



Supporting your gymnasts through their teenage years

Advice for coaches

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Supporting your gymnasts through their teenage years

Advice for coaches

Gymnasts put a high level of trust in their coaches to guide them through challenges. As a coach, you play a pivotal role in supporting girls to stay in gymnastics through and beyond their teenage years. By understanding the barriers to continued participation and proactively addressing these, you can help them to stay and thrive. Feeling understood, respected and supported by their coaches will help them to continue to enjoy gymnastics for years to come.

Reframe progression and give girls moments of pride

Gymnasts are highly motivated by unlocking new skills. Pride and feelings of self-worth are closely linked to this, with girls feeling they are only progressing if they're improving. The concept of a skill ceiling is deeply embedded, with girls feeling limited by the belief that progress ends at a certain age. Coaches can help to challenge this by reframing progression through:

- **Focusing on other ways girls can succeed in gymnastics alongside skill development** and highlighting the value they bring to the wider club environment. This could include supporting teammates, mentoring younger gymnasts or building resilience as they work through an injury or the loss of a skill. For more ideas [see 'The Gymnast's Voice' research here](#).
- **Giving all girls opportunities to celebrate moments of pride** which aren't only linked to standing on a podium or mastering a new skill, emphasising a sense of belonging and feeling valued wherever they are in their journey with gymnastics.



Supporting girls through puberty

When girls reach puberty, they can experience a temporary drop in their physical ability and as a result, their confidence and enjoyment can suffer. For many girls, reaching puberty is seen as the beginning of the end of their gymnastics career. Coaches can support girls by:

1. Running team puberty

workshops for girls that challenge misconceptions and offer positive support. Challenge the notion that puberty marks an end to girls' progression, through educating gymnasts about what happens during puberty and how they can manage and adapt to changes to keep enjoying the sport they love.

2. Making sure younger girls have inspirational examples of older girls

and women who have continued in the sport. Consider asking older gymnasts to talk about their personal experiences of gymnastics during this stage with younger gymnasts.

3. Creating opportunities for younger and older girls and women to train or work together.

Normalise participation in gymnastics beyond puberty through making sure younger girls have role models to look up to.

4. Supporting girls to understand the changes in their bodies in the context of sport.

Signpost girls towards age-appropriate educational materials that they can access in their own time. See: [Tips and Tricks for Girls - Her Moves](#)

5. Focusing on finding joy in gymnastics and adapting to different needs

during this transitional time. Provide opportunities for girls to train in a different way, for example by focusing on the skills they are enjoying and giving them opportunities to learn and experience other disciplines.

6. Proactively offering a range of options when it comes to training kit choices,

as well as encouraging the use of appropriate and necessary kit such as sports bras. Girls might feel more self-conscious during puberty when wearing clothing that is tight or with little coverage.

Offer a balanced approach to support teenage girls' changing lives and needs

As girls move into their teenage years their lives become busier, particularly when it comes to balancing sport with school, developing friendships and other hobbies. They may start to disengage with gymnastics even if they still enjoy it, because the environment is not working for them in the context of their life stage. Coaches can support gymnasts to stay by:

- **Proactively trying to meet the needs of gymnasts during this time**, for example by creating a quiet space in the gym to do homework before or after training.
- **Embracing the development of an identity and sense of self outside of gymnastics**, which can help to strengthen long term engagement. Girls might be keen to try out new hobbies and sports as they develop their sense of identity, and in this context a demanding 'all or nothing' attitude to gymnastics can lead to them simply leaving the sport.
- **Reinforcing the benefits of continuing in gymnastics** like enjoying movement, having fun with friends and developing teamwork and leadership skills by providing lots of opportunities to experience these.
- **Enabling girls to balance their participation with other aspects of their lives**, supporting them to keep enjoying the benefits of gymnastics as they grow up.

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Create a strong culture of belonging for all gymnasts

Having fun with friends and having strong support networks are key motivators for girls taking part in gymnastics. During their teenage years, friends are especially important to girls' development, as they strive to become more independent and discover their identities. However, it is important that all girls, whether on the recreational or competitive pathway in gymnastics, feel valued and have a strong sense of belonging in the sport. Coaches can help all gymnasts to feel included and valued together by:

- **Providing opportunities for girls to mix**, for example through integrated training sessions or organising social activities which welcome all gymnasts together and enable friendships to flourish.
- **Seeking opinions and ideas from all girls across your club**, taking their input into consideration when it comes to key decisions, to make sure they feel that their opinions are being heard and responded to.
- **Taking the time to get to know all girls as people as well as gymnasts** to help them feel valued for the unique contribution they bring as individuals regardless of their level in the sport.

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