Flexibility Training:

Guidance and Advice

Empowering Clubs, Elevating Coaches, Inspiring Gymnasts.

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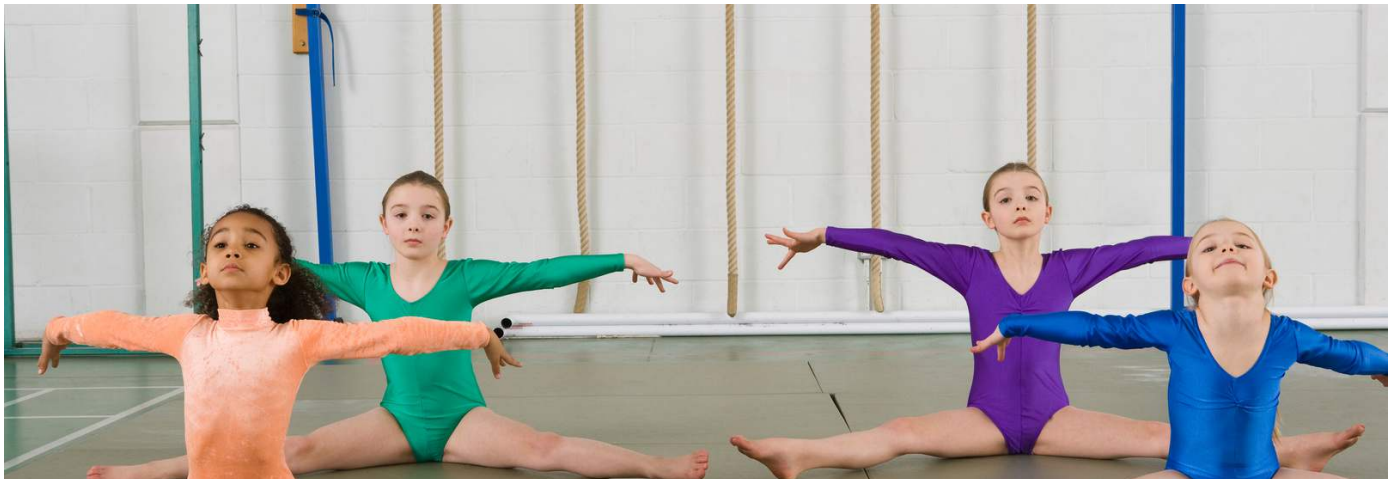
1.Introduction



IGA has developed the following position statement in collaboration with the Institute of Sport. Should you have any questions or concerns after reviewing this document, please reach out to IGA.

In gymnastics, flexibility is a crucial element of the sport, and incorporating a flexibility programme into training is highly recommended. Properly executed flexibility training enhances the range of motion required for various skills, boosts performance potential, and may help reduce the risk of injury. Conversely, improper practices can lead to injuries and potentially have adverse psychological effects. This position statement outlines the current recommendations and best practices for flexibility training in gymnastics. IGA recognises the collective responsibility to safeguard both the physical and psychological well-being of gymnasts.

Flexibility training should always be tailored to the individual gymnast and should never exceed mild pain or discomfort. The gymnast must have the autonomy to stop the training at any time.

1. Key Recommendations

The amount of time dedicated to flexibility training should align with the gymnast's level (e.g., recreational or competitive) and the specific demands of their discipline.

A flexibility program should be tailored to individual abilities and anatomical differences, progressing in a manageable way. It should not exacerbate any existing injuries.

During periods of rapid growth, flexibility may decrease. Coaches and gymnasts should be aware of potential psychological and physical effects and avoid overloading flexibility training to compensate. Focus should be on maintaining rather than improving flexibility.

Flexibility training should always occur in an environment where adults are present, including at least one qualified coach.

Gymnasts should thoroughly warm up their joints and muscles before engaging in flexibility training.

Various methods can be used in flexibility training (e.g., static, active, passive, proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation, dynamic). Recommendations include:

- Coaches should apply only those techniques they have formally learned through educational courses and which fall within their scope of practice.
- Flexibility training should, where possible, be gymnast-led (hands-off approach).
- Any peer-assisted flexibility training should be guided and directly supervised by a qualified coach.

Facilitators should be mindful of their proximity to the gymnast during flexibility training to ensure the gymnast does not feel vulnerable or have their dignity compromised. Awareness of how proximity and handling may be perceived is important.

Open and honest communication (e.g., regarding pain thresholds and the feeling of stretch) should occur throughout flexibility training. Effective communication between coach and gymnast is essential.

Clubs, coaches, and instructors should work to educate gymnasts and their parents/guardians about the importance and best practices for flexibility training in gymnastics.

3. Different Flexibility Training Types

Static Stretching

Static stretching involves holding a stretch in a challenging but comfortable position for a period of time, usually between 15 to 60 seconds. This type of stretching helps to increase the length of the muscles and improve overall flexibility. It's typically performed at the end of a workout or training session to cool down and promote muscle relaxation. For example, reaching down to touch your toes and holding that position is a static stretch.

Active Stretching

Active stretching requires the use of the muscles to hold a stretch position without any external assistance. This type of stretching actively engages the muscles being stretched and strengthens them in the process. For instance, lifting your leg to hip height and holding it there without support is an example of an active stretch. It helps to improve muscle strength and endurance while enhancing flexibility.

Passive Stretching

Passive stretching involves using an external force, such as gravity, a partner, or a prop, to help achieve and maintain a stretch. Unlike static stretching, where you rely on your own muscles to hold the stretch, passive stretching allows for relaxation of the muscles being stretched while an external force takes over. For example, using a strap to pull your leg towards you while lying on your back is a passive stretch.

Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation (PNF) Stretching

PNF stretching is an advanced form of flexibility training that involves both stretching and contracting the targeted muscle group. This technique often includes a cycle of stretching, muscle contraction (isometric hold), and then stretching again. PNF stretching is typically done with a partner or coach and is effective for increasing flexibility and range of motion. An example is the “contract-relax” method, where you stretch a muscle, contract it against resistance for a few seconds, and then stretch it further.

Dynamic Stretching

Dynamic stretching involves moving parts of your body through their full range of motion in a controlled, smooth manner. This type of stretching is typically performed as part of a warm-up routine to prepare the muscles and joints for physical activity. Dynamic stretches are often sport-specific and include movements like leg swings, arm circles, and walking lunges. The goal is to increase blood flow, improve mobility, and activate muscles before engaging in more intense exercise.

Each type of stretching serves a different purpose and can be beneficial depending on the context and goals of the flexibility training. Combining different stretching techniques can help achieve balanced flexibility and overall physical performance.