry consultant, and for years has been a member of the USAG National Safety Review Board, seminar presenter for the Amateur Athletic Foundation, the US Association of Independent Gymnastics Clubs, Australia Gymnastics Federation, Canada B.C. Gymnastics and USA Gymnastics. He also served on the USAG National Preschool Advisory Panel and has lectured at the USAG Business Owners Conference presenting on recreational gymnastics, youth fitness, technology and marketing.

In 2006 USA Gymnastics presented Jeff Lulla the Business Leader of the Year Award.

Jeff Lulla earned a B.A. degree in Physical Education from CSUN in 1976, and has over 30 years of teaching and coaching experience.

In 1985 Jeff opened the first Fun & Fit Gymnastics Center in Burbank, California and in 1987 opened the second Fun & Fit Gymnastics facility in Santa Clarita, California, acquired Imagymnation Gymnastics in Simi Valley in 2008 and sold it in 2012. Fun & Fit Gymnastics Centers also contract with private schools and their local city Park and Recreation Departments teaching recreational gymnastics both on and off site.



In 1991 Jeff began to license a self-esteem building curriculum developed at Fun & Fit to other gymnastics schools and fitness clubs. Since then, hundreds of gymnastics and youth fitness programs internationally have been licensed to use what is called the "Fun & Fit Gymnastics Program".

In 2012 Jeff partnered with Smart Moves, an online curriculum and lesson planning platform based in New Zealand. Since then he has installed his gymnastics curriculum, along with 1,000 additional and customizable skills, drills, games and activities into the platform and, along with his team, build 250 progressive lesson plans. Gym clubs subscribing to the Smart Moves planner can add their own content, edit Jeff's content and access everything on any web browser.