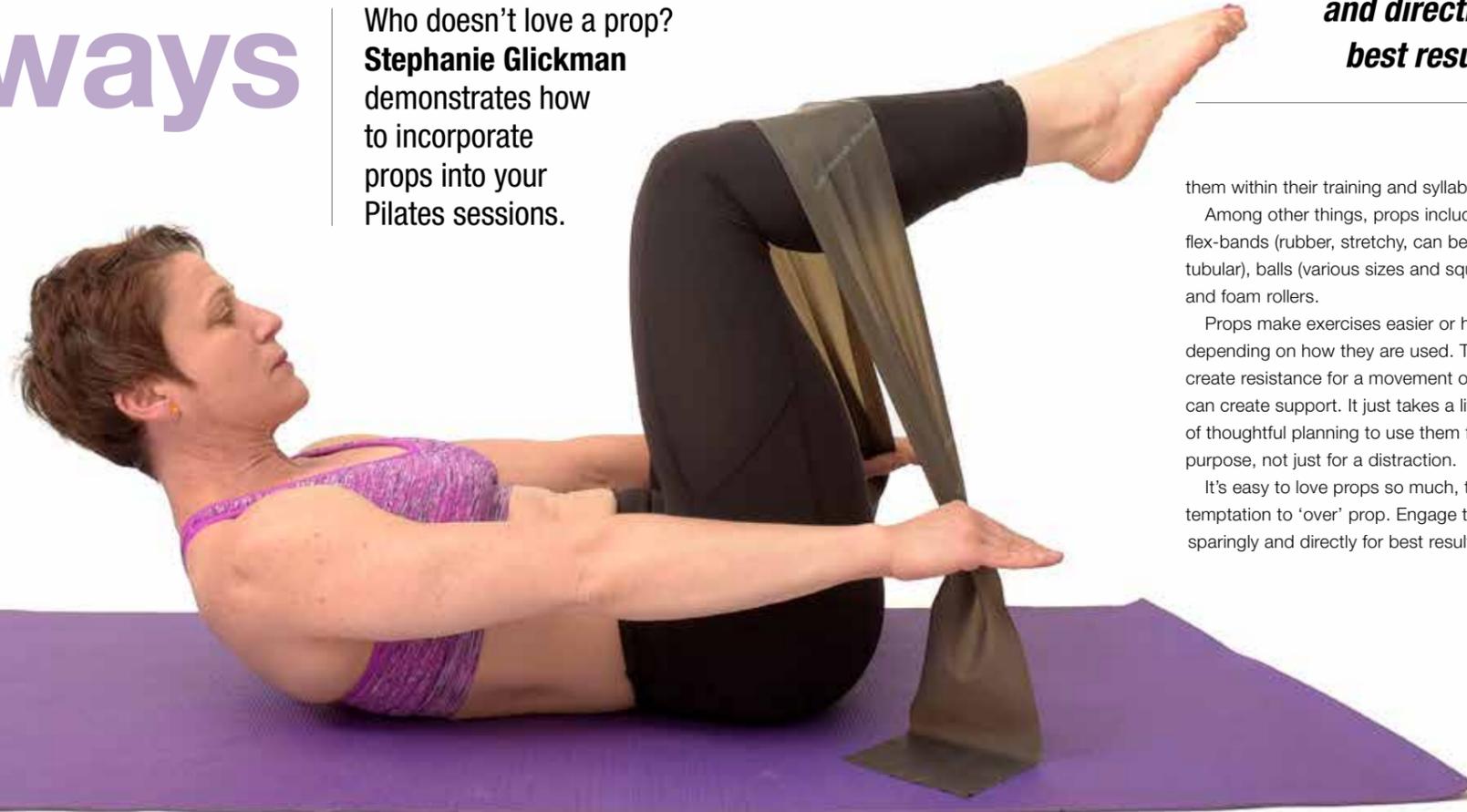


# Propping up Pilates sessions

## The abdominal curl

### 4 ways

Who doesn't love a prop?  
**Stephanie Glickman**  
 demonstrates how  
 to incorporate  
 props into your  
 Pilates sessions.



**“It's easy to love props so much, there's a temptation to 'over' prop. Engage them sparingly and directly for best results”**

them within their training and syllabi.

Among other things, props include flex-bands (rubber, stretchy, can be flat or tubular), balls (various sizes and squishiness) and foam rollers.

Props make exercises easier or harder, depending on how they are used. They can create resistance for a movement or they can create support. It just takes a little bit of thoughtful planning to use them for a purpose, not just for a distraction.

It's easy to love props so much, there's a temptation to 'over' prop. Engage them sparingly and directly for best results.

cervical vertebrae.

The skull and neck need to relax and 'come along for the ride', as the abdominal wall contracts to bring the shoulders off the mat. But this can be difficult for the trainer to cue and the client to embody.

Using the flex-band like a hammock gives feedback to drop the back of the head into the band. Keeping the head in contact with the band throughout the abdominal curl means the neck is gently flexing, not extending. This keeps the intended C shape of the movement and means the skull is not shearing forward on any cervical vertebrae.

And the cueing can be super simple:

“Keep contact between the back of the head and the band throughout the movement.”

“At the top of the curl, let the head drop a little heavier into the band, then curl up more from the wrinkles in the centre of your shirt.”



**The flex-band provides hammock-like support to help relax the head and neck as the abdominal wall contracts to bring the shoulders off the mat.**

The 'band as a hammock' option is especially great for beginner clients as it guides them into a comfortable shape. It's direct and easy to feel, making it an extremely effective external cue.

**Tensioning the shoulders and back to create more external load – resistance**

While the previous option is an assist, the band is just as versatile as a load. It can challenge resistance into the abdominal curl position as in the 100s example below.

Here the flex-band takes on a new role – to increase resistance for the shoulder extensors and, by extension, the upper back, hip flexors and core. The prop creates a spring-like sensation to press down into. When the arms begin to pump up and down in the 100s, the trunk and legs stay still. Keeping still is as much a challenge as pumping the arms. The whole body works more strongly with the flex-band than it would in the same positioning and movement without the prop.



**Adding the band into the 100s creates increased work for the shoulder extensors and, by extension, the rest of the body that must hold isometrically as the arms pump up and down.**

The flex-band 100s is a great option for more intermediate or experienced clients who want that extra challenge of co-ordination and/or extra load. For those who complain about their necks, it can also be done with the head down, which will focus on the shoulder work without overloading the cervical spine.

**P**rops spice up workouts, keep clients engaged and are super versatile. Props can make an exercise easier or harder, depending on how they are used. They can create resistance or support – such is their beauty!

**Joseph Pilates – a prop master**

Joseph Pilates was a prop master, although his inventions and exercise gadgets are usually described as equipment or apparatus. He developed them as a way to help his students achieve his famous system of movement called Contrology, which involved a series of 34 bodyweight exercises. Pilates recommended practising his Contrology sequence four times a week, for 20 minutes at a time, to achieve the

ideal physical fitness.

His equipment was both large furniture (like the universal reformer) and small gadgets (like the toe corrector). All the apparatus (still in circulation today) provide external feedback to help students achieve the challenging mat exercises more easily. They have springs, poles and platforms to push or pull against to assist in creating a particular shape of the spine and limbs. Sometimes they support the load of the body. Sometimes they challenge balance or stability.

Today, classical Pilates studios still use the Contrology equipment and props. Specially made by companies devoted to Pilates' original designs, this apparatus is wonderful, but also bespoke and not always easily

available. It's also too large to transport to a gym or a group class. But, luckily, there are accessible and affordable contemporary options for props that also provide the external cueing and feedback of studio Pilates equipment. Incorporating these options into sessions can add spice and challenge to workouts, transforming a client experience from good to great.

**Contemporary props offer many possibilities**

While contemporary props are not original Pilates creations, they are widely accepted and used across both Pilates and fitness training. They can easily be found in gyms, physiotherapy clinics and sports shops. Many contemporary Pilates schools use

Use the same prop for different purposes, depending on clients' needs. Or use one exercise but prop it different ways to achieve different outcomes.

**The abdominal curl – so many options!**

Let's take a look at propped variations of the abdominal curl – also called the sit-up, chest lift, abdominal prep and good ole' crunch. Each variation has a different, specific purpose.

**Releasing the neck and curling from the centre using the flex-band – assistance**

Clients often complain about their neck overworking in the abdominal curl. Leading with the chin to curl up shears the head forward, creating unnecessary strain on the

**Add a balance challenge while opening up the chest**

It's not the prettiest of props, but the foam roller works a treat for both releasing tight muscles and challenging balance. Doing the abdominal curl while lying on the roller is perfect for those with tight pectorals and shoulders, as the starting position allows the scapulae to slightly retract around the prop, thus opening the collar area. The head and tailbone should both start on the roller.

Cue to drop the head back into the hands. (This is the same cue as releasing the head into the hammock-like band.) Then curl from the waist area. Collar area remains open and wide throughout. There is no need to hunch or round the shoulders. At the top of the movement, the eyeline skims over the knees.

Rollers are inherently wobbly, so there will be an extra balance factor here. Press feet firmly into the floor throughout.

To increase the balance challenge, do the exercise with the legs in tabletop – that is super hard! If that's just too impossible (which is likely), try with one leg in the tabletop position and the other on the floor. Then repeat with the opposite leg in the tabletop position.



**Performing the abdominal curl while lying on a foam roller will add both a balance challenge and an opening of the chest area.**

**Mobilise the thoracic spine by working in and out of spinal extension**

While the foam roller variation opposite begins to open the chest, it only brings the thoracic spine from the starting point of neutral into spinal flexion.

Using the overball, as in the example below, the thoracic spine begins not in neutral but in spinal extension. Thoracic extension is a notoriously difficult movement to achieve, which makes this variation especially delicious. The starting position passively places the thoracic spine into extension.

There is greater range of movement here than in all the other variations shown above, which is why it is such a great option for the tighter bodies that need extra assistance moving their spine through flexion and/or extension. It is especially nice for kyphotic clients who struggle to lie their heads and necks down flat when supine on the mat.

Because of the greater range of movement of the abdominal curl from this starting position, it is a more challenging option, strength-wise. But if the client can handle that extra effort, the slow, eccentric descent back over the ball really pays off in mobility gains.



**Draping around the overball to start the abdominal curl adds more range of movement for the exercise and is a great way to cultivate assisted mobility of the**

**“Subtle differences in propping and cueing exercises create real results for clients”**

**thoracic spine into and out of spinal extension. To mobilise further, add a spinal rotation at the top of the exercise, as in the picture below.**



**So many options – choose wisely!**

Look at the client in front of you and choose the variation that most suits them. While most exercises can be great for most people, it's the subtle differences in propping and cueing those exercises that create specificity and real results for clients. A few little tweaks in programming can make all the difference in the world. **fp**



**BIOGRAPHY ▶**

Stephanie Glickman has taught fitness for 20 years and Pilates since 2003. In 2006 she established Armature (Melbourne, Australia), a studio dedicated to Pilates and strength training. She is certified through Stott Pilates, Breathe Education, Pilates ITC, Polestar and the APMA, and regularly presents nationally. She is also a recreational Olympic weightlifter and the dance critic of the *Herald Sun*.



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