

What, When, and How to Teach Preschool Tumbling Skills

By Patti Komara

Below are my Ten Commandments of Teaching Tumbling:

1. Move- Don't just stand there and call off skills and corrections, but move alongside the student as you give encouragement and suggestions as you spot them.
2. Organized- Keep good records of what you've already taught your students by dating the progression sheets as you teach them each a new skill. Have all your needed props and equipment out and ready for your class.
3. Spot- For every skill introduced you should spot the first skill so the child feels the correct way to perform it. Then, move alongside them as they attempt the skill at least two more times.
4. Excited- It's your enthusiasm that motivates your students. If you're excited about a new skill, they will be, too.
5. Safety- From your ability to spot, the equipment and your safety certification to what skill you should suggest, make safety #1.
6. Reinforce and Repeat- Do each skill in every lesson at least three times. Repeat the name of the skill often. Quiz the students throughout the class, review what you did in class, and then leave them with a challenge.
7. Visual Cues- Use small traps and equipment such as poly dots, handprints and footprints as indicators for hand and foot placement.
8. Teach Part/Whole Method- Teach each tiny part of the skill and let the student feel achievement and then put it all together.
9. The Latest Equipment- Look through the newest equipment catalogs. Stay on top of this industry and use the latest, most innovative equipment pieces.
10. Make it Fun- When Mom or Dad asks that invariable question, "Did you have fun?" The students have to answer enthusiastically, "yes!" To keep your classes full, make it FUN! Try to do relay races, parachute or a quick game at the end so they leave laughing, out of breath and happy.

Skills, Stations and Spotting

With all beginning students regardless of age, you should start with the basic body positions. For preschoolers, I identify these as: squat, pike, straddle, lunge, v-sit, tuck (squat is on the floor and tuck is knees to the chest in the air), bridge (for those who are physically ready and over four years old), and "Ta-Da" (straight body landing with flexed knees and arms overhead in a "V"). Keep in mind that young children often have difficulty understanding prepositional phrases such as behind, next to, or in back of. Because of controversy and concern regarding introducing spinal hyperextension skills such as bridges or back-bends, we avoid emphasis in this area until the children are at least age five.

I have observed that many instructors don't place enough emphasis on these basic positions. Instructors should review these positions at the beginning of every class as part of the warm-up and reinforce them throughout the lesson. If a child understands the basic positions and remembers their names it's much easier to put together movements and create skills.

Animal walks are a great way to teach different kinesthetic drills. One of your jobs as an instructor is parent education. Explain to the parents how these play-like activities are a quick, easy, and fun way to have the students creatively mimic movement patterns that later transfer to more traditional gymnastics skills. Some of the ones that I use include:

Camel Walk

A walk on all fours with legs straight. (“Can you round your back and walk like a camel?”)

Bear Walk

This is also on all fours, but with the legs bent. (“Move S-L-O-W-L-Y”) – if the child can understand the difference between Camel and Bear Walks, they will better understand your suggestion of straightening their legs when learning a cartwheel. They will learn kinesthetically what an extended leg feels like while their head is below their hips.

Crab Walk

Have the students sit down with their hands behind them. Tell them to lift their bottom off the floor and walk. This helps to increase arm strength, abdominal strength, as well as coordination.

Bunny Hops

They are done on all fours, but have them move both the hands and then both feet. This encourages weight transfer, and exchange between upper and lower body parts.

A child’s awareness in space, especially when upside down, is not well developed during the preschool years. The development of kinesthetic awareness is one of the key benefits of gymnastics for preschoolers. Communicate this to the parents.

Teaching preschool tumbling these days is much easier than in the past due to the availability of “skill builder” equipment such as wedges, donuts, octagons, and trapezoid pieces. This equipment, along with the use of progressions, has reduced the time needed for spotting each student when new skills are introduced. The result is safe teaching, more student participation, rapid learning, and more fun! You should be aware of all of the different ways this equipment can be utilized to benefit curriculum goals. A great group of equipment from Artistic Covering is the Crayola Box Incline and the brightly colored Crayon Beams.

Rock-n-Roll. This movement is helpful to children learning forward and backward rolls. Use this drill to reinforce correct hand and head placement. Rock’n’Rolls are done on the floor in a tuck position. The student rolls backward onto the back and then rolls forward up to the feet. This mimics the end of the forward roll. This is also an excellent way to relax the spine and muscles of the back after rocking in a bridge position or working on walkover drills.

Skill Sequences – Instructors need to be aware of the importance of teaching linked sequences of movement as well as individual skills. As an instructor, you need to suggest to the children that gymnastics is not just doing single skills, but being able to put these skills together into longer movement sequences and combinations. These sequences eventually form the basis for development of gymnastics routines. As soon as the students can perform two different skills, ask them to try to link these together. They will have fun with the challenge of this task as well as learn the important concept that the end of one skill can be the beginning of another. Teach them if a skill ends with one leg out, the next one has to start with one leg out. Ask them to help you form routines.

For example, my instructors use what we call the “V-sit Combo” with preschoolers. This sequence includes forward roll, touch toes, V-sit, and straddle roll. Be creative and permit the students to show their own creativity in linking skills into combinations. Other possible examples include:

- Forward roll to straddle, straddle roll to squat.
- Forward roll to step-out, cartwheel.
- Cartwheel ¼ turn inward to backward roll.
- Round-off, backward roll.
- Forward roll, cross feet and ½ turn to backward roll.
- Handstand forward roll to land in straddle, straddle forward roll.
- Chasse to 2 cartwheels – or cartwheel, chasse, cartwheel.
- Backward roll to knee scale, sideward roll.
- Straddle roll to squat, forward roll with stepout.
- Front scale to handstand, forward roll, “Ta-Da!”

Make sure at the beginning and end of the combinations you teach the students to have a straight body position (Ta-Da!)

One of the easiest ways to teach forward rolls is down a wedge. You can also have the children go down a half donut or over a small barrel or octagon. If a student keeps his/her neck stiff and won't roll, ask them to hold a bean bag under their chin during the roll. I suggest that you spot at the beginning to make sure that they tuck their heads. Tell them to look at their tummy.

One of the most difficult skills to teach preschoolers is the backward roll. The children seem to be frightened when their knees are headed right toward their face. Therefore, I recommend teaching the back straddle roll first. One way to teach backward rolls is to line-up your group lying on their backs on an 8” skill cushion with their heads off the mat. Have them reach their hands backwards for the floor. Tell them to reach for the floor, push, and “kick your feet over your head” or “throw your toes over your nose!” This way, your entire group can work on the skill at the same time. Telling them to push with their hands usually ends up with puzzled faces. You can go the child and push on the tops of their hands to emphasize the idea or tell them to mash potatoes into the floor or hold hands up like you're carrying a pizza pie! Sometimes if you chalk their hands, it makes them aware if they are pushing or not and leaving a handprint.

Some other ideas: If the children let their feet go apart on their rolls, have them hold a foam ball or shape between their knees or ankles. Start the students on a trapezoid piece and roll back onto a wedge. With this set-up, the children have to push with their hands to get their bodies over the rope. You can use a small barrel (or octagon) at the end of the wedge, this also makes them push with their hands, and kick their legs to get near a handstand over the barrel.

Cartwheels are another challenging skill. First, teach a bunny hop. This is a two-hand, two foot alternating skill on all fours. Next, put down a small trapezoid piece or stacked panel mat with a hoop in it. The children place their hands in the hoop and do a side bunny hop. To help figure out which leg a child should use in the front for a cartwheel, have them kick to a handstand (horse kick). Watch to see which leg seems to land in front. It is a good idea to put a stamp on their hand or tie a ribbon on one wrist to help the child remember which leg goes in front. Chalk marks, rubber targets, poly dots or other visual cues can be combined with the hoop and trapezoid piece to aid in the development of the hand-hand-foot-foot action. Mats, trapezoid pieces, and wedges can

be used to create walls for the children to cartwheel between. If you have taught the lunge position, have them start and finish in a lunge. Teach them to start looking at one wall in a lunge, then cartwheel and end in a lunge facing the opposite way. Make a line of cones with jump ropes in them for an alley of cones to cartwheel between. If you have cartwheel mats, utilize them every week somewhere in your obstacle course and have others available for individual instruction. Many equipment companies have a cartwheel mat that has hand and footprints painted in the proper place for cartwheels – or, you can make your own by cutting shapes from contact paper to place on any exercise mat. Try making a clock face on the mat with chalk and have the students put their hands on eight and ten or two and four to do a cartwheel. Put a jump rope down and have them attempt a cartwheel on the tightrope. You could also have the kids cartwheel across a floor beam or the 4-color “Fun Tunnel”. Cartwheels can be taught on an incline also. If you have a big 60X10 incline you can have your preschoolers doing two cartwheels in a row. Another station for cartwheels is to attach a jump rope to the strap of a trapezoid piece or stick the jump rope into a fold of a stacked mat. Have the gymnast place his/her hands on the trapezoid as the instructor raises the rope higher and higher. The student must kick higher and higher to clear the rope.

A round-off is easily taught as a cartwheel $\frac{1}{4}$ turn in over a barrel or octagon. You can also spot this skill going down an incline. Another round-off drill is to have a poly dot on a fat beam where their hands go and a set of footprints facing towards the beam at the end for their feet upon landing.

When teaching handstands to preschoolers, give them something to grasp such as a set of parallettes. They can more easily balance in this way than with their hands flat on the floor. Teach them a “statue” body while lying on the floor first. Later, put them on top of an incline with their upper body hanging off the high end. Assist them to lean down into a handstand. Handstands against the wall are helpful, but remember to always have their tummies towards the wall, not their backs to help create a hollow body.

We start teaching the bridge when the children are ages five and older and are developmentally ready. We have a little saying, “hands by hair, belly button in the air.” A safe way to introduce the backbend when a beginner is ready is with a spot leaning backwards towards the high side of an incline. You should place one hand under the lower back for support and the other hand grasps the upper arm for control of the movement while your dominant leg is between their legs. Get close and keep their hips in front of their ankles. Then allow them to roll back towards their hands and rock back up.

Having preschoolers do splits in class takes too much time. There are too many other fun activities that we can do with them instead of taking the time to help each student achieve a good split position. Use your time wisely in preschool class. By age five, you might introduce the splits by starting them kneeling and telling the young gymnasts to pretend that their hip bones are headlights on a car. “Keep your headlights flashing straight forward as you slide in your splits. Keep your hands on the floor next to you.” You can also make a split station by butting two wedges tall sides together.

When teaching, be sure to repeat a skill at least three times. Incorporate the three senses when teaching – the students HEAR your explanation, SEE you demonstrate the skill, and FEEL the movement with a spot or assistance. Incorporate different techniques and new skills, but always reinforce what you have previously taught.

I encourage my instructors to use cross mat tumbling to provide more activity and limit standing in line waiting for turns. Your circuits and stations for teaching tumbling

should lead the students from one activity to the next. By the use of visual cues, your stations can be almost self-explanatory. Obstacle courses seem to lend itself to activity and not a lot of teaching. Take time for demonstration and explanation.

GAMES

Children always respond better when there's fun incorporated with learning. Here are a few games to help teach positions and beginner tumbling skills.

1. Freeze Game

When reviewing the positions, doing animal walks, or rolls down a mat have them stop on your command by saying, "freeze."

2. Relay Races

Utilize rolls, animal walks, and cartwheels down a mat between cones and ropes as a way to improve their skills. All children enjoy races and competition. This can also be used in parent and tot classes while the parent helps.

3. Hopscotch Roll

Make a hopscotch area on the mat with chalk or purchase one of the vinyl hopscotch mats. Have the students toss a bean bag into the numbered spaces. Whatever number it lands on is the number of rolls or cartwheels they must do.

4. Roll the Dice

A similar number game utilizes foam dice pieces you can purchase from P.E. supply houses. Have the children roll the dice against a wall or mat to determine the number of skills they must perform.

5. Roll the Barrel

It's the same idea. Tape numbers on an octagon mat and have the children roll it to determine the selected number of skills.

6. Simon Says

This traditional game can be modified in many ways to suit your goals. In this version, tell the children to listen for the position or skill that the instructor calls. If they miss during the game, they must go to the other team.

Tumbling is the basis for all gymnastics, therefore the tumbling section of the class should be the longest. Have the parents help you to set goals for different skills by a special date. Enlist their help to encourage the children to practice at home. Certain tumbling skills can be practiced all week at home. Use practice sheets, calendars, and explanation sheets to help the parents get involved with their child's gymnastics training. There are even a few skills that you can show the parents how to spot. While we don't want them to be coaches, their involvement helps their understanding of your selected teaching curriculum. At least every quarter, give the parents something that shows the child's progress – ribbons, certificates, medals, etc. This recognition is appreciated by the students and their parents.

With the knowledge of what skills to teach, when to teach them, and some hints on how to teach them, you should get excited about preschool tumbling. Make a challenge to yourself to **TEACH SOMETHING NEW TO EVERY CHILD IN EACH CLASS EVERYDAY!** 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.