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## Easy Cartwheels for Preschoolers

Trying to teach a cartwheel to children ages 2 to 5 can be an exasperating task. But if you use visual cues and some drills with cute, imaginative names, it can become fun and productive for both the student and the teacher.

The use of visual (rather than verbal) cues is the key to teaching all tumbling to preschoolers. Visual cues such as handprints lead the students to do what is needed to accomplish the skill. You can use anything as a visual cue- rubber targets or dots, handprints and footprints, and chalk drawings on the floor.

With this technique the student is more self-directed and there is more potential for stronger feelings of self-esteem and accomplishment. Relatively little spotting on the teacher's part is needed, and this makes for a win-win situation in class- empowering the student and freeing the teacher's time.

The following fun methods offer a new approach to teaching youngsters to do cartwheels.

### **Elevated Hula Hoop**

Place a hoop on stacked panel mats. Tell the children to put their hands in the hoop and kick their feet around to the other side.

### **The Wheel**

Create the spokes of a wheel by stretching ropes out from a central cone to four other cones placed in a circle. (Put the ends of the ropes in the tops of the cones.) Have the students learn over a rope and place their hands on a target, then kick their feet around. Continue around the wheel. (See Diagram A.)

### **Between the Walls**

Create walls by standing mats on their ends. Challenge the children to kick their legs up high enough so they don't knock over the walls.

### **Down an Incline Mat (Wedge)**

The child starts at the top of the mat and performs a cartwheel going downhill, which creates more airtime for kicking the legs around. Also try using a 60-10 (large) incline and have the children do two cartwheels in a row. Place two hoops in a row to cue them.

### **Higher and Higher With the Rope**

Attach a jump rope to a trapezoid block or secure it under a pile of mats. Have the students place their hands on the block and kick their legs up. As you raise the rope higher the students are forced to kick their legs closer to vertical.

### **Yellow Brick Rope**

Coil a large cloth rope (like a tug-of-war rope) in an open spiral. Have the children start in the middle, placing their hands down and kicking over the rope. As the spiral gets bigger, the children have to kick their legs up higher and higher.

### **Carpet Strip**

Go to the carpet store and get a sample strip (approximately 12 inches wide by 3 feet long). With chalk, draw an X where you want the children to place their hands and feet.

### **Floor Beam**

By having students place their hands on the beam and kicking around to the other side, you can work at least three students at once. Because the beam is elevated, it gives them enough airtime for a proper landing.

### **Alley of Cones**

Connect plastic traffic cones with plastic jumping ropes to create two lines with 4 to 5 feet of space between them. Use five cones on each side, then place two or three hoops in the space between the lines to indicate proper hand placement. Have the students do cartwheels between the rows of cones (See Diagram D.)

### **Smiling Clock Face**

With chalk, draw a clock face on the mat. Tell students to place their hands on the 2 and 4 of the clock and kick their legs around. Also have them work on 8 and 10 to practice cartwheels to both sides. The clock face can also be used for handstands, by having the children place their hands on the 5 and 7.

Parents love this drill because this exercise familiarizes children with a clock with hands and a face. (So many clocks these days are digital.)

### **Frosty the Snowman**

This explanation is for a “right” cartwheel. You need to move the hoop to the left of the carpet squares. The whole group can work at the same time.

If you have six students, spread the carpet squares and give each child three foam cubes. Ask them if they’ve ever built a snowman. Tell them to place one foam cube in front of the carpet square. That’s the body of Frosty the Snowman. Have them place their hands in the hoop and kick their feet over Frosty’s bottom layer. To encourage them to kick higher to achieve their cartwheel, have them build the snowman layer by layer and see if they can kick all the way over Frosty. This is extremely successful because it’s fun, it keeps their attention, and it allows the students to work simultaneously.

### **Hoop Holders**

Instead always placing the hoop on the floor, use a Styrofoam hoop holder or make one by buying a Styrofoam circle that is 2 inches thick by 8 inches in diameter and cutting it in half. Make a cut on the rounded side and place the hoop in it. (See Diagram E.) This challenges the children to kick higher.

### **Cartwheels Mats**

Rainbow-colored panel mats, with panels of different colors (and every fourth panel the same color), are a tremendous aid teaching cartwheels to preschoolers. The different colored panels allow you to instruct your students to spread out by merely saying, “Everyone, get behind a red square.” This is considered ‘cross-mat tumbling’ and is the most time-efficient way to teach group tumbling.

The Tumblebear Square has a set of stairs that goes to a middle block, then fans out to three small incline mats. It’s fabulous for running a group of children through cartwheels and forward and backward rolls.

For about \$30, you can purchase an exercise mat with printed handprints and footprints in the proper place for 3 and 4-year-olds to learn cartwheels. With six of these, small groups of preschoolers can practice their cartwheels all at once.

### **Home Practice**

Trying to determine whether a child naturally does a cartwheel to the left or the right can be a challenge. One of the best ways is to have children place their hands on the mat and kick up like a “horse kick.” Watch their feet. The leg that is kicked up the highest is the one that is *not* their cartwheel leg. For example, if the right leg is highest, their left leg is the leg that they would put in front to start their cartwheel.

After determining their cartwheel leg, place a stamp or mark on the foot (or the same hand) so they can go home and practice. Emphasize to the parents that at-home practice that same week is critical in order to reinforce the cartwheel action. Tell them to be sure there is plenty of space for the child to practice. Spotting this skill isn't necessary. If the children remember which foot to start with, they can practice safely each day until their next lesson.

Teaching cartwheels to preschoolers can be fun and effective when approached with a sense of imagination. Using visual cues is the key to allow children to feel the skill by themselves and experience self-gratification. Take the challenge and teach those cartwheels!

## **Patti Komara's Bio**

Patti Komara has owned a gymnastics school in Dyer, Indiana since 1969 offering gymnastics, dance, swimming, and a fitness-based educational preschool called Gym-N-Learn. Patti began speaking at national seminars in 1981 and has led hundreds of training workshops. Patti's Tumblebear Connection has produced more than 80 instructional DVDs. She has written books on yearly lesson plans for The internationally known Tumblebear Gym Program, School-age Gymnastics, Dancing GymBears, YogaBears, CheerBears, Gym-N-Learn, and her very successful Swim Program. Patti co-authored the original USAG preschool KAT certification program. In 2003 she was named USAG Business Leader of the Year. In 2005 Patti was selected as Client of the Year by Action International and in 2006 was given the national service award by USAG. In 2009 Patti began formal consulting for those in our industry and in 2010 her gym, Patti's All-American, was named in her local newspaper as "Best of the Region" once again. Patti has over 6000 subscribers to her "In the Loop Monthly E-Newsletter" which she has published since February 2007.