

## **Why Gymnastics is Great**

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With Shawn Johnson's release of her new gymnastics video game, children may think they are experiencing the wonder of gymnastics from a two dimensional TV screen, but what does a gymnastics club have that the boxed video version lacks?

Of course there are the obvious answers. Real people. Real hands full of chalk. Real precarious landings. Real twists and flips. The brain wires for learning through whole body movement that video games cannot begin to replicate.

### **Flip on Focus**

Any time a child participates in activities requiring the movement of large muscles and the compression of joints, this is referred to as heavy work. Heavy work is a term used in the therapy world to describe the types of activities that help focus the brain. The number one prescription for children who need to improve focus control is exercise that includes heavy work activities. Dr. John Ratey, author of *Sparks*, calls exercise "Miracle-Gro" for the brain. Vaulting, hanging, flipping, climbing, and leaping are examples of phenomenal heavy work opportunities for children. Focusing with ease leads to learning with ease. Gymnastics not only improves focus but also builds the foundation for academic skills like writing and reading.

### **Hang Ten for Handwriting**

Observing children swinging on uneven bars seems as far away as one can get from observing a child trying to write a paragraph, but actually, the two require remarkably similar skills. For children to have good handwriting skills, they must have strong muscles that work together for a common cause. Mighty abs, back muscles, shoulder muscles, forearms, wrists, and fingers are essential for good writing skills. When children have poor upper body strength and weak core muscles, they have trouble sitting upright at a desk, holding a pencil, and writing legibly. Bar work strengthens all muscle groups responsible for writing with ease. A video game cannot begin to provide the strength and stability that a real workout on the bars provides.

### **Roll Into Reading**

Ever see a child do a forward roll using a video controller? It just can't be done. Without the actual motion of rolling, important brain connections are missed. These connections cannot be made without activating an important system that lies deep within the inner ear. This system is called the vestibular system (ves-tib-u-lar) and is the Olympic gold winner when it comes to brain development. Working in tandem with the brain, the vestibular system integrates auditory, visual, and tactile input. Specific types of movement common to gymnastics help the vestibular system develop properly. These include the back and forth movement in swinging, the rotational movement as in twisting, and the up and over movement used for rolling.

A fully functioning vestibular system leads to:

Awesome self-regulation skills  
Strong integration of the auditory and visual systems for reading  
Excellent coordination, balance, and motor skills  
Great sense of spatial and body awareness

Children who struggle with ADHD, developmental delays, reading failure, or sensory processing issues benefit enormously from participation in gymnastics, preferably non-competitive initially.

The next time you watch children doing somersaults, remember what amazing neural connections are going on inside their developing brains. Connections are being made at a rapid fire pace providing the foundation for academic, behavioral, and emotional success.

### **Rolling as an Advantage**

One might think of rolling as something done only while performing skills at a gymnastics club, but rolling is a life skill! It's not a coincidence that one of the more famous lines consistently quoted in every day language is, "Roll with the punches." When life hands us our ups and downs, having learned how to roll, literally and metaphorically, is an essential skill that helps us stand on our feet after taking a tumble.

H. Stephen Glenn, inspirational author and speaker, struggled in school with dyslexia and ADHD. All his teachers said that he wouldn't amount to much, with the exception of one. Insightful Mrs. Hardy, Stephen's fourth grade teacher, said to him, "You will always be a round peg in a square hole, so your responsibility is to organize things so rolling is an advantage."

Real life, not the video version, requires us to roll with the punches and learn how to land on our own two feet. Let the lessons begin inside your neighborhood gymnastics club!

Go to [www.usa-gymnastics.org](http://www.usa-gymnastics.org) and scroll down to find a gymnastics club near you. For information on ways to add academic zip to gymnastics classes, visit [www.schoolmoves.com](http://www.schoolmoves.com).