

Teachers Link Juggling to Improved Academic Skills

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Although they admit to a lack of scientific data supporting their observations, several teachers and administrators recently told Education World that they've seen students' schoolwork improve after the kids learned to juggle. Improvements in concentration, eye-hand coordination, fine motor skills, reading, and behavior are just some of the benefits of juggling cited by educators. Included: Tips on using juggling in the classroom.



Mention juggling in schools, and most people probably think of balancing tasks and commitments, not of tossing balls and scarves into the air. Some school districts, however, have found that teaching students to juggle real objects improves not only their coordination but their academic performance and behavior as well. In fact, several teachers recently told Education World, juggling increases students' ability to concentrate, enhances their eye-hand coordination, and builds self-confidence.



Fifth graders Brittany, 11, (left) and Jeremy, 11 (right) at Nowlin Elementary School in Blue Springs, Missouri, show off their juggling skills. Students juggle in physical classes and in after-school juggling and circus skills classes.

"They don't just perform better, they have a desire to perform better," says Debbie Curtis of students who participate in her school's juggling club. Curtis, the principal of Nowlin Elementary School in Blue Springs, Missouri, added, "They seem to try harder in class and have fewer discipline problems."

JUGGLING BREAKS

At Nowlin, students learn to juggle in kindergarten during physical education classes; they practice during classroom juggling breaks. Students in grades three through five are eligible to join the juggling and circus skills clubs.

Greg Goodman, the school's physical education teacher and advisor for the circus skills and juggling clubs, says he started the juggling program seven years ago to appeal to children not interested in team sports. Goodman explains that the kids start by juggling scarves, then move on to such "stuff" as

(Photo courtesy of Nowlin Elementary School)

beanbags, balls, small plungers, rubber chickens, and rubber fish. Some students in the circus skills class even learn to ride unicycles while juggling. The students perform at an annual assembly at their

school and at other schools as well.

Classroom teachers have reported seeing improvement in students' academic work and focus after they start juggling, Goodman tells Education World. "You look at how they use both sides of the brain [while juggling]," he says. "Juggling gives students a lot of confidence, and it's something they can practice without a coach."

Juggling also is good for developing eye-hand coordination and learning to store memories. "Kids learn the easy stuff and then move on," Goodman says. "They can do literally hundreds of thousands of [juggling] patterns with just three objects."

Students who juggle also get a physical workout. After wearing heart rate monitors to measure their exertion level while juggling, the students realized they had to be in good physical shape if they wanted to do complicated routines, according to Goodman.

THE WHOLE SCHOOL JUGGLES

Schools in Jacksonville, Florida, have experienced similar success with their juggling programs.

"The whole school juggles," says Alice Daugherty, a first-grade special education teacher at Alimacani Elementary School in Jacksonville, which has pre-K through fifth graders. "We use it to improve eye-hand coordination, concentration, and confidence."

Teachers at Alimacani are provided with a video about juggling, and students, who have about 15 to 20 minutes juggling time three days a week, start by juggling scarves, Daugherty says. She too has observed children's reading skills improve after kids learn to juggle. In fact, that was one reason for launching the program.

"We started a juggling program in 1994-1995 to help prepare the kids for reading," Jan Tipton, Alimacani's physical education teacher tells Education World. Some teachers observed, moreover, that children who had trouble learning to juggle also had trouble learning to read. "We find that if we give kids extra practice juggling, their reading improves as well. It's my way of helping in an academic area," Tipton notes.

Juggling also provides other benefits. "It levels the playing field. Some kids don't excel in other areas of athletics, but they *can* juggle well," Tipton says. Juggling is a good way for kids to burn off steam, adds third-grade teacher Catrina Perkins. Perkins, who is learning to juggle from some of her students, uses juggling to help students practice listening and following directions as well as build teamwork skills as they work on group routines.

First-grade teacher Ellen Langley said that she has seen children apply the concentration they develop from learning to juggle to other activities, including academic activities. "They will pick up a book and read it right through," Langley says.

"I believe that when you learn to focus and pay attention to steps," adds third-grade teacher Terry Brock, "that helps with everything."

JUGGLING FOR SUCCESS

None of the teachers' reports of juggling's benefits are a surprise to David Finnigan. Finnigan has traveled to more than 2,000 U.S. schools to teach students, teachers, and parents how to juggle and to help schools start their own juggling programs. "I wish people would take seriously the effects of juggling that I see in kids," Finnigan tells Education World.

Finnigan, whose Juggling for Success program is based in Celebration, Florida, says that besides providing exercise, juggling builds academic and interpersonal skills. Learning to track objects with the eyes improves students' reading, he explains, and their mathematics and science skills benefit from learning to put objects in logical order. Children's self-esteem also gets a boost from learning a new skill -- one they can teach their parents at the family juggling nights Finnigan hosts.

Juggling employs multiple intelligences, and helping one another helps foster cooperative learning techniques in kids. "It's learning from the outside in," Finnigan says. "While they're learning to juggle, they're using the left side of the brain; when they're juggling, they're using the right side. After they've been juggling for a while, both sides of the brain are active."

For the children, of course, the benefits of juggling probably are not as important as the fun they're having. "The kids enjoy it so much," Goodman says. "They get positive attention for learning a new skill, and it's a good hook to get them involved in exercise."