

## My Tot and Me Programs Help Fill Daytime Ice

by Dorice B. Stancher

Do you want to increase the use of off-peak daytime ice and boost attendance in your Learn-to-Skate classes? Starting a “My Tot and Me” program may be the answer.

Marketing classes specifically tailored to pre-school and kindergarten-age children and their parents allows you to reach a new audience sooner, and then work to retain them as they progress to Learn-to-Skate, figure skating and hockey programs.

Participants in “My Tot and Me” programs appreciate the opportunity to skate with their youngsters, virtually eliminating the separation anxiety so common to this age group. This “quality time” experience can develop into a lifelong enjoyment of skating for participants, and foster future participation by siblings. Additionally, many adults purchase private lessons and equipment for themselves, noting the obvious health benefits.

For any skating program to be successful, enthusiastic well-trained instructors and a well thought out marketing plan are essential. Despite these variable costs, there is still net profit, in addition to goodwill created in the form of future lessons, equipment purchases and concessions. And it’s far better than having “dead ice”.

Tot classes can be arranged in half-hour increments with an average class size of 12 students (with parents or guardians) plus two teachers, creating an ideal student/teacher ratio. Interactive learning games and instruction involve both the children and adults, giving them practical skills to grow on. An additional half-hour may be added for practice time and informal instruction. Some rinks will hire coaches for the additional time in order to help parents become more comfortable on the ice and to address individual needs of the children.

At this young age, many will become tired after the first half-hour. Washable markers can be provided for on-ice artistry, provided they are supervised and are on ice free from dangerous traffic. A small plastic saucer or sled attached to a tow-rope and pulled by an instructor creates smiles for kids and allows the adults to focus on learning by freeing them to learn from the second instructor.

### Marketing: Getting the Word Out

Your marketing plan can start with the typical point-of-purchase flyer. Many rinks have so many flyers on their counters that it looks like the leaves of fall. With so many messages vying for attention, it’s essential that flyers be organized by category and have their own identity. For instance, your flyer for your “My Tot and Me” program should grab the attention of the younger set. Why not consider adding a simple dot-to-dot or drawing to color to your flyer? The longer the parent and child hang on to your information, the greater the opportunity for repeated impressions on a wider variety of people. Keep in mind that bright, colorful graphics with simple uncluttered messages work the best.

(\* Note: ISI Clip Art makes designing fun flyers quick and easy.)

A brief listing for your new program can also appear in your regular newspaper ads and Learn-to-Skate information. Advertising is important to your entire program.

Public relations can also be done at minimal cost to build awareness for your program and arena.

Mascots can visit the class during special times, including the beginning or the end of sessions and holidays. It's also a nice way to tie-in awareness for birthday party options. There's nothing like a cute photo and a brief press release to generate visibility in local papers. Don't forget to obtain parents' written permission before using children's photos.

### Hiring the Right Instructors

The ideal professional for this program is teamwork-oriented and willing to pool resources to meet the needs of the class. The teaching style should be positive and enthusiastic, utilizing simple language to address individual needs of the participants. There is no room for negative comments; corrections must be done in a positive way. The goal is to have fun and to make everyone want to come back. The instructor should be familiar with this market (pre-school/kindergarten), enjoy their antics, and know how to retain their interest through interactive play.

Your skating professionals are part of the marketing mix and should be included in your communications chain for feedback, since they are in close contact with the target market. Compensation should take into consideration the added responsibilities and the additional level of communications skills required.

The easiest way to develop a teaching style for these younger students is to sample learning shows geared to this age group. Take "Sesame Street" for instance; watch the actors, their facial expressions; listen to the dialogue. Observe what motivates and holds children's interest. Keep in mind that they're "me" centered and incorporate what appeals to them in your learning activities on ice. Tots like colors, numbers, using their imaginations, smiles, laughter, variety (new games), repetition (old favorites).

Most of all, instructors shouldn't forget to look for opportunities in the "present moment." That is, to remain spontaneous and work with what is happening with their class in the here and now.

Remember, parents will be willing to pay for a quality program if you make their child happy.

### Quick Cost/Benefit Review

Average admission:

Tot with Adult, plus rental skates \$20

Class 1 (1 hr. morning) 12 students

Class 2 (1 hr. afternoon) 12 students

24 students X \$20 X 8 weeks = \$3,840

Less: Professionals' fees

2 instructors @ \$20 per class (\$40 hr.) = (\$320)

Net: \$3,520

Plus goodwill (future equipment and lessons, concessions, birthday parties, etc.) Fixed costs remain standard.

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