

Creative Preschool Bar Skills and Variations

By Patti Komara

A large number of new teachers tell me that they're scared of the bars. During the first class they taught they said they were feeling pretty confident. But, when their students started moving towards the bar stations their stomach felt sick. New teachers aren't sure what to do, how to spot the skills, and how to keep the rest of the group busy while they're spotting one child. This article should address those concerns.

Skills

The skills listed below are in a general progression order. Start parent and tot classes at Level A as well as all other preschool groups to make sure they understand and have mastered the basics. Keep a checklist for each class. Record and date each skill when you introduce new ones to the class. This is helpful when a substitute teacher is needed. He/she can immediately determine the group level and teach appropriate skills. Also, the checklist is helpful to show parents how their children are progressing.

A few notes on teaching skills:

A back hip pullover seems to be a difficult skill for young students to master. Use a ladder hanging from the high bar for students to walk their feet up. When their tummy is near the low rail, tell them to do a chip-up and kick their feet over. You can also use stacked panel mats or a trapezoid piece to assist the kick over action. When using stacked panel mats, unfold a section to make the kick-off point lower as they get stronger. After these drills, have them do chin-ups for strength development. When teaching the back hip circle insist that the feet stay high on the front support finish position.

For front supports, I suggest that you chalk the preschooler's thighs where you want them to touch the bar (the little ones have a tendency to lay their tummies on the bar). I don't recommend most classes use chalk. However, there may be some girls and boys in the older classes that might need it. Don't sacrifice safety for cleanliness.

For casting, tell the children to first hunch like a cat, lock their legs and squeeze their bottom. To keep their legs together, have them hold a foam piece or beanbag between their knees. Tell them to lock their arms and raise their chest high with their necks stretched tall like a giraffe.

A single leg stemrise is a favorite old skill I love to do in beginner classes. It's like a single leg kip. When teaching them a stemrise, tell them to ride the bar with their thigh and pretend their leg is a piece of bread. There is butter on the top bar. They are going to butter the bread by sliding their extended leg against the top bar and then throwing their tummy over the bar to end in a front support on the high bar.

A drill you can use for glide kips is to have the child hold a bean bag or foam piece between their ankles. Have them try to glide out and drop it into a laundry basket, hoop, or on a chalk circle drawn on the mat. You can put a wedge in front of the set of bars. Have them practice stretching to kick the incline to achieve a glide action and body extension.

Preschool Bar Skills

Uneven Bars

Level A

Long hang
Swing in long hang
Possum hang pull ups
(laterally hang under the single bar and chin-up to left ear and then right ear)
Straddle hang
Shimmy across (lateral moving)
Hang in tuck

Level B

Casts (3)
Swing and regrasp
Tuck shoot
Straddle shoot
Back hip circle (spot)
Pike hang (10 sec)
Straddle hang
Bent arm hang (6 sec.)

Level C

Leg-ups (5)
Cast to pike
Cast to straddle
Back hip circle
Bent arm hang (12 sec)
Sole circle dismount
Basket hang (inverted pike)
Free L support

Front support	Cast to tuck	Underswing DM ^{over pole}
Fwd. Roll dismount(DM)	Swing half turn	Back Hip C high bar
Swing, drop bean bag in hoop	Run under and arch	Stemrise
Swing in pike	Single leg cut	Birdie Perch
Belly- button push-ups	Swing in straddle	
Sole circle swings	Back hip pull over	
Leg-ups (2)	Glide swing	Pull ups or chin-ups (2)
Pullover high bar		
Hang in pike	L-sit on low bar	
Single knee touch (front support, bring one alternately to the bar)		
Hang (walk forward & backward)		
Space walks (ft. support & swing legs under bar)		
Leg-ups (3) (toes to bar)		
Back hip pullover (spot)		

Safety Notes

Because the bars involve height, many parents are apprehensive about this event. It is imperative for the coaches to become “safety-maniacs” at this event. Here are some key points to keep in mind:

1. Don't put a child in a support position that's above their waist level. Lower the bar to the appropriate level. If the bar won't lower, you can build up the height of the mats under the bar.
2. During the first lesson, teach the students how to fall, rollout and dismount correctly.
3. Teach the proper grips and the need to rotate the grip for skills such as a forward roll dismount. (Tell the kids it's like Daddy on his motorcycle- vroom, vroom).
4. Provide your preschoolers with a set of bars just for them. A set where the rails are small enough for their small hands to grasp.
(Equipment notes: Jr. Swing Bar- this is a small single rail that is adjustable to heights needed for preschoolers. Because it breaks down into three small pieces for easy transporting, it's perfect for a mobile program.)
5. If you use a ladder to help them get to the low bar, make sure you have a foam piece under it so that the ladder doesn't ruin the base mat. Use mats, inclines, or barrels underneath to protect the preschooler if their foot goes through rungs- they always do!
6. Any time a student is hanging from a height where they can't jump down safely, always have your hand on their wrist. If the student says, “I can do it by myself”, you can reply, “I know you can! I'm just going to be here as a helper!”
7. Skin-the-Cat can be a dangerous move for preschoolers and I don't recommend it unless it is spotted. Too many times the child lets go in the middle of this skill- if the instructor doesn't react fast enough, the child falls. A Penny (or Cherry) Drop is a difficult skill for new instructors to spot, therefore, I don't recommend them. I also avoid any skills that require swinging from one bar to another. Forcing a child to do skills on the high bar before they're ready isn't necessary. Teachers of preschool classes should have the philosophy of “teaching within the comfort zone.” If a child doesn't want to go to the high bar...don't. Do the skill on the low bar and encourage them. But, if they still don't want to go, don't force them; try again in a few weeks. If they are really afraid of the bars, let them do strength work instead.
8. For landing purposes it is advisable to use a 4” landing mat, not an 8” skill cushion. If new skills are going to be taught, you can keep a skill cushion under the bars, but not for dismounts. If an 8” skill cushion is all that's available, use a panel mat on top for landings.

9. A child should never hang without tension in their chest and arms. Explain this to the parents in parent and tot classes and to all your instructors. The children shouldn't be allowed to hang until they understand this concept.
10. Some gyms use a rebounder or min-tramp for younger students to jump to front support. If you do this, I recommend you to pad the bar. Many kids have hit their teeth while their jumping gets out of control.

Spotting

Remember to always keep a hand on the child when they're hanging upside down-this will prevent a number of problems. When spotting and working with the child on the bars, position yourself so you can maintain supervision of the other children working at the other bar stations. When spotting a back hip pullover, position yourself in front of the bars to assist lifting the hips. One hand goes under their legs and the other on their back. At the end of the skill, one hand should be under their legs to help them achieve a good front support position. Be prepared to assist them if they rotate over the bar too fast and start to fall.

Circuits

For parent and tot classes and five-six year old classes you can utilize a number sets of bars at one time. With students who are 3-4 years old, it is sometimes hard to keep them from running away if you have too many stations. In this case, I recommend that you use just two stations in the circuit.

To be successful in creating a well-rounded fitness program as well as making it gymnastically oriented and fun, design a circuit for every lesson that includes a skill teaching station, a strength game, an imaginative play area, and a hand/eye coordination station. For instance, here is one lesson where you can use a four-bar- station to incorporate these ideas:

Bar #1 Skill: back hip pullovers with the instructor assisting.

Bar #2 Hand-eye coordination: the child hits a foam ball with a bat off a cone and the ball goes through a hoop hanging from the low bar.

Bar #3 Drill: Stations where skills are practiced safely

Bar #4 Strength game: child holds a bent arm hang, or hang in tuck, pike or straddle while reciting the ABC's. Or, imaginative play: the child hangs from the low bar and tries to knock off dinosaur eggs (disguised as bean bags)

Body/Eye Coordination Stations

1. Hang plastic bowling pins from the bars. Have the students push them alternately using the "tracking" principle with their eyes. (Ocular Pursuit)
2. Hang a plastic tire or hoop from the bar. The preschooler throws bean bags, foam balls, or small footballs through it. (Hand/eye coordination)
3. Place wedge mats up and down under the low bar. The students roll beach balls to partner. At the same station have the students walk up the incline and do a front support and then forward roll dismount to a forward roll down the wedge mat.
4. Hang balloons from either bar and kick for foot-eye coordination or hit with paper plate racket for hand-eye coordination.
5. Hang large and small aluminum pie tins that have been taped together with dry beans inside them. The children throw beanbags at the plates. The preschoolers love the noise this makes!
6. Hang foam shapes and letters from the high bar for the students to kick while hanging or swinging from the low bar.

Imaginative Games

1. Have the children hold foam vegetable shapes between their feet and do leg-ups or hold it as long as they can.
2. Hang holiday balloons from the bars- Easter eggs, valentine hearts, pumpkins, etc.
3. Gorilla turns- “How many times can you hang and turn?”
4. Frisbee catcher- one child hangs from the bar while another child or instructor tosses a foam Frisbee for the first child to try to catch with their feet.

Other ideas for bars

1. Hang bells from the high bar. Each child shimmies (moves laterally hanging from the bar) while attempting to ring each bell in succession.
2. Hang rings from the bar to have the children do inverted pike and straddle hangs.
3. Hang a plastic coated 5-lb. Weight plate from a climbing rope with a knot under it to use as a swing for toddlers. Be sure to instruct them to keep hold of the rope until they have dismounted from the swing to their feet.
4. The students can bring a stuffed animal to class and try to hold it between their knees and chest while in a tuck hang. Hold this for five seconds or shimmy down the bar and through a hoop.
5. Place a plastic slide under the low bar...the child does forward roll dismounts from the bar to land on the slide. When they slide down...Ta-Da!
6. Take a segmented hoop, pull it apart and rehook it around the bar. Have the student possum hang or shimmy in tuck position through the hoop.
7. Put a trapezoid piece or stacked panel mat in front of the bar at an angle. Have the students jump to the low bar from the various angles increasing the difficulty as you pull the trap piece further away. From the trapezoid they can:
 - A. Jump and swing
 - B. Jump, tap, front support, and jump down.
 - C. Jump, swing from high bar five times and jump off to the front.
 - D. Jump, cast 3 times and then forward roll dismount.
 - E. Handstands- jump, tap, handstand. (Tell them to “pinch my finger in your armpit”)
8. Use cones, ropes, a small barrel, or the instructor holding a stick as a barrier (visual cue) for them to dismount over.
9. Use chin-up bars on the walls around the bar area to keep the students busy doing strength work: pull-ups, chin-ups, leg-ups, hang in pike, straddle, tuck, and bent arm hang. This can be its own mini-circuit.
10. Use various methods for the children to mount the bars: a take-off board, a mini-tramp, a jogger, a ladder or plank, an inclined beam (have trapezoid pieces underneath), panel mats, ½ donut, incline mats, slide, stairs, barrels, octagons, or a “mountain.” The mountain is a 4” mat hung over the low bar with trapezoid pieces, octagons, or other mat shapes underneath for support. This is useful for skills that you are teaching on the high bar (HB).
11. Use combinations. As soon as the students have learned a few basic skills, have them combine the skills together into sequences such as:
 - A. Long hang, shimmy, straddle shoot, L-sit.
 - B. Jump, front support, forward roll, dismount.
 - C. Long hang shimmy, tuck shoot drop to hock swing (from knees). (Be sure to spot this)

Benefits

The bar area is a great place for preschoolers to learn some very important organizational and social skills. Not only are they having fun with the different circuits, and are being kept busy, but they are learning to take turns as a member of a line. Sometimes they have to wait their turn. You can have them stay on a carpet square, sit in a hoop, safety spot, or use other means to control their activity while they are waiting. It's too abstract for you to just tell preschoolers to wait in line for their turn. Be specific. Tell them, "I want you to sit in your hoops on this blue mat and watch the other students do this skill. You can learn by watching and listening." Use colors of the mats as indicators or small motor equipment as visual cues. Remember most preschoolers don't understand prepositional phrases such as behind, in front of, or beside.

Take the challenge- use the bars as a positive circuit for preschoolers! Remember to use a teaching station, a strength game or an imaginative area, a drill station, and a body/eye coordination station when designing your circuits. When formulating your lesson plans, select achievable skills, introduce skills in a logical and safe progression, use constant positive reinforcement, keep the students active, and plan for fun!

Safety Notes for Bars

1. Not above eye level
2. Teach how to fall first lesson
3. Teach proper grips and how to rotate- motorcycle
4. Special size set of bars- Jr Swing Bars- Gibson/ Norbert's
5. Mat under ladder or octagons
6. Always have your hand on their wrist
7. Proper landing mat

Not to do:

1. Skin the cat
2. Penny drop

Create a 4 Bar Circuit

1. BHP with teacher- skill
2. BHP with ladder- reinforcing skill
3. L support, slide down and "Ta da"- strength
4. Chin-ups and knock off dino eggs- fun imaginative