

# Teaching Cartwheels to Preschoolers

By Patti Komara

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Trying to teach a cartwheel to children ages two to five can be an exasperating task. 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 hand prints and footprints lead the student visually to do what their body parts need to do to accomplish the skill. You can use anything as a visual cue—rubber targets, rubber dots, hand prints and footprints, and chalk drawings on the floor.

With this technique the student is more self-directed, therefore displays a stronger feeling of self-esteem and accomplishment. There is relatively little spotting on the teacher's part and this makes for a win-win situation in class—empowering the student and freeing the teacher's time.

Listed below are some new ways to teach cartwheels and the explanations of how to keep them fun.

## **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 placing one cone in the middle and stretch four ropes out placing the ends of the ropes in the tops of the cones. Have the students place their hands on a target over the rope and kick their feet around. Continue around the wheel. (See Diagram A.)

## **Between the Walls**

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

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

Start at the top and perform the cartwheel going downhill to create more air time for kicking the leg around. Also use a 60-10 (large) incline and have them do two cartwheels in a row. Put 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 students place their hands on the block and kick their legs up. As the teacher raises the rope higher the students are forced to kick their legs closer to the vertical. (See Diagram B.)

## **Yellow Brick Rope**

Place a large cloth rope (like a tug-of-war rope) in a snail like fashion. Have the child start in the middle and place their hands down. As the snail's circle gets bigger the child has to kick his legs up higher and higher. (See Diagram C.)

### **Carpet Strip**

Go to the carpet store and get a sample strip. It's approximately 12" wide by 3' long. With chalk draw x's where you want the children's hands and feet to be placed.

### **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. It's also elevated to give them air time for proper landing.

### **Alley of Cones**

Create an area between two lines of plastic traffic cones connected with plastic jumping ropes. Use five cones on each side and use two or three hoops to indicate the hand placement. (See Diagram D.)

### **Smiling Clock Face**

With chalk make a clock face on the mat. Tell students to place their hands on the "2" and "4" and kick their legs around. Also have them work on "8" and "10" to develop both cartwheels. This can also be used for handstands by placing the hands on "5" and "7". Parents love this drill because so many clocks these days are digital so the children don't become familiar with a clock with hands and a face.

### **Frosty the Snowman**

(This is done for a "right" cartwheel. This can be done with the whole group working at the same time.) If you have six students, spread the carpet squares evenly apart. Place a hoop in front of and to the right of the carpet square. Have three foam cubes for each child. 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, build the snowman 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 all students to work simultaneously.

### **Hoop Holders**

Instead of always placing the hoop on the floor, use a Styrofoam hoop holder. Purchase or make one by buying a Styrofoam circle 2" by 8" and cutting it in half. Make a cut at the rounded side and place the hoop in it. (See Diagram E.)

### **Mancino Cartwheel Mat**

First, you must teach tumbling in a "cross-mat" fashion, not "down the mat." Rainbow-colored panel mats, with panels of different colors and every fourth panel the same color, are a tremendous aid in 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 mat."

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 hand prints and footprints in the proper place for three and four year olds to learn cartwheels. Many gyms have at least six of these so that groups of preschoolers can work their cartwheels all at once.

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 “horsy 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 is critical that same week to reinforce the cartwheel action. Tell your parents to be sure and have plenty of space for the child to practice. Spotting this skill isn’t necessary. If the child remembers 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! ♦

Additional resources:

Patti Komara’s Tumblebear Gym  
Instructional videotapes and lesson plans  
1530 Joliet Street  
Dyer, IN 46311  
219-865-2274

Flaghouse Equipment Co  
150 North Maquesten Pkwy.  
Mt. Vernon, NY 10550  
800-221-5185

Mancino Equipment Co.  
4962 Baynton Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19144  
800-338-6287  
Fax 215-843-1529

## **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.