

10 Tips For Your School-Age Program

We do so much for our preschool classes—props, themes, and special equipment—but what special things do we do for those 6-18 year olds who come just once a week? In some gyms the school-age department can represent as much as 70% of the gymnastics enrollment. For these classes parents need to know their children are progressing and having fun. In preschool classes, having fun is the most important. In school-age classes, the most important thing is that students are learning new skills.

1. Hiring Staff-When I hire a new teacher I give the prospective teacher a job description and ask them, “After reading this tell me why you’re most suited for this job.” If they aren’t motivating, enthusiastic and fun—forget it. Do as Southwest Airlines does, “Hire the attitude, train the skill”. (Let’s hope that’s not what they do for their pilots!) It helps if they are former gymnasts or cheerleaders. Cheerleaders make great teachers, because they can tumble and are usually perky and cute. It’s such a gut thing. If something is telling you not to hire them, listen to your gut. You know the type of person who you want to represent you. Stick to it.
2. Training- Create a training manual for your gymnastics teachers and then a specific procedures manual for each of your school-age and preschool departments. My training DVDs are the first line of training. Next they meet with one of our managers to go through the procedures manual, learn spotting, go through skill by skill our Star Achievement Program, and test them on how they would teach certain skills. After that they are out of the floor learning. Sometimes it might take a few weeks, others it could take a few months. Teaching skills to school-age students is oftentimes the same as preschool—you just speak to them differently. Use skill building equipment, stall bars, rainbow mats, gloves, wrist bands, unfold a stacked panel mat, 8-12” skill cushions.
3. Continuing education, various tests throughout their first year, and attending regular monthly staff meetings are all essential. They need to be safety certified and also certified in CPR and First Aid. Our teachers can never stop learning and should always watch the newest training DVDs out there and attend seminars regularly. Remind them to use the “part/whole method” of teaching, “tell, show, spot”, do the skills 3x, not an activity time—it’s a teaching time, use phrases like “no room in between” and “big toes smash together to keep those legs together”, use questions to teach, rephrase a correction, whisper when teaching teens
4. Organization of the Department-Break the kids into age & level divisions. You need a lot of levels, so students feel achievement and parents see results. Each of my teachers have their own book including their attendance sheets, achievement lists, etc, Teach them what to do if you have mixed ages and ability levels in the same class. Fill all time slots with either group

private lessons, private lessons or group lessons. I divide my managers up by levels and give each level such as intermediates, advanced, etc its own director. That manager is responsible for each and every kids in their level.

5. Scheduling- I recommend you assign a manager to make sure classes have their own rotation schedules, cleaning, warm-ups, and uniforms schedules. Don't have school-age classes at the same time as your preschool classes if your preschool classes use a lot of props, etc. I have a special class for preschooler classes that don't have all the props and decorations, themes, etc in them called, "Jr. Gym Prep". They are an hour long and only focus on gymnastics skills for ages 4 & 5 year olds.
6. Give a "What to Expect in Class" Sheet- When parents and kids are new, they need a sheet explaining what will happen in class in detail, who their teacher will be, and what they can do at home to help them. Send that to them in the mail before the first class. Make sure a new student gets a name tag which denotes to treat them with T.L.C. because we know then that signifies they are new to the program or they are making up a class. Both instances these kids are anxious and need our special love and attention.
7. Lesson Plans, Curriculum, & Themes –Yes, even for school-age classes, you need them. They need some detail in the warm-up and ending activity section. Emphasize to the teachers that kids in classes can learn so much faster with cross mat tumbling. Have those kids spread out and all go at once across the mat with all skills that don't require a spot every time. In classes, it's imperative to make sure parents and kids FEEL like they're learning new skills all the time. Have skill themes, fun themes (movies, T.V shows), and themes that can fit both preschool and school-age, so no more setting up and tearing completely down each day. School-age classes need an end of the year show. We call them GymFest or Tumblefest. It's an in-house meet where we cancel all classes and compete with a Champions Meet Sat/Sun, everyone get a participation ribbon with the winners getting trophies, etc.
8. Music, Warm-ups, and the Importance of the End of Class- For the warm-up, pick a leader, change activity if it isn't working, correct their positions and their exercise technique, and remember-they are children! They want to have fun, too. The end of class is so important, because it's for review and fun, (relay races, tug-of-war, team caterpillar, quicker-picker-upper, my game DVDs are packed full of ideas—literally hundreds of games. Parents love to see them are the end of class running, having fun and for gosh sakes, wear them out! Parents love that. When the kids get in the car, the parents will ask (as you know), "What did you do in class today?" If your teachers review what they did right before they leave, each child can get in that car excitedly and go on and on about your class. Parents won't take them out of class if their kids are having fun and learning--key in on that!
9. Drills, Drills, Skills, and Learning- Award Programs- Because these kids have chosen not to be on teams, they need programs such as Goal-of-the-Month, Star Achievement System, bell/ribbon skills, postcards, Wow Cards, and various contests. Give it to them.
10. Marketing/Advertising- Knowing when, how, and what sells is the key to bringing in more student. It's necessary to advertise in July and August for the fall. We do a lot of Facebook ads at that time. We've decided to minimize our use of newsprint advertising compared to the

past and increase the amount of money we're investing into award programs for our existing students. We know we get new students from word of mouth, so we are hoping by making our present students happy, they will encourage lots of others to join. We use Wow cards in class, send personal postcards and letters in the mail, Glad You Were Here cards, birthday cards, get-well cards, and Way to Go cards each night. We make a joiner call and send that new student a postcard. We send our inactives a re-joiner card and right after they quit, a Give Us Your Opinion Survey (1-10, what can make us a 10?). We do parades and mall demos. At those we don't send all hotshots. We use some "regular students" to make those kids watching say to their parents. "Hey Mom, I can do that—can I take gymnastics lessons there?" We give a free month demo classes for just ½ hour once a week for a month. We have hosted local physical education teachers at our gym for a teachers training session free of charge. Let them know you are the expert and hopefully they will mention your gym to those talented kids in their classes We'll send donuts/bagels/cookies to local teachers' lounge at elementary schools so they mention our name to parents and they become your ally. We need to think of every angle to get people talking about our gyms. What can you do in your community to spread the good word about your gym?

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