

Small Hand Apparatus For 3-5 Year Olds

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Introduction

Are you looking for an addition to your existing gymnastics programming that's innovative, fun and inexpensive to initiate? Consider rhythmic gymnastics for preschool age children.

Rhythmic gymnastics can begin as small and as easily as adding it as a station in your present gymnastics program. Rhythmic gymnastics at the preschool level can also be offered as its own program without ever getting into higher levels and older age groups.

For those interested in pursuing programming for 6 year olds and older, USA Gymnastics offers an excellent developmental level program (levels 1-4). Through text and accompanying video, gymnastics staff can become knowledgeable to teach beyond the preschool level.

This article will offer an introduction to methods and progressions for teaching skills using rhythmic gymnastics balls and alternative apparatus. Using alternative apparatus serves as a fun progression to the development of ability in rhythmic gymnastics for the preschool age child.

Getting Started

Both traditional and alternative rhythmic apparatus can be used to get things going! Rock-climbing rope can substitute for jump ropes, kick balls can take the place of rhythmic gymnastics balls, hula-hoops for rhythmic hoops, tennis balls in the toes of a pair of tube socks for clubs, and wood doweling attached to ribbon from a fabric store for a rhythmic ribbon! Look in all of those nooks and crannies at home and in the gym. You may just have some of these items tucked away. These implements can serve as great substitute rhythmic apparatus until classes get off the ground.

As far as alternative apparatus goes, the sky is the limit! Just about any fun and safe implements that can be used to develop hand-eye and foot-eye coordination should be considered. Balloons, bubbles, koosh balls, bean bags, light weight tennis racquets, punch balls, feathers, swim noodles, cones, sponge bats/balls, scoops and scarves are just some ideas.

Building confidence with a variety of implements which teach proper body movement is a great progression for the preschool age child! Implements that are soft (bean bags, koosh balls) are helpful because they aren't as threatening to a child if "mis-caught" as a heavier ball might be at the outset of learning a skill. Lightweight objects (scarves, balloons) are easier to visually track in the air because they stay in the air longer, facilitating in the development of hand-eye and foot-eye coordination.

Method of Teaching

Begin by separating the apparatus skill from the body skill. Provide the participant with a

mental concept of the pattern of the skill. This should be done by way of demonstration and verbalization. Practicing each segment of the skill will facilitate learning the entire skill.

Even at this elemental level there should be focus on the fundamentals of good technique. It is difficult to change incorrect form and technique if it has been practiced for many years. Keep in mind though that once given the knowledge of the basic mechanics of the movement, with practice and time the skill will develop. Once the preschooler has had a chance to experience the body element and the apparatus element separately, the two can be combined.

PROCEDURE FOR TEACHING

Step 1: Identify the Apparatus Skills

The skills specific to ball include:

- swings
- exchanges
- rolls (on the ground, on the body)
- bounces and catches
- tosses and catches
- balances (on the hand or other body part)

Step 2: Teach the Concepts

Familiarizing the preschool participant with correct terminology will facilitate the learning of the skill. While it is important to teach terminology, be careful not to overwhelm students with big words. It is helpful to explain concepts using similes along with a demonstration; "gently catch the ball like you would a baby bird that has fallen from its nest. Reach up to meet the bird in the air with your hands" vs. "catch the ball by absorbing the impact when the ball contacts your hands."

Incorporate and reinforce academic concepts such as:

- identification of body parts
- identification of body joints
- body movement related to ball
- swinging
- circling/rotating
- rolling (on the ground or on the ball)

OPPOSITES

above	below	front	back
around	straight	heavy	light
apart	together	high	low
before	after	in	out
big	little	large	small

close	far	near	far
fast	slow	over	under
forward	backward	right	left
up	down	straight	bent

Step 3: Breaking Down the Skill into Smaller Parts

Feeling a measure of accomplishment is vital to keeping a child's interest when learning a skill.

A skill can be broken down in two ways; by first using alternative equipment and by breaking the skill into parts.

Alternative equipment is helpful when it can mimic the mechanics of movement of the traditional apparatus yet being perhaps lighter, easier to grasp, etc.

Alternative equipment that is relative to skills with a rhythmic gymnastics ball includes scarves, balloons, koosh or fleece balls, bean bags, sponge balls, punch balls and beach balls.

Some facilitating alternative equipment includes scoops, lightweight tennis racquets, buckets and pitch backs.

Example-progressions of tossing and catching using alternative equipment. It is suggested that this skill be taught after bouncing and catching.

The term "toss" would be explained as "up with energy" vs. "throw" which might be explained as "forward with energy."

Bean Bags and Buckets

Description

Place several floor markers on the ground, with buckets (hoops may substitute) at varying distances from the markers.

Toss the beanbag to the bucket by swinging with a straight arm. Let go of the beanbag at the top of the swing. Imagine that the beanbag is drawing a rainbow from your hand, into the air and into the bucket ("pot of gold"). The beanbag should go up, over and down!

Koosh Ball and Scoops Description

To make a scoop, cut off approximately 1" from the bottom of a 1-gallon plastic milk or water container.

Hold the handle of the scoop with the big opening at the top. Remember to keep the arm straight. The arm swings from the shoulder to toss. Watch the koosh ball while it is in the air. Meet the koosh ball in the air with the scoop. Reach up with a straight arm so that the scoop is under the koosh ball.

Elements to experiment with:

- Tossing and catching koosh ball with scoop in same hand
- Tossing with one hand, catching with scoop in opposite hand
- Tossing with scoop in one hand, catching with opposite hand

Balloons**Description**

Using two hands, toss the balloon into the air. Keep the arms straight and watch the balloon leave your hands (if participant holds on too long, the balloon will be tossed behind them). Keep wrists straight, reach high with both hands to stretch and catch. Catch the ball only with hands, not against the arms or body.

Beach ball and Pitch-back**Description**

A pitch-back is commonly used for baseball. It usually has a metal frame and a taut net that "pitches back" a tossed or thrown object.

Place a floor marker a distance away from the pitch-back. The pitch-back should be angled up slightly.

Toss the beach ball up so that when it comes down it will bounce onto and off of the net. Watch the beach ball leave your fingertips. Keep arms and wrists straight. Be ready to step and catch because the ball may not bounce exactly back to you. Reach up toward the ball with your arms and hands. Bend at the knees when catching instead of catching "into the body."

This skill can also be practiced with the allowance of the ball to bounce first before it is caught.

Step 4: Introduce the Whole Skill

Having had the opportunity to practice the correct body and equipment technique with the alternative equipment, and developing comprehension and confidence with those progressions, the whole skill can be introduced. This whole skill is introduced using the traditional rhythmic apparatus, in this case a rhythmic gymnastics ball.

Example-tossing and catching the ball

A rhythmic gymnastics ball is made of plastic or rubber and generally for the preschooler, the ball is about 16cm. Slightly larger balls can be substituted.

Participants spread out on the floor area while practicing small tosses and catches to themselves. The ball should be kept below head height. This will familiarize the preschooler with the size and weight of the ball (the student should have already worked on other skills with the ball, i.e., balancing in hand(s), rolling on floor and body, bouncing/catching).

Participants, still spread out, can do medium to large tosses of the ball but allow one intermediate bounce of the ball before it is caught. This allows more time to visually track the ball and by letting the ball bounce, some of the force of the ball is diminished. Bend the knees ("plié") when catching the ball.

Preschoolers can next toss the balls with medium height, using learned tossing skills (watching the ball, straight arms and wrists, letting fingertips be the last thing touching the ball, tossing "up"). The ball can now be caught without the intermediate bounce, using the learned catching skills (watching the ball, meeting the ball high in the air, letting fingertips be the first thing to touch the ball, keeping arms straight, plié while catching and lowering arms).

Step 5: Develop Technique

There should be some frequency in revisiting these learned skills. Body memory is not automatic. For each correction you give, give at least one acknowledgment of something well done. This will help to reinforce the positives and encourage improvement where it is needed.

Ask the preschoolers questions about the skill. By verbalizing the skill or parts of the skill, the cognitive process will enhance the performance of that skill.

You can also demonstrate the skill with an error in part of the skill and ask the children to tell you what they liked and what you could make better. Developing their visual acuity can also help them translate what they see into what they do.

Conclusion

Start with the basics. What you teach your students now will have a lasting impact on them. Keep the environment positive, make it fun, and include a variety of activities to keep their interest and meet your goals with your preschool participants.

Translate terminology into a language they can understand. Rolling a ball on the rug using two hands could be "building a snowman." Raising a hoop over head and lowering it toward the ground can be "sunrise, sunset."

Be observant of the children both in what they do and what they say. If you listen and watch carefully, they can be some of your best teachers!

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