



Examining the reasons why young gymnasts drop-out, or withdraw from, participation in recreational and competitive gymnastics

British Gymnastics – England commissioned the Institute of Youth Sport to conduct a study to examine the reasons why young gymnasts leave the sport. The aim of this document is to highlight the key findings of this comprehensive study and to offer guidance on how we can tackle some of the issues raised to improve our sport. We are keen to point out that this report is in no way meant to criticise current methods of delivery and practice, but is aimed at helping to provide a better service to you, our members.

Over 5000 former gymnasts and their parents were asked to complete a survey and telephone interviews were conducted with 40 former gymnasts and their parents. Interviews and focus groups also took place with coaches and staff at four different clubs, which were thought to be undertaking effective practice in retaining gymnasts (effective practice case studies).

Key findings:

- The former gymnasts started gymnastics at an average age of **6.2** years and stopped at an average age of **9.9** years
- Nearly 50% of respondents described themselves as formerly 'recreationally active'

Most important benefits gained from being a gymnast:

- 'Improved strength and fitness'

"She kept herself fit, kept her body supple, strength in her arms"
(Mother of 9-year-old recreational level girl)

- 'Enjoyment/fun'

"I loved loads of aspects of it (gymnastics). It was so much fun I guess. Doing all those sort of things and being with my friends"
(Gymnast, 13-year-old regional level girl)

- 'Good exercise'

"All my kids loved it. It was good exercise and the coaches were brilliant, they made lots of new friends"
(Mother of 12-year-old recreational level boy)

Interestingly as gymnasts became older, the benefits of 'improved strength and fitness', 'good exercise' and 'develop new skills' became less commonly cited, whilst 'enjoyment/fun' and 'social' became increasingly cited. In terms of

performance levels the perceived benefits were similar with recreational gymnasts being slightly more likely to cite 'good exercise' as a benefit and higher-level gymnasts being more likely to cite 'strength/fitness' and 'confidence' as benefits.

Most important reason for leaving gymnastics:

- Found it 'boring/repetitive' – a lot of people said it became boring partly due to waiting around and partly due to repeating the same sort of warm-up or activities in each session.

"More time doing actual gymnastics, less warm-up and standing around"
(Gymnast, 7-year-old recreational level boy)

"They just did the same thing every week and the classes were very big so it was on a sort of a circuit. So I could see they were getting a bit bored when it was the same thing each week"

(Mother of 7-year-old recreational level girl)

- Left to take up a new sport
- 'Didn't like the coaches'

The reasons for leaving differed by age, gender and performer level. For example boys were more likely than girls to cite 'boring/repetitive' as a reason, whilst 'didn't like the coach' and 'new sport' were more important to girls.

Recreational gymnasts were more likely to cite becoming bored or 'lack of progression' as the most important reason, but higher-level gymnasts were more likely to cite 'no longer enjoying the sport', 'lack of time' or 'injury' as the most important reason.

The most important reasons for leaving gymnastics according to parents were 'didn't like the coaches', 'boring/repetitive' and 'no longer enjoyed it'.

Sports taken on by former gymnasts

Nine out of ten (91%) former gymnasts were taking part in another sport at the time of returning the survey with the top three being swimming (17%), football (12%) and dance (11%). The key point here is that when most people leave gymnastics, they are taking part in another sport. Gymnastics is a foundation sport; it provides the necessary skills to take part in a range of sports. We're aware that young children will sample a few sports including gymnastics before deciding on which one(s) they like best.

Retention of gymnasts

Parents and former gymnasts were asked what could have been done to retain their participation? The main things were: more feedback between coaches and parents; sessions to be more fun/less serious; an equal focus on all children; more targets/rewards for participation; coaches to be more encouraging; and provision of more opportunities for boys.

The effective practice case study findings indicate that recreational gymnasts in particular, are more likely to continue to stay in gymnastics when they have fun and enjoy themselves, have opportunities to demonstrate their skills and are listened to.

In addition, the case studies confirmed that the quality of coaching is a hugely influential factor in retaining young people within gymnastics. Developing coaches from within clubs was seen to be particularly effective. The case study findings suggest that teenagers are more likely to stay involved in gymnastics, either competitively or non-competitively, if they are offered other opportunities such as leadership or coaching opportunities to retain and revive their interest and their enthusiasm in gymnastics. Providing flexible, sociable and fun sessions for teenagers is successful both in retaining existing gymnasts and also in recruiting new gymnasts to the sport.

What we're doing with the information

The research has provided us with a wealth of data, which has enabled us to understand the typical pattern of drop-out in gymnastics. British Gymnastics is planning to support the development of coaches and clubs following the evidence from this research. The information is being used to guide future developments and products to help support the sport. Here are just a few examples of how we intend to offer this support:

Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Since the main reason for leaving the sport is 'boring/repetitive', we intend to provide CPD on how to handle large groups i.e. ensuring participants are as active as possible throughout sessions. Guidance on lesson planning is required to ensure sessions are fun and varied. There is also a need for workshops/resources on warm-up ideas and games.

One of the key reasons for leaving the sport was lack of progression. We need to do more to promote the use of award schemes as a means for the gymnast to measure their progress and feel they're working towards something.

Retaining gymnasts

The effective practice case studies provide insight and best practice for how to retain gymnasts. We will write case study cards of the clubs visited, focussing on how they have retained their gymnasts. The case study findings show the need to provide older gymnasts with the opportunities to develop additional skills other than gymnastics, such as leadership. We will develop a resource on how to set up a Leadership Academy explaining the benefits both to the clubs and the gymnasts.

Using the research findings, we will provide workshops for clubs on ways to achieve better retention rates.

Retention/recruitment of boys

An issue and often the single reason for leaving gymnastics, particularly for boys, was the closure of the club they had joined. We will monitor the provision of activity for boys, identifying any major gaps and examining the need to create more opportunities for boys to take part.

For any questions regarding this research or for more information, please contact Seyram Atubra, Researcher, British Gymnastics seyram.atubra@british-gymnastics.org