In the sport of gymnastics, the titles of coach and instructor are typically used to mean different things. Instructors generally teach students who participate in gymnastics at a preschool or recreational level, while coaches instruct, guide, and prepare athletes for gymnastics competition. Yet the basic task of both gymnastics coaches and instructors is to teach and help athletes learn. So although the term coach is used most frequently throughout this book, much of the material can apply to both coaches and instructors.

If you are like most gymnastics coaches, you have probably been recruited from the ranks of former gymnasts, gymnastics enthusiasts, coaches of similar sports, or even parents. Like many rookie and veteran coaches, you probably have had little formal instruction on coaching. But when the call from the local gymnastics club went out for coaches, you answered because you like children and enjoy gymnastics and perhaps because you wanted to be involved in a worthwhile activity.

Your initial coaching assignment may be difficult. You may not know everything there is to know about gymnastics or about how to work with children. Coaching Youth Gymnastics presents the basics of coaching gymnastics effectively. To start, we look at your responsibilities and what’s involved in being a coach. We also examine five tools for being an effective coach.
YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS A COACH

Coaching at any level involves much more than just teaching a cartwheel or spotting a back salto. Coaching involves accepting the tremendous responsibility you face when parents put their children in your care. As a gymnastics coach, you’ll be called on to do the following:

1. **Provide a safe physical environment.**

   Participating in gymnastics involves inherent risks. As a coach you’re responsible for minimizing risk, and one way is to conduct regular inspections of facilities, apparatus, and equipment used for practice and competition. Providing a safe physical environment also includes offering proper supervision and instruction, educating the athletes regarding safety policies, removing or preventing known hazards, ensuring access to first aid supplies, and having an emergency action plan in place.

2. **Communicate in a positive way.**

   As you already know, you have a lot to communicate. You’ll communicate not only with your athletes and their parents but also with fellow coaches, officials, administrators, and others. Communicate in a positive way that demonstrates you have the best interests of the athletes at heart.
3. **Teach the fundamental skills of gymnastics.**

When teaching the fundamental skills of gymnastics, keep in mind that you want to make sure your athletes are always having fun. Therefore, we ask that you help all athletes be the best they can be by creating a fun yet productive practice environment. Additionally, to help your young gymnasts improve their skills, you need to have a sound understanding of gymnastics skills, progressions, and technique. You should reassure athletes and parents that you will be teaching the safest techniques in order to help athletes prevent injury.

4. **Teach the rules of gymnastics.**

Introduce the rules of gymnastics, and incorporate them into individual instruction. Many rules can be taught in practice, including aspects of judging, proper skill execution and penalties, and general gymnastics etiquette. Plan to review the rules any time an opportunity naturally arises in practices.

5. **Direct athletes in competition.**

Your responsibilities may include determining appropriate levels of competition, determining readiness for competition, relating appropriately to officials and opposing coaches and athletes, and making sound decisions during meets. Remember that the focus is not on winning at all costs but on coaching your kids to compete well, do their best, improve their gymnastics skills, and strive to win within the rules.

6. **Help your athletes become fit and value fitness for a lifetime.**

We want you to help your athletes become fit so they can participate in gymnastics safely and successfully. We also want your athletes to learn to become fit on their own, understand the value of fitness, and enjoy training. Thus, we ask you not to use conditioning (e.g., doing push-ups or running laps) as a form of punishment. Make it fun to get fit, and make it fun to participate in gymnastics so that your athletes will stay fit for a lifetime.

7. **Help young people develop character.**

Character development includes learning, caring, being honest and respectful, and taking responsibility. These intangible qualities are no less important to teach than the skill of a handstand. We ask you to teach these values to athletes by demonstrating and encouraging behaviors that express these values at all times. For example, stress to young athletes the importance of encouraging their teammates, competing within the rules, and showing respect for their opponents. Be a positive role model for your athletes.

These are your responsibilities as a coach. Remember that every athlete is an individual. You must provide a wholesome environment in which every athlete has the opportunity to learn without fear while having fun and enjoying the overall gymnastics experience.
Assessing Your Priorities

Even though all coaches focus on competition, we want you to focus on positive competition—keeping the pursuit of victory in perspective by making decisions that, first, are in the best interests of the athletes and, second, will help them succeed.

So, how do you know if your outlook and priorities are in order? Here’s a little test:

1. Which situation would you be most proud of?
   a. knowing that each participant enjoys participating in gymnastics
   b. seeing that all athletes improve their gymnastics skills
   c. watching your athletes win championships

2. Which statement best reflects your thoughts about sport?
   a. If it isn’t fun, don’t do it.
   b. Everyone should learn something every day.
   c. Sport isn’t fun if you don’t win.

3. How would you like your athletes to remember you?
   a. as a coach who was fun
   b. as a coach who provided a good base of fundamental skills
   c. as a coach who helped them win

4. Which would you most like to hear a parent of an athlete on your team say?
   a. Nicole really had a good time participating in gymnastics this year.
   b. Josh learned some important lessons participating in gymnastics this year.
   c. Megan won every gymnastics competition this year.

5. Which of the following would be the most rewarding moment of your season?
   a. having your team want to continue practicing, even after practice is over
   b. seeing one of your athletes finally master her glide kip on bars
   c. watching one of your athletes qualify for the national meet

Look over your answers. If you most often selected a responses, then having fun is most important to you. A majority of b answers suggest that skill development is what attracts you to coaching. And if c was your most frequent response, winning is tops on your list of coaching priorities. If your priorities are in order, your athletes’ well-being will take precedence over your team’s success every time.
USA Gymnastics is the sole national governing body for gymnastics in the United States, with more than 98,000 athletes registered in competitive programs as well as more than 20,000 professional, instructor, and club members. USA Gymnastics, through its Professional Development Program, is dedicated to providing gymnastics coaches and instructors with the best coaching and teaching information available today.

Content expert Kathy Feldmann, vice president of membership services at USA Gymnastics, has been involved in gymnastics for over 40 years. She has been a high school and college coach, physical education and health teacher, and private gymnastics club owner. Currently she holds a brevet rating as a women’s gymnastics official. Before assuming her current role, Kathy held positions in the USA Gymnastics organization as a national, regional, and state chair. She has been a USA Gymnastics collegiate liaison, commissioner of officials for Massachusetts high schools, delegation leader for World Championships in 1994, and team leader for World University Games in 1995, 1997, and 1999. Kathy judges competitions for the Junior Olympic level as well as the collegiate level. She has officiated at numerous national, Olympic Trials, and international events. She was a technical assistant official at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. Kathy has been at the USA Gymnastics national office since 1997. As vice president, she oversees the three divisions of membership, club services, and educational services. She is the director of the annual national congress and trade show, which is the largest educational event conducted by USA Gymnastics.

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To order a copy of the book Coaching Youth Gymnastics, click here or call toll-free at 800-747-5698.