

The Gymnastics Parent Survival Guide

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A Parent's Role

Parents are a very important part of a gymnast's sport experience. Parents are such vital sources of support, both emotionally and financially, and a gymnast could not be successful without such dedicated parents. At the same time, because parents have so much influence, they can make gymnastics more challenging for their child. This guide is meant to encourage you to continue doing the wonderfully supportive and helpful things you do for your child, and also help you understand what behaviors to avoid.

The overall theme of this guide is **BALANCE**. Think about being on a balance beam for a moment. If you lean too far to either extreme (right or left), you fall. You have to find a moderate position right in the middle. As a gymnastics parent, you can do the same. You likely have many wonderful things you do for your child. But too much of any good thing can be counter-productive. On the other hand, doing too little is not helpful to your child. This guide will offer ideas for striking a balance and being an effective gymnastics parent.

Why Children and Adolescents Play Sports

More than 20 million children between the ages of 6 and 16 play organized sports. According to numerous studies, they play because they want to:

- Have fun
- Improve existing skills and learn new ones
- Be with friends and make new ones
- Feel the excitement of competition
- Succeed or win, and
- Exercise or become fit.

Children will continue to be involved in a sport if it meets his or her needs, but if those needs aren't fulfilled, the child may choose to drop out of sport. Children drop out of sport because of:

- Conflict of interest
- Lack of playing time
- Lack of success
- Little skill improvement
- Lack of fun
- Injuries
- Overemphasis on winning
- Competitive stress
- Too much criticism from coaches
- Pressure from parents to achieve

As a parent you can have an impact on increasing the reasons children stay in sports and decreasing the reasons they drop out.

Your Responsibilities as a Gymnastics Parent

1. Find a balance between encouraging your child to learn gymnastics but not pressuring him or her. Allow your child to compete or quit (with some discussion, of course!) as he or she chooses.
2. Understand what your child wants from gymnastics and be supportive in helping him or her achieve those goals. Remember that not every gymnast has the same goals and not every gymnast will have your goals.
3. Set limits on your child's participation. Make gymnastics a part of your and his life, but don't forget to include other important activities too.
4. Make sure the coach is qualified to offer your child the proper and safe training.
5. Keep winning in perspective and help your child do the same. There is more to gymnastics and competition than the outcome of a meet or if he or she places.
6. Help your child set realistic yet challenging personal performance goals rather than focusing exclusively on winning.
7. Help your child understand the valuable lessons sports can teach. Participating in gymnastics is a good way to learn how hard work and persistence can pay off.
8. Help your child be responsible to the team and coaches. Gymnastics participation also is a good place to begin learning to take personal responsibility.
9. Turn your child over to the coach during practice and competition. Don't be your child's coach from the sidelines.
10. Give the coaches any information related to your child's health concerns. Tell them about any allergies, medications, or anything else that could affect her performance.

Being a Role Model

Children learn behaviors from observing other adults and peers in their environment. But they probably learn most from their parents. Therefore, you are likely to see your actions and words in your children. Sometimes your actions are even more powerful than your words. So even if you tell your child one thing, he or she may pay more attention to what you do. For example, if you tell your children to respect others but you don't model that respect, then the message is lost.

It is especially important that you model good sportspersonship. It is crucial that you maintain a healthy attitude toward sport and gymnastics if you expect your child to do so. You can model appropriate attitudes and behaviors by:

- Encouraging all the athletes at practice and at meets
- Showing interest, enthusiasm and support for your child
- Controlling your emotions in frustrating situations
- Abiding by the judges' decisions and helping children to learn how to handle these decisions

- Congratulating the winners
- Looking for positive learning situations in training and meets
- Keeping a positive attitude toward the gymnastics environment
- Staying out of the competition area
- Helping when coaches or club administrators ask
- Thanking the coaches, judges, and administrators at meets

There are also some behaviors to avoid:

- Don't advise the coaches on how to do their jobs
- Don't coach your child during meets
- Don't make insulting comments to competitors, other parents, judges, or coaches
- Don't drink alcohol at practice or meets or come to the gym or field having drunk too much

How to Help Your Child Enjoy Competition

1. Help your Child Set Performance Goals

Performance goals (which emphasize individual skill improvement) are more effective than Outcome goals (which emphasize winning) for two reasons:

- Performance goals are in the gymnast's control
- Performance goals help the gymnast improve

Performance goals should be specific and challenging but not too difficult to achieve. For example, rather than choosing a goal of "Have a good practice today" you might help your child set a goal such as "I will remember to take a deep breath and focus before each routine." This is a mental training goal; you and the coach(es) can help your child set specific skills goals as well. You also can help your child focus on performance goals before meets so that competition can be an enjoyable learning experience. If you can't attend a meet ask performance-related questions of your child. Don't ask "Did you win?" but ask "How was the meet?", "How did you feel you performed?", or ask about a specific performance goal.

2. Develop an Appropriate Winning Perspective

Your motto here should be "Athlete First, Winning Second." Every sport decision you make should be based on what is best for the child, and then what will help him or her perform well. Clearly winning is important—that often is why children become involved in sports. But the desire to win can take on such great proportions that the sport is no longer enjoyable. Sometimes an intense desire to win can produce fear of failure in a child and subsequent low self-esteem. So it is important to tone down the focus on winning and encourage personal performance goals instead. That way a gymnast is

aiming to master his or her own skills or routines rather than making comparisons to others. And, with that approach, often winning takes care of itself.

3. Build your Child's Self Esteem

Building your child's self esteem is one of your most important roles. You will want to let your child know he or she is important and valuable outside of any gymnastics accomplishments. It's easy to say positive things when a child does well, but some parents often struggle with what to say when a child does poorly. Make sure that you show your child unconditional love whatever the outcome of a meet or practice. While you don't want to say, "You did really well!" when this is not the case, a child still needs to know he or she is valuable as a person, not only as an athlete.

4. Emphasize Fun and Skill Development

Without having some fun while doing gymnastics your child may not want to continue. Therefore, FUN is paramount to the sport. Children have fun when they learn new skills, get to compete, find the training environment stimulating, and have balance between positive comments and corrections from coaches. Children do not have fun when they feel pressured to win, when coaches and/or parents constantly criticize them or when they don't learn new skills. A focus on developing skills, rather than winning, is something children can control. When they learn skills, they see improvements and become motivated....and they have fun!

5. Be Involved...But Not Too Involved

Every club needs parents to help make the program successful. Volunteering your time helps your child and gives you the opportunity to meet other parents who have children in the sport. Here are some things you can do:

- Educate yourself about gymnastics and meets
- Look for televised events or locally held competitions and share these events with your child
- Take videos of training or competition for the coaches (with the coaches' approval of course!)
- Offer to assist with running meets if needed
- Help with fundraising
- Serve as a Booster club officer or member
- Get involved with club publicity
- Get involved with local, state or national gymnastics associations

On the flip side of the coin is parental over-involvement. Signs of over-involvement include:

- Being overly concerned with the outcome of the meet
- Spending a lot of time talking to the coach about meets, athlete skill levels, and how the coach conducts training

- Your child asking you *not* to attend competitions or practices
- Requiring your child to attend extra practices or do extra training

Gymnastics Parent Checklist for Success

Consider your answers to the following questions before your child becomes competitive in gymnastics. If you can answer “yes” to each question, the road ahead will likely be much easier for you.

1. *Can you share your child?* You will need to allow another adult (the coach) to guide your child and possibly share some of the admiration your child has directed toward you.
2. *Can you admit your shortcomings?* Since we are all human, we all make mistakes. We might admonish our children too quickly or (negatively) misinterpret their actions. We can’t avoid these types of mistakes, but we can choose how to deal with them. Admitting you are wrong is often a huge challenge, but certainly not impossible. When you model the ability to admit you are wrong, you open communications with your child and provide him or her with a positive role model.
3. *Can you accept your child’s disappointments?* Being a parent means supporting your child through disappointments as well as victories. How will it be for you if your child performs poorly, especially at an important meet? It is easy to let your own frustrations or anger take over when your child really needs you to be there for him or her. You also might find yourself the target of your child’s frustration or anger. Will you be able to understand your child’s reaction and avoid your own emotional reaction? Keeping your emotions in check can provide another positive model for your child.
4. *Can you accept your child’s triumphs?* Although accepting triumphs would seem to go without saying, some parents might find themselves becoming competitive with their own child. It might be difficult to be truly happy for their child when the child is performing better than the parent ever could. Parents also might find themselves overly focusing on minor errors as opposed to overall success when children reach a high level of competition. Look carefully at how you feel about your child’s success.
5. *Can you give your child some time?* When parents lead busy lives, they might find it difficult to squeeze in time to watch their children compete. After all meets often take up a whole weekend. Realize how important it is to a child to have parents supporting him in reaching his goals. On the other hand, don’t promise to go to a meet when you know you will not be able to fit it in. Find a balance so that your needs as well as your child’s needs are both considered.
6. *Can you allow your child to make his/her own decisions?* Sports are a wonderful mechanism for children to learn to take responsibility for themselves and make important decisions. As a parent you are not likely to sit idly as your child’s

gymnastics career unfolds, but you also do not want to make decisions without your child's input. You will likely have ambitions for your child, but the real challenge is looking beyond your hopes and determining what your child really wants. You may find this is the first step in a long process of letting go.

7. *Can you say honestly that you are modeling and providing consistent, positive messages?* Try to step out of your parent roll for a minute and look honestly at your own behaviors related to your child's gymnastics. Are you complementing your child for hard work and perseverance? Are you supporting all athletes in their endeavors? Are you happy for your child when he or she shares an accomplishment with you? If you are truly putting your child's desires above your own, then you will be able to model positive behaviors.

Talking to Your Child after a Disappointing Performance

It's hard to know what to say after a disappointment. Sometimes it might be easier to know what *not* to say. A gymnast doesn't want to hear, "You did great!" when he or she did not. He also does not want to hear, "It wasn't that important" because it was important to him or her. Although you mean well, children can detect superficial comments. Gymnasts are allowed to be unhappy after working so hard for something that slips from reach.

It helps to know your child and what is helpful to him or her. In some cases, he or she may not want to talk about it and the best thing is a hug with time spent together. Another child might want to talk about it and hear "I know you are disappointed, and I'm sorry you did not reach your goals." You won't always say the right thing, but your child will likely let you know it that is the case. And you can begin to learn what he or she needs as you participate in subsequent meets together.

What to Look for in a Good Coach

Coaches come from many different backgrounds and have a variety of types of training. Often none of their formal training is specific to coaching. For example, many were good gymnasts and now coach. But "great gymnast" does not necessarily equal "great coach." (And incidentally, great coaches were not necessarily great gymnasts.) Without any formal training, coaches often coach as they were coached (having no other model to follow) and may have picked up some less-than-helpful strategies. So here are some things to look for. A good coach:

- Knows about gymnastics and children/adolescents. He or she understands about physical and emotional development of boys and girls as different ages. The coach knows what children at different ages are capable or not capable of doing.

- Knows that different gymnasts have different personalities and learning styles. What works for one gymnast might not work for another, and a coach must adjust accordingly.
- Understands each child's motivations for taking up gymnastics. Some gymnasts are very serious about reaching their potential, others are there for the social interactions and camaraderie.
- Is sensitive to children from various social, economic and racial backgrounds. A coach must give instruction to all athletes and help them to feel a part of the team.
- Is a skilled teacher, clever psychologist, and sensible negotiator.
- Thinks about more than just winning. Long term goals of developing physically, psychologically and socially are also important areas.
- Is skilled at teaching the fundamentals of gymnastics. Improving and learning new skills is a major reason kids participate in gymnastics and coaches must be able to address this need.
- Teaches young athletes to enjoy success and learn from disappointment.
- Emphasizes improvement, competence and striving for excellence.
- Helps children develop positive self-images.
- Teaches and models behaviors that reflect good moral attitudes.

Warning Signs of Poor Coaching

Be concerned about the experience your child is getting if the coach:

- Physically, verbally or sexually abuses athletes.
- Criticizes athletes rather than their behaviors.
- Uses profanity.
- Argues with judges or meet officials frequently and excessively.
- Allows cheating.
- Ignores less-skilled athletes.
- Makes winning the only goal.
- Makes kids feel important only when they win.

Questions you can ask the Coach

The following questions will help you learn about the coach and understand the environment where your child will train. To find the answers to these questions you can talk with the coach, observe the coach in the gym or at meets and talk with other parents whose children train under the coach.

Coaching philosophy

- Does the coach keep winning and losing in perspective, or is he or she a win-at-all costs coach?

- To what degree does the coach emphasize fun and skill development and give support as children strive to achieve goals?

Motives

- What are the coach's motives for coaching?
- To what degree does the coach seek personal recognition at the expense of the athletes?

Knowledge

- How well does the coach know the rules and skills of gymnastics?
- How well does the coach know how to teach those skills to young people?

Leadership

- To what degree does the coach permit athletes to share in leadership and decision making, or does he or she call all the shots?
- Is the coach's leadership built on intimidation or on mutual respect?

Self-control

- Does the coach display the self-control expected of athletes, or does he or she fly off the handle frequently?
- When kids make mistakes, does the coach build them up or put them down?

Understanding

- Is the coach sensitive to the emotions of the athletes or so wrapped up in his or her own personal emotions that the kids' feelings are forgotten?
- To what degree does the coach understand the unique make-up of each child, treating children as individuals?

Communications

- Do the coach's words and actions communicate positive or negative feelings?
- How well does the coach know when to talk and when to listen?

Consistency

- Does the coach punish one youngster but not another for the same misbehavior?
- To what degree is the coach hypocritical, saying one thing and then doing another?

Respect

- To what degree do the athletes respect and listen to what the coach says?
- How much do the athletes look up to the coach as a person to emulate?

Enthusiasm

- How enthusiastic is the coach about coaching?
- How well does the coach know how to build enthusiasm among team members?

Summary

Now you have some ideas about how to balance your involvement in your child's gymnastics, how to help him or her enjoy competition and how to choose appropriate coaches. Continue to support your child and help him or her make good decisions. And, above all, enjoy your child's gymnastics experience!