

CASE STUDY

British
Gymnastics
More than a sport

WOMEN
N
SPORT

Should I stay or should I go?

What motivates girls aged 11 to 13 years old to stay in gymnastics?

2016-17



WHAT DID WE WANT TO KNOW?

Previous research undertaken by British Gymnastics shows that many children drop out of the sport by age eight or nine with only 15% of total participants remaining active by the age of 16¹.

Over the last four years, British Gymnastics has focused on developing initiatives to better retain participants in gymnastics with a specific focus on 11 to 13-year-olds. In that period, participation of this age group in clubs has significantly increased, with the majority of these participants being girls. However, British Gymnastics recognises a need to further understand this audience and the factors driving this growth.

Women in Sport undertook a research project to support this need and investigate what influences girls aged 11 to 13 years to keep taking part in gymnastics. The project explored whether products British Gymnastics have put in place, specifically TeamGym and MY Club, are helping to retain female gymnasts and to establish the role significant people such as parents, friends or coaches play within girls' lives at this age.

The project was funded by **Sport England** and conducted in partnership with **British Gymnastics**.

¹ Further Development of the Gymnastics Participant Model, Leeds Metropolitan University 2012.



WHO DID WE TALK TO?

Women in Sport undertook a review of existing research into this target audience, collating insights gathered by British Gymnastics and the wider sport sector to help us understand girls and their relationship with sport.

Interviews were conducted with seven parents. The research¹ took place at three gymnastics clubs in West Sussex, Hampshire and Derbyshire who offer either TeamGym or MY Club sessions to girls aged 11 to 13 years old. The clubs represent larger clubs in dedicated gymnastics facilities as well as smaller clubs in non-dedicated facilities (e.g. school sports centre) with some more competitive than others. Interviews were conducted with seven parents and 16 girls. Further in-depth interviews were held with three head coaches and five junior coaches and an additional 10 girls who had completed a pre-task.



GIRLS

To understand their lives both within and outside of a gymnastics setting, looking closely at their motivations for taking part in sport, key influencers in their lives, and their experiences of TeamGym and MY Club.



CLUB COACHES

To understand their experience of delivering TeamGym and MY Club and explore why they think girls drop out of gymnastics at this age.



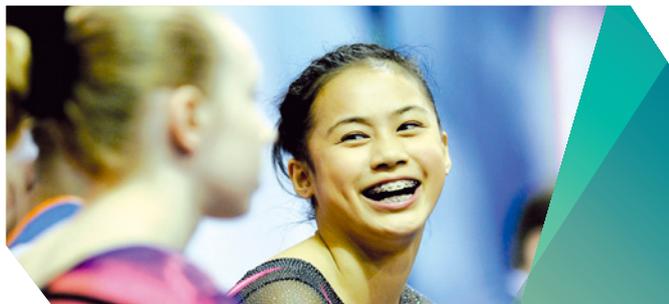
PARENTS

To understand what they believe is happening in their daughters' lives at this age and what they see as the benefits and barriers to gymnastics as their daughters get older.

¹ Further Development of the Gymnastics Participant Model, Leeds Metropolitan University 2012

WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

From existing research², the main motivations for girls to be active between the ages of 11 to 16 is to have fun and to be healthy. Our research for this project however shows that the dominant values and motivations for the girls involved in gymnastics are different:



TO NURTURE FRIENDSHIPS

Friendships are vital to the appeal of gymnastics. Making friends and returning to see them at each session is crucial to keep girls interested and engaged



TO FEEL HEALTHY, STRONG AND FLEXIBLE

Girls are proud of what their bodies can do and they value being active as opposed to leading a passive, sedentary lifestyle.



TO DEVELOP SKILLS

Girls' primary motivations for attending MY Club or TeamGym is to learn new skills, develop and progress. They like being able to show these new skills to their friends and classmates at school.



TO BE CHALLENGED

Girls value the chance to push themselves to do difficult things and overcome fears.

"I like that gymnastics gives me a separate side of life. I have other friends"

"I like learning new moves so that I can show my friends at school.... When we do gym at school I'm able to do stuff that they can't"

² Girls Active Pre intervention Survey Report, Youth Sport Trust, 2015
<https://www.youthsporttrust.org/sites/yst/files/resources/documents/GA%20PI%20Survey%20v4.pdf>



Wider research by Women in Sport² highlights that as girls get older, (moving from ages 11 to 14 to ages 15 to 16) spending time with friends becomes more important and developing skills becomes less so.

Outside of gymnastics it is clear that the girls have complex lives. There are several influences on girls at this age which all interplay and guide the choices they make. From talking to the girls we know that friendships are fundamental in their decision making. Some other themes that also influence them heavily include:

SOCIAL MEDIA

and imagery forms an important part of girls' lives. They highlight their use of social media, most commonly Instagram and Snapchat, as a way of communicating with and keeping up to date with their friends' lives. They like using images as a way of sharing their experiences with friends, both within and outside of the gymnastics setting.

"I use Instagram and Snapchat every day. I like Instagram because you can see what people are up to"

BUSY SCHEDULES

are common for girls outside of school, often filled with activities like music, singing, dance and other sports (netball, football and hockey), as well as fitness related activities. The girls who take part in the more flexible MY Club sessions take part in a wider range of activities than the girls in TeamGym, which requires more training time per week, especially when preparing for competitions.

INFLUENCERS

are identified as a range of different people in the girls' lives including mums, teachers, and coaches, as well as some higher profile role models like gymnasts Simone Biles and Annie Leblanc (12-year-old YouTube gymnast) and blogger Zoella.

BEING HAPPY

is an important state to strive for and the girls emphasise the importance of taking part in activities such as listening to or playing music, dancing and doing gymnastics, as a good way of achieving daily happiness.

"I love music and I also play the piano and sing various songs. This boosts my confidence and gives me hope"

² Girls Active Pre intervention Survey Report 2015 <https://www.youthsporttrust.org/sites/yst/files/resources/documents/GA%20PI%20Survey%20v4.pdf>

BRITISH GYMNASTICS INITIATIVES

British Gymnastics created the MY Club and TeamGym products following research with various groups of participants based on their motivations to take part in gymnastics.

The products are aimed at providing a more social and fun environment while retaining some core elements of progression and skill development within the sport. The aim of the products is to retain young people in gymnastics for longer and we wanted to understand whether the initiatives are having an impact on girls aged 11 to 13 years old and if so why?

MY Club is a 'club within a club' where gymnasts are encouraged to work with a coach to plan their own sessions, decide on what they would like to do and achieve, manage their own development and organise social events.

GIRLS

- Enjoy the relaxed atmosphere that MY Club offers; being able to spend time with their friends.
- Find MY Club accessible for those who have no gymnastics experience.
- Dislike mixed gender sessions due to their issues around body confidence and confidence more generally.
- Like being able to choose which apparatus they do, as they feel self-conscious and fear judgment of others waiting and watching on equipment such as bars and beam.

COACHES

- Like that MY Club is open and inclusive.
- Find it a challenge to strike the right balance between sessions being sociable and maintaining focus and discipline.

PARENTS

- Like the non-competitive approach of MY Club.

TeamGym brings together skills from other gymnastics disciplines and adds a team element, so gymnasts can train, perform and compete alongside friends.

GIRLS

- Like the team element of TeamGym and as a result feel under less pressure when they take part.
- Enjoy being supportive and encouraging of each other emotionally and physically in sessions.
- Like having the option to skip 'harder' equipment like bars and beams.
- Like that TeamGym allows them to still take part in gymnastics but without the hours of commitment expected in competitive training, which makes it easier to fit it into their lives.
- Dislike the challenge of maintaining team spirit when members leave.

COACHES

- Like the team ethos of TeamGym
- Like the more balanced approach which TeamGym offers, which allows it to fit with other activities and school.
- See it is a good tool for retaining mid-level gymnasts.
- Like giving girls some control and a chance to come up with their own ideas.
- Like that it gives positive life lessons such as team work and communication.
- Find it challenging to get the right balance between less formal fun and the commitment still required to take part in the sport.

PARENTS

- Feel it can be challenging if not everyone in the group has the same level of commitment.

"It includes everyone of all abilities... everyone's special... you don't have to shine to be included"

"We're a team and we don't have to compete against each other... I wouldn't like to compete against people in the same group"

INFLUENCE OF THE COACHES



The influence of the coach is the most important factor in keeping girls engaged in all three clubs. Girls respond to coaches who are supportive and encouraging, but who also push them to challenge themselves.

Girls respond well to coaches who:

- Display character and whose style is reflective of the session being delivered.
- Act as positive role models.
- Are welcoming and encouraging.
- Adapt their style to be more relaxed than in other areas of gymnastics, such as competitive artistic gymnastics.
- Understand and respond to the pressures in girls' lives.

The girls, coaches and their parents all agree that MY Club and TeamGym have helped to increase retention in the sport. However, they highlighted some areas to be considered:

- It is difficult to balance the traditional delivery of gymnastics, which focuses heavily on progressions towards skill development, with the more relaxed social environment the girls would like.
- In a formal gymnastics environment, girls are used to being led by their coach as they progress and learn new skills. Therefore, in informal sessions, when they are given the opportunity to provide ideas and proactively make choices, they find it difficult.
- There is limited capacity in clubs and therefore some clubs might find that by retaining more older girls, fewer younger girls can be brought into the club.

Overall we found that the MY Club and TeamGym initiatives have a positive impact on retaining girls aged 11 to 13 in the sport. The coaches, the environment they create and friendships all work in combination with the products to support in girls in continuing with gymnastics.

"We want the best from them, but it's about her ability, it's about allowing them to be the best they can be"

"The coaches are friendly and help you to improve, they don't make you feel awkward. They have lots of tips about how to do things better"

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations will be considered by British Gymnastics in their ongoing programmes of work, such as reviewing their portfolio of gymnastics products, coach education and support, and also when considering how to engage directly with gymnasts.

Women in Sport will continue to offer advice and guidance to British Gymnastics as they consider the development of their programmes to help encourage girls aged 11-13 years to continue with the sport.

WE RECOMMEND THAT BRITISH GYMNASTICS:

- 01** Continues to develop initiatives such as TeamGym and MY Club in line with girls' values and motivations, which help clubs find the right balance between offering skill development and fun.
- 02** Develops more support for coaches who deliver gymnastics to 11-13-year-old girls and offer broader coach development to help them create environments that foster fun and friendship, which appeal to girls who want to access more than the traditional culture of competitive gymnastics.
- 03** Considers how social media can be further used as a tool to keep girls engaged with the sport they love (with appropriate safeguarding restrictions in place).



TESTIMONIAL

David Marshall, Participation Director, British Gymnastics commented:

"We greatly value our partnership with Women in Sport and value the insight this research has provided, giving us greater understanding from girls who've taken part in our targeted programmes, and providing better understanding about their lives, values and motivations, and how we can further develop our programmes to support them to continue within gymnastics. We will now review the products we offer to this age group and use the recommendations provided by Women in Sport to try to ensure girls of this age continue to engage in high quality gymnastics opportunities."

FIND OUT MORE

Women in Sport

womeninsport.org

British Gymnastics

british-gymnastics.org

Sport England

sportengland.org

