

# Fantastic gymnastics

At the recommendation of Frank's teachers, I registered him for gymnastics at a local recreation center. I took one look at the room, covered in foam blocks and mats of primary colors, soft toys, a small set of parallel bars, and a 10 foot long trampoline, and knew it would be a great place for Frank to play and learn.



The first couple of weeks were rough. Frank was a ping-pong ball, bouncing from station to station in no particular order, refusing to dismount the trampoline, and nearly pile driving a classmate in the foam pit. A few times, we had to leave early, with me lugging Frank at my side, like a kicking/screaming suitcase. (Fortunately, I've learned to ignore the dirty looks.)



One day, it clicked. His regular teacher was absent. She's always shown care for Frank's safety, but she doesn't expect much of his behavior or performance-wise. The substitute teacher began yelling his name. He didn't respond. I pulled her aside to explain his situation.

"He has a receptive language delay," I told her. "We don't know what that means yet. He could be autistic. He could have an auditory processing disorder. Or he could just be stuck in a phase."

She barely listened to me as I rattled out the same disclaimer I've been giving everyone when Frank does something off-putting.

But, she wasn't worried about the labels floating in the air over Frank's head, waiting to be pinned to his chest where a nametag might go. She was focused on Frank, the little boy in front of her and the gymnastics feats she wanted him to complete: a slide down the Little Tykes slide, a crawl over the rainbow, a jump from a spring board up and over a mat stack, parallel bars, a tumble down the wedge, a tip back and forth on the big roll, a steady walk across the balance beam, a climb up the tiny rock wall, three bounces across the trampoline, and a great big dive into the foam pit.



While the other three little gymnasts were led by their guardians through the routine, the teacher held Frank's hand and guided him through each exercise, in order, twice, explaining the directions to him each time, slowing down and repeating

as needed.

On the third go-round, Frank nailed the routine with very little outside help. His teacher and I (and even one of the other parents) applauded his accomplishment. (If only I had a little gold medal to give him!)

Over the past two months since he's been in gymnastics, I've noticed a difference in Frank. The chaos in his mind is binding and reorganizing itself to the point where he is more mild than wild. Belligerence has given way to patience. Frank listens when I say his name. Frank is beginning to understand.

Here's why:

1. Gymnastics offers structure and routine.
2. Gymnastics offers the chance to learn social skills, like taking turns and sharing.
3. Gymnastics offers young children the opportunity to learn new verbs (jump, climb, swing, slide) and prepositions (over, up, under, down).
4. Gymnastics is an excellent form of exercise. (God wants us to take care of the amazing bodies He gave us. Building muscles is one way to be healthy.)
5. Gymnastics is fun!



This morning, when Frank woke up, the first thing he said was, "gymnastics?"  
"Not until tomorrow," I told him.

Neither one of us can wait!