

Teach Vaulting To Preschoolers? Yes- But, Make it Fun!

It seems while teaching the other four events in gymnastics it's fairly easy to develop skills, drills, and stations- but the vault event poses some challenging problems for most preschool gymnastics coaches. Hopefully, this article will provide you with some new ideas for skills and drills, as well as spark your imagination for innovative and creative vaulting activities.

Skills

I believe that when teaching vaulting to preschoolers it is helpful to divide the activities into five component parts: the run, the hurdle (step, step jump), the use of the board, the vault position and the landing. If we think in these terms and divisions, it becomes easier to create relevant preschool teaching stations. To effectively teach preschoolers and keep them motivated, we need to keep them busy. If you have a station set up for running drills, prepare board drills to get them back in line. If you're working on the hurdle going down the vault runway, have them do running drills to get them back in line. In vaulting it is often very difficult to have all the students working at the same time. Lines are almost inescapable, and therefore you must carefully proper your lesson plans before class.

I have included with this article a list of skills and drills that we use in the Tumblebear program. I'd like to explain a few skills in the list.

In the Statue Game, Parent and Tot (or instructor and student) are paired in twos. The teacher or Mom attempts to lift the child to a stand from a lying position while the child stays

rigid like a statue. This helps them learn that a tight body transfers energy better and increases their kinesthetic awareness of a tight, hollow body position.

Step, step, jump drills are used to teach the hurdle and are taught by creating stations with visual cues like round rubber targets. Lay two cues arranged vertically, and then two next to each other. These can be on the floor, on incline mats or on the board. You can also use small hula-hoops or chalk marks on the mats. Anywhere it asks for a “trap”, this indicates a trapezoid piece about 18-24” in height. You can, of course, substitute a stacked panel mat.

Superman/Wonder Woman is when the student runs, hits the chalk line or board and lies tummy down with arms extended as the instructor carries them. (You should be a strong coach and effective spotter for this one, but it does establish the idea of flight from the board take-off to arrival on the vault table. This drill is also helpful in developing a “trust” relationship between the student and the coach as spotter.)

A Bunny Hop is a four point skill starting like a bear walk, but both hands move forward at one time, then both feet- the child should not go to a full squat. (By the way, bunny hops are also a useful preparatory drill for cartwheels).

Knee Slapper is a tuck jumps, but by slapping their knees it helps the preschoolers to understand to bring their knees forward and upwards towards their chests.

In the Seat Kicker, the child brings their heels to their bottom in the air. (This drill helps to develop hamstring strength and balance).

Pike rebounds are performed from a stand on the take-off board, with the student leaning forward while holding into two stacked trap pieces. This helps them understand the timing off

the board. They perform multiple bounces from the board attempting to lift the hips high in the air while pushing down through the arms on the trap pieces.

Flanking Around a Trap Piece (with shapes as visual cues) is a great station for students even as young as two years. Prepare one trap piece with vinyl cut-out shapes as visual cues on the trap and around the other eight pieces on the floor). As the preschooler puts their hands on a shape on the trap and flank, the student should call off that particular shape on which they are standing or placing their hands. You can create other fun games with this approach- use your creativity!

The Run

Basic running technique is very important in gymnastics and other sport activities. I suggest that you introduce this over the course of several lessons and then continue to reinforce the concepts and techniques. For example:

Lesson One- Have the students run and hit chalk line 15 times.

Lesson Two- Review hitting the chalk line a few times and then 15 more runs using the board, teaching them to reach their maximum speed when they hit the board.

Lesson Three- Teach them the hurdle or the step, step, jump

Lesson Four- Review the run drills and add the brush slap technique to encourage the arms to go around and up.

Lesson Five- Work on jogging in place then step, step jump.

Lesson Six- Work on landings with straight body and no hollow chest. When teaching landings tell the students to envision themselves landing in a bucket of mud, a jar of peanut butter, or a tub of margarine. On successful landings always show a big Ta-Da!

I hope this information gives you an idea of how slowly and methodically I believe teaching vaulting should be conducted for preschoolers and beginners. An important point to remember is that most vaulting drills can should be taught without the table. With the use of a board, a trap or panel mat, a low beam and an incline mat, you should be able to come up with hundreds of safe and effective drills to increase your students' vaulting awareness and knowledge without the apprehension they might feel if you simply ask them to run full speed towards this "giant immovable thing" that looks like a big tongue!

Safety Notes

An important aspect regarding vaulting safety is to always have proper matting around the table. Bring the table down to the lowest height possible. Purchase the eight- inch mat horseshoe mat that fits around the board. Young children have a hard enough time trying to just reach and target the board correctly. I consider it vitally important to always mat extensively when teaching preschoolers.

As a small caveat I would like to make a point about safety for preschooler and the gymnastics school business. Often our programs represent the first time your preschool student's parent leave their child with anyone for lessons. This alone would make them apprehensive. It is simply imperative to stress the safety measures you take, the extra matting you provide, the fact that your instructors are USAG Safety Certified and KAT Accredited, and that you hold SAFETY as the number one priority.

Stations

I believe that most instructors are familiar with the “mountain” on the uneven bars. You can utilize a similar concept at vaulting. Begin by having your preschoolers just run up a landing mat over the table(a mini-mountain), getting to the top and jumping off to a stack of eight-inch skill cushions with a panel mat on landing mat on top. Make sure you have the landing mats up high enough on landing side so your preschoolers aren’t dismounting any further than they can propel themselves up. Use this opportunity to reinforce your landing skills.

You can also use an incline mat going up to the table and one going down the other side. This station would not be for landing drills, but more for the ability to run and use the real vaulting table. If you’re looking for another station for preschool run drills, try an incline, mini-tramp, or board going up to the table and a plastic slide going down.

I recommend you not use plastic slides in your preschool gymnastics program just for play, but as a teaching station. Parents might look at the slide and ask themselves why they’re paying money to have their children play on slides they can buy for them at home. Only let children go down the slide if they do an L-support or other skill on the vault and a good landing when reaching the end. Try putting a carpet square at the end of the slide for a Ta-Da, and then have them do a forward roll to another carpet square and another good Ta-Da! A great place to use a slide is under the low bar. When the student does a forward roll dismount they land on the slide and then get to slide down and a Ta-Da! This keeps it fun AND serves as a reward.

I also like to use a ladder or plank up to the table with a mountain down the other side. (If you are using a ladder anywhere in your program I recommend you use a plank or stacked mats under it so there is no chance for a child to step through the rungs and hit their face.)

You can also use the table in the middle of one of your circuits or obstacle courses. For example, put a tunnel to an incline mat, connect it with a ladder to the vault table and then have the students, jump off with a dismount to stacked eight –inch skill cushions. Always remember to have them dismount to a landing mat or panel mat.

Another station suggestion is a plank up to the table. From the horse, the child jumps to a min-tramp and does a tuck jump, pike jump, straddle jump, seat kicker or knee slapper onto a landing mat. (You may want to spot this.)

Other Ideas and Hints

1. Try to think of different ways to utilize various complimentary pieces of equipment such as incline mats, mini-tramps, planks, ladders, boards, or octagons (clamped together in front of the table) to create more drills.
2. As a vaulting area to use on the way back from the table, put a number of take-off boards down a runway with panel mats over them. Call it “crocodile lane” and have the kids run and hit the boards while pretending to run and jump on all the crocodiles’ heads. It helps to mark their “heads” or the place they need to jump with a visual cue.
3. Another fun station for returning the students back in line is to put stacked panel mats or trapezoid pieces in a row covered with a strip of panel mats. Call this station “hills and valleys” and have them run up and down the various heights.

Most equipment suppliers offer preschool vault boards designed for students under 70 pounds- don’t permit older/heavier students to use them or the boards will break down quickly.

To summarize, if you teach vaulting to preschoolers by breaking the teaching process down into the five parts mentioned at the beginning of this article, you'll be able to create ideas for drills and make it easier for the young students to learn and most of all...have fun. Good Luck!

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.