



SUPPORTING
BODY CONFIDENCE
IN
Gymnastics

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Supporting Body Confidence in Gymnastics

This information and guidelines have been developed with the support of **Singapore Gymnastics** with the aim of helping gymnasts, families, coaches and staff understand more about body image, and feel more confident in contributing to enhancing and maintaining body confidence in all gymnasts, across all disciplines, genders, ages and levels.

It is widely acknowledged that there are many and varied factors which contribute to body image and that sports participation can play an important role in contributing to both negative and positive body image. Singapore Gymnastics is encouraging all members, athletes and staff to consider ways we can individually and collectively contribute towards environments where gymnasts are more likely to feel positive and good in their bodies as much of the time as possible. Additionally, this information can be an important part of starting and continuing conversations about how we can directly address the risks of poor body image, disordered eating, eating disorders and mental health issues in gymnastics.

Singapore Gymnastics is committed to providing support systems and information to contribute to protecting gymnasts from harm, and offering the opportunity to optimise their performance and positive quality of life both within and beyond their time in gymnastics.

Background:

What is “body image?”

Body image is most commonly considered to be the way we think and feel about the weight, shape or appearance of our bodies. Most people experience a combination of both negative and positive body image over the day, week and over longer periods of time. When negative body image becomes more dominant, it can lead to anxiety, low mood, excessive comparing to others and changing our eating and exercise patterns in ways which negatively impact our lives.

Body image concerns are experienced on an individual level but are not just an individual issue. We are all influenced by many factors outside our control which both positively and negatively impact the way we feel about ourselves and our bodies including age, gender, our family upbringing, body shape and size, involvement in sport, friendships, culture and many other factors.

Although body image is a serious and common factor in the development of an eating disorder, many people who experience body image concern will not have an eating disorder. Even so, the impact that feeling bad about our bodies can have on our lives can be significant and if not addressed, can last a lifetime. The good news is that, in

our own way, we all have a role in supporting gymnasts to feel good about their bodies so they are able to live, train and compete at their best.

How does negative body image develop?

We often have positive body image in our younger years, with some children remaining feeling very positive and confident in their body and for others, negative body image can emerge over time and can be “triggered” by an event, or series of events. This might be younger than we think, often from about the age of 5 when we become more aware of the world around us. This might include comments on body shape (not just teasing or bullying, but comments in general), comparisons to the bodies of others, being weighed or measured or body changes related to normal growth or puberty. Negative body image usually starts as a series of thoughts and feelings before sometimes being accompanied by behaviours, such as food monitoring and restriction, exercising or self-weighing/measuring. So by the time athletes have started engaging in behaviours, feeling negatively about the body can often have been experienced for a length of time.

Who is more likely to experience body image concerns?

There are groups of people who are more likely to experience body image concerns in ways which interrupt quality of life. These include:

- People of all genders and ages whose bodies are not viewed as ideal within a culture, sport or group of the community
- People who do not necessarily fit into a particular sport-specific athletic “stereotype” (and feel pressure to attain a particular shape/weight/size)
- People who compete in sports where a weight is demanded (such as in weight category sports) or a certain weight, shape or size is seen as more preferable for performance (such as in aesthetic sports)
- People who are more critical of themselves and more likely to compare themselves negatively to others
- People who believe that bodies can be easily changed through behaviours
- People who have a genetic history of eating disorders and other mental health conditions

What can help gymnasts?

Although we have some understanding of what can be helpful and unhelpful, it’s important to remember that everyone is different and there’s no “one size fits all” approach. **Prevention and early intervention across whole groups and organisations** is key to developing a shared understanding of what best supports athletes at all stages of development through the development of protocols and clear communication pathways.

Pillars of Body Confidence

1. Everyone has a role
2. Language and communication matters
3. Supporting positive nutrition
4. Safety in tracking growth & development

Pillar 1 - Everyone has a Role

Everyone has a role in contributing to an environment where gymnasts are more likely to feel positively towards their body AND less likely to feel negatively towards their body. For younger gymnasts, adults are particularly important role models.

Role of the Coach and Support Staff

Lead by example - Coaches, teachers, mentors, more senior athletes and parents can be very important role models for athletes - what you say, don't say, do and don't do really matters. Athletes are often highly attuned people, and will pick up on signals that their body is being thought of as not good enough.

Develop and communicate a confidential, open door, judgement-free policy so that gymnasts feel safe and welcome to share their concerns in a way that they feel heard, respected and that their concerns will be taken seriously.

Role of Parents and Families

Take the time to reflect on the way bodies are spoken about at home

The language we use can be powerful; we all grow up with different messages about bodies – our own and others – in ways which can unintentionally filter down to our kids. Take the time to reflect on words and phrases you use at home & consider ways you may become more aware of using either neutral (neither good, nor bad) language, or steer away from appearance-based comments altogether.

Stay open to conversations about body image

The way we would speak with a younger child, an older child and a teen about body image would naturally vary, and you know your gymnast the best. Involving young people directly in conversations about body confidence is an important way to communicate boundaries (what is OK, and what is not OK) and understanding helpful pathways of communication (who would I tell if something doesn't feel OK).

Encourage gymnasts to become more aware of the way they speak about bodies – their own and others – ensuring that it is clear that they would not be admonished or “in trouble” as they learn to shift their language.

Support your gymnasts natural body shape, and change over time

Young people’s bodies grow and develop at different ages and at different rates. Even children from the same family can have very different growth patterns. It’s important that young people know that growing and going through puberty means that they should be increasing in both height and weight, that their body shape will change, that’s it’s completely normal, and that it can feel different and strange.

For young people who grow before their friends, team-mates or peers, this can be challenging, and they may need extra support and reassurance.

Be aware of the signs of negative body image

It can sometimes be hard to know if something is “normal” or worrying and you know your son/daughter best. If they appear more critical than usual, start making negative comments about their own body that you haven’t heard before, or start changing their food, eating and exercise patterns then these might be signs they are worried about their body. Even changes we might see as “healthy” (for example, changing their types of snacks) are worthwhile raising, to make sure your gymnast understands how to fuel their body properly for training. If you’re concerned, check in with your son/daughter. They may say “nothing is wrong” but as a parent, it’s worth keeping an eye on any new behaviours.

For children going to school, counselors may be able to offer some support to parents.

Understand our own body story

We all carry our own body image experiences and it’s very common that we too have, and may continue to experience, poor body image through adulthood. One of the most powerful ways we can help athletes – no matter our relationship with them – is to understand ourselves first and work on our own relationship with our body.

Role of the Gymnast

Gymnasts can support each other by watching out for any signs that team-mates might be struggling with body image. You might hear comments, notice changes in mood or behaviour or maybe just think “something’s not quite right.” Know who you can speak to (it might be a parent, coach or another support person) and focus on being a good friend/team-mate.

Another of your roles is to focus on your own training, eating and body shape/size. Aim to appreciate yourself as a unique person with your own body rather than

comparing yourself to others, particularly other gymnasts, peers or people on social media.

The best way you can show appreciation and respect for yourself and your family is to take care of yourself and your body.

Pillar 2 - Language and Communication Matters

Pause and think

It is common that the delivery of a comment / message may be received differently to how it is intended. Be thoughtful and considerate of the personal circumstances, characteristics and experiences of each individual which may influence their ability to understand the intention of your message.

Offer corrections and feedback with kindness and respect

In gymnastics, coaches will be giving corrections about body positioning and we can choose our words which help gymnasts understand what we are trying to say without making them feel bad.

Avoid comparisons

Avoid comparing one person to another, particularly either directly or indirectly implying that one is “better” than another. Conversations about gymnasts’ bodies (regardless of whether this is praise or criticism) in front of other gymnasts, are to be avoided. Comparisons are not constructive and can be harmful to the gymnasts who are being compared, as well as to gymnasts who hear the conversation.

Both praise and criticism can be unhelpful

Both praise and criticism for body appearance, shape, size or weight may be harmful, whether directly to a gymnast, in front of them or about them to other people. Avoid commenting on body shape and size, and instead praise skill, function, effort, perseverance or other attributes that are not appearance-based.

Talk to other adults, if necessary, privately

Avoid conversations with coaches or other staff about bodies or eating habits (either that of gymnasts, or staff) in front of gymnasts. These conversations, if necessary, for performance and / or wellbeing, should be kept private.

Support body trust through interoceptive (inner body) awareness – an ability to feel the body from the inside including cues such as bladder and bowels, hunger, fullness and thirst, discomfort and pain – can be a powerful tool that coaches and

parents can use to support athletes in trusting themselves. Athletes are then more likely to be aware of, and respect their limits, nourish and hydrate themselves well and communicate with coaches and parents about any difficulties they may be experiencing before things become less easily managed.

Ask questions like “how did that feel to you?” or “Talk to me about what you could feel in your body about (eg. your body position)?” or “I trust that you can fuel and hydrate yourself well around training sessions by listening to what your body needs”

Separate body image from body shape and performance – it’s common to believe that body image can be improved by changing one’s body shape or weight and certainly, this can be true on an individual level, particularly if an athlete receives praise and positive feedback. But given what we understand about the potential harms of undertaking behaviours which lead to intentional body change, it’s important we support all athletes, in all bodies, at all ages and stages of development to stay connected to their most natural bodies, particularly during periods of growth. It is also important to send the message that feeling good about one’s body does not rely on it being a particular weight, shape or size and that we don’t need to change our bodies to be more valuable or worthy as people.

Pillar 3 - Supporting Positive Nutrition

Keep conversations about food and eating positive

Comments regarding specific foods, or foods eaten should be minimised or avoided by coaches and staff members who do not have any specific training or qualifications in nutrition. It is recommended that these conversations are conducted by a qualified Dietitian who works with the club, gymnast and family.

Any nutrition information being communicated by an organisation / club (written, verbal) must be evidence-based and sourced from reputable organisations such as Sports Dietitians Australia (www.sportsdietitians.org.au)

Supplements

Any conversations or questions about supplementation including vitamins, minerals, powders, drinks or any non-whole food items should be directed to a Sports Dietitian or medical specialist. Do not discuss, or promote supplements of any description to gymnasts.

Nutrition education and advice should be delivered by an experienced Sports Dietitian only.

If you have questions about food and nutrition, please speak with your club or organisation's Sports Dietitian.

Hydration

It is important that all young people are well hydrated and that gymnasts are supported to be drinking water regularly throughout the day, including before, during and after training. Please speak to the Sports Dietitian if you have questions about how much gymnasts need to be drinking, and refrain from making recommendations which differ from professional advice.

Pillar 4 - Safety in tracking growth and development

Any assessment or tracking over time should only be conducted with a clear rationale, alongside carefully assessing risks and benefits to the gymnast.

Any monitoring or tracking of a gymnast's body (including weight, height, skinfolds or physique assessments such as BIA - Bioelectrical Impedance Analysis) should only be conducted by an **experienced and certified anthropometrist**, after both **education has been provided** and **written consent** from gymnasts and a parent / guardian has been obtained.

If body weight is being measured for the purposes of growth, **height should be taken at the same time and** at a frequency which offers relevant and appropriate information to support the performance or wellbeing-oriented rationale.

Coaches or support staff are not to weigh gymnasts. If there are concerns about a gymnast's body shape, weight or composition, this needs to first be discussed with experienced health professionals (Sports Doctor, Sports Dietitian) before any conversations are conducted with the gymnast and their parents / carers.

Clear lines of communication and a clear reason for intervention or any advice-giving are essential.

1. Education

Prior to any body composition assessments, an information session is to be held with gymnasts and parents (if gymnasts are under 18) to provide a full explanation and rationale of the process, and to seek fully-informed consent.

2. Consent

Consent for body composition assessment is essential. Both gymnast and a parent / guardian must provide written consent for any gymnast under the age of 18. Only the gymnast must provide consent if they are 18 or over.

3. Privacy

All gymnasts have the right to privacy and to have a clear understanding about what, who, how and when their personal data is being shared.

Consent forms must be kept confidentially in a secure, locked location.

4. Communication

Any body-related results (weight, height, medical results) should only be shared with or between coaches if consent from both gymnast and parent (if applicable) is given.

Consent must be sought for every new communication which varies from the consent given. E.g. If results are being requested by another health professional.

Singapore Gymnastics welcomes your questions and feedback on this document, which is intended to be supportive to all members of our communities. Thank you for your role in taking care of our gymnasts.

Appendix A

Consent Form — Weights and Heights

- a. I, (Full name of parent/guardian if athlete is under 18) consent for the measurement of weight and height to be completed on my daughter/son (Name of gymnast).
- b. Consent for the measurement of my weight and height to be completed (If gymnast is over 18) (Name of gymnast).

I understand the following (please tick to indicate understanding):

- the process of taking weight and height (how, when and why it will be done)
- the benefits and risks to my daughter/myself
- how this information will be taken, stored and used both now and in the future
- that I will be informed if / when there are any changes to this process
- that I will be informed if there are any concerns, or queries at any time I understand that I can withdraw this consent at any time.

Signed (parent / guardian, if gymnast is under 18, gymnast to sign if over 18):

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Date:/...../.....