

Flexibility Training for Gymnasts

Many concerns have been expressed recently about what is acceptable practice with regards to stretching exercises and flexibility training for gymnasts. To protect the gymnasts in our care and to protect ourselves against possible allegations of poor practice, coaches must carefully consider their actions and how they might be perceived by an observer.

Important factors for a safe and successful gymnastics flexibility programme:

- Encourage a good flexibility programme from the beginning as young children are more flexible and once a good range of movement is achieved it is easier to maintain.
- For a flexibility programme to be effective the gymnast must be motivated and want to improve in this area.
- Develop an understanding of why flexibility is essential for gymnastics. The gymnast must understand that if they do not improve / maintain their flexibility it will limit their skill development, the quality of their work and make them more susceptible to injury.
- Always remember there are a variety of ways to stretch, not just 'hands on' passive stretching. Situations where the gymnast is using their own body weight are usually more effective and longer lasting.
- It is important to maintain a balance between passive and active stretch.
- Stretching must only be done in a suitably warm environment and only when the gymnast is thoroughly warmed up.
- Regular, gradual and progressive stretching with a focus on achievable and measurable targets is likely to be far more effective.
- Expectations must be consistent with all other factors related to gymnastic development i.e. age, potential, physiology and training situation.
- It is not necessary or desirable to experience extreme discomfort in order to become more flexible – in fact it is this aspect of a flexibility programme that is likely to put the gymnast off and make it less effective.
- In all situations the gymnast must be in control and able to say STOP.

To be avoided:

- Unrealistic expectations for a 'quick fix'.
- Situations where gymnasts may feel 'exposed' i.e. for stretching box splits it is better to have gymnast lying on stomach as opposed to lying on back, better to have gymnasts wearing shorts etc.
- Coach stretching gymnast to the point of excessive pain or extreme discomfort.
- Exercises that place the coach's and gymnast's bodies in "close proximity" and could be considered inappropriate.

The coach should never:

- Touch a gymnast's inner thigh, groin area or buttocks during stretching exercises.
- Use their full body weight to push down on a gymnast.
- Work alone and with only one gymnast.
- Work alone in a secluded or separated area in the gym where they cannot be observed by other adults.

It is impossible to establish guidelines for every situation that may occur in our sport and common sense should be used at all times. If you are unsure of the appropriateness of any stretching activity do not be afraid to discuss it with someone you trust or alternatively contact British Gymnastics.