There is always so much excitement in watching children grow and develop. That is probably the major reason most preschool gymnastics teachers do what they do. Adults who provide children diverse situations to experience positive reinforcement, encouragement and the opportunity for a lot of repetition can definitely guide this development.

Repetition. That is probably a familiar word to any gymnastics instructor. Not many 3 year olds learn to skip or cartwheel over a mat on the first try. It usually takes dozens of attempts (although hundreds is what it feels like sometimes) for a child to show improvements that eventually lead to skill mastery. This brings up the question, “How do you motivate anyone to perform those repetitions that are necessary?”

Luckily, preschool teachers are some of the most creative people around. They search to find new and exciting ways to encourage young children. Trampoline is not only one of the most exciting and favorite pieces of equipment in the gym, but sadly one of the most under used pieces as well. Most people are probably wondering how this can be true. Coaches say, “We get on the trampolines every class because it’s the kids’ favorite.” However, there is a big difference between “just getting on” the trampoline and using it to help a child’s development.

Many trampoline rotations in preschool classes consist of students practicing their straddle jumps and then maybe a second turn to do their favorite “trick.” (If that were how the rest of the class went, parents would likely stop bringing their children back.) Since trampoline has the element of excitement built in, teachers need to take this opportunity and mix the fun with learning. Trampoline is a great tool for helping children learn body control and awareness, air sense and even memory skills. A plan incorporating knowledge of child development, trampoline safety and skill progressions is all that’s needed to help turn a trampoline lesson into a fun opportunity for children to grow and develop.

The goal of this article is to encourage increased and more diversified trampoline use in early child development programs by providing information about trampoline safety, child development and progressive teaching methods.

Equipment Safety
Equipment safety is the first consideration for any program. In most cases, common sense and safety awareness is sufficient for a teacher or club owner to decide what equipment is appropriate for preschool students. There are a few areas to keep in mind when considering trampoline equipment, including bed selection, padding, and extra protection.

There are three main types of trampoline beds available: black (polyurethane) beds, webbed straps and strings. Most trampolines are acceptable and safe for preschool classes. All should be checked regularly and kept in a good state of repair. Padding should cover both the frame and springs. Special attention should be given to the corners of the trampoline. Since there are usually no springs in the corners, there are spaces where an athlete or coach might step through. Added support in the way of a spring stretched across this space or extra padding is usually an acceptable solution.

The short sides of the trampolines are typically where an athlete who has made an error will travel, so extra matting is needed. The size and type of this padding is dependent on specific factors such as size and location of the trampoline, as well as if the trampoline is above or in-ground.

Above vs. In-ground Trampolines
Both above and in-ground trampolines can be safe for the preschool age athlete. It’s recommended that above ground trampolines have safety platforms (or “end decks”) on the short sides of the trampoline. The long sides of the trampoline must be spotted by adults or addressed in another way such as a platform or padded wall along one side. Additionally, young athletes should be spotted whenever mounting and dismounting the apparatus. While in-ground trampolines help eliminate the need for spotting during mounting and dismounting, special consideration should be taken in regard to the shorter sides of the trampoline.
Developmentally Appropriate

Our main goal in gymnastics (and trampoline specifically for this article) is to help children develop their gross and fine motor skills. Chart A shows a guide of children’s development from the ages of 2 through 6 years of age. We want to choose activities on the trampoline that are age appropriate and that challenge them to develop to the next level. Chart B was developed based on the information from Chart A and experience gained from working with these age groups in gymnastics classes. Remember, these charts should be used as a guide only. Some children will be slightly above or below their listed level of development. These charts should be used as a reference to help develop initial lessons.

Safe Teaching begins OFF the Trampoline!

The most important concept in this article is to always teach a skill on the floor or a skill cushion first before progressing to the trampoline. Increased height and power not only make skills easier to complete but also make them more dangerous. Simply put, all athletes should safely perform all jumps or drops on the floor or appropriate skill cushion before they are asked to perform these skills on the trampoline. All skills discussed here should be performed without travel from the center of the trampoline.

Jumps and Turns

Conceptually, jumps with or without twist are straightforward to teach. First, children should be taught their positions seated on the floor (figs. 1,2,3) (e.g. tuck, pike, straddle, split). Second, they should practice their jumps in each position on the padded floor. Take special care on pike jumps with children younger than 5 years old, as they tend to rotate and lose balance. Third, they should begin to perform their jumps on the trampoline with NO BOUNCE. Only once a child can safely perform jumps in this way should they be encouraged to take small jumps before these skills. Remember, even simple jumping with arms in different positions (down, over head, out in front) can be challenging to young children.

Drops

Drops on the trampoline are children’s first experience of rotation in the air. They are wonderful to expose young children to if done in a safe and progressive manner. Drops introduced in this article will be the seat drop (fig.4), hands and knees drop (fig. 5), front drop (fig. 6) and back drop (fig. 7). Knee drops should not be performed at this level due to concern over low back injuries.

First, all drops should be performed seated or lying still on a padded floor. Second, children should perform them on a thick skill cushion or solid foam pit from a stand. (A bent-kneed “freeze” position as shown in fig. 8 works well as a starting point.) Instructors should use their own judgment and make certain the mat is not too soft that the athletes will “bottom out.” Third, the athlete should perform the drop onto a skill cushion (4 – 8 inches) on the trampoline, again from a stand (fig. 9). For most children under the age of 7, there is no need to perform any of these drops, with the exception of the seat drop, on the trampoline without the mat. Trampoline safety is always the priority. If children are still benefiting from using the mat on the trampoline, coaches should not feel a need to remove the mat more quickly just to perform the skill on the bed.

Combinations

Combining skills shows another level of mastery by the child. Asking children to combine skills on the trampoline not only helps with their motor development but also helps their cognitive (memory) skills. First, children should be asked to combine identical skills together such as tuck jumps. Quickly they will be able to perform this one skill in a series. Second, they will be ready to combine two different skills together such as tuck jump-straddle jump. Then they can progress to repeating these two skills to form a pattern. Third, they will be able to combine three or more skills together such as tuck jump-straddle jump-1/2 turn. Again, they should progress to repeating these skills to form another pattern. When developing lessons one should be creative. Children love to try different combinations of skills they have already learned!

Remember safety is always first! This (continued on page 20)
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article should be used as a reference or a starting point to develop fun and appropriate lessons for children. No article can substitute for experience. Working with an experienced teacher should always be a priority for any aspiring teacher. Under the guidance of a careful and knowledgeable teacher, trampoline is a great tool for children of all ages to develop coordination and foster a love of physical fitness.

Chart B: Trampoline Development: A General Guideline

### Chart A: General Development: The Emergence of Motor Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gross Motor</th>
<th>Fine Motor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Runs, climbs stairs, jumps from objects (both feet)</td>
<td>Throws ball, kicks ball, turns page, begins to scribble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hops, climbs stairs with alternating feet, jumps from bottom step</td>
<td>Copies circles, opposes thumb to finger, scribbling continues to improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Runs well, skillful jumping, begins to skip, pedals tricycle</td>
<td>Holds pencil, copies square, walks balance beam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hops about 50 feet, balances on one foot, can catch large ball, good skipping</td>
<td>Colors within lines, forms letters, dresses and undresses self with help, eats more neatly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Carries bundles, begins to ride bicycle, jumps rope, can catch a tennis ball</td>
<td>Ties shoes, uses scissors, uses knife and fork, washes self with help</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>