

Learning to Juggle - the basic steps

All AWS students in grades 3 and up have already had instruction in the following progression and skill-building tips. It is vital that each step be completed to automaticity before moving ahead. In other words, until the learner can do that step with ease and repeatability - perhaps even talking a bit or looking a bit wider than a narrow focus only on the balls.

Encourage: even step 1 IS juggling. So when student is good at step 1, he/she “has learned to juggle!”

You will need: 3 tennis balls, or 3 socks tightly rolled up with a golf ball or similar weight inside. And an invisible brick wall.

1. Stand in good balance. Begin with 1 ball and one hand. Toss ball up from just about waist height, about 6 inches out from side, up to eye height. This is the best height for all steps below. Catch and repeat until you can do this very easily and with uniform height - until you don't need to reach out of position or take a step to make your catches.

2. Repeat step 1 with the other (non-dominant) hand.

3. One ball, both hands. Begin tossing up and catching from side to side. Reminder: the toss should initiate from about waist height, about 6 inches out from side, center its apex in front of forehead, and be caught symmetrically on the other side with the hand not needing to reach far out, catch near the centerline, or with a step to save the catch. Continue

Troubleshooting: If the catching hand is always reaching in toward the middle, i.e., not in a symmetrical position, this is where the invisible brick wall comes in - pretend there is a wall from the floor up to about belly height that the ball needs to go over. Mastery of a symmetrical toss-catch at this step will save a LOT of frustration with the rest.

4. Two balls, both hands, only two toss-catches. Initiating with the dominant hand each time, toss the first ball as above; toss the second ball when the first ball reaches its apex. Hint: the spot in the air where the first ball stops rising and begins to descend is the target for the second ball (which will not collide because the first ball has already moved on).

Troubleshooting: this is a good point in the progression to work to have the tosses be at least 50% be from the wrist, i.e., not with stiff “dinosaur arms”.

5. Now the fun begins. Three balls, three tosses, two catches and a drop. The transition to three balls is a big one. To reduce frustration and avoid creating muscle memory for poor method, you are going to not worry about catching the third ball. Thus, it's the same as step 4 except adding one more toss, but letting the third ball drop. Work toward having the spot where it drops be about where it would need to be, i.e., it doesn't land five feet away. Begin with two balls in the dominant hand, one in the other. All of the above pointers about stance, hand position, symmetry, etc. still apply.

Troubleshooting: One of the most common bad habits that comes in at this step is “ice cream scooping” - the hands start to swoop in under the midline rather than stay out to the sides. Bring back the brick wall if needed. Also, it is okay for a while at this step to toss balls a little higher, in order to give oneself more time.

6. Three balls, three tosses, two catches and a toss to a partner. Instead of dropping the third ball, toss it to a partner who is standing straight in front of you, about 6 feet away.

7. Three balls, three tosses, three catches. Experience shows that when all of the above has reached automaticity - ease and repeatability with a relaxed gaze - it is best to spend some time mastering three toss/catches without needing to step out of position or do a lot of reaching out.

8. Three balls, four tosses and catches. For the same reason, practice stopping at four catches. I have found that once the rhythm of four is mastered, progression to steady juggling is then just a matter of time devoted to practice.

Good luck!