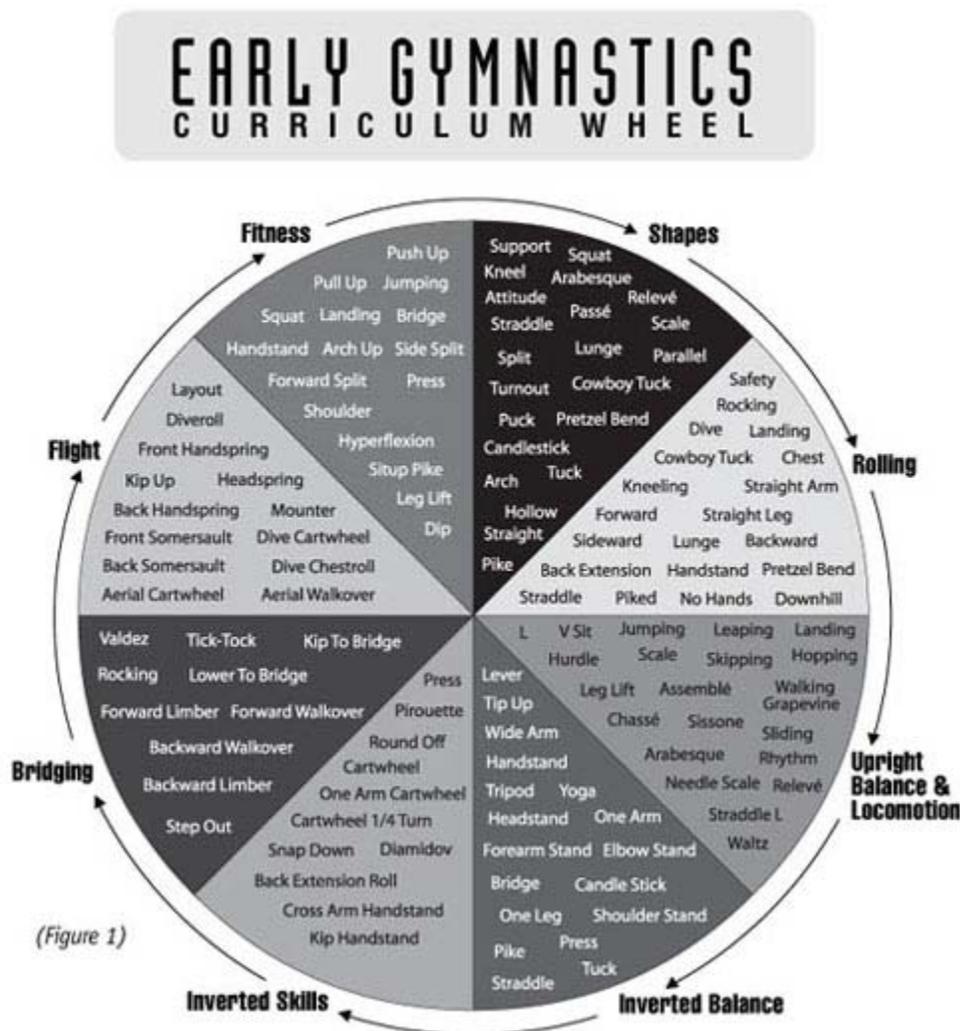


## Early Gymnastics Curriculum Design

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Preparation of young gymnasts requires careful thought and fluid execution. Even at the earliest stages, gymnasts bring unique capabilities with them. Although gymnastics skills should be taught in a simple to complex order, there appears to be little agreement on precisely what this idea means for many gymnastics skills. For example, most would probably



agree that one should teach/learn a forward roll before learning a back handspring. However, we might find little agreement on whether one should teach/learn a handstand forward roll before a backward roll. The two ugly words, "it depends" summarize this kind of choice. The choice of whether one skill should be taught before another may also be based on individual instructor experience and skill, access to special equipment at the time, whether other gymnasts in the instructional group are ready for a particular skill, and many other factors. Thus, the gymnastics instructor is faced with a teaching/learning situation that is simultaneously strict and free. Instructors should always proceed from the simple to the complex and from the easy to the difficult. However, we often find that some gymnasts have specific talents and progress rapidly within one skill family while progressing only slowly in others. How is an instructor to know the skills that should be taught/learned at any given point in the young gymnast's learning experiences?

Gymnastics skills begin with fitness characteristics. If the gymnast is not fit enough (i.e., strong, flexible, etc.), skill learning will be impossible. Of course, the gymnast cannot just condition and not practice skills. Skill practice should focus newly acquired fitness (e.g., strength and flexibility) in skill

learning so that the fitness quality is focused specifically at gymnastics skills. Following fitness, the gymnast should understand and be able to achieve the necessary body positions. After fitness and body shapes, the gymnast usually progresses in the following way (Figure 1):

**1. Rolling skills** are usually taught early. Rolling skills are used to prepare the gymnast for movements that are close to the floor, and as a means of recovering from a fall while learning another target skill. The instructor should emphasize methods to clear the head and methods of making the roll smooth. Clearing the head may require considerable upper body strength. Performing a smooth roll (i.e., not bumpy) requires that the gymnast's body moves smoothly from one contact point to the next (i.e., from shoulders to back to hips, to feet).

**2. Upright balance and locomotion** involves body shapes and simple movements. Upright balance, of course, doesn't involve being inverted. The gymnast learns about body shapes and body control while trying to hold unusual body positions in static and in upright locomotion. The gymnast should be instructed in appropriate body positions and postures. When the gymnast is asked to hold a balance position for a period of time or during a movement, the posture and position often deteriorate. Instructors should monitor the gymnast's body positions so that poor postures are identified early and the gymnast becomes able to identify and adopt specific body positions while moving.

**3. Inverted balance skills** require a clear understanding of body positions while upright. Inverted skills place a great deal of stress on body positions and postures due to the disorienting influence of being upside-down. Because the acquisition of inverted balance skills is more difficult, the gymnast should be exposed to a number of different types of inverted balances. For example, there are many versions of headstands that can be used to help the gymnast learn about body position and postures while inverted. If headstands become too easy, then the gymnast can progress to forearm stands and handstands. Gymnasts are required to move into and from inverted positions, most commonly handstands from all directions. Inverted balance skills allow the gymnast to learn about movements into and out of upside-down positions in relatively slow and controllable ways. Again, instructors should emphasize sound body positions and postures at all points of the movement.

**4. Inverted skills** take the gymnast's abilities to a higher level. The gymnast must now combine both balance and movement with inversion. Gymnasts should learn these skills from both the right side and the left side, both forward and backward.

**5. Bridging skills** come relatively late in the curriculum design shown in Figure 1. Bridging skills require an understanding of body position, enough flexibility to achieve the positions, and the strength to achieve and maintain the arched or bridged position without jeopardizing the athlete's safety. These skills can be performed slowly while the upper or lower body is supported on mats. The gymnast can also be elevated slightly so that all movements proceed "downhill" and are thus easier to perform.

**6. Flight skills** are covered last. The primary reason for delaying flight skills until late in the learning progression is safety. Often when flight is added to a skill, the impact forces increase dramatically along with danger. Flight skills may or may not require spotting, and thus the skill of the instructor also increases. When instructing flight skills, thicker and softer mats, are also important.

While it might be easier to simply provide a dogmatic approach to the teaching of gymnastics skills (i.e., a recipe), the reality is that instructors must be allowed latitude and discretion in their choice of skills for instruction and the path the gymnast takes from skill to skill. The context or circumstance surrounding any instructional setting is often very dynamic and requires good

judgment in the selection of skills and teaching methods.

For example, let's say that the gymnasts have just come from a birthday party, they've been "out of control" during the birthday party, and now they must be taught gymnastics skills. The planned skills include some flight skills and some bridging skills. The instructor may look at the whole situation and decide that a non-gymnastics-type game is needed to slow the gymnasts down and bring them back under control. The game involves a contest between two groups to spell some word with their bodies. The first team to make the word wins. The gymnasts are learning about body shapes in a way that may not look like gymnastics at first, but the instructor can manipulate the gymnasts behaviors by asking them to take one of the curved shapes that was needed to make a letter in the word to fit the "hollow" shape that is needed in gymnastics. Then from the hollow body position, the instructor moves the gymnasts into a lesson on using the hollow body position to enhance the push-off phase of a front handspring.

Skilled instructors can often manipulate the teaching/learning circumstance so that the gymnasts continue to learn valuable skills while being aware of what the gymnast brings to the specific learning situation. Instructors should attempt to maximize the circumstances that they meet in order to maximize teaching and learning.

The curriculum wheel shown in Figure 1 is a model of gymnastics instruction that establishes a general direction for instruction (clockwise around the wheel - starting at Fitness), while allowing some freedom in actual skill selection (within each movement family "pie-slice"). The curriculum wheel is an attempt to be simultaneously tight and loose, to acknowledge an overall direction of instruction while incorporating individual learning paths. Figure 1 shows a curriculum wheel for tumbling. Similar "wheels" can be developed for the other artistic events and other activities. The teaching methods for each family of skills or individual skills will be left to future