



THE GYMNAST'S VOICE

HARNESSING
OPPORTUNITIES TO
RETAIN TEENAGE GIRLS
IN GYMNASTICS



FOREWORD

Gymnastics presents a unique and powerful opportunity to support girls to develop a strong love of sport and other physical activity at a young age and Gymnastics Ireland is committed to developing and delivering positive experiences and opportunities for all involved in gymnastics, including our teenage girls. In 2022, thanks to a funding investment from the Sport Ireland Women in Sport programme, Gymnastics Ireland, working in partnership with Women in Sport UK, engaged in the largest member-based piece of research to date - “Keeping Teenage Girls in Gymnastics”, with the voice of our teenage gymnasts at the heart of the initiative. This research report clearly outlines what drives teenage girls’ engagement and enjoyment in gymnastics and highlights areas that can be developed to enhance progression and create more moments of pride for all gymnasts and to build an inclusive, and positive body image culture in our member clubs and the sport of gymnastics in Ireland to extend girls’ gymnastics journey beyond the teenage years. Our gymnasts have shared their voice, and we are listening. This research will underpin the development of future gymnastics programmes, policies and club support in relation to the retention of teenage girls in our sport. This year-long research project involved a large cohort of motivated participants which included our member clubs, their gymnasts, and parents. We would like to express our thanks and gratitude to the clubs for their time, effort and willingness to take part; to the teenage gymnasts themselves - their investment, dedication and commitment to their sport is inspiring and we are forever grateful for their insights; and of course, a special thanks to the gymnasts parents who gave up their time to be part of this research and who also continue to support their daughters journeys through gymnastics. Finally, thanks to the team at Women in Sport UK. Their passion and commitment to this project was inspiring and reassured us that we were heading in the right direction with our plans and ideas for retaining teenage girls in our sport.



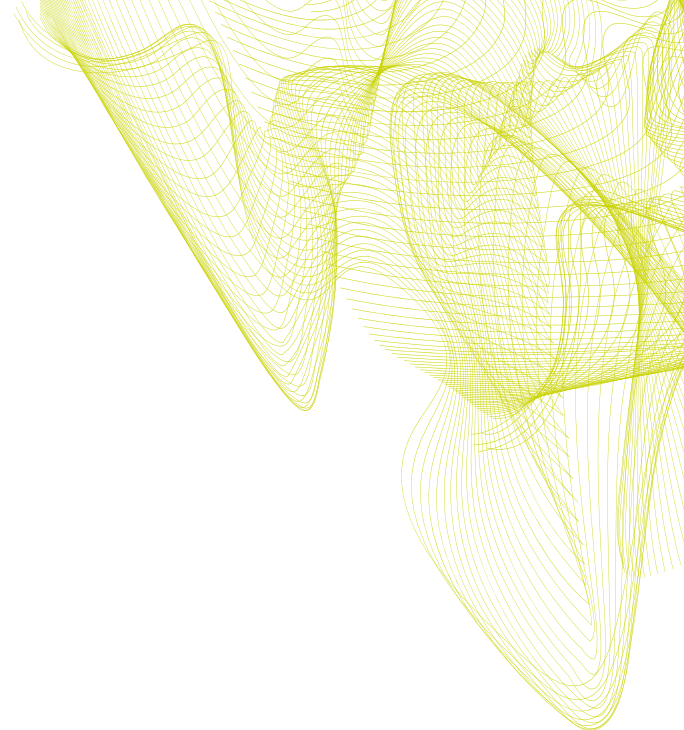
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INTRODUCTION

Why is it important to engage and retain teenage girls in sport?

The most recent evidence from the Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study (2018)¹ suggests that very few girls are meeting the Republic of Ireland's National Physical Activity Guidelines for children of at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day. This should include muscle strengthening, flexibility, and bone-strengthening exercises at least 3 times a week. Only 13% of primary aged girls are sufficiently active and this declines to 7% of girls in the teenage years (age 14-15), and only 5% by age 16-20. The teenage years are a challenging life-stage to engage and retain girls in sport but a critical one that we must get right, as this is when long-term attitudes, habits and behaviours are formed to being active. The vast majority of girls in Ireland are missing out on the lifelong physical, mental and wellbeing benefits that an active lifestyle provides, and this has to change.

Understanding what girls value in their wider lives can help us make sport more relevant and meaningful.

In 2020-2021 Sport Ireland commissioned Women in Sport to carry out research to explore girls' relationships with sport and physical activity in Ireland. Adolescent Girls Get Active² was released, a comprehensive research report into the wider lives and motivations of teenage girls in Ireland, and their attitudes to being active and the barriers that prevent engagement. The 5 anchors of what really matters to teenage girls from that research underpins this report on the specific sport of gymnastics. We strongly advise those working with teenage gymnasts to review the anchors for a deeper understanding of girls' lives and values to ensure that what is offered in gymnastics is truly relevant and meaningful for them. This report builds on Adolescent Girls Get Active and brings new understanding around the specific needs of teenage girls who are currently engaged in sport and ideas to retain them which draw on the 5 anchors.

¹ Sport Ireland (2018) The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study: CSPPA 2018

² Sport Ireland (2021) Adolescent Girls Get Active



5 ANCHORS

WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN TEENAGE GIRLS' LIVES?



1

SUPPORT NETWORK

A sense of place in the world.



2

INDEPENDENCE & OPPORTUNITY

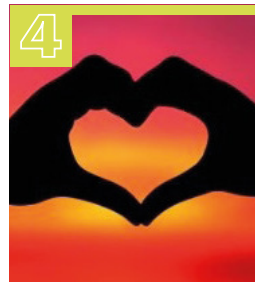
Desire to grow up and find themselves.



3

SOCIALLY CONNECTED

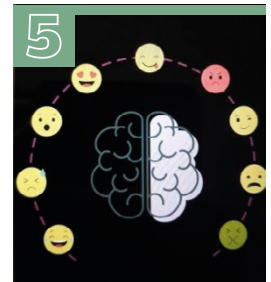
Connection, validation and inspiration.



4

MOMENTS OF PRIDE

Fuelling confidence and self-worth.



5

KEEPING ON TOP OF IT ALL

Managing teenage pressures.

Original Framework - Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls (Women in Sport, 2019)

The opportunity for gymnastics

Gymnastics is a popular activity for girls in Ireland and is one of the few sports that attracts more female participation than males. Participation has increased substantially in recent years with clubs over-subscribed with long waiting lists. Gymnastics offers a wealth of physical, mental and social benefits for girls and can support healthy development during adolescence. Girls show interest in gymnastics and enjoy it from a young age (primary years) and as such, it offers a powerful opportunity to give girls the best possible start point and influence their love of physical activity, with potentially far-reaching consequences on activity levels in adolescence and throughout the lifespan.

STRENGTHS OF GYMNASTICS TO SUPPORT A LIFE-LING LOVE OF ACTIVITY FOR GIRLS

- Attracts more female participation than males
- Engages girls at a young age - that critical under 11 start point
- Boys are not naturally seen as better than girls
- Not just one sport - includes a variety of different types of skills and disciplines
- Encourages healthy risk-taking and builds resilience in a safe environment
- Provides great foundational skills for other sports

“As a young girl I used to always bend and twist and I loved bouncing and jumping and showing my mam new tricks so she signed me up for gymnastics.”

(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 12)

“I have grown up with it and love it in my life.”

(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 16)

Research Aims

Despite these strengths and girls entering the sport from a young age, Gymnastics Ireland have identified a significant drop off in participation in the teenage years, with girls starting to gradually disengage from ages 11-12 and worsening with age. Gymnastics Ireland commissioned Women in Sport to carry out research to explore teenage girls' experiences of gymnastics to:

1. RETAIN

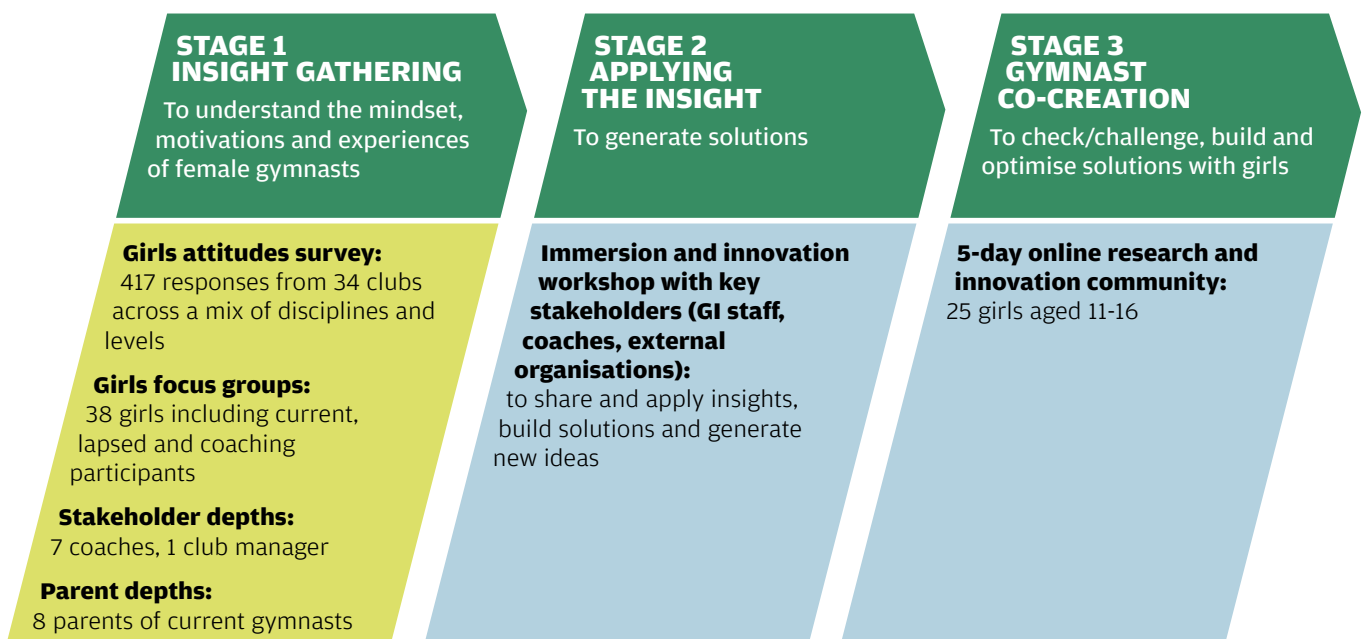
Deeply understand why girls drop out of gymnastics during their teenage years and seek solutions as to how Gymnastics Ireland can engage and retain them for longer.

2. OPTIMISE & EXPAND

Evaluate existing participation programmes and innovate potential new initiatives that could appeal to a broader teenage audience, whilst also retaining those currently engaged.

Methodology

A mixed-method, iterative methodology was used to explore girls' experiences of gymnastics and included the perspective of coaches and parents as key influencers in their gymnastics journey. We engaged over 450 girls aged 10-18 from a variety of gymnastic disciplines and abilities, representing 34 gymnastics clubs across the Republic of Ireland. The research was conducted between March - September 2022.



Understanding the target group

It is important to recognise that teenage girls are not a homogenous group, especially when it comes to sport and physical activity. Girls have different attitudes, needs and motivations and importantly, different lived experiences of sport and physical activity. There is a broad spectrum in their levels of engagement³, ranging from the completely disengaged, to those who previously enjoyed sport but have fallen out of love with it in their transition to teenage years (figure 2). Initiatives have been developed to enhance the activity levels of ‘non-sporty’ girls in Ireland, but it is equally important to understand the experiences of ‘sporty’ girls who are currently engaged, to guard against gradual disengagement. Understanding their changing needs and motivations as they move through the challenging teenage years is critical to their continued love and enjoyment of sport and physical activity. This research therefore focuses predominantly on the lived experiences of current female gymnasts, which includes passionate participants as well as serious competitors on our spectrum of engagement⁴, and the factors that influence gradual disengagement.



³ Women in Sport (2019) Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls: Building Strong Foundations for their Futures

⁴ Within this report, we use language currently used within gymnastics to distinguish between girls who are recreational participants and girls who are competitive and on Gymnastics Ireland’s competitive pathway.

1. WHAT MOTIVATES AND DRIVES TEENAGE GIRLS' ENJOYMENT IN GYMNASTICS?

In this section we provide insight into the factors that drive girls' engagement and enjoyment in gymnastics and explore their intentions to continue participating in the sport. Where relevant, we offer insight into key differences in girls' experiences, specifically around age and participation pathway (recreational and competitive gymnasts) to encourage deeper consideration of these girls' needs.



1.1 Fun, friendship, improving skills and challenge drive girls' enjoyment

Learning and mastering new skills gives girls moments of pride that fuel confidence and self-worth.

Learning new skills and techniques is by far the most enjoyable aspect of being a gymnast for girls. Gymnastics is a highly technical sport that enables girls to challenge themselves physically and mentally and take risks, but within a safe and supportive environment. Discovering the possibilities of their ability gives girls a strong sense of fun, freedom and expression that they often don't get the opportunity to experience elsewhere in their lives. As such, they gain a great deal of confidence, pride and accomplishment from mastering new skills - 77% of girls said taking part in gymnastics makes them feel good about themselves and their ability.

"I love bars, it feels like you are flying." (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 15)

"The thing that brings me back to gym is learning new skills, improving, winning, the feeling when you do a skill and people say WOW in amazement, it's a great feeling." (COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 12)

TOP 3 THINGS GIRLS ENJOY IN GYMNASTICS:



Improving strength and flexibility gives girls the foundations to improve skills and feel mentally and physically strong.

Girls improve their strength and flexibility through physical conditioning, and whilst some don't enjoy this aspect of the sport as much as others (some girls feel it can be painful, repetitive, boring), girls recognise that it is fundamental to improve skills and progress in the sport. Feeling physically strong also helps girls to feel mentally strong. Over time, girls develop a good awareness of their physical capability and this understanding of their body gives them the mental strength and courage to challenge themselves. Girls also appreciate that the physical and mental strength gained through gymnastics supports other sports and activities they participate in.

"I think every exhausting and painful moment is worth it because the pleasure of achieving a new skill can absolutely make up for that pain and exhaustion!!" (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 14)

"I like how strong it makes me feel, I love the feel of the freedom." (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 16)

"Thanks to gymnastics I feel flexible, strong and brave to do other sports as well." (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, AGE 11)

Gymnastics facilitates long-term supportive friendships.

Girls need and value a strong support network in their lives, and trusted relationships with others give girls a sense of place and identity within the wider world. During adolescence, friends are especially important to girls' development, as they strive to become more independent from family and discover their own identities with peers. As most girls join gymnastics in their primary years, they develop strong bonds with one another over time and can gain a strong sense of belonging, often describing their club as a second home or family. Although gymnastics is an individual sport, girls enjoy having fun with friends and value others who celebrate, support and encourage them through tough times. Friendship is therefore a strong factor that sustains their commitment and keeps them coming back to gymnastics, if well managed by clubs.

"I have realised some of my closet friends are in gymnastics and I have learnt to overcome fears and struggles I used to have when I was younger."

(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 15)

"Not only do I get to learn new skills, challenge myself, improve my strength and flexibility, I also get to do all of that with my friends."

(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 15)

QUALITIES OF A GOOD FRIEND IN GYMNASTICS - AS EXPRESSED BY OUR GYMNASTS...



1.2 Girls value encouraging and supportive coaches who help them progress

Most girls have strong, positive relationships with their coaches. Given how important progression is, girls value coaches who challenge and support them to learn new skills and continuously improve. When girls lack this, they can become easily frustrated and demotivated. Trust and communication between gymnast and coach is especially important due to the high-risk nature of skills. A high proportion of girls said they would feel fairly/very comfortable approaching their coach if they had concerns about a new skill or technique (85%), and about any injuries that could affect their participation (87%). Girls put a great deal of faith and trust in their coaches and want to do their very best for them.

"I trust to my coach that they will teach me the right technique and will encourage me step by step." (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 11)

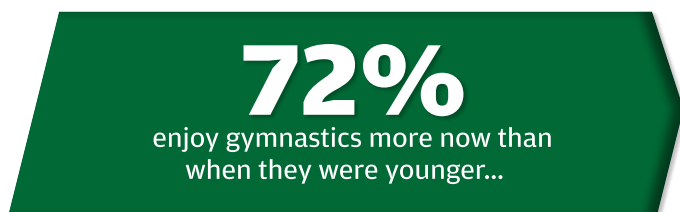
“They make you feel safe. They communicate with us... communication’s the most important thing.” (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 13)

“It’s not really like a superior kind of... not like a teacher at school. It’s more just like they become second mums to you when you’ve known them for so long. It’s really close-knit. That’s why I enjoy it. That’s why I enjoy it. That’s why I’m still there.” (JUNIOR COACH, 18)

Girls spend a great deal of time in the training environment, so it is important that coaches facilitate meaningful sessions that enable all girls to enjoy themselves with friends and stay motivated. Overall, three quarters of girls (76%) feel training sessions are frequently fun and enjoyable but recreational gymnasts were much more likely to agree with this (81%) than competitive gymnasts (66%). Enjoyment in training also decreases with age, from 80% of younger girls (10-11yrs) to 66% of older girls (15-18yrs).

1.3 Many girls enjoy gymnastics more now than when they started but fewer have strong intentions to continue in the sport

With this understanding of what drives girls’ engagement, it is positive to see that a high proportion of current gymnasts (72%) enjoy the sport a little/a lot more now than when they started. Enjoyment is highest amongst younger girls (10-11yrs) but declines with age with 59% of older girls enjoying the sport more now (15-18yrs).



Despite increased enjoyment for many, 63% of girls have seen their friends drop out of gymnastics recently.

This was evident for all age groups with drop out observed more by older girls (15-18yrs), as well as amongst competitive gymnasts. Coaches felt that competitive gymnasts tended to drop out at a later age (around 15), compared to recreational girls who drop out younger (12-13). Girls cited practical reasons such as friends not wanting to commit as much time to the sport, too much school work, managing multiple sports, and the expense associated with gymnastics, as well as more psycho-social reasons, such as girls not feeling good enough/able to compete anymore, lack of progression, lack of friends their age and feeling self-conscious about their body and appearance. Only 52% of current gymnasts surveyed had a strong intention to continue with gymnastics over the next 2 years, and this was higher amongst younger girls (63% - 10-11yrs) than older girls (45% - 15-18yrs). This storm of factors described by girls can have a negative impact on enjoyment and contribute to gradual disengagement. We will explore these factors in more detail in the next section.



2. THE CHALLENGES TO RETAINING TEENAGE GIRLS IN GYMNASTICS

For many girls, gymnastics forms a strong part of their lives and identity and brings them a great deal of joy and happiness. However, as girls mature during adolescence and start to discover who they are, they inevitably start to question the value of gymnastics in their wider lives. To retain girls during this time it is important to understand their changing needs and ensure the sport grows with them and continues to give them what they're seeking. In this section we take a deeper look at the key factors that impact enjoyment and gradual disengagement. Before we do, two core themes that underpin some of the challenges to retaining teenage girls need to be highlighted.

Girls have a deep-rooted belief that gymnastics has a natural lifespan and a ceiling at which they can no longer improve, therefore progression is critical for girls.

The view that gymnastics has a short lifespan has been normalised and this puts increased pressure on girls to continuously improve. There are very few sports where the expectation is to get better and better and in such a short space of time. While increases in body size, hormones, and muscle strength can improve athletic performance in gymnastics, there may be a temporary decline in balance skills and body control during the adolescent growth spurt. As female gymnasts age, become taller and potentially lose flexibility for a time, they may not be able to perform skills they used to.⁵ However, it is also possible for girls to learn and master different types of skills that are more suitable to their post-puberty body and/or to take more time to learn and perfect skills. Since the early 1970's in Women's Artistic Gymnastics (WAG), the average age of 'peak ability' shifted early to mid-teens. This changed the perceived norm and the accepted way of thinking and culture in the gymnastics community. However, around the world coaches and gymnasts are now redefining this culture and understanding that they can continue into adulthood.

Now we are seeing more female gymnasts at an elite level reach their peak later in their careers often competing into their late 20's and early 30's. For example, WAG gymnasts Oksana Chusovitina (age 46) competing in Tokyo, Ellie Black (age 27) bronze medallist

⁵ Brown, K.A., Patel, D.R. and Darmawan, D. (2017) 'Participation in sports in relation to adolescent growth and development', *Translational Paediatrics*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 150-159.

on beam in the 2022 World Championships and Elisabeth Seitz (age 26), the current European champion on uneven bars. This is not restricted to WAG and women of various ages in adulthood are competing successfully in other disciplines such as trampolining, acrobatics, tumbling and rhythmic gymnastics.

Despite this, some within gymnastics do feel that a younger body makes for a better gymnast, and this can be reinforced by girls, coaches, parents, social media, and a lack of visible/older role models across the sport who aren't elite athletes. Girls should be able to participate in gymnastics for as long as they enjoy it but as girls age and feel they have, or are, reaching 'the ceiling' of their ability, they struggle to see how they can stay in the sport and, ultimately, rule themselves out. It is therefore important to consider how to expand girls' perceptions around the longevity of gymnastics and ensure there are suitable opportunities and pathways for progression within and beyond the teenage years.

The higher value placed on competitive gymnastics than participation for its own sake can impact girls' experiences.

Competition and competitiveness are deeply ingrained in the culture of sport and bring many positive benefits to a sport and its participants. Similarly, recreational participation is important for a sport's growth and its value for improving the health and wellbeing of wider society is well recognised. Gymnastics in Ireland has a greater proportion of recreational than competitive gymnasts, who often train in close quarters with one another in clubs. It can be an intensely physical, aesthetic and competitive sport where great value is placed on individual skill. Within this environment, it's important to consider how all girls are valued regardless of their ability and how to meet the needs and motivations of both competitive and recreational groups to keep teenage girls engaged in the sport.

2.1 Progression is a fundamental driver of enjoyment and confidence for all girls – we need to reframe what progress looks like and provide more opportunities to experience and celebrate it.

Girls link learning and progression to mastering physical skills, which can negatively impact confidence and enjoyment.

Girls generally define learning and progression as a sort of self-challenge that leads to mastering a new skill. Gymnastics is a very intense physical practice that constantly challenges girls; although this is largely positive, it means that girls do not often regard progress as being anything other than learning new physical skills. To a much lesser extent, some gymnasts do recognise progress as holding on to skills longer or improving on those skills, but this does not come with the same level of excitement and celebration as mastering new ones.

“I struggled with wanting to attend gymnastics when I couldn't get skills I was working on for ages.” (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 11)

“If we continue doing the same skills on floor, bars, beam and vault I will most likely stop because there is no point on continuing if I can't learn new skills and try new things.” (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 16)

Around 7 in 10 girls say there are lots of opportunities to learn new skills and progress (75%) and this was higher amongst competitive (82%) than recreational gymnasts (72%). Despite this, only 48% of girls feel they are frequently improving and becoming better gymnasts. This declines to just a third (33%) of older teenage girls (15-18yrs), who may feel they are nearing their peak ability. When girls lose skills, have mental blocks or struggle to master new ones, they don't feel they are progressing and their confidence and enjoyment suffer. It is important to also consider this from a coach's perspective. Some girls may have unrealistic expectations of their ability and want to push themselves more quickly than is safe and coaches have to manage girls' and parents' expectations carefully while helping girls maintain a sense of progression. Enabling girls to try different disciplines/skills such as trampolining has helped some coaches to do this.

What constitutes 'progress' and how it is valued therefore need reframing beyond purely physical skills, and the opportunities for progression need to be expanded to better support girls' personal growth as people as well as gymnasts. This would give girls more holistic goals to work towards and support continued engagement.



IDEAS

REFRAME PROGRESSION TO SUPPORT GIRLS' HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT AS GYMNASTS

WHAT WOULD GIRLS LIKE TO LEARN BEYOND PHYSICAL SKILLS?

How to be a good teammate and support others

How to be more confident in myself

How to build resilience through tough times

How to build the confidence of others, without needing to compete with them

How to keep my body healthy

How my body changes as I get older

How to lead/organise others

How to become a coach, judge or official

“Learning resilience because when things get hard for me, I usually just give up.”

(RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 15)

“I would like to learn more about how the body changes so that I would be able to find ways I can improve myself in gymnastics and not get injured a lot.”

(RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 16)



IDEAS

EXPANDING PROGRESSION: “GYMSTARS” OR “GYMTRACK”

An app (or equivalent such as record books) that allows all girls to set their own goals, and/or with coaches and friends, at the beginning of the year. Girls/coaches use the app to log and keep track of their personal achievements and behaviours and collect points/rewards when they tick things off.

GIRLS CAN COLLECT POINTS IN LOTS OF DIFFERENT CATEGORIES:

Attending leadership and coaching courses

Working with other groups and clubs - in any way at all!

Helping at events and volunteering at the club

Taking part in expedition challenges

KEY FEATURES:

Daily or weekly notifications to keep girls motivated

Girls/coaches can upload photos and videos to a memory board so girls can look back on their progress

Share pictures and videos in the Open Pinboard Area so friends can follow/cheer each other on

Girls can choose to give parents access to see how far they've come

Points = prizes! Rewards could include: free club gear/kit or discounts, join points with friends to go on trips, inviting an inspiring gymnast into the club to teach a class or give a talk

WHAT GIRLS THOUGHT OF THIS IDEA...

“It would help older girls to stay in gymnastics. I love the way that you can choose your own goals I think that would really help me.” (COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 11)

“I like the fact it encourages gymnasts to interact in a different way by volunteering and leading instead of just training.” (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 16)

“I like how it tracks your progress and learning in different fun ways! I love the way you can also try new things.” (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 14)

The ability to become a leader/coach at a young age is a real strength and opportunity to expand girls' sense of progression.

Providing opportunities to lead and support others can provide invaluable leadership and life skills and equip girls with the knowledge to better understand themselves and give back to the wider gymnastic community. Girls who had engaged with coaching grew in confidence, had a stronger sense of purpose and were motivated to stay in the sport for longer. They acted as great role models for younger girls who felt they could relate to them. Some clubs have recognised this and support girls to become ‘young leaders’ and transition to coaching courses/qualifications, but this was not offered consistently across

clubs. Some girls also did not see coaching or volunteering as a way to stay engaged in the long-term. There is an opportunity for Gymnastics Ireland to develop a strong and engaging leadership programme/pathway for teens and support clubs to implement it. This could also serve as a way for Gymnastics Ireland to connect more directly with teenage girls and build a pipeline of future leaders/coaches for the sport.

“Being a role model for the young leaders and younger gymnasts is something I’m proud of as I know I am looked up to and can pass on valuable skills and knowledge.” **(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 16)**

“If an older child is really looking to give up training, I’d try and encourage them to start coaching. I prefer coaching to training now and it has helped me grow as a person in so many ways.” **(RECREATIONAL GYMNAST AND COACH, 16)**

“For some of them, coaching just isn’t enough. They want to stay involved, but it’s not meeting their needs. I want to just be able to investigate it further and see what we can do as a club to maybe promote it.” **(COACH)**

Girls, parents and coaches want more accessible opportunities for girls to showcase their progress and achievements.

One of the main ways girls demonstrate their progress is through showcasing their skills and achievements. Gymnastics Ireland have developed pathways that culminate in annual competitions and events for girls of different abilities. Currently, competitive gymnasts move through a development pathway that enables them to compete at The National Series, a competitive events programme that covers numerous disciplines. Similarly, recreational girls can take part in national participation programmes such as The FLOOR and GymSTART, which are open to all levels of ability, ages and categories of Gymnastics Ireland membership.

Despite these events, over half of the gymnasts surveyed (56%) had only taken part in training in the last 12 months. Girls, parents and coaches expressed frustration that there aren’t enough accessible opportunities throughout the year for girls to participate in and showcase their achievements. This impacts girls in different ways.

- **Infrequency of events** – Girls spend a great deal of time in training working hard towards annual competitions/events. If they cannot attend for any reason such as injury, cancellation or extenuating circumstances it can be truly devastating. More frequent competitions/events, perhaps at a more local/regional level would give girls more to work towards and sustain motivation.
- **Competition/event nerves** – The build up to annual events can create a lot of nerves and anxiety for gymnasts. The fact that girls only have one shot to get it right creates a lot of pressure. If they fail to perform, this can affect their confidence and willingness to engage again. More opportunities to experience competitive and/or performance environments would benefit girls mentally as well as physically.

■ **Skill requirements in competitions** – In women’s artistic gymnastics, gymnasts must compete in all four disciplines (vault, bars, beam and floor exercise). Gymnasts who excel in some disciplines but less so in others are frustrated that they don’t get the opportunity to compete at all, despite having strengths in certain disciplines.

■ **Lack of opportunities in late teens** – Older teenage girls and their parents expressed frustration that there is little opportunity for them to engage in meaningful competition once they reach a certain age. Despite many events being open to all ages and abilities, older teenage girls are often few and far between within these. Girls also spoke of not being able to remain in clubs at a late age unless they competed in competitions.

■ **Location and cost** – Most annual competitions/events take place in the Sport Ireland National Indoor Arena in Dublin. Whilst girls enjoy these high-performance facilities and the spectacle of the events themselves, this can present cost and logistical barriers for parents and clubs travelling from all over Ireland.

To help girls maintain a sense of progression, some clubs have created activities and in-house competitions to support motivation and enjoyment. It is important to harness the good practice already taking place in clubs and share learnings with the wider gymnastics’ community.

“I like working with other clubs, you can do competition between a few clubs to help us get used to competition and ease the nerves on the big competitions.” (COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 14)

“Focus on just the areas you’re good at. I’m not the best at bars, I’d love to drop this and just do floor vault and beam, this will help me progress in the things I love and can get better at.” (COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 14)

“[For older girls] there’s no one else in the competition their age at their level. It totally demotivates them. They don’t want to continue then.” (COACH)

“When you’re at your senior, I feel like you just stay there. There’s not as many competitions.” (EX-GYMNAST, 16)

Gymnasts have different motivations and goals in gymnastics, but all girls need to feel they can progress in ways that work for them, and that they are valued for it.

It is important to recognise that girls have different motivations and levels of ambition that drive their engagement in gymnastics. These can also change over time and be influenced by the focus of their club. Young gymnasts are much more likely to dream big, with hopes of being an Olympian or competing for Ireland and push themselves much harder, whereas older girls tend to realise over time that it’s more important to enjoy themselves and have fun with friends, rather than being overly ambitious and potentially unhappy if they cannot reach lofty goals.

“When I first started my goal was to go to the Olympics, now it’s to keep up the sport even when I get a lot of homework... I don’t feel pressured to be good as I just want to have fun and enjoy the sport.” (COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 14)

Just under half of girls (45%) describe themselves as very competitive and wanting to take part at the highest level in gymnastics. Similarly, just under half (42%) say that although they enjoy competing, they prefer taking part more for fun. Only 12% don't enjoy competing at all. Girls, coaches and parents alike spoke of an underlying culture of some clubs valuing competition above participation and that more time and energy is placed on competitive gymnasts. This impacts competitive and recreational girls in different ways, one of which is how they perceive and engage with different opportunities and pathways.

COMPETITIVE MOTIVATIONS	RECREATIONAL GYMNASTS	COMPETITIVE GYMNASTS
I'm very competitive and want to take part at the highest level	32%	70%
I enjoy competition but prefer to take part more for fun!	50%	29%
I don't like competing and prefer to take part more for fun	17%	1%

When we look more closely at the motivations of **competitive gymnasts**, just under a third (29%) enjoy competing but actually prefer taking part more for fun. However, half of competitive gymnasts (51%) said they would not, or would find it hard to, approach their coach about stepping down from competition and 36% feel there aren't enough opportunities to take part just for fun if they do. Although participation events are open to gymnasts of all ages and abilities, for competitive girls this can feel like a step backwards rather than positive progression, and there will be inevitable concern around whether they will be valued less by their coaches and peers for it. Some competitive girls have taken part in events like The FLOOR and loved it but could not continue because it took time away from their competitive activities.

“They [girls] actually loved The FLOOR so much that we couldn't get any of the skills done as a competitive group of gymnasts that we're meant to do for competitions.” (COACH)

“Part of the biggest issue is not having exit routes... some of them are adamant that they just don't want to compete anymore. There's no one else in the competition their age at their level. It totally demotivates them.” (COACH)

Interestingly, just under a third of **recreational gymnasts** (32%) say they are very competitive and want to take part at the highest level. Whilst it may not be feasible for these girls to transition to competitive gymnastics based on their current ability, the participation events open to these girls don't appear to be engaging them (or their clubs) as much as they could. Only 9% of recreational girls surveyed attended The FLOOR and 21% attended GymSTART Competition in the last 12 months. If clubs lack coaching capacity, and/or don't invest time into these events for girls because of the need to focus on competitive gymnastics, some girls may never get the opportunity to take part in any events. This, coupled with the requirement to be able to master all disciplines to compete in the National Series, can restrict recreational girls from progressing and in their eyes, 'moving up'.

“The coaches aren’t mad about it [The FLOOR] because they’re part-time, they’re coming from full-time jobs down in the evening. They want to come down and teach competitive gymnastics, not all of them... but a few of them are hoping to, one day, be competitive coaches.” (COACH)

2.2 Moments of pride fuel girls’ confidence and self-worth – all girls need to feel a sense of pride and achievement along their gymnastics journey

In the teenage years, girls’ confidence can suffer for a variety of reasons. Moments of pride, no matter how big or small, provide emotional feedback that builds a girl’s self-esteem. Outside of gymnastics, girls do have opportunities to experience moments of pride, for example in school and studies, entering the world of work, or doing well in other sports and hobbies. In gymnastics, it is important to ensure all girls can experience moments of pride along their journey.

Skills and progression are largely valued and celebrated through competition and events but not all girls have the opportunity to experience these.

For girls, pride in gymnastics tends to be linked with mastering skills that were either difficult or that they have been working on for a long time. These are initially celebrated in training with coaches and friends and the culmination of their hard work is celebrated through performance and competitions.



“When you’ve been working so hard towards getting a skill... then you get the pride of being able to do that and that you put in all the work, and you get the outcome.” (EX-GYMNAST, 14)

“The medals and everything, they just show how far you’ve come, I guess. When you achieve a skill, everyone is so happy for you. It makes you feel good and everything.” (EX-GYMNAST, 16)

However, opportunities to perform/compete are infrequent and not all girls are/want to engage in them. When we look at what girls enjoy most about gymnastics, it is interesting to note that only 31% of girls say competing in competitions and only 7% say performing in front of a crowd. This is behind learning new skills, having fun with friends, improving strength/flexibility, challenging themselves and keeping fit and healthy, all of which take place largely in the training environment. So, whilst more competitions are desired, there is a real opportunity and need to celebrate girls’ progress and achievements more within clubs. This is particularly important for older girls who may feel a heightened lack of progression or confidence.

Coaches hold a great deal of trust and respect with gymnasts and can be powerful influencers on a girl's confidence.

Girls spend a great deal of time with their coaches who guide and support them along their gymnastics journey. Gymnasts tend to feel indebted to coaches for their efforts and impressing coaches and making them proud can often be more important than the pride of family members, and girls themselves. Coaches therefore have a lot of influence over how girls feel and are uniquely positioned to build their confidence. On the occasions when coaches don't recognise and celebrate girls' efforts, put too much pressure on them and in some cases even demean them, it can have a deep and lasting impact on how girls feel about themselves and lead to drop out. In our survey, 55%* of gymnasts say their coach gives regular feedback, praise and encouragement and 47%* say coaches help them to feel proud of themselves (*very well).

“My coaches always congratulate us or tell us when they see improvements.”

(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 13)

“Positive reinforcement is so good in teen classes. Outside, in school and everything, you're so judged.”

(JUNIOR COACH, 16)

“Some coaches just have a way of getting more out of them... but some coaches over the years have been really, really tough on them. They definitely don't respond as well to that kind of style of coaching ... they thrive on encouragement and praise, more than somebody who's just really, really strict all the time or pointing out all their bad points.”

(PARENT OF TWO GYMNASTS, 14 AND 17)

Teenage girls often compare themselves to others and when struggling with learning a skill occurs at the same time as other difficulties in their lives (such as struggling at school, at home), the lack of success can cause a downward spiral and a lot of self-punishment, causing a teenager to turn in on herself and suffer from low self-esteem and anxiety. It is therefore important to consider what, besides physical skills, gives girls moments of pride in gymnastics and that we celebrate these to help girls realise **their own best**, irrespective of the achievements of others.

“I would love to build my confidence a bit more and learn to believe in myself.”

(RECREATIONAL GIRL, 14)

“As a teen, as you get older, some people just keep getting skills over and over again. Once you hit a certain limit, you slow down on achieving skills, so getting recognised for the small basic things, it can be a really big deal.”

(JUNIOR COACH, 18)

Many of the behaviours that girls would like to be recognised and celebrated for are those that signify their growing independence and being more adult-like, for example setting their own goals, giving back to others, being a role model and using their voice. Girls are used to being guided by their coaches from a young age but crave more independence and choice in their teenage years. Coaches should consider when and how they facilitate this transition for girls - from coach led sessions to coach guided sessions, and empowering girls to have more input into the things that really matter to them.



IDEAS

WHAT ARE GIRLS' MOMENTS OF PRIDE IN GYMNASTICS THAT NEED TO BE RECOGNISED AND CELEBRATED?

Achieving a skill they've been working on for a really long time

Regaining a skill that they thought they lost

Being brave and overcoming fears about trying something new

Being a good cheerleader and supporting other girls

Being resilient and bouncing back when things get tough

Being creative or artistic

Being a role model for other girls

Being kind and doing something for others

Taking responsibility for own development

Having the courage to voice opinions and ideas

Picking others up when they are down

Making a new girl feel really welcome at the club

Commitment to training/club (e.g. other life pressures, injury)

Giving back to the gymnastics community (e.g. volunteering, helping others)

Going to a competition/event for the first time

“So many things could be seen as achievements in gymnastics but I think helping and encouraging your teammates is a huge one that sometimes people forget about!” **(RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 14)**

“Being a role model would make me feel proud because it means others look up to you and aspire to be you. It's so empowering and makes you feel like you can do anything.” **(RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 16)**

“Just coming to class. It can be difficult to motivate yourself sometimes, being present shows your determination and resilience.” **(RECREATIONAL GYMNAST AND COACH, 16)**

Rewards can help celebrate girls' achievements but they must be relevant and meaningful.

In addition to verbal praise and encouragement, girls are also motivated by material, tangible rewards that make a difference to their lives, either by saving them money, giving them chances to express themselves (e.g., clothing) or providing opportunities to bond with their teammates (e.g., a social trip out). Rewards can celebrate and help motivate girls but shouldn't be used too frequently otherwise they lose their value, as does the sense of pride girls gain from receiving them.



IDEAS

HOW WOULD GIRLS LIKE TO BE CELEBRATED?

Feedback, praise and encouragement

Certificates/awards/awards evenings e.g. 'gymnast of the month', 'most helpful gymnast' 'most inspiring gymnast'

Movie/pizza nights, gym sleepovers, trips

Free/discounted club gear and merchandise, discount vouchers

Achievement walls

Free, end of year festivals hosted by clubs and/or Gymnastics Ireland but informed by girls

Sharing achievements with parents

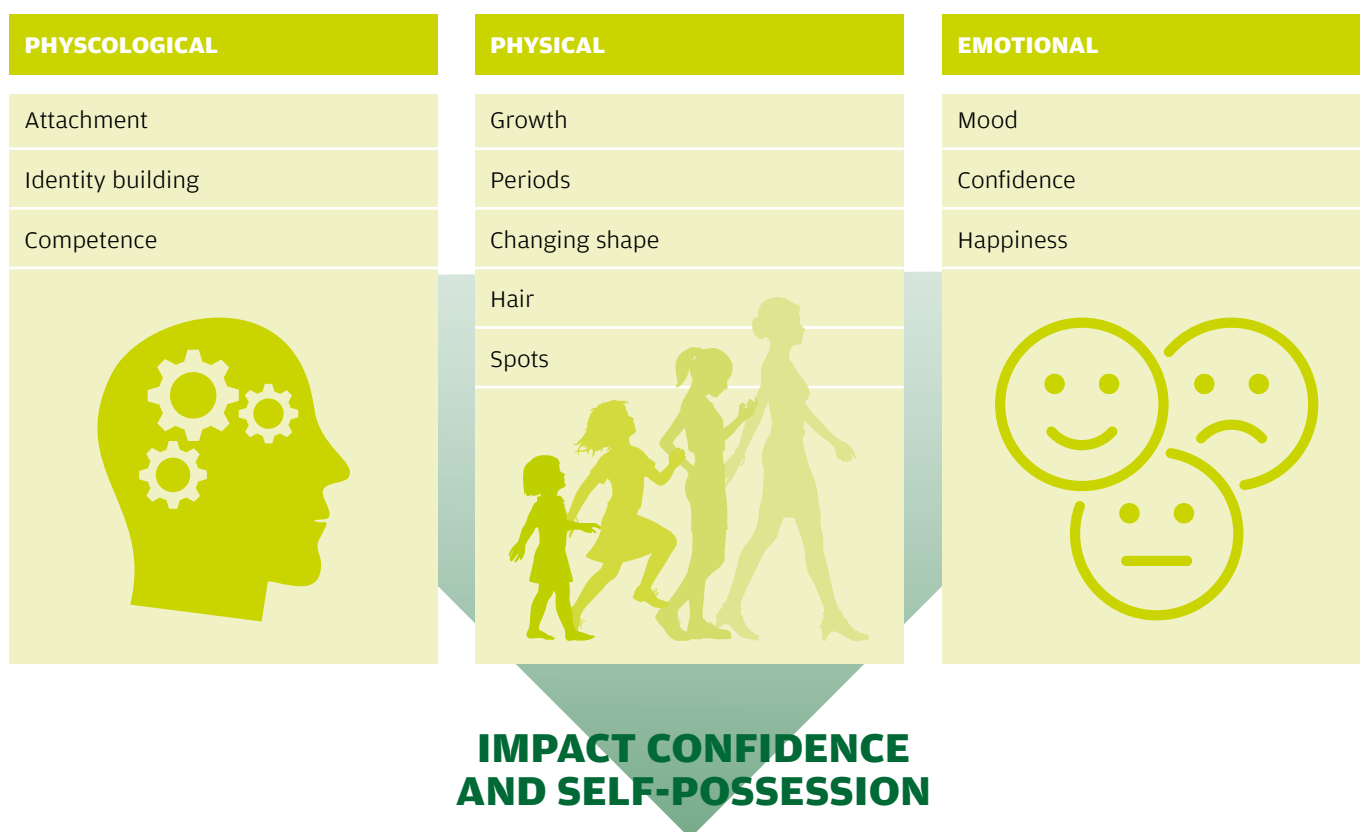
“My group used to have a reward system and every time you went to training you got one ‘dollar’ and say you got a new skill you’d get 3 more and you would save them up and when you got a certain amount you could choose something like a leotard and my coach would get it for us, we also had a team folder so we could either add our dollars into our folder or the team folder and with the team folder we saved up for trips to places.”

(RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 15)



2.3 Puberty can have a significant physical and emotional impact on gymnasts – more work is needed to support girls during this time

Puberty is a stage of rapid development where girls experience physical, psychological and emotional changes over a number of years. On average, girls enter puberty at around 11 years old but it can start as early as age 8, which means girls develop and mature at different rates. These changes can have a significant impact on even the sportiest girls' confidence and self-perception and can contribute to gradual disengagement if girls are not supported.⁶



Changes during puberty cause concern and anxiety, and can hinder progression

Gymnastics helps girls to feel fit, strong and healthy and can positively influence how they feel about their bodies and themselves. It teaches girls great self-awareness of their body and capabilities and over time they learn how far to push themselves and feel they know when they're ready to perform skills. When girls' bodies begin to change during puberty, they are also highly aware of and concerned about the unknown impact this could have on them as they age. Losing flexibility and strength, growing taller and weight changes are key worries for girls, as this could affect their ability to perform skills, increase their risk of injury, stifle their progression and cause them to feel they are no longer good enough. Girls would benefit from a better understanding of how puberty impacts them as gymnasts and as people. Guidance for parents would also enable them to work with coaches to support their daughters more during this time.

⁶ Women in Sport (2018) Puberty & Sport: An Invisible Stage

“Even just getting taller makes it harder to do a lot of tumbling moves.”

(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 15)

“I would like to know more about the physical changes as I grow up. I’m more concerned about my flexibility as a gymnast.” **(RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 16)**

Girls are also learning how to manage the practical aspects that come with their changing body in sport, such as participating on their period/period pain, breast development, body hair and general self-care, which is particularly important in an aesthetic sport such as gymnastics. Having access to information and advice would support girls to cope better, from period products in club toilets to online resources about what to expect as a gymnast during puberty.

Some coaches make an effort to give girls advice on physical aspects such as the importance of stretching to maintain flexibility and nutrition but few proactively address the different facets of puberty in any depth with girls, especially the emotional and practical challenges. This is partly due to girls not feeling able to talk about such issues with coaches (especially men, and older female coaches who they feel won’t be able to relate), as well as coaches not having the knowledge and/or confidence to discuss sensitive issues with girls. There are understandable safeguarding concerns to be mindful of and coaches require more guidance and support to communicate effectively with girls and their parents. At the other extreme, girls also shared instances where coaches passed comment on their bodies, which had a deeply negative impact on their experience.

“It starts at a very young age, that kind of stigma within certain groups where people just don’t want to talk about anything at all to do with your body, whether it’s growth, puberty, attire, anything, it’s a very uncomfortable topic.” **(COACH)**

“My friend left gymnastics because of the people there. Everyone has body image issues and it just wasn’t a good community at all. It was because of the coaches. They’d comment on all the girls’ bodies and stuff so people don’t want to do it anymore.” **(RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 11)**

At a time of so much change and upheaval, girls need to feel that there is an emotionally safe and supportive space within clubs where they can discuss concerns and seek information and advice when needed. This would empower girls to feel more comfortable, confident and in control of their changing bodies and improve their gymnastics experience.



IDEAS

A PROGRAMME OF FUN, INTERACTIVE BODY CONFIDENCE WORKSHOPS IN CLUBS THAT FOCUS ON 'THE CHANGING GYMNAST BODY'

KEY FEATURES:

A safe space that facilitates open but confidential conversations

What to expect and how to manage physical and emotional health during puberty

Guidance on managing periods and breast development

Focus on what the body can do, not what it looks like

Celebration of diverse body types and their strengths

Nutrition education

Transparent information/advice on kit to support changing body

Coaches and older girls give advice openly

Relatable speakers and role models (gymnasts, dancers) invited to speak

Information pack for girls with links to supporting resources

Information pack for parents to support their daughters

Follow up support - a 'wellbeing ambassador' in clubs (young coach/older teenage girl) that girls can approach for advice on puberty and any other concerns

WHAT GIRLS THOUGHT OF THIS IDEA...

"I feel this would really help girls! I know that when I was experiencing these changes I think it would have really helped me!" (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 14)

"Even though I am very shy and usually don't like talking about puberty with anyone except my mum, if this workshop will become available to our club, I will definitely attend." (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 12)

Body image and self-consciousness can have a significant impact on girls' enjoyment - clothing, especially leotards, make girls feel vulnerable and exposed

As girls' bodies change, they can become increasingly self-conscious about their appearance and how they appear to others; one way they manage this is through clothing. A third of the gymnasts surveyed (34%) said they feel self-conscious about their appearance and this increases with age, with almost twice as many older girls feeling self-conscious about their body image (64% - 15-18yrs).

"I feel like all these people are watching you and you're half-naked."

(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 12)

“In competitions there are a lot of expectations around personal grooming and looking right. I accept I have to present this way for competitions but finding a bra to fit right under a leotard or managing periods etc. can be difficult.” **(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 13)**

Gymnastics is an aesthetic sport and presentation of appearance can be highly valued in certain disciplines. For practical and safety reasons, girls must wear appropriate clothing to practise skills and perform in competitions and events. At international events and competitions, the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) the governing body for gymnastics worldwide, has a code of points for each discipline, which sets the dress code rules. While the traditional leotard has long been the standard attire, through cultural changes and shifting standards these rules are changing to reflect the wants and needs of the gymnasts. While Gymnastics Ireland follows FIG’s dress code at all national competition, there is scope for adaptations to these rules. In May 2022 the choice to wear shorts was given to Gymnastics Ireland’s competitive National Series female gymnasts, while in participation events, gymnasts have always been allowed more freedom to choose from a variety of clothing, including shorts, leggings, and t-shirts.

In our survey, only half (50%) of gymnasts say their clubs are flexible about the clothing they can wear in training. Some clubs are far more inclusive and allow shorts, leggings and t-shirts to help girls feel comfortable, whilst others are stricter and strongly favour leotards (especially for competitive gymnasts in the lead up to competition) and also discourage girls from wearing sports bras. Despite shorts being allowed in competitions/ events, many girls expressed deep frustration that they are not allowed to wear shorts to compete/perform. This appeared to come from either coaches’ personal views on appropriate kit for competition, or not understanding or miscommunicating the attire guidelines set by Gymnastics Ireland.

“We are forced to not wear shorts. In America it’s become a rule that you can wear shorts if you want, it’s optional.” **(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 12)**

“They can’t understand why they can’t wear their shorts at competitions because it doesn’t restrict their movements. I don’t think they’ve ever been given a valid reason why they’re not able to wear shorts. It just doesn’t make sense.” **(PARENT OF TWO GYMNASTS, 14 AND 17)**

34%

of girls feel uncomfortable wearing a leotard...

...rising to

48%

of girls aged 15-18yrs


The lack of clarity and transparency around kit is very important as a third of girls feel uncomfortable wearing a leotard. This is evident for recreational and competitive gymnasts alike but increases to just under half of older girls (15-18yrs). At a time

when girls are trying to manage their changing bodies and are learning to set healthy boundaries, imposing leotards can make them feel incredibly vulnerable, exposed and lacking autonomy. Shorts help girls to feel more comfortable and confident in their skin and in their performance, especially when managing their period. The guidelines on wearing shorts in competitions has not reached enough girls for this to be normalised within the sport and more targeted work is needed with girls and coaches to do so.

“Definitely the leotard by itself [is least comfortable] cause I feel like my privacy is violated.” **(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 12)**

“Leotards without shorts is so uncomfortable to wear past a certain age. Periods would be my main concern.” **(RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 16)**

“There’s no really hiding your body when you’re in just a leotard. It makes you ten times more conscious, especially if you’re surrounded by a lot smaller people.” **(JUNIOR COACH, 16)**

GIRLS IDEAL KIT FOR COMPETITION		
Shorts to manage periods and body hair.		
Choice of short or long-sleeved leotards to manage bras and body hair.		
Enjoy wearing club colours but not being forced to wear something brief.		
Tracksuit bottoms and t-shirts when walking around between events.		

The lack of openness and transparency around kit is creating unnecessary barriers to girls enjoying the sport and could contribute to girls developing body image issues in the long-term. Half of girls do not feel able to speak up about clothing - 49% would not, or would feel uncomfortable, to approach their coach if they felt self-conscious in their gymnastics gear. Too many girls do not feel seen and heard on the issue and this needs to change.

There is a growing debate around the purpose and value of certain clothing/kit for female participation in sport more widely. Gymnastics Ireland have a significant opportunity to leverage the strengths of the sport, challenge the status quo and be at the forefront of body positivity for girls across Ireland through better education, information and support for coaches, girls and their parents.

2.4 Girls depend on their close friendships in gymnastics – group dynamics and team cohesion need careful management.

A girl's support network and friendships are very important in the teenage years and are a strong driver of enjoyment and engagement in gymnastics. As girls often look at gymnastics as a second home and close friends as a second family, team cohesion, support and mutual respect are extremely important. Any rupture or negativity within training groups or the wider club can have a strong impact on them, even if only small and fleeting. Just over half of girls (51%) surveyed say their coaches encourage girls to support one another very well and a similar number (49%) say they would not, or would find it hard to, approach their coach if they were having issues with friendships or other girls in the club.

“I love when people ask how I am as it just gives me a boost of happiness but I hate when someone is ignoring you as it gives me a stomach pain and ruins my session. I'd say it is because of worry and anxiety.”

(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 14)

Managing group dynamics is a constant challenge for coaches.

Girls have developed very strong bonds with one another over time and they benefit greatly from their existing friendships. However, the close-knit groups formed in clubs can also become cliquy and make it more challenging for girls to move between groups, or perhaps join a club as a new member. Within clubs, girls tend to be organised into training groups by age or ability and these can change over time, and this can present problems around lack of progression and lack of friends for girls.

- **Age groups** – mixed abilities mean more advanced girls may feel held back by others, whilst less advanced girls may not feel good enough/able to progress in comparison to others.
- **Ability groups** – create potentially wide age gaps between girls at a time when they prefer to be with girls of a similar age and with similar interests. Younger girls of a higher ability can make older girls feel not good enough for their age, whilst younger girls can struggle to assert themselves and be heard amongst older girls.

“We sometimes get grouped by ability but there's a big age gap (the oldest is 17 and then it drops to 14, 13 and 12) so the oldest usually works by herself.” (COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 14)

“Recently I feel it's been hard in my group, they're all older and sometimes I find it hard to be heard because I don't speak up as much.”

(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 11)

“How do you deal with the fact that the level of ability and gymnastics is such a wide range... you want to train with your friends, but if you want to do things that are more advanced, you don't want to be held back by the fact that they can't do them, but you only want to be there if your friends are with you.” (COACH)

Girls broadly prefer being grouped by age first and then ability within this, so that they can train with friends but still progress at a comfortable pace. In practice, the number of coaches/girls in a club, and the available space and facilities can make this difficult. If girls have not built relationships with other gymnasts beyond their immediate training group, when group dynamics change it can be challenging for girls to feel comfortable and a sense of belonging with girls they don't know very well.

Girls question their worth when 'talented' gymnasts receive more attention and focus.

7 in 10 girls say there's a real sense of friendship amongst girls in their club but despite this, less than half of girls feel valued by peers in their club. Competitive gymnasts were much more likely to feel a strong sense of friendship (90%) and feel valued by other girls (59%), than recreational gymnasts.

Not feeling valued by peers stems in part from the difficulty of managing group dynamics effectively. However, the value placed on gymnasts who are seen as more skilful or 'talented' appears to have the greatest impact on girls. Girls, parents and coaches described an underlying 'them and us' culture within some clubs, which is often expressed through some coaches favouring more advanced gymnasts and giving these girls more time, focus and attention than others. This sends subtle but strong messages to girls, which causes them to question if they are good enough, and if their time at the club is valued and appreciated. This creates stigma between girls of different abilities which can then be reinforced by girls themselves.



“During coaching sometimes because you're not as experienced you can be looked down on by others and not receive the same treatment.”

(COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 16)

“I wasn't one of the higher kids, but I wasn't one of the lower ones either... they [coaches] would complain in front of us when they had to be with us. It was terrible. It was really difficult to hear and I really think that that definitely had a huge impact on me because it just made my whole year so bad.”

(JUNIOR COACH, 16)

“I get brilliant interaction and feedback [from club/coach] on [my daughter] who is in competitive, and nothing from [my other daughter] who is in the recreational. The recreation doesn't exist.”

(PARENT OF TWO GYMNASTS, 10 AND 11)

Most girls do feel that people in their club are supportive and caring. All girls need to feel appreciated and heard and when coaches and other girls show that they care and value their opinion, it reaches much further and deeper than is first apparent. Just under half of girls (43%*) say their coaches get to know them as a person/individual and only a third (32%*) say coaches ask girls their girls views and input (*very well). It is important that coaches take the time to get to know girls as people as well as gymnasts, and ensure their voice is heard to empower them.



IDEAS

WHAT BEHAVIOURS HELP GYMNASTS FEEL VALUED & APPRECIATED IN CLUBS?

When people smile and seem happy to see me
When people talk to me as soon as I come in the door
When people ask for my opinions and ideas
When coaches and others focus on what I'm doing and trying to improve on
When people ask me how I am
When people show that they care about me (e.g. say things to boost my confidence, or lift my mood when I'm down)
When people celebrate my achievements
When people ask me for help
When people take an interest in what's going on in my life

“Making sure that their input is considered on things and always listen to the girls and make them feel wanted.” (RECREATIONAL GIRL, 15)

“I think it's so important to feel that your coaches really listen and take on our ideas!” (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 14)

Providing more opportunities for girls to mix with one another would improve team cohesion and widen their support network through tough times.

Coaches should consider how they can manage club dynamics more proactively and provide more social opportunities and activities to facilitate a collective sense of 'togetherness'/'team' across the club. As groups change over time and girls inevitably lose close friends from gymnastics with age, it is important that girls have a wider support network of friends to draw on beyond their immediate training group to keep them motivated and engaged. The stigma between girls of different abilities also needs attention with more opportunities for gymnasts of different abilities to interact in a fun and non-judgemental space. Some coaches are mindful of this and facilitate more social interaction within training to create fun sessions for all. However, only 20% of girls surveyed say there are lots of social events and activities for gymnasts (rising to 31%

of competitive gymnasts). Girls feel it is important to get all members involved in club activities and they want more opportunities to build wider friendships.



IDEAS

WHAT WORKS CURRENTLY & GIRLS WOULD LIKE TO SEE MORE OF?

Social evenings - party nights, pizza nights, games nights, 'teen' nights

Away days - team building days not focused on skills, camps for older girls (not just up to 12), more regular trips out and away

Training - fun games for all abilities (obstacle courses)

Home events - more in-house competitions/events/ routines - whole club rather than individual efforts

Buddying and mentoring - older girls mentoring younger girls

Mixing with other gyms - by training in one another's spaces with them, Zoom sessions

"I will stop gymnastics in most likely a year because our groups will change and I won't be with my friends." (RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 12)



IDEAS

INCREASE GIRLS' SOCIAL CONNECTIONS BY FUSING GYMNASTICS WITH OTHER ACTIVITIES

Girls loved the idea of fusing other sports and activities with gymnastics. For example, weekly fitness sessions which bring together gymnastics with yoga, pilates, dancing, aerobics, boxing etc. that are also open to the community. For current gymnasts this would:

Help girls socialise with more gymnasts beyond their training group

Reduce and tension or stigma between girls of different abilities

Help girls stay connected to non-gymnast friends who could join in

Keep training fresh and exciting by exploring different activities

Tap into their wider skills and enjoyment in other sports

Sessions that are gymnastics specific would be more accessible to the wider community and could expand the sports appeal to more girls/women, who don't need to be an experienced gymnast to join in the fun!

"We all would benefit from it (bringing gymnasts and non-gymnasts together) and if there is advertisement done more girls can join the clubs and to understand and see that it's not all about gymnastics skills. It's also about community, friendship, keeping active and healthy."

(RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 11)

2.5 Practical barriers such as perceived lack of time, taking part in other sports and expense are more likely to influence drop out if deeper underlying issues aren't addressed.

Few girls feel gymnastics takes up too much of their time but older teens are more likely to struggle with the commitment of gymnastics. Adolescence is a time of significant upheaval and adjustment for girls. With age comes more external pressures and priorities that girls must manage alongside gymnastics, which can be stressful and exhausting without the right support. Managing increased academic pressure at school and home, relationships and conflict, online interactions and expectations, and the physical and emotional challenges of puberty can all take a toll. Girls are learning to juggle the 'must dos' of school and family life with what they want to do, and it's important that they see time in gymnastics as time 'well spent'. The amount of time taken up with gymnastics affects social time with friends who don't do the sport, meaning they experience fear of missing out on other activities, as well as time to study, which can cause more pressure when it comes to school work.

"The negatives would definitely be not having enough time for other things such as going out with my friends or yes school work!"

(RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 12)

It is positive to see that only 18% of girls said that gymnastics training and competitions take up too much of their time and it's hard to fit in with everything else going on in their lives. Older teens (15-18yrs) who have more pressure in the build up to leaving cert at school were more likely feel this way (30%). Overall, girls feel their parents are very supportive of their sport, with only 12% saying their parents think they spend too much time on gymnastics and should focus more on school work. However, this increases significantly again for older girls (37%).

Only
31%

of girls feel their coach understands the pressures in their life (very well)

Just under a third of girls (31%) feel that their coaches understand the other pressures in their life very well. It is important that coaches communicate with girls and their parents about the wider pressures they face so that flexible solutions can be sought for girls to participate in a way that works for them, and that they still enjoy.

Other sports can compete for girls' time and may be prioritised above gymnastics.

As 'sporty' girls, it's important to recognise that for some, gymnastics is not their only sport and they enjoy taking part in other activities as well. Younger (10-11yrs) and recreational girls were more likely to participate in other sports given the time restraints on older and more competitive gymnasts. Other sports included dance/ballet, team

sports (camogie, Gaelic football, soccer, hockey, volleyball, basketball), athletics and swimming. Girls recognise that gymnastics gives them great foundational skills that benefit them in other sports (strength, flexibility, technique) but if they feel they aren't able to improve or reaching their peak ability, it is far easier to make the decision to leave gymnastics and focus on other sports that offer more progression and are less expensive. More could be done within messaging and campaigns to promote and reinforce the wide benefits of gymnastics as a sport for life, rather than just for young girls.

“I got too tall for gymnastics, it was getting a lot harder. It was easier for me to progress in athletics.” (EX-GYMNAST, 17)

“Love gymnastics but am involved in other sports I am better at.”

(RECREATIONAL GYMNAST, 15)

Parents value the wealth of benefits gymnastics gives their daughters, but it is expensive and can burden girls and their families.

In comparison to other sports in Ireland, gymnastics can be expensive to run due to the need for specialist coaches/staff, equipment/apparatus and club/venue/event costs. For gymnasts and their parents, this cost is realised in the form of club membership fees, clothing and kit and often extensive travel and expenses/fees to attend competitions and events. Girls are very aware that parents are investing significant time and money in them, and many girls feel like a burden. As such, they can be averse to doing anything over and above what they already do that could burden their families further.

“Too many girls leave because of the cost of gymnastics and when other sports are free and they have better chances of getting college scholarship in different sports, why put all the money into one thing that for the majority won't help in their futures. It's sad to see how difficult it is for girls to do well in gymnastics.” (COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 14)

“I do community games also and it's almost free and you can choose so many different things, they also have county finals, regionals and then national so lots of chances to get medals and experience with your chosen events.” (COMPETITIVE GYMNAST, 14)

Parents felt that the time and expense of gymnastics can place a lot of pressure on the family, especially if they have more than one child in gymnastics and/or other sports. Parents are making value judgements as to how long their daughters can continue with the sport but believe strongly that they are gaining a huge amount from it. They recognise the wide range of benefits and life skills that gymnastics teaches their daughters and the positive impact it has on their physical and mental wellbeing. Although the gains currently outweigh the costs, the burden it puts on parents means they may be more likely to support their daughters' decision to leave if they weren't enjoying it. The current cost-of-living crisis could also have a serious impact on girls' ability to remain in gymnastics. Similarly, girls from more deprived communities may be excluded from joining the sport all together due to cost.

The Gymnast's Voice Harnessing opportunities to retain teenage girls in gymnastics

“Sometimes it’s really tough and you’re constantly running back and forth, especially when we have two different girls, maybe in different days or different times, and you’re constantly over and back.”

(PARENT OF TWO GYMNASTS, 14 AND 17)

Practical barriers can contribute to a girl leaving gymnastics and ways to minimise these should be considered carefully by clubs and Gymnastics Ireland. In isolation these are unlikely to be the main reasons that girls disengage if they continue to love and enjoy the sport and have the support of parents. It is therefore important to address the deeper underlying issues around progression and pathways, moments of pride and self-confidence, managing puberty/body image, and group dynamics that have a bigger impact on their enjoyment discussed earlier in this section.





3. RECOMMENDATIONS

It's clear that girls benefit a huge amount from their involvement in gymnastics and that the majority have a largely positive experience. Gymnastics is in a uniquely powerful position to help girls develop a strong love of sport and physical activity from a young age but currently, too many girls are needlessly ruling themselves out of the sport in the teenage years, and often regret doing so. A strong ecosystem is needed to support and retain them, therefore key recommendations are provided for both Gymnastics Ireland and coaches/clubs as key influencers in girls experiences.

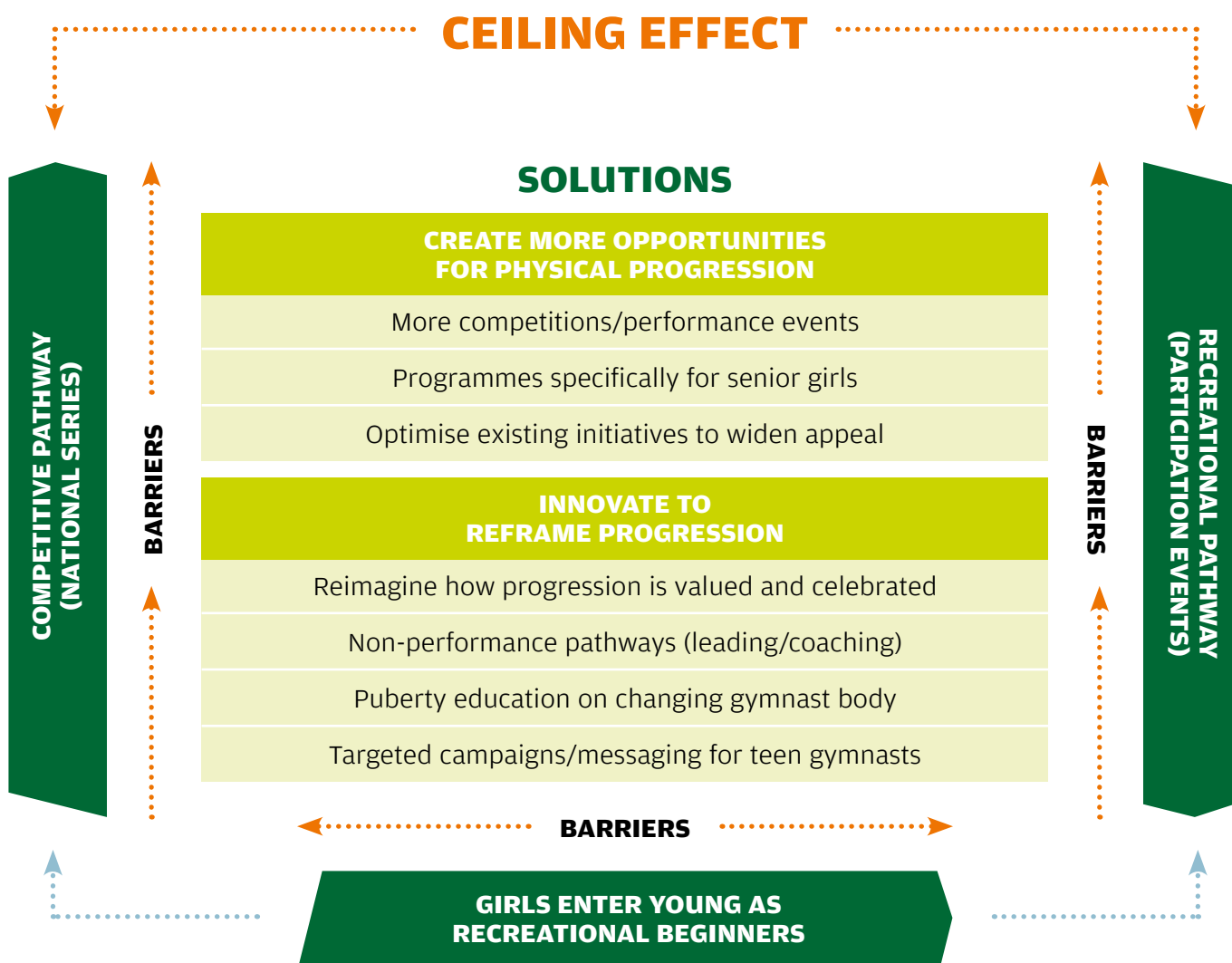
3.1 Opportunities for Gymnastics Ireland

As the governing body, Gymnastics Ireland should seek ways to counter the perceived 'ceiling effect' and minimise the barriers uncovered in this research which reinforce girls' narrow perceptions of the short life span of gymnastics. Given how vital learning and progression is to gymnasts' enjoyment, it is important to evaluate how current pathways are structured and perceived and may be inadvertently reinforcing the 'ceiling effect'. Potential solutions include a more frequent and tailored programme of events/competitions for girls, especially senior teens who feel there is nothing for them and addressing the real and perceived barriers that restrict girls' movement between pathways. However, there is also significant opportunity to reframe how progression and participation for its own sake is valued in the sport and innovate solutions to give all teenage girls a sense of purpose, pride, and enjoyment to extend their gymnastics journey.

Key recommendations

1. Innovate around pathways to cater to different girls' needs and motivations to extend their gymnastics journey within and beyond the school years, especially for senior girls. What could this look like and where/how might it take place beyond clubs?
2. Existing participation initiatives engage younger gymnasts and need optimising to become more relevant, appealing and accessible to competitive and recreational teenage girls, especially seniors.

3. There is significant opportunity to leverage the unique strengths of gymnastics and be at the forefront of body positivity for teenage girls in sport in Ireland. To do so, barriers relating to puberty, attire and body image should be addressed. Use the insights gained in this research to inform education, guidance and communications for coaches, girls and parents.
4. Work with clubs to reframe and expand the value of ‘progress’ and facilitate opportunities for more moments of pride and personal achievement for all girls along their gymnastics journey.
5. Tailor marketing and communications to appeal directly to teenage girls and dial up the wow factor around competitions and events. Use relatable, diverse role models, especially senior teens and young women, to inspire and shift perceptions around the longevity of gymnastics.
6. Encourage and facilitate collaboration between clubs, harness best practice and share learnings and ideas across Gymnastic Ireland’s club members.
7. Finally, ensure teenage girls stay at the heart of thinking and innovation. Create impactful and sustainable ways to connect with girls (e.g. via social media and clubs) to understand their experiences and to check and challenge ideas and initiatives.



3.2 Opportunities for coaches and clubs

Gymnasts spend the vast majority of their time in the training environment, therefore coaches and clubs play a pivotal role in supporting their continued engagement. Coaches also have more direct lines of communication with parents which could be strengthened. The findings of this research also indicate that competitive gymnasts are broadly having a more positive gymnastics experience than their recreational peers, which is largely influenced by club culture.

Key recommendations

1. Reframe how 'progress' is defined and valued in clubs and support girls' holistic development.

Progression is fundamental to girls' enjoyment and strongly linked to mastering physical skills, but this can hinder girls' confidence and enjoyment when they inevitably hit stumbling blocks. Support girls' progression through their holistic development as people as well as all-round gymnasts and open their eyes to the different ways they can continue to learn and grow. Exposure to different disciplines/events/activities, leadership and mentoring opportunities, and giving girls more choice and ownership over their development through goal setting can support girls' motivation and sense of purpose for continued engagement, irrespective of their ability.

2. Facilitate and celebrate more moments of pride beyond just physical skills.

Mastering physical skills gives girls powerful moments of pride which are largely showcased and celebrated through competitions and events, but these are infrequent and not all girls engage. It's important that girls gain emotional feedback from gymnastics and coaches play a crucial role in supporting confidence and pride. Facilitate more moments of pride for girls within the training environment beyond just physical skills; recognise and celebrate other behaviours, soft skills and wider achievements with meaningful rewards along their gymnastics journey, to help all girls feel good about themselves.

3. Educate and support girls to understand and manage their changing gymnast body and promote a body positive culture.

The physical, emotional and practical challenges of puberty can significantly impact girls' enjoyment and engagement. Clubs need to adopt flexible, inclusive kit policies and empower girls to make decisions on attire to help them feel comfortable and confident in their skin; with no judgement. Normalising the taboo of puberty through better education and guidance for girls (and parents) to manage their changing gymnast body will help them feel informed and supported. Creating a 'safe' space for girls to discuss their anxieties and concerns would help to create an open and more body positive culture across the sport.

4. Leverage the strength of the 'gymnastics family' and widen girls' support networks.

A girl's support network and friendships are very important in the teenage years and are a strong driver of enjoyment in gymnastics. Carefully manage group dynamics to avoid cliques and create more opportunities for girls to mix with their peers within and

outside of training. Creating fun and non-judgemental activities for girls to socialise (across disciplines and abilities) will strengthen club cohesion and togetherness and widen girls' support networks to keep them engaged through challenging times.

5. Foster an inclusive culture that values all girls and participation at every level.

Coaches and staff have a collective responsibility to create an inclusive culture in clubs. All girls, both recreational and competitive, want and need more voice and choice over their experience. Coaches should take time to get to know girls as people as well as gymnasts and understand their changing needs. Reflecting on how current practice and opportunities in clubs could be strengthened to support the needs of all girls, not just the talented few, would enable teenage girls to feel they are truly valued and belong.

3.3 Utilise the 8 Principles for Success

In 2021 Women in Sport developed 8 Principles for Success² to support organisations and clubs in Ireland to engage and retain teenage girls in sport. These can be used by Gymnastics Ireland and coaches/clubs to realise the recommendations above and check and challenge existing programmes and offers to enhance their appeal and relevance. They can also be used to innovate and develop completely new initiatives through a teenage girl lens.



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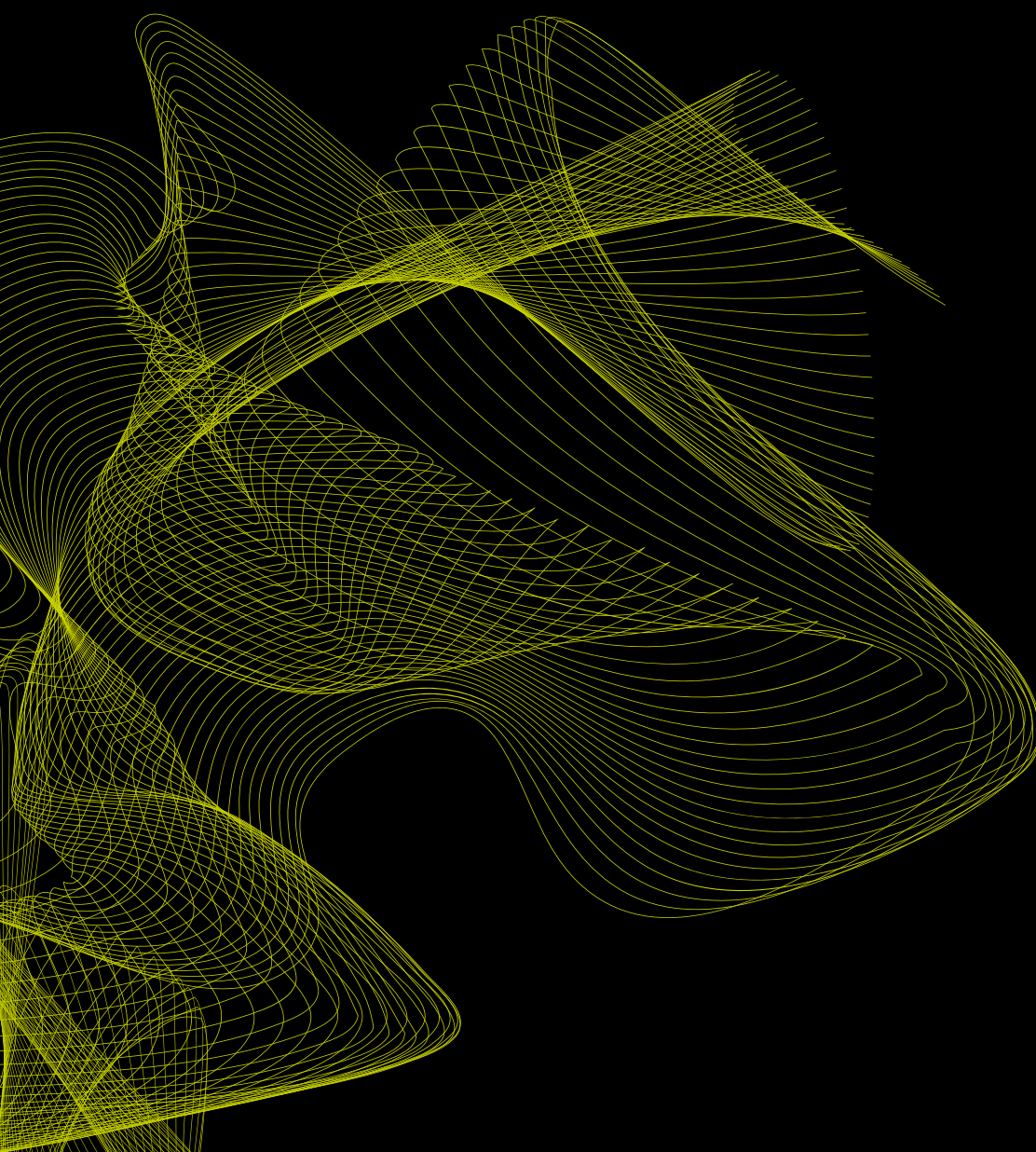
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