

Teaching Tots

by Tiffany Mayes

Forget your gold medal and everything else you know about ice skating. Teaching Tots is a whole different ball game. Thirty minutes with a tot can seem like a lifetime, or you can turn it into enjoyable playtime. Keep in mind that ice is scary to tots. If you can distract them with games, toys, etc., you'll be surprised at what they can accomplish.

Sound effects will often endear you quickly with tots. Falls require a "ker-splat" or a "ker-plunk." Getting up earns a round of applause. Toes touching at the completion of each swizzle make kissing sounds. Back wiggles can be done to 1-2-cha-cha-cha-3-4-cha-cha-cha, etc. Remember your "toot-toot" or "chuga-chuga-choo-choo" sounds as you march down the railroad tracks. Take your clues from the tots in your class. Many of my ideas come from them.

Make sure you find a way to make falling fun. Tots to Olympians fall on ice, so they need to know that it's okay and not scary. Falling is just what comes before getting up.

Always suggest gloves or mittens for your tots. After all, you can't have fun if your hands are cold. Getting up requires them to touch the ice and they simply don't want to when it's cold. I usually keep an extra pair of gloves or mittens in my pocket for the tots who forget to remind their parents to bring their gloves.

Washable Markers

Washable markers are a great tool in classes for any age, but especially in Tot classes. Draw a line for the skaters to stand on instead of hanging on the wall. Tots love to get on the train, skate down the railroad tracks to the different train stations where they have to complete different tasks. Tots can dip under the trees, swizzle down the river, jump the waves, skate on one foot over the bridge, make sunshine arms, spin on the snail shell, or turn time around on the clock. Let your imagination run wild!

Make sure the markers you use are washable, because when the Tots fall, they will be wearing the colors.

Toys

Toys make a huge difference in teaching tot classes. The more, the better! Your goal is to get the tots moving and toys will really help you with this astronomical task. Tots are usually very happy to gather rubber ducks, foam fish, etc. They are basically playing fetch, but for some reason I've never been able to figure out, picking up plastic frogs is a completely different game than picking up plastic cookies to a four-year-old. Then you can get really advanced and ask them to pick up one duck and one frog. On the way to the pond they can "quack quack" or "rib-bit rib-bit."

Blowing bubbles is another great toy/game. Tots can chase after the bubbles and stomp on the ones that make it to the ice.

Check your local toy store, Target or educational/learning stores for bath toys or anything that is soft and waterproof. Educational/learning stores are also a great resource for small, colorful cones for tots to maneuver around, and for toy carts or baskets to wheel all the toys on and off the ice. These carts are made for playgrounds but work great on ice too. For a more economical option, look at

laundry carts or plastic baskets with handles.

Games

Games can involve music, toys or just silly stuff. Do a two-foot spin and finish with “Ta-Dah!” Count backwards for the rocket blast off. Draw a star on the ice for each skater and see who can erase their star the fastest. Turn basic marching into a marching band with plastic instruments.

There are always old standbys from the playground like “Cut the Cake.” Be creative and change the words to children’s classics. For example: “Here we go around the Mulberry Bush, Mulberry Bush, Mulberry Bush. Here we go around the Mulberry Bush, early in the morning.”

Skaters stop, release hands, spin around once and resume singing while demonstrating the activities that they are singing about: “This is the way we wiggle backwards; this is the way we swizzle forwards; this is the way we stretch up high; this is the way we dip down low; this is the way we jump up high, early in the morning.”

Music

Music can really enhance your games and activities. Lots of us have played “Ring-Around-the-Rosey,” but there are many more options. Here are just a few of the ones I’ve found fun to play:

- Marching
- If You’re Happy and You Know It
- Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes
- London Bridge Is Falling Down
- Follow the Leader
- Up, Down and Touch the Ground
- The Numbers Jump
- Doing the Penguin
- Hokey Pokey
- Limbo Rock
- In De Conga Line
- Itsy Bitsy Spider
- Calypso Caboose
- I’ve Been Working on the Railroad
- Down by the Station/Little Red Caboose
- Chicken Dance

Stickers and Other Rewards

I learned early in my teaching career that tots are easily bribed. I had a class of three- and four-year-olds that I couldn’t get to move more than five feet in 30 minutes. Children were crying; parents were complaining. An upside down bucket topped with Hershey Kisses saved me from those

glaring parents. Those same children who wouldn't move in week one went 35 feet in the blink of an eye in week two.

Bribery doesn't have to be candy. Tots respond well to stickers too. Everyone who makes it to the wall without falling gets a sticker. Make sure you're prepared to give everyone more than one chance. Everyone must go home with a sticker. In today's environment, parents will be telling you how you've created irreparable harm to their precious child's self-esteem if their child doesn't receive a sticker.

As the class progresses, you'll be able to bribe them with their favorite activity. It might be playing a particular game or making kissing sounds when their toes come together on their swizzles. Be creative; you'll find lots of ways to convince a four-year-old to perform to your heart's desire.

Take Home Fun

Keep your tots or any of your class students thinking about ice skating in a fun way when they're not skating. Coloring pages, mazes, dot-to-dot activities, crafts, etc. are all great ways to keep them thinking about skating when they're not at the rink. Spend some time looking at coloring books, etc. to find things to add to your collection, or purchase ISI's clip art designs and create your own. (Call the ISI Order Department at 972-735-8800, extension 213 to purchase clip art.) Kids love this kind of stuff.

You can give them on-ice practice assignments too. For instance, give them the assignment of practicing their one-foot glide until they can hold it to the count of five or 10. I reward this by giving high-fives for a count of five and double high-fives for a count of 10.

Parents: Help or Hindrance?

This is a sticky subject. Parents want to help their children. It's a natural instinct. However, parental involvement can be a huge distraction in your class. Often kids are fine, as long as they don't see their parents. The minute they see Mom, it's all over, and the crying begins. In cases like this, I usually suggest that the parent stay close by, so they can see, but out of their child's sight. We have several pillars in our rink, so I usually suggest that parents hide behind one of them. Scout out good locations in your facility for parents to hide from their toddlers.

Use the "out of sight, out of mind" principle for walkers on the ice too. Try to get tots to skate without them. When you've exhausted all your tricks, then give the walker a try, but get them off of it as quickly as possible. Often, once a tot uses a walker, it's difficult to wean them off the walker.

Conclusion

Teaching tots can be fun and rewarding. Arm yourself with ample teaching tools and let the tots lead the way.

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