

Beam Skills and Activities for Preschoolers

By Patti Komara

Beam is the easiest gymnastics event to teach preschoolers. As long as you keep them on the low beams, they feel comfortable enough to try all the various walks and most of the skills listed below. Beam is easy because the event lends itself to the use of props, music, and various games.



Skills

The skills below are listed in a progression beginning with the most basic. All children mature at their own pace mentally, socially, and physically. Children also develop differently in the elements of fitness: strength, endurance, and flexibility.

Difficulty Level A	Difficulty Level B	Difficulty Level C
(Parent and Tot) Walks forward relevé sideways bear (on all fours) L-kicks backward step-stag on-incline beam lunge pose, V-sit straight jump dismount front support mount tuck jump dismount Birdie Perch (deep plié w/ hands on beam) front scale chassé side straddle mount on low beam relevé turn	knee scale (L&R) walk on med-high beam- no falls plié walk back step stag chassé front small running steps straddle jump dismount straight ½ turn dismount squat turn developé walk front support mount on medium beam step hops sidewinder in push-up (see photo) crab push-ups cross over walks jump, switch feet side kicks cartwheels low beam front scale (5 sec.) bounce ball while walking on low beam	Lunge step stag Low tuck jump Squat mount Pike jump dismount Tuck jump dismount ½ turn Straddle support Leg cut-hip uprise on high beam Kneescale dismount Chassé (Medium beam, no falls) Straddle mount on medium beam Handstand with spot English handstand with spot Long running steps



Difficulty Level A is for Parent and Tot classes as well as a place for all preschoolers to start. Basically speaking, Level B is appropriate for three and four years olds and Level C is for five and six year olds. Any child can progress to Level C after completing the first two levels.

I believe that keeping individual check-off skill lists in preschool

classes isn't appropriate. This takes too much time out of class. Most preschool classes are 45 minutes in length. This is just the right amount of time for a fast-paced, fun-filled, perpetual moving class. There's no time to use individual skill sheets. What is recommended, however, is a "class check-off list." At the conclusion of the class or day the instructor should date when the skill was taught. Coaches who instruct a large number of classes weekly can't be expected to remember from week to week what skills were mastered in each class.

Safety Notes

A few safety comments about the beam are important to keep in mind.

- Don't put a child on a beam higher than his/her waist. Children can learn all the skills they need on low beams in preschool. If you're forced to use high beams, build mats up to them so the students can easily "see" over the beam when they mount.
- Teach the children how to fall! If they feel like they are about to fall, teach them to jump off safely. This lessens their fear to get on the beam initially.
- Teach the student to "feel" the center of the beam through their body.
- Don't have the tots dismount any further than they can jump up from a two foot take-off. Please watch their joints and hold their waist not their hands while they walk on the beam.
- Have students dismount onto a 4" landing mat, not an 8" skill cushion. There's too much give to the landing when they're asked to jump into a skill cushion.

Spotting

If you keep the tots on the low beam and teach using progressions, there's very little need for spotting. If you must put them on the high beam, spot them on their walks by holding their waist, not their hand. Even a slight loss of balance could pull and tug at their arms too much and possibly injure their elbows or shoulders.

Remind them to look at the end of the beam when doing their walks, not down at the beam in front of their feet. Give the children various arm positions while they're doing their walks. Don't have them just do the arms out at the sides (airplane arms) put some pizzazz and style into the arms. Have them overhead, on shoulders, on the waist, on the tops of the thighs, bow and arrow, V-shape, hug yourself, and various ballet arm positions.

Teach the children the proper ballet terms for the walks, and what they mean in French.

- *Chassé* - to chase
- *Plié* - to bend
- *Developé* - to bring up and extend

You should always give more challenging walks and combinations to those preschoolers who need them. For instance a side combination for three years olds might be chassé, chassé, step together. A four year old might do chassé, step over, chassé. A five-year-old could do chassé, step together, step over. Always challenge the kids who are ready for more.

If you're looking for more beams, there are many varieties on the market. I like the three-layered red, white, and blue ZIN-KIN Beam. Use cloth jump ropes laid on the floor to be used as their own beam. Taped lines work well, too. There are two beams you can find in equipment catalogs you



might want to get. The Edu-Beams (it has shapes, numbers, and colors on it) and Beam-Links (this beam comes in sections with a Velcro top which are great for mobile programs).

Vary the way you place the floor beams. Zigzag them, put them in a triangle or rectangle, or build inclines, planks, ladders, stairs, or other beams up to it. Always have the student mount and dismount-even if it's a step-on mount and a straight-jump dismount (Ta-da!) at the end. Use visual cues such as footsteps, hand prints, small foam letters and bean bags to "tell" them where to put their hands or feet. Place two floor beams by each other. Have the child's hands on one and feet on the other. Move laterally down the beams. (Call this spider walks.) Use descriptive language and catchy names often, but always teach the proper gymnastics name too.

Stations



Creating different stations or challenges at the beam area is easy with the use of props. A "station" is an area where students can go and work by themselves on a task that is basically self-explanatory. Successful preschool classes are based on children learning through instruction and self-discovery.

Have a station where the children exercise. They can place their hands on the beam in a crab position and do tricep

push-ups. The children can place their hands on the beam and stretch out to a push-up position with their feet on the floor and move laterally down the beam (sidewinder push-up). If it's an older boys' class, have them put their feet on the beam, stretch out in a push-up position with their hands on the floor and do decline push-ups.

Have stations where the students can work on hand-eye coordination activities like throwing balls to other children while they're each on a floor beam. Have them roll a ball, football or exercise wheel down the beam. Put photo cards or pictures on the beams to step over that goes with a special theme for that day. Have a cone on each side of the beam with a rope in the cones to create a barrier to step over, etc. Have plastic bowling pins next to the beams to knock over for plié walks and to develop foot-eye coordination. A station utilizing the concept of crossing the mid-line of the body can be created by putting cones alongside the low beam. Put foam balls on the top of the cones. The task is to pickup the balls, cross their arms, balance, and put the balls on the other cones.

Put the beam over the pit to create a crocodile pit and then use bubbles to help the kids jump off into the pit. Have a station where the students put their hands on the beam and their feet on the floor and they work on handstands, handstand snapdowns, and cartwheels. Use a beam or oversplitting for the older children as a waiting station. Use the plank, ladder, and floor beams to connect the high beams in patterns. Have the low beams in a square and children all spread out two to a beam. The teacher in the middle can review poses, positions, and various walks. In Parent and Tot classes, Mom can hold the child's feet and place a hand under the child's tummy to do wheelbarrow down the beam. You can put a trapezoid piece across a floor beam and use it as a surfing station

Other Activities

Using props such as jump ropes, balls, scarves, lummi sticks, hoops, and ribbons can make the class easy for the coach and fun for the student. Children frequently feel more confident on the beam if they have something to hold. Here are some props and ideas for their use:

Hoops

1. Place them lengthwise tucked snugly under the medium beam. The students can use this as an "in and out" station.
2. Place them snugly under the medium beam facing the end of the beam and create a tunnel to get back in line.
3. Slide a hoop under the floor beam and let the student hold the hoop (steering wheel) and drive down the beam. Children can just hold the hoops in their hands and drive their car, also.
4. Use the hoop as a jump rope.
5. Roll it alongside the beam as the student does various walks and motor skills.
6. Place the hoop over head and "flutter" or overhead and twist for helicopter.
7. Hold the hoop with both hands and move like a figure 8 as the child does walks down the beam.

Jump Ropes (cloth pieces of clothesline)

1. Hold the rope at various heights (overhead, shoulder height, low) and do leaps, poses, walks, turns, and motor skills.
2. Use as a jump rope.
3. Make figures in the air as child walks down the beam.
4. Put the rope around the child's waist. Cross the rope and have a teacher on each side and pull creating a turn. (spider web)
5. Place the rope on the floor and use as a beam.

Rhythmic Ribbons and Scarves (Alternative: crepe paper streamers)

Keep the ribbons short so that they don't become tangled. Have the children move down the beam doing various poses, walks, turns, and motor skills while they make flowing arm movements with the ribbon in their right hand, then left hand.

Lummi Sticks, Foam Shapes, Bean Bags

This is a great "child-directed" lesson. Give each child a piece of equipment. Ask them to participate by suggesting out loud some ideas about what they can do with these pieces of equipment while they move down the beam. Call on each child to encourage participation.

Balls and Balloons

These activities are limited to the floor beams only. On the high beam the child tends to "walk" right off the beam following their ball or balloon- Oops!

1. Bounce them on the side while moving down beam.
2. Hold at various levels while doing movements on the beam.
3. Throw, roll, or bounce a ball to partner while standing on another floor beam.
4. Roll the ball down the beam.
5. Do rhythmic movements with the ball in hand while moving down the beam.

Games

All children love to play games. Here are a few for beam:

1. **Hokey-Pokey** - Bring a tape player over to the beam area with the music playing. Arrange the floor beams so that all children face the same way (towards the instructor). Have the instructor lead and do the song while the kids are on the beam. This works balance, directionality, turning, and movement to music.

2. **Simon-Says** - As a way to review poses, positions, turns and walks, play this familiar game while all the children are on the floor beams. No losers, though, the "losers" just go to another beam.
3. **Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes** - This familiar song can be sung while the kids walk down the beam. They can say, "head, shoulder, knees and toes, knees and toes, knees and toes, head, shoulders, knees and toes" while they're touching the correct body parts and walking down the beam. At the end of the song and the end of the beam they can say "all turn around." Then they're ready to go down the beam again.
4. **Macarena** - Spread the kids out and have them do this popular dance. Have a wedge of cheese mat (incline) at the end of the beam. When they finish the dance all dismount down the cheese wedge and then you have Macarena and Cheese! (Thanks Steve Greeley for that joke!)
5. **Vegetable Soup** - Lay small foam cut outs of vegetables on the beam. As you move down the beam with various walks, pick up the vegetables to the end of the beam and then you have vegetable soup!

Balance beam for preschoolers can be fun for them and a treat for the instructors with just a little preparation and planning in the lesson plans. Use these ideas- good luck!

Patti Komai's Bio

Patti Komai has owned and operated Patti's All-American Gymnastics in Dyer, Ind., since 1969 where she offers gymnastics, dance, and swimming. Patti began speaking at national seminars in 1981 on preschool and school-age gymnastics and the business of owning a gymnastics school. In 1986 Patti began putting her speeches on videotape and has since produced more than 60 instructional videotapes for instructors and owners. Presently she has written and sells yearly lesson plans for preschool, school-age gymnastics, and preschool lesson plans that can be used for a preschool dance program within your gym. Patti has written over 50 articles on the gymnastics business. In 1995 Patti was selected by USA Gymnastics to be a member of the committee that created the KAT preschool gymnastics certification program and so-authored the KAT workbook. Her products can be found at www.tumblebear.com or call (219) 865-2274 for a recent catalog.