

*“It’s too bad when parents think their children can do no wrong — but it’s better than thinking they can do no right.”*

- author unknown, from the Albert W. Daw Collection

In a recent article, I wrote of the many benefits of participating in a Gymnastics program. The skill development, physical benefits, social improvements and cognitive development of young athletes was outlined. Signing a child up for a Gymnastics class is a major first step toward a healthy lifestyle. What happens then? Research strongly suggests that parents play the largest role in influencing the development and healthy socialization of their children involved in sports. Selecting a Gymnastics program that provides a safe and nurturing environment is a primary concern but a parent’s responsibility does not end there. What are the next steps a parent can take to ensure a positive experience for their child?

---

## The Role of Gymnastics Parents

---

A study led by Benjamin Bloom in 1985, *Developing Talent in Young People*, looked at how talent manifests and is developed in young people. The study divided the careers of talented young people (in art, music, mathematics and sports) into three stages: early, middle and later. Using terminology from Alfred North Whitehead, we call them the Romantic, the Technical, and the Mature stages.

- **The Romantic Stage** is the beginning. The child just loves the sport. She can’t wait to get to the gym; she practices her cartwheels and handstands at every opportunity. The child experiences immediate success. She is better at this activity than her peers, which increases her enthusiasm for participating in it. As Bloom puts it for the swimmers he studied, “these are the years of playful encounter with the sport...” Enjoyment is critical. “Had there been no excitement during the early years... there would never have been a middle or later period.” One swimmer remarked, “Practices were fun... you’re having so much fun that you don’t realize you’re exhausted.” A child’s self-appraisal of ability (self-esteem) is directly related to a parent’s judgment of their child’s physical ability (Felson & Reed, 1986). As a child’s perceived competency in gymnastics is a key factor in continued participation on to the next stage of development; two factors are critical – successful task completion and parental support (Horn & Harris, 1996). At a certain point, someone, often a parent, but typically a recruiting coach, notices talent in the child, this often leads to the middle or Technical Stage.
- **The Technical Stage** is inaugurated by the appearance of the technically-proficient coach who is brought into the picture to ensure that things are done correctly. The transition from sport as fun to developing the proper technique is where many kids drop out. As the focus moves to technical proficiency, all too often the sport becomes more like a job and less like a wonderfully fun experience. The joy goes out of the experience, and the child removes himself from the sports experience as soon as he is able. As children enter this stage, parental feedback continues to be critical in shaping their child’s self-perception (Stipek & MacIver, 1989). It is important that the parent’s feedback be directed toward task completion rather than comparisons to others or the correct technique. In other words, leave the coaching to the coaches. Parents must remain involved in a firm and consistent manner, enforcing guidelines, limits and appropriate expectations (Baumrind, 1978).
- **The Mature Stage:** Here the child has developed her talent to the point where she is performing at a high level on a grand stage at the national or maybe even the worldwide level. Most kids never make it to this stage. Why? For some, it is a lack of talent or interest, but a majority of the kids who do have the talent do not make it to this stage because they have lost the joy in playing, which powers the commitment and effort needed to become great. Most youth with talent never reach the Mature Stage because fun is sacrificed in the technical stage. Perhaps the most important lesson for parents

here is that you need to manage the transition from the Romantic to the Technical Stage. Make sure your child isn't rushed into the Technical Stage. A child expected to “work” at the sport too soon is more likely to turn off and never reach the Mature Stage.

A too-early focus on technique can drain the enjoyment that fuels the drive for excellence. A parent should provide their children with a variety of opportunities and multiple chances to achieve success in the early years of sport participation (McCullagh, Matzkanin, Shaw & Moldanado, 1993). Parents need to offer lots of positive feedback. There are drawbacks though; research indicates that as peer comparisons become increasingly more important to the young athlete, by about the age of 9, children become more evaluative of parent feedback. If positive feedback is not accurate, does not match performance, then the parent's involvement could actually be detrimental to the child's perception of their sport competence (Horn & Harris, 1996). Parents must give encouraging but honest and accurate feedback.

Talent is not often obvious at an early age. Bloom stated: “One of the most startling discoveries of our study has been that it takes a while to recognize swimming talent.” Only 10% or less of the athletes could be confidently identified as gifted by the age of 11 or 12. One coach didn't recognize how talented a swimmer was even after working with her for five years (she went on to make the Olympics). Remember, Kathy Johnson (bronze medalist on floor exercise, 1978 World Championships and team silver medalist and balance beam bronze medalist, 84 Olympics) did not begin her gymnastics career until she was 13 years old – fairly late considering the talent she subsequently demonstrated.

Many kids have great potential. Support makes the difference: Perhaps the most interesting assertion Bloom makes is most children (95%) have the ability to approximate the achievements of the talented youth with proper encouragement. What is the difference between the children who reach the stage where their talent blooms forth and those who don't? These children experienced something from their parents that seemed to make a huge difference.

“So far as we can tell, this willingness to give encouragement and support on the part of the parents (and siblings) is one of the major distinctions between the families of these Olympic swimmers and other families.” “...no matter what the initial characteristics (or gifts) of the individuals, unless there is a long and intensive process of encouragement, nurturance, education and training, the individuals will not attain extreme levels of capabilities in these particular fields.” The research is very clear – what a parent says and does have a tremendous influence on their child. The more you as a parent support your children, the more your children will reach the highest level of talent development possible for them.

***About the Author:***

Michael A. Taylor is a USAG Kinder Accreditation for Teachers (KAT & MELPD) Instructor, serves on the USA Gymnastics PreSchool Advisory Panel, is a USA Gymnastics National Safety Instructor, serves on the USA Gymnastics Safety Review Board, is a USAG PDP I Video Clinic Administrator, an American Red Cross CPR/First Aid and Sport Safety Instructor, and an American Sport Education Program Coaching Principles (PDP II) Instructor. Michael is a Certified National Youth Sports Administrator; an Instructor for the Stanford University based Positive Coaching Alliance, a long-time member of the United States Elite Coaches Association and a former gym owner. He is currently a Senior Recreation Supervisor for the City of Menlo Park that includes the 1600 student Gymnastics program in Menlo Park, CA. A Certified Pool Operator and a licensed National Playground Safety Inspector, Michael is also the owner of Gym.Net, a Gymnastics Professional's Network of Educational, Business, Consulting, and Internet Services specializing in Gymnastics oriented businesses. Michael can be reached at:

Michael A. Taylor,  
E-mail: coacht@gym.net or mataylor@menlopark.org  
Phone: 650-330-2274 / Fax: 650-327-2323  
501 Laurel Street  
Menlo Park, CA 94025

**REFERENCES:**

*Developing Talent in Young People*; Bloom, 1985  
*Positive Coaching Alliance*; c/o Stanford University  
*Social Psychology Quarterly*; Felson & Reed, 1986  
*Children and Youth in Sport: A bio-psychosocial perspective*; Horn & Harris, 1996  
*Child Development*; Stipek & MacIver, 1989  
*Pediatric Exercise Science*; McCullagh, Matzkanin, Shaw & Maldonado, 1993  
William A. Sands, Ph.D., C.S.C.S. Sport Physiologist