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The voice of young children in sporting activities

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How 3-5-year-old children have a voice in decision-making in a gymnastics programme

GymTOTS explorers

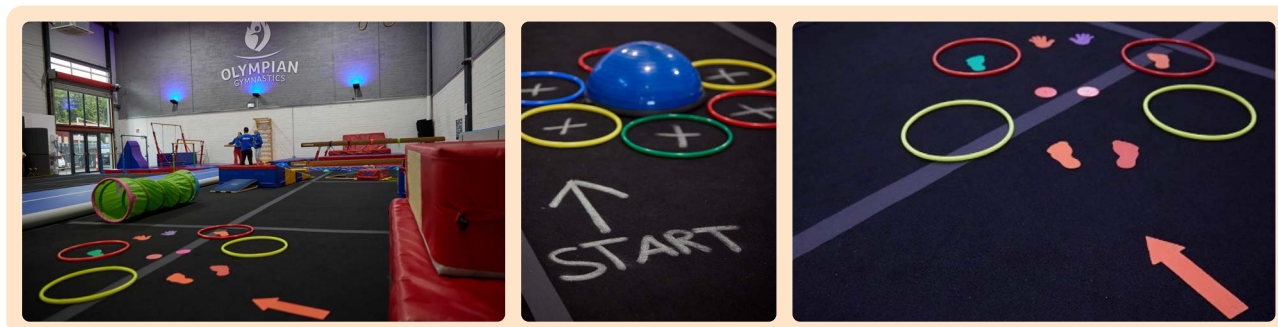
Olympian Gymnastics runs a GymTOTS programme for children aged 3-5 years called 'explorers'. In explorers' classes, each child attends the one-hour class alone. If children get upset at being separated from their parents, the coaches point out that the child can try the class for a few minutes, and if they are still upset, the coach can phone the parent. GymTOTS sessions use gymnastics and early childhood equipment. The structure of each class is:

Circle time – with all children in the class

There are coloured spots stuck on the floor around the room. Each child picks a spot and sits on it. Coaches start by asking children for their news or to share anything they want. Then one of the coaches reads a story, such as Jack and the Beanstalk, and the children do actions to accompany the story, such as chopping down the beanstalk. Children often lead the actions that accompany the story.

Group time – rotating through a circuit formation to all gym equipment

Children are divided into groups, and each group has the same coach every week, who knows and understands the needs of each child. Children can also try participating in a different group. The children rotate around the gym visiting the beams, bars, vaults, and floor. They follow the circuit with visual aids such as arrows, plastic hands and feet and stop spots. At each piece of equipment, coaches support and teach them to hop, jump, walk and learn skills. Children are free to take part in each activity or not to take part.

**Cool down session – with all children in the class**

At the end of the class, there is a cooldown session during which they sing songs. Each child is offered a fun stamp of participation. Those who want a stamp pick the colour and design of the stamp and where they want it – on their arm, leg, or hand.

How the children are given Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence

Space

- Coaches help children to feel safe by greeting them at the door and if the child has a favourite coach, they try to be there to welcome the child.
- Children feel safe to express their views because they know they can go to or contact their parents at any time.
- Circle time eases them into the class and allows them to feel safe to talk about whatever they want.
- Coaches make time to look at and give positive feedback to children when children want to show off something they are good at.
- Coaches work one-on-one with each child and support them go at their own pace through the gym equipment.

Voice

- At the start of each class, coaches ask children what they are excited to do or would like to do, and their views are acted on.
- Children can raise the things that matter to them. They can ask coaches for music and movements they like. They can also ask their parents to make requests to the coach.
- Children also show coaches what they want through their body language or actions, such as sitting down if they are tired or indicating they are afraid or want time away from the group.

Audience

- Coaches show they are ready and willing to listen to children by always using open body language and talking to children at their own level.
- Coaches talk to parents to encourage children to trust them.
- Coaches explain to children why they can't use certain equipment or do certain movements without support.

Influence

- Children know how much influence they can have because they are encouraged to adopt their own interpretation of movements – for example, when a coach asked a child to put their arms out straight, the child said, 'Oh, aeroplane arms'. Now the coaches use the child's expression in the class to explain straight arms.
- Coaches give feedback to children by checking with children if the music or the group is too loud, and if so, they often play a sleepy lion game where all children lie quietly. Coaches also give feedback to children through high-fives, fist bumps, words, and stickers, depending on the preference of the child.
- Coaches take children's feedback about what they like and don't like and adapt the classes accordingly.

