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KENSINGTON GYMNASTICS MAGAZINE

What children learn through gymnastics in London

LONDON'S FAMILY GYMNASTICS GUIDE

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Kensington Gymnastics Magazine is an independent educational publication created in London for families, gymnasts, and anyone interested in understanding gymnastics more clearly.

This magazine exists to explain — not to persuade. To inform — not to promote.

To bring clarity to a sport that is widely admired, often misunderstood, and rarely explained in calm, accessible language.

Each issue explores gymnastics through science, experience, and culture — from children's movement and development, to anatomy, food, lifelong participation, and the world's most important gymnastics events.

Written from London and shaped by life in a global city, this publication reflects a simple belief: movement matters most when it is understood.

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Stefan Kolimechkov PhD

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Editor's Letter

Dear Readers,

When we began this magazine, our aim was simple: to help families understand gymnastics more clearly.

Gymnastics is often seen from the outside. People notice the cartwheels, the handstands, the competitions and the medals. But much of what matters most in gymnastics is harder to see.

It is hidden in the small muscles that quietly support movement. It is hidden in the food that gives a child enough energy to learn. It is hidden in the sleep and recovery that allow new skills to "click" a few days later. It is hidden in the confidence that grows when a child realises that gymnastics is not only for one type of person, one body, or one personality.

That is what this issue is about.

In these pages, we look beneath the surface of gymnastics. We explore the deeper systems that sit underneath progress: the body, the brain, food, recovery, language, confidence and belonging.

We begin with the hidden muscles around the shoulder and shoulder blade — the parts of the body that help children move with greater control and stability. We then explore why carbohydrates matter so much for growing children, and why recovery is not something that happens separately from learning, but an essential part of it. Often, children become stronger and more coordinated not only during a lesson, but afterwards, when the body and brain have time to respond.

This issue also asks a wider question: who is gymnastics really for?

Across London, many children learn gymnastics not in giant sports centres, but in church halls, school halls and community spaces. We explore why those smaller places can still provide powerful opportunities, and why the quality of the experience matters more than the size of the building.

We also widen our view beyond London and look at the wider world of gymnastics. Some countries become famous for the sport because of history, culture and opportunity, but medals tell only a small part of the story. Children everywhere need the same things: safety, encouragement, time and the feeling that gymnastics belongs to them.

Finally, we continue to challenge some of the most common myths about gymnastics. In this issue, we look at who gymnastics is really for — and why it belongs to boys and girls, quiet children and confident children, sporty children and children who simply want to move.

Like the first issue, this magazine is not written to persuade families to choose gymnastics. It is written to help them understand it. We believe that movement matters most when it is understood — and that when families understand more, children benefit too.

From London, with curiosity and care,

Stefan Kolimechkov PhD
Editor, Kensington Gymnastics Magazine

Editorial Manifesto

Kensington Gymnastics Magazine exists to make gymnastics understandable.

Created and written in London, this publication reflects the discipline, tradition, and intellectual confidence of the city it serves. Its purpose is to explain gymnastics clearly, thoughtfully, and responsibly — drawing on science, professional experience, and respect for the people who practise it.

We believe that understanding matters more than instruction, and clarity more than opinion. Gymnastics is complex by nature, and simplification without explanation often leads to confusion rather than confidence. Our role is not to prescribe, but to illuminate.

Where scientific evidence exists, this magazine draws on it carefully and conservatively. Where evidence is evolving, uncertainty is explained honestly rather than ignored. Where experience matters, it is valued — without exaggeration or urgency.

This magazine is written with patience. Knowledge is built gradually, not rushed. Issue by issue, our aim is to support better conversations around movement, development, and lifelong participation in gymnastics.

In this issue: we look beyond first impressions and explore who gymnastics is really for, how children learn, and why understanding the sport matters as much as participating in it.

FEATURE

What Gymnastics Teaches Children Before Skills Appear

An everyday observation many families recognise
Many parents notice something quietly reassuring over time.

Children who move well often seem to:

- settle into activities more easily
- follow instructions with less friction
- adapt more calmly when tasks change
- appear more confident in unfamiliar situations

This isn't usually described in scientific language. Parents might say a child is "more focused", "better at listening", or "more settled in their body". These observations are rarely dramatic, and they don't appear overnight. They emerge gradually, often alongside regular participation in structured movement activities such as gymnastics.

Importantly, this isn't about intelligence, talent, or behaviour labels. It's not about turning movement into a tool for academic performance. And it's certainly not about expecting children to be quieter, more compliant, or more productive.

What parents are often noticing is something more fundamental: the way a child organises their body is closely linked to the way they organise their attention, effort, and responses to the world around them.

For families raising children in a busy, stimulating environment, these small changes matter. They shape daily life far more than any individual skill or achievement.

Why this matters
When parents think about gymnastics, they often focus on visible outcomes — skills, routines, and physical ability. Less obvious are the quieter foundations being developed underneath: coordination, control, and the ability to manage effort and attention.

In busy, cognitively demanding environments, these foundations matter. They shape how children move through daily life, respond to challenge, and adapt to new situations. Understanding what gymnastics may be supporting beneath the surface helps families interpret progress more calmly — and recognise value even when change is not immediately visible.

What scientists mean by coordination and executive functions
To understand why researchers are interested in this connection, it helps to translate a few key terms into everyday language.

Gross-motor coordination
Gross-motor coordination refers to how well a child organises large movements of the body. It includes:

- balance and postural control
- timing and rhythm of movement
- the ability to sequence actions smoothly
- adjusting movement when conditions change

Good coordination doesn't mean performing advanced skills. It means moving with control, awareness, and adaptability — whether running, jumping, balancing, or transitioning between positions.

In gymnastics, coordination is constantly challenged. Children are asked to:

- place their body precisely in space
- control movement through different shapes
- start, stop, and change direction intentionally

These demands are not about difficulty. They are about organisation.

Executive functions
Executive functions are a group of mental skills that help children manage their actions and attention. They include:

- focusing and sustaining attention
- controlling impulses
- remembering and following instructions
- planning and adjusting behaviour when something doesn't work

These skills develop gradually throughout childhood. They are influenced by many factors — including environment, sleep, stress, relationships, and experience.

Crucially, executive functions are not fixed traits. They are developing systems, shaped over time through repeated, meaningful challenges.

FEATURE

Why movement and thinking develop together

From a scientific perspective, the brain and body do not develop in isolation.

Coordinated movement places demands on the nervous system that go beyond muscles and joints. When a child learns to control their body, they are also learning to:

- anticipate what comes next
- correct mistakes in real time
- regulate effort and attention
- stay engaged through challenge

These processes mirror the same systems involved in executive functions.

This is why researchers are increasingly interested in activities that combine physical movement with:

- structure
- sequencing
- feedback
- and gradual progression

Gymnastics is not unique in this respect, but it offers a particularly clear example. Movements are broken down, repeated with intention, and refined over time. Children are encouraged to notice how their body feels, where it is in space, and how small adjustments change the outcome.

In everyday terms, movement becomes a learning environment.

For children growing up in cognitively demanding settings — where attention is constantly pulled in different directions — this kind of embodied learning may play a valuable supporting role. Not by accelerating development, but by supporting the systems that help children manage complexity more confidently.

What this gymnastics study actually examined

The study by Silvestri et al. (2025) set out to explore a question that sits at the intersection of movement and development:

How are children's movement coordination and certain aspects of cognitive organisation related — and does gymnastics training appear to influence this relationship?

To investigate this, the researchers compared preadolescent gymnasts with children of a similar age who were engaged in other organised sports. The aim was not to rank sports or declare a "best" activity, but to examine whether the specific movement demands of gymnastics were associated with differences in coordination and executive functioning.

The researchers assessed:

- gross-motor coordination, using standardised motor tests that examine balance, timing, and movement control

- executive functions, including attention, inhibition, and cognitive flexibility, through age-appropriate assessment tools

All measurements were conducted within established research protocols. Importantly, the study focused on associations, not cause-and-effect claims. This distinction matters, especially when translating research for families.

The children involved were not elite performers, nor were they selected based on exceptional ability. They were young athletes participating in structured sport within a typical developmental range — a detail that makes the findings more relevant to everyday families.

What the researchers found — explained carefully

The study found that children practising gymnastics tended to demonstrate:

- stronger gross-motor coordination profiles, particularly in tasks requiring balance, sequencing, and control
- associations between coordination and certain executive function measures, suggesting that children who organised movement more effectively also tended to perform better on selected cognitive tasks

These findings do not suggest that gymnastics "improves intelligence" or guarantees better academic performance. What they suggest is more subtle — and more useful.

Gymnastics places repeated demands on:

- planning movement before executing it
- adjusting actions mid-task
- maintaining attention while controlling the body
- responding calmly to feedback and correction

Over time, these demands may support the development of systems that help children manage both physical and cognitive challenges.

It is also important to note what the study did not show. It did not claim that gymnastics replaces other forms of learning, nor that more training automatically leads to better outcomes. The researchers were careful to frame their findings within the limits of developmental science.

For families, this restraint is a strength rather than a weakness. It reflects how child development actually works — gradually, unevenly, and in response to many interacting influences.

Why this matters for families raising children in London

To understand why this research resonates particularly strongly with London families, it helps to consider the environment children are growing up in.

Modern city life places high cognitive demands on children from an early age.

School routines, travel, noise, schedules, screens, and constant transitions all require attention, regulation, and adaptability. At the same time, opportunities for free, unstructured movement are often reduced.

In this context, the quality of movement experiences becomes increasingly important.

Gymnastics fits urban life in a distinctive way. It:

- operates effectively in compact spaces
- offers structured, progressive challenges
- requires attention, sequencing, and control
- emphasises body awareness rather than speed or contact

From a developmental perspective, this combination is meaningful. It creates an environment where children are asked to coordinate their bodies carefully, respond to instruction, and adjust effort — all within a setting that values precision and patience.

For London families, the relevance of the Silvestri study lies not in comparison or competition, but in understanding what kinds of movement experiences support children living in cognitively demanding environments.

The implication is not that gymnastics is the only answer, nor that children should do more.

Rather, it highlights why structured, well-coached movement — when delivered appropriately — can play a supportive role in helping children feel more organised, confident, and capable in their daily lives.

What families may notice over time — without promises

When parents read research like this, it's natural to ask: what might this look like in real life?

The most important point to make first is that developmental changes are subtle, gradual, and individual. There are no guarantees, timelines, or checklists. Children do not suddenly become more focused or organised because they attend a class. Development doesn't work that way.

That said, families whose children participate in well-structured gymnastics programmes sometimes describe small, cumulative changes such as:

- increased confidence in moving their body through unfamiliar situations
- smoother transitions between activities
- greater tolerance for challenge and correction
- improved awareness of posture, balance, and control
- a calmer response when tasks require effort or patience

These observations are not signs of performance or achievement. They are signs of organisation — of a child learning how to manage their body, attention, and effort together.

It's also important to acknowledge what families may not notice:

- there may be plateaus
- some phases may feel awkward or inconsistent
- progress may slow during growth spurts
- confidence can fluctuate

None of these indicate failure or lack of benefit. They are part of normal development, especially in activities that demand coordination and control.

For parents, the value of understanding studies like Silvestri et al. lies not in expectation-setting, but in interpretation. It helps families recognise that development is often happening beneath the surface, even when visible progress feels uneven.

Coordination before complexity — a central principle of gymnastics

One of the clearest messages to emerge from both gymnastics practice and developmental research is this:

Coordination comes before complexity.

In gymnastics, children do not begin with difficult skills. They begin by learning:

- how to hold their body in space
- how to control balance and alignment
- how to sequence simple actions smoothly
- how to listen, respond, and adjust

These foundations are revisited constantly. Even as skills become more complex, the underlying requirement remains the same: organised movement.

The Silvestri study reinforces this principle from a scientific perspective. It suggests that when children develop strong coordination, they are also supporting systems related to attention, planning, and self-regulation. Not because gymnastics is "special", but because it demands intentional movement rather than reactive motion.

This is why good gymnastics programmes resist rushing. They prioritise:

- repetition with purpose
- progressions that match readiness
- corrections that focus on quality rather than speed
- patience over pressure

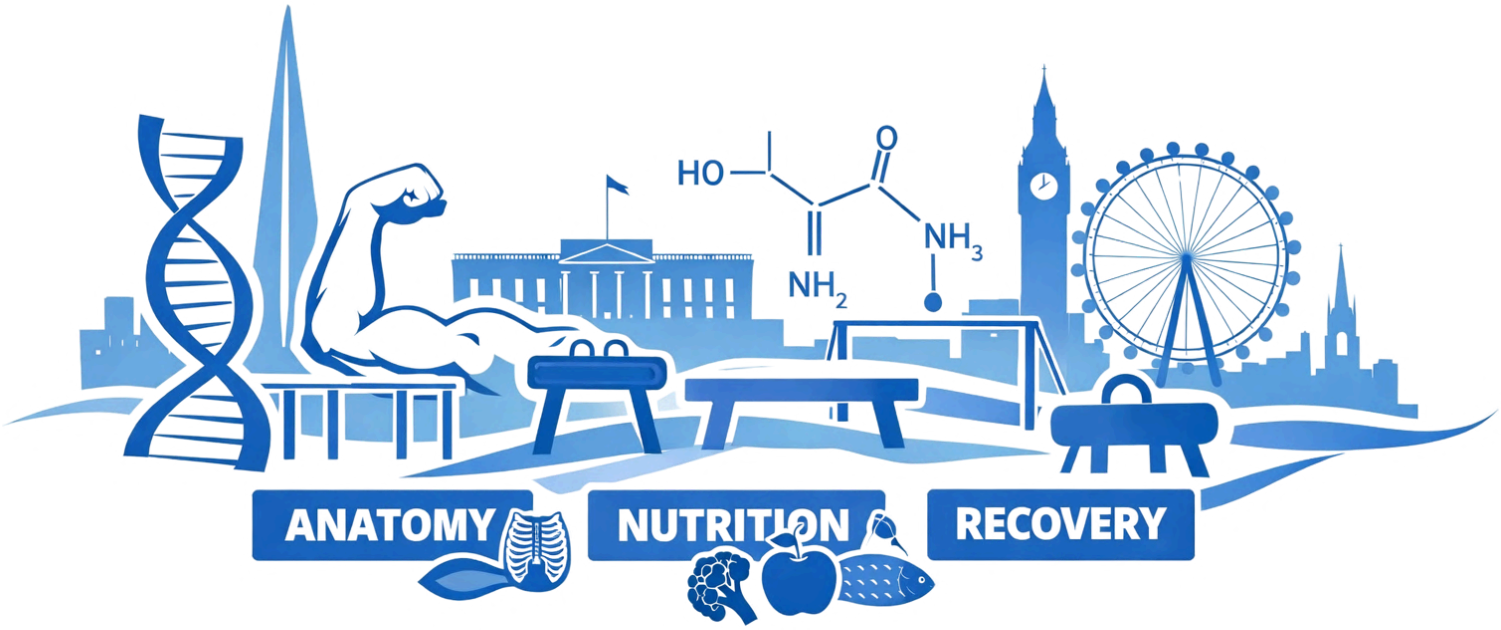
For families, this reframes how progress is understood. Progress is not defined by how many skills a child collects, how quickly they move through levels, or how impressive routines appear. It is defined by how well a child can organise themselves — physically and mentally — as demands increase.

FEATURE

In a world that often rewards speed, early achievement, and visible outcomes, this perspective can feel countercultural. But it is also what allows gymnastics to function as a form of movement education rather than mere performance training.

Reference: Silvestri, F., Campanella, M., Marcelli, L., Ferrari, D., Gallotta, M. C., Hamdi, F., Albuquerque, M. R., Bertollo, M., & Curzi, D. (2025). Gross-Motor Coordination and Executive Functions Development in Soccer and Artistic Gymnastics Preadolescent Female Athletes. Journal of Functional Morphology and Kinesiology, 10(1), 85. https://doi.org/10.3390/jfmk10010085

Summary
In a city like London — where children navigate busy schools, crowded transport, constant stimulation, and tightly structured days — the ability to organise oneself matters deeply. Gymnastics, when delivered with patience and care, offers more than visible skills; it offers repeated opportunities to plan, adjust, balance, and persist within challenge. Research such as that of Silvestri and colleagues helps clarify what this means in developmental terms: movement quality and cognitive organisation are not separate journeys. For families, this reframes progress. The most meaningful question may not be how quickly a child advances through skills, but how confidently they are learning to manage their body, attention, and effort within the demands of modern urban life.



FOUNDATIONS

Gymnastics Anatomy

Understanding the shoulder blade in growing gymnasts

The Shoulder Blade: The Hidden Platform
When parents think about “strong shoulders”, they often picture arms.

In gymnastics, the real foundation sits slightly deeper and slightly wider: the shoulder blade.

The shoulder blade, or scapula, is not fixed in place. It glides across the ribcage, guided by a network of muscles that coordinate continuously during movement.

Every time a child supports their body weight through their hands, hangs from a bar, or reaches overhead, the scapula must move smoothly while remaining controlled.

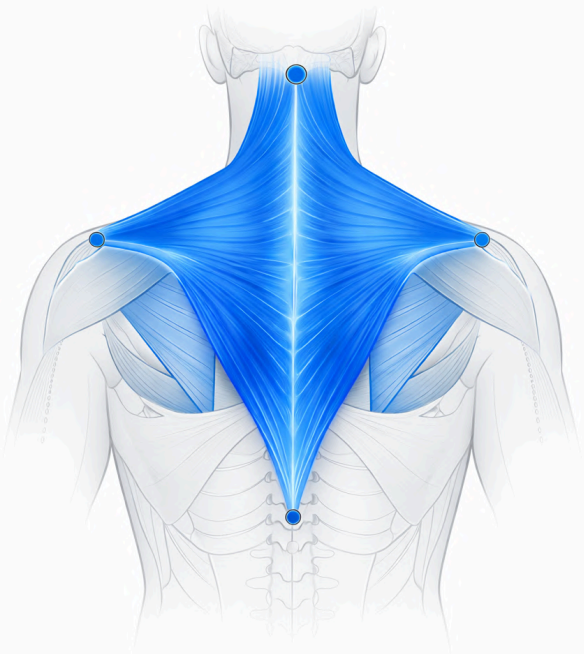
If the shoulder blade is organised, the arm can work safely.
If it is not, the shoulder joint itself absorbs more stress.

For growing bodies, that distinction matters.

Gymnastics does not build shoulder stability through isolated drills. It develops it gradually through shapes, crawling patterns, supported holds, and progressive weight-bearing tasks.

FOUNDATIONS

Understanding this system helps families recognise sensible progressions and calm, structured coaching.



MUSCLE SPOTLIGHT

Trapezius

Where it sits

The trapezius is a large, diamond-shaped muscle covering the upper back. It spans from the base of the skull down to the middle of the spine and extends outward to the shoulder blade.

It has three functional regions: upper, middle, and lower fibres.

What it does

- Upper fibres assist with elevation and upward rotation
- Middle fibres help retract the scapula
- Lower fibres contribute to depression and controlled upward rotation

Together, these fibres guide how the shoulder blade moves during overhead activity.

In gymnastics

The trapezius helps organise the shoulder blade when arms lift overhead.

You will see it working in:

- Wall-supported handstand shapes
- Planks and box supports
- Active hanging positions

The lower fibres are especially important in keeping shoulders controlled rather than excessively shrugged.

Common misunderstanding

Shrugging the shoulders is not the same as stabilising them.
True stability involves coordinated movement, not tension alone.

Movement Lens

When the trapezius is well-coordinated, children often look steadier overhead. Their shoulders do not creep towards their ears, and their handstand shapes appear calmer and more organised.

Parent takeaway

In a well-coached class, overhead positions look controlled rather than strained.

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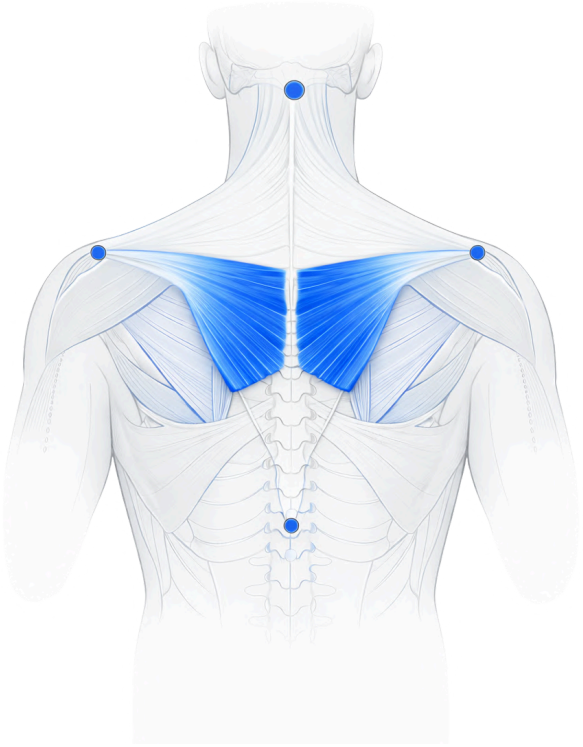

MUSCLE SPOTLIGHT

Rhomboids (Rhomboideus major et minor)

Where they sit

The rhomboids sit between the shoulder blades, beneath the trapezius.

What they do

They draw the shoulder blades gently inward (retraction) and contribute to upper-back stability.

In gymnastics

They assist in maintaining organised shoulder positioning during:

- Active hangs
- Ring basics
- Support transitions

They help prevent excessive rounding of the upper back.

Common misunderstanding

Good posture is not forcing the chest forward. It is controlled alignment supported by coordinated muscle activity.

Movement Lens

When the rhomboids contribute effectively, hanging positions appear more stable and transitions look smoother rather than collapsing through the shoulders.

Parent takeaway

Subtle upper-back control is a sign of developing strength and coordination.

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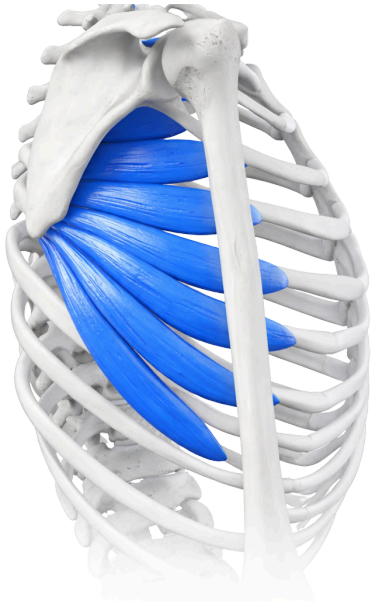


MUSCLE SPOTLIGHT

Serratus Anterior (Serratus anterior)

Where it sits

The serratus anterior wraps from the ribs around to the inner border of the shoulder blade.

What it does

- Protracts the scapula (moves it slightly forward)
- Assists upward rotation
- Prevents “winging” of the shoulder blade

It helps the shoulder blade stay flush against the ribcage during movement.

In gymnastics

This muscle is essential for active straight-arm support. It allows children to push the floor away rather than sink into their shoulders.

You will see it working in:

- Planks
- Bear walks
- Handstand preparation
- Cartwheel entry

Common misunderstanding

Shoulder stability does not come from the upper back alone. The serratus anterior plays a central role in organised support.

Movement Lens

When serratus anterior is well-coordinated, children look lighter in support. They appear to push tall through their shoulders rather than collapsing downward.

Parent takeaway

A stable shoulder blade often makes weight-bearing positions look confident rather than effortful.

FOUNDATIONS

MUSCLE SPOTLIGHT

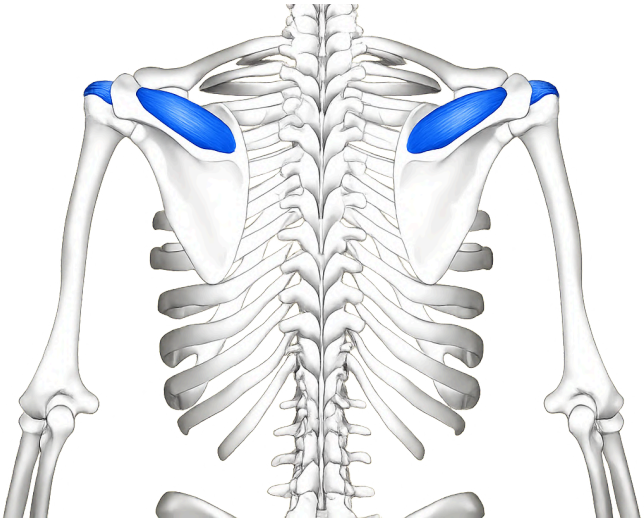
The Rotator Cuff

The Deep Stabilisation System

Beneath the larger shoulder muscles lies a smaller group of **four muscles** known collectively as the rotator cuff.

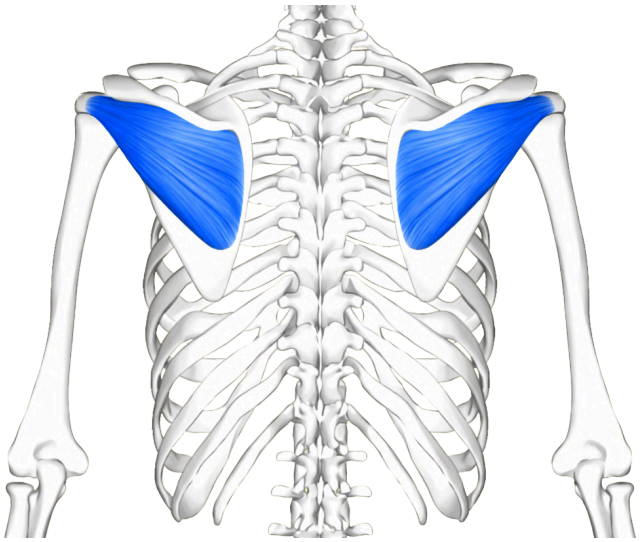
Their role is precision rather than power.
They help keep the head of the upper arm bone centred within the shoulder socket during movement.

In growing gymnasts, this deep stability is particularly important when arms move overhead or when weight is transferred through the hands.



Supraspinatus
Initiates the early phase of arm lifting and contributes to joint compression for stability.

In gymnastics
It supports the first phase of arm elevation and assists during transitions into hanging or support positions.



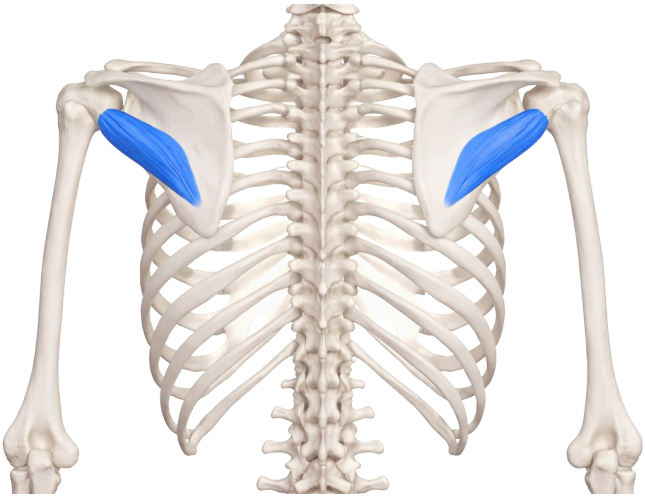
Infraspinatus
Supports external rotation and posterior shoulder stability.

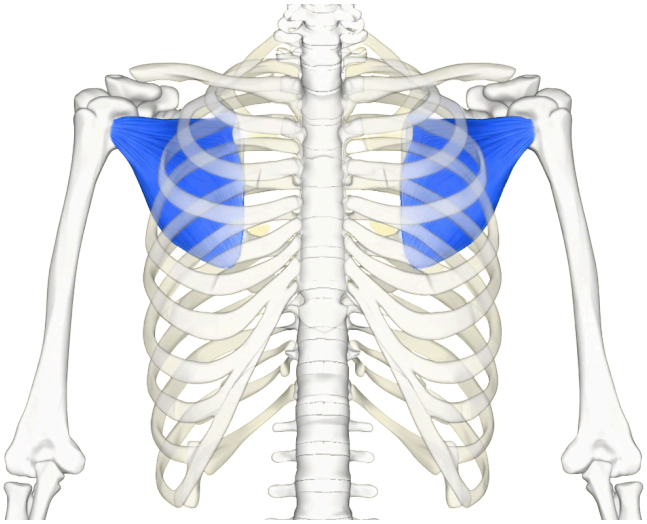
In gymnastics
It helps maintain organised overhead positioning when the arms are bearing load.

FOUNDATIONS

MUSCLE SPOTLIGHT

The Rotator Cuff





Teres Minor
Assists external rotation and fine control of shoulder positioning.

In gymnastics
It contributes to controlled overhead support and smooth transitions.

Subscapularis
Provides internal rotation and anterior shoulder stability.

In gymnastics
It helps prevent the shoulder from drifting forward under load.

Movement Lens
Deep stability: When the rotator cuff functions well, overhead positions appear centred rather than strained. The shoulder looks stable and controlled, even during weight-bearing.

Parent takeaway
Where Children Commonly Compensate
During early development, you may notice:

- Shoulders collapsing towards the ears
- Shoulder blades lifting away from the ribcage
- Excessive arching of the lower back during support
- Bent elbows replacing scapular control

These patterns are common during learning.
They are not signs of failure — they are part of coordination development. A structured programme adjusts progressions rather than pushing intensity.

FOUNDATIONS

MUSCLE SPOTLIGHT

The Rotator Cuff

Training Notice

Exercises and support positions should be adapted to the individual's age, experience, and readiness. Gymnastics skills involving weight-bearing through the arms require qualified supervision and appropriate equipment. Stop if pain occurs and seek professional advice if symptoms persist.

Research Context

Scapular coordination and controlled progressive loading are widely recognised as central to overhead sports and youth shoulder health.

Kibler WB, Sciascia A, Wilkes T. (2012). Scapular dyskinesis and its relation to shoulder injury. Journal of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons.

FOUNDATIONS

Food, Growth & Gymnastics

Carbohydrates: Why Growing Gymnasts Need Energy

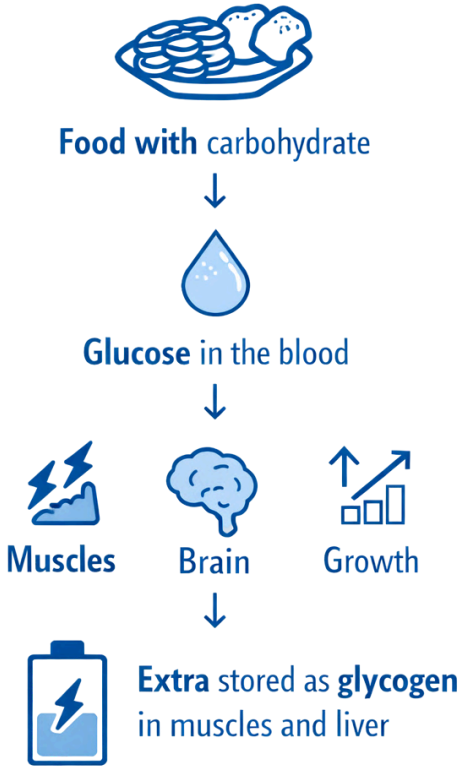
When families think about food and gymnastics, they often think first about protein. Protein seems to receive all the attention in sport. Yet for most primary school-aged gymnasts, the nutrient that matters most during a normal school and gymnastics day is usually carbohydrate.

Carbohydrates are the body's main source of energy. They help children think in the classroom, concentrate during homework, and still have enough energy left for gymnastics in the evening. They are especially important for children because children are not small adults. A growing body needs energy not only for movement, but also for growth, learning, and development.

For many London families, this is very familiar. A child leaves school tired, travels across London to gymnastics, perhaps eats only a small snack on the way, and then suddenly seems flat, moody, or lacking concentration in class. Often the problem is not motivation. The child may simply need more energy.

What Are Carbohydrates?

Carbohydrates are one of the three main nutrients in food, alongside protein and fat. Their main job is to provide energy. When children eat carbohydrates, the body breaks them down into glucose. Glucose travels in the blood and is used by the brain, muscles, and other organs as fuel.



Some of this glucose is used immediately. The rest is stored in the muscles and liver in a form called glycogen. Glycogen is like the body's "energy reserve" for later.

Children use carbohydrate constantly:

- during the school day
- when running and playing
- during gymnastics
- while thinking and concentrating
- even while growing

Because of this, active children often need more carbohydrate than many adults realise.

Simple and Complex Carbohydrates

Not all carbohydrates behave in exactly the same way.

Simple Carbohydrates

Simple carbohydrates are broken down quickly. They provide fast energy.

Examples include:

- fruit
- milk
- yoghurt
- honey
- jam
- white bread
- fruit juice

These foods can be useful before gymnastics or when a child needs quick energy.

Complex Carbohydrates

Complex carbohydrates are broken down more slowly. They provide steadier, longer-lasting energy.

Examples include:

- porridge
- oats
- wholegrain bread
- potatoes
- rice
- pasta
- beans
- breakfast cereals with less added sugar

These foods help children stay full for longer and provide more stable energy throughout the day.

A child who eats only quick, sugary foods may feel energetic for a short time and then suddenly become tired again. A child who has more complex carbohydrates earlier in the day often has more consistent energy for school and gymnastics.

Quick Energy	Longer-Lasting Energy
Banana	Porridge
White toast with jam	Wholegrain toast
Fruit juice	Oats
Crackers	Rice
Yoghurt	Pasta
Dried fruit	Potatoes

Best for most children: combine one fast-energy food with one slower-energy food.

Why Fibre Matters Too

Fibre is a type of carbohydrate that the body cannot fully digest.
It does not provide much energy, but it helps in other ways:

- supports healthy digestion
- helps children feel comfortably full
- slows down how quickly energy is released
- supports gut health
-

Foods rich in fibre include:

- fruit
- vegetables
- oats
- wholegrain bread
- beans
- brown rice

However, balance matters. A child who fills up only on very high-fibre foods before gymnastics may feel too full or uncomfortable during class. For this reason, many children do better with lighter, easier-to-digest foods shortly before training.

Why the Brain Needs Carbohydrate

The brain uses glucose as its main source of fuel.
This is one reason why some children struggle to concentrate after school or during gymnastics when they have not eaten enough. They may seem distracted, emotional, or low in energy, when in reality they are simply under-fuelled.

Gymnastics requires concentration as much as movement. A child learning a cartwheel, handstand, or sequence on the beam needs to:

- listen carefully
- remember instructions
- react quickly
- coordinate their body

All of these depend on the brain having enough energy.
Food supports learning, not only training.

FOUNDATIONS

Why Carbohydrates Matter in Gymnastics

Gymnastics may not look like a long-distance sport, but it still uses a great deal of energy.

Children in gymnastics are constantly:

- running
- jumping
- climbing
- supporting their body weight
- repeating skills
- thinking and concentrating

Carbohydrates help provide the energy for all of this.
If a child does not eat enough carbohydrate, they may:

- seem unusually tired during class
- lose concentration more quickly
- become irritable or emotional
- struggle to finish the class strongly
- say that their legs “feel heavy”
- appear less confident than usual

This does not mean that every child needs a “sports diet”. Most young gymnasts simply need regular meals and snacks that provide enough energy across the day.

Foods That Give Fast Energy and Slower Energy

Faster Energy

Banana
Toast with jam
Fruit juice
Crackers
White bread sandwich
Yoghurt
Dried fruit

Longer-Lasting Energy

Porridge
Wholegrain toast
Oats
Rice
Pasta
Potatoes
Beans

The best approach is often to combine the two.
For example:

- banana and porridge
- toast with peanut butter
- yoghurt and fruit
- sandwich and fruit

This gives children some quick energy straight away and some steadier energy for later.

What Families Often Misunderstand

"Carbohydrates are unhealthy."
Carbohydrates are not bad. They are the body's preferred source of energy, especially for growing children.

"My child does not need carbohydrates because they only do one gymnastics class."
Even one class after a full school day can require a great deal of energy.

"Healthy eating means eating less bread, rice, or pasta."
For children, eating too little can sometimes be more of a problem than eating too much. Growth comes before performance.

"If my child is tired, they probably just need more sleep."
Sleep is important, but tiredness can also happen when a child has not eaten enough during the day.

London Reality Box

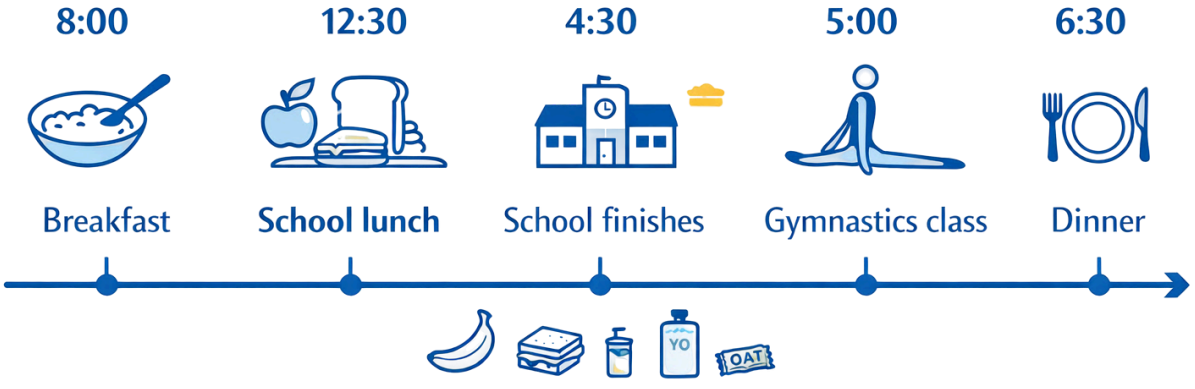
From school to gymnastics in London

Many children travel straight from school to gymnastics. By the time they arrive at class, it may have been several hours since lunch.

For children attending classes in Kensington, Chelsea, or Knightsbridge after school, a small snack on the way can make a huge difference.
Simple ideas include:

- banana
- small sandwich
- oat bar
- yoghurt pouch
- crackers and cheese
- fruit and a few rice cakes

The goal is not a 'perfect' snack; it is simply to help children arrive at gymnastics with enough energy to enjoy and benefit from the class.



Snack on the way to gymnastics

Best for most children: *combine one fast-energy food with one slower-energy food.*

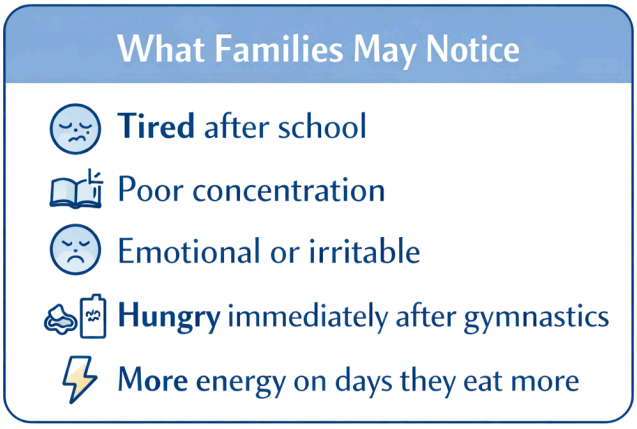
FOUNDATIONS

What Families May Notice

Children who are not eating enough carbohydrate may sometimes:

- become tired very quickly after school
- ask for food immediately after gymnastics
- lose concentration during class
- seem unusually emotional or irritable
- struggle more during evening activities
- have much more energy on days when they eat better

These signs do not necessarily mean that anything is wrong. They are simply reminders that growing children often need more energy than adults expect.



Why This Matters

Healthy eating in gymnastics is not about strict rules or avoiding certain foods. It is about helping children have enough energy to grow, think, move, and enjoy being active.

For primary school-aged gymnasts, carbohydrates are usually the most important source of that energy. When children eat enough across the day, they often feel more confident, more focused, and more able to enjoy gymnastics.

Growth comes before performance. The goal is consistency, not perfection.

Looking Ahead

In the next issue, we will explore protein: how it helps build the growing body, why children need it for growth and repair, and why most young gymnasts need much less protein than social media often suggests.

FOUNDATIONS

Recovery in Gymnastics

Why children become stronger after training, not only during it

When families think about improvement in gymnastics, they often picture the class itself: the practice, the shapes, the repetitions, the concentration.

But children do not become stronger, more coordinated, or more confident only while they are training.

Much of that change happens afterwards.

Recovery is the process through which the body and brain adapt to what happened during training. After a gymnastics class, the muscles begin to repair, the nervous system organises what has been learned, and the brain strengthens new movement patterns.

In Issue 2, we have already explored two parts of this process:

- the anatomy of the shoulder blade and the muscles that support stable movement
- the importance of carbohydrates in giving growing children enough energy

Those two ideas connect directly to recovery. Muscles can only adapt if they have been used sensibly and then given enough time, energy, and rest afterwards. The shoulder blade becomes more stable not simply because a child practised a shape once, but because the body has time to respond to that practice. Carbohydrates help provide the energy that allows that response to happen.

Learning continues after the class ends

Gymnastics is a learning sport. Children are not simply exercising; they are learning how to organise their bodies in space.

A child may spend a lesson practising a wall handstand shape, an active hang, or a forward roll. During the class, the movement may still look uncertain. Yet the next week, the same child may suddenly appear steadier and more confident.

Parents often describe this as the skill having “clicked”.

In reality, that change may happen because the brain continued processing the movement after the session finished. Recovery is not only physical. It is also neurological: the brain gradually becomes more efficient at organising the pattern it has already practised.

For growing children, this is especially important. Their bodies and brains are developing quickly. They often need repetition, but they also need space between repetitions.

More practice is not always better. Sometimes, better recovery is what allows learning to appear.

Why sleep matters so much
Of all the parts of recovery, sleep is probably the most important.

During sleep, children's bodies release hormones linked with growth and repair. The brain also strengthens memory, including "movement memory" — the ability to remember and reproduce physical skills more easily.

A child who sleeps well may find it easier to:

- concentrate in class
- remember new skills
- stay emotionally calm
- recover between sessions
- cope with the physical demands of growth and gymnastics

By contrast, when children are very tired, they may appear less coordinated, more emotional, or less enthusiastic about gymnastics. Sometimes this is interpreted as a motivation problem. In reality, it may simply be a recovery problem.

This matters particularly in London, where children often balance school, homework, commuting, and evening activities within long, busy days. The combination of a full school day and an after-school gymnastics class can be demanding, even when a child loves the sport.

Why This Matters
Gymnastics does not only change children during the lesson. It changes them afterwards — when the body repairs, when the brain processes movement, and when growing children are given enough sleep, food, and time to adapt.

For families, this can be reassuring. If a child seems tired after class, or if progress appears slow for a few weeks, this does not necessarily mean that something is wrong. In many cases, it simply means that the body is still doing its work.

Growth is not instant. Recovery is part of the process.

FOUNDATIONS

What families often misunderstand

"Children recover very quickly, so they do not really need recovery."
Children often recover differently from adults, but that does not mean recovery is unimportant. Growing bodies still need rest, regular food, and enough sleep.

"If my child enjoys gymnastics, more classes are always better."
Enjoyment matters, but children still need time between sessions to adapt. More classes only help when they are matched by enough recovery.

"If my child is tired, they are probably just being lazy."
Tiredness in children may have many causes, but one of the simplest is that they are under-recovered: not enough sleep, not enough food, or simply too many demands in one day.

London Reality Box

A busy London day
A child may wake up early, spend a full day at school, travel across London, attend gymnastics in Kensington, Chelsea, or Knightsbridge, eat dinner late, finish homework, and then go to bed.

By the end of the day, that is a great deal for a growing body and brain.
When children seem more emotional, less coordinated, or more tired during evening classes, it does not necessarily mean they are losing interest. Sometimes they simply need a little more recovery built into the week: an earlier bedtime, a better snack after school, or a quieter evening between activities. This London rhythm is one reason why high-quality, well-structured classes often work better than trying to fit in more and more training.

What Families May Notice

Children who are not recovering well may sometimes:

- become unusually tired after gymnastics
- seem more emotional or irritable
- struggle to concentrate in class or at school
- find previously easy skills suddenly harder
- complain that their arms or shoulders feel "heavy"
- lose enthusiasm for a short period
- appear much more energetic after a good night's sleep or a quieter weekend

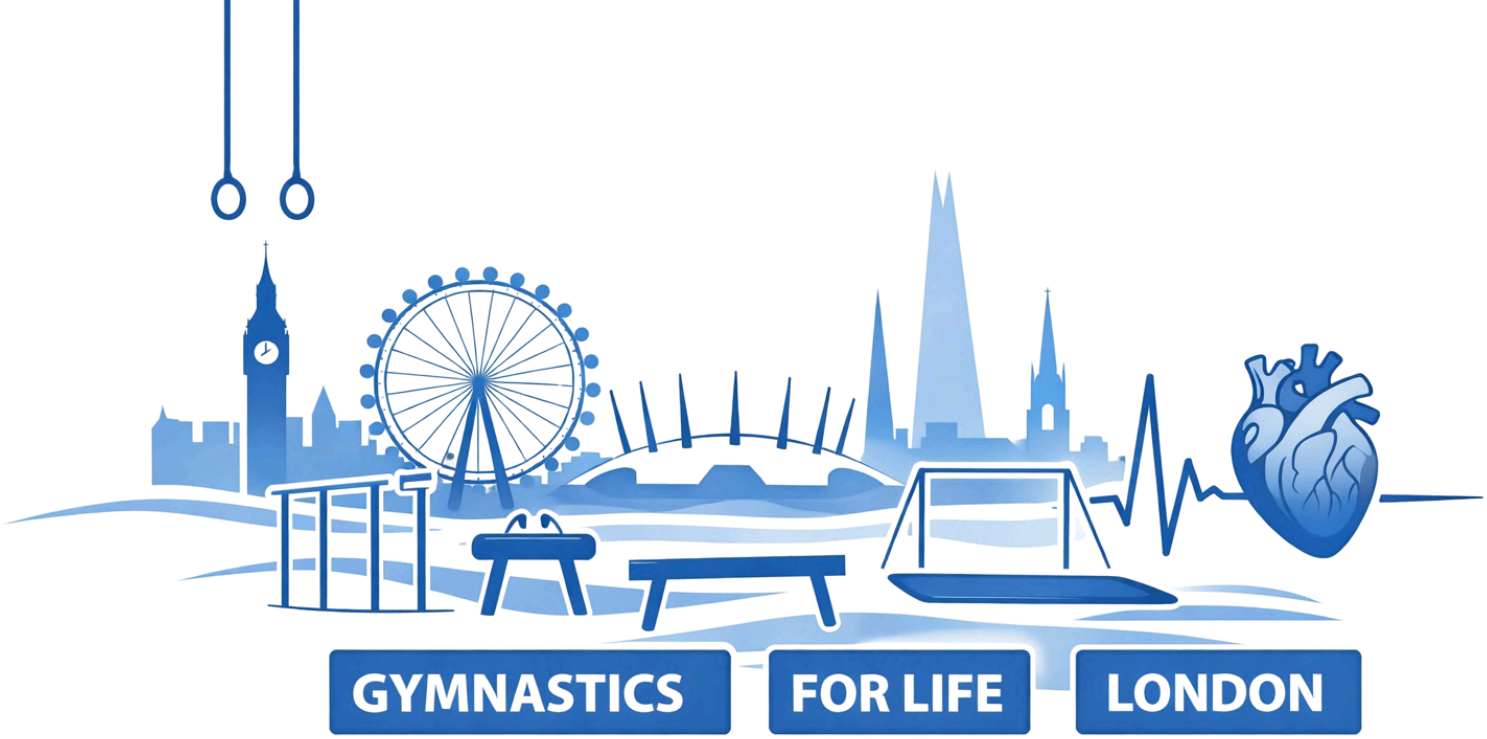
These signs do not necessarily mean that anything is wrong. They are simply reminders that growing children often need more recovery than adults expect.

FOUNDATIONS

Key Takeaway
In gymnastics, progress does not happen only in the gym.

It happens afterwards: when children sleep, eat, rest, and allow their bodies and brains time to adapt. In a busy city like London, where schedules can become full very quickly, recovery is not a luxury. It is part of healthy development.

Strong foundations are built not only through training, but through the balance between training and recovery.



GYMNASTICS FOR LIFE

Masters & Lifelong Movement

Why We Become Weaker With Age — and Why We Do Not Have To

From the age of around 30, adults gradually lose muscle and strength. But much of this decline is not inevitable. The right kind of movement can help us stay strong, capable and independent for decades longer.

Many adults notice it quietly.
The shopping bags feel heavier than they once did. The suitcase is more awkward to lift into the overhead compartment. The stairs at the Underground station seem steeper. After a long day at work, the body feels tired, stiff and less capable than it did ten or twenty years earlier.

It is easy to assume that this is simply what ageing feels like.

But the truth is more hopeful than that.

What many people experience is not only "getting older". Much of it is the gradual loss of muscle, strength and control that occurs when the body is used less, challenged less, and allowed to become more sedentary over time.

GYMNASTICS FOR LIFE

Strength changes with age – but much of that change can be ***slowed, reduced*** or even ***reversed*** *through movement.*

Scientists have a name for this process: sarcopenia. Sarcopenia is the gradual loss of muscle mass and strength that occurs with age. It usually begins slowly from around our thirties, often without us noticing, and then accelerates later in life.

The good news is that this process is not fixed.

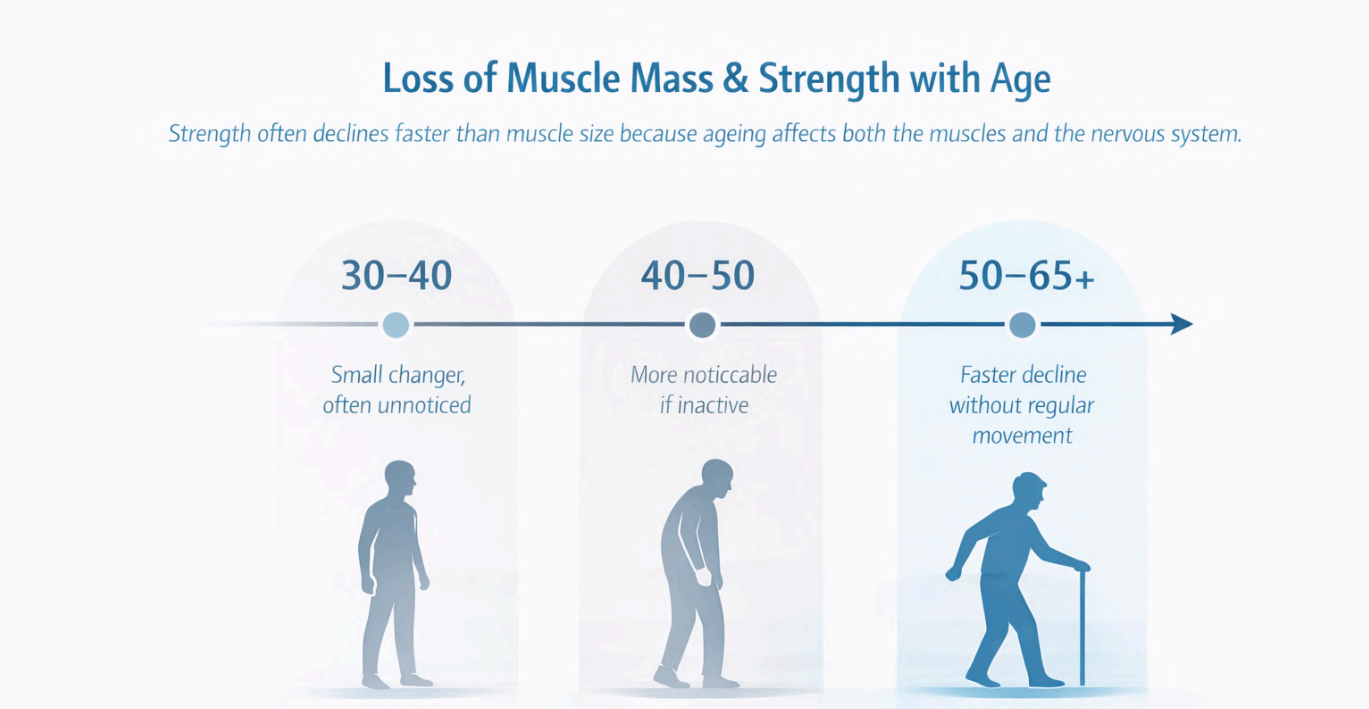
The body remains remarkably adaptable. Adults can become stronger in their forties, fifties and beyond. Muscles can still respond. Balance can still improve. Confidence can still return.

Ageing does not mean stopping. It means adapting.

What the Science Shows

Researchers estimate that adults begin to lose a small amount of muscle mass from around the age of 30. At first, the changes are slow. Many people notice very little difference during their thirties. But from around the age of 50, the decline often becomes faster, especially if a person is inactive.

Muscle size gradually becomes smaller, but strength often declines even faster than muscle size itself. This is because ageing affects not only the muscles, but also the nervous system that controls them.



The brain and nerves become slightly less efficient at activating the muscles quickly and fully. The result is that adults may feel slower, weaker, less powerful and less coordinated, even if they still appear physically fit.

This is one reason why people often notice changes such as:

- finding it harder to get up quickly from the floor
- feeling less stable when stepping off a kerb
- struggling more with carrying heavy objects
- recovering more slowly after physical effort
- feeling less confident in their body

The issue is not simply “how much muscle” we have. It is whether we can still use that muscle well.

As we age, the most important qualities are often:

- strength relative to body weight
- balance
- coordination
- control
- reaction speed
- confidence in movement

These qualities are exactly the ones that gymnastics develops.

Many adults imagine that strength is only important for sport or for looking athletic. In reality, strength is one of the foundations of independence.

GYMNASTICS FOR LIFE

Strong muscles help us climb stairs, carry shopping, get up from the floor, protect our joints, prevent falls and continue doing the activities we enjoy. Adults who maintain more strength and muscle as they age are often able to remain independent and physically capable for much longer.

Successful ageing is not simply about living longer. It is about adding functional, capable years to life.

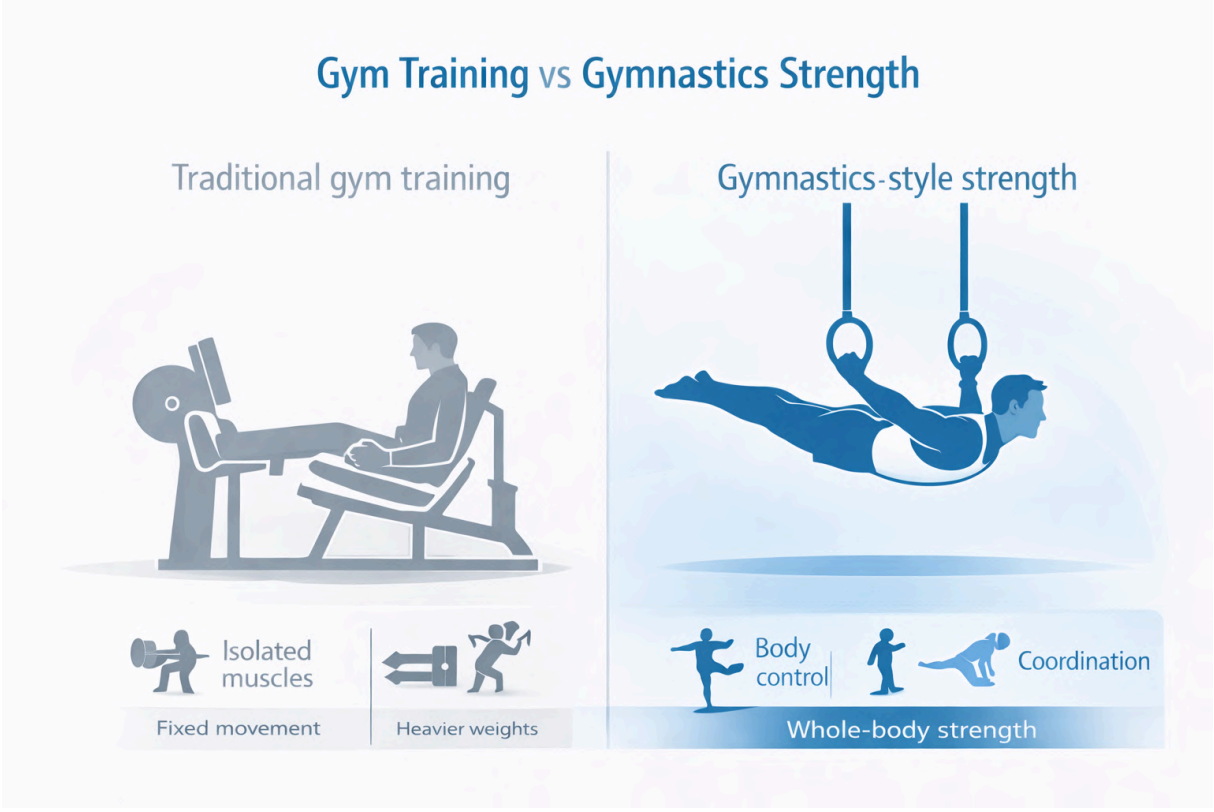
Why Gymnastics Is Different

Most advice about staying strong as we get older focuses on traditional gym training: lifting weights, using machines, or doing simple exercises in isolation.

These methods can certainly help. But gymnastics offers something slightly different.

Gymnastics does not simply train muscles. It trains the relationship between muscles, balance, posture, coordination and control.

In a traditional gym, a person may strengthen one muscle group at a time. In gymnastics, the whole body learns to work together.



GYMNASTICS FOR LIFE

Traditional strength training

- Focuses on isolated muscles
- Measures how much weight is lifted
- Often emphasises appearance
- Usually works in simple positions

Gymnastics-style strength

- Focuses on whole-body control
- Measures how well you can control your own body
- Emphasises capability
- Develops strength in many positions and directions

In later life, the most important kind of strength is not how much weight you can lift.

It is whether you can still control your own body.

Can you rise from the floor without using your hands? Can you maintain your balance if you trip? Can you reach, twist, climb, bend and carry with confidence?

Gymnastics-style movement helps preserve exactly these abilities.

It develops:

- body-weight strength
- balance and posture
- mobility and joint control
- coordination and reaction speed
- confidence in movement
- awareness of where the body is in space

Perhaps most importantly, gymnastics teaches control.

That control remains useful throughout life. The movements may change as we get older, but the principles remain the same.

A child learns to balance on a beam. An adult learns to balance while stepping off a train or walking on an icy pavement.

A young gymnast learns to control their body in a handstand. An older adult learns to control their body when bending, reaching or preventing a fall.

The purpose changes. The value does not.

GYMNASTICS FOR LIFE

Masters Lens – From My Own Experience

When I was around 28 years old, I competed at the Men's London Open Gymnastics Championships in 2016. Looking back, that was probably one of the strongest periods of my life, especially on rings.

At that time, recovery came more easily. I could train difficult strength skills repeatedly and come back the next day ready to do the same again. I could tolerate more volume, more repetitions and more intensity.

Today, I know that I cannot train in exactly the same way.

The biggest challenge is no longer motivation or technique. It is recovery.

My shoulders, especially after difficult rings work, now need far more time to recover between sessions. In recent years, shoulder pain and inflammation have sometimes limited my progress and stopped me from surpassing the level I reached in 2016.

Yet something else has changed too.

Although I may not recover as quickly, my technique is much better than it was then. I have more patience, more control and a much deeper understanding of my own body.

GYMNASTICS FOR LIFE

I now spend more time on mobility work, preparation and recovery. Foam rolling, massage, careful warm-ups and lower-intensity training days have become essential parts of training rather than optional extras.

I also do fewer repetitions than I once did. Difficult isometric ring strength elements such as crosses and planche variations are now often trained using pulley systems, assistance machines or resistance bands rather than always at full intensity.

Ten years ago, I might have viewed that as a sign of becoming weaker.

Now I understand that it is simply a smarter way to train.

The clearest example came during my preparation for the Masters World Cup in the USA in 2024, and again now as I prepare for the upcoming 2026 Masters World Cup and the 2026 British Gymnastics Masters Championships, representing Kensington & Chelsea Gymnastics Academy.
Those preparations taught me something important.

I cannot train exactly as I did in my twenties. But I can still perform at a very high level. In some ways, I believe I am close to the shape I had in 2016, and I believe I can return there again. The skills are still possible. The ambition is still there.

The difference is that now I reach that level through better technique, more intelligent planning and much greater respect for recovery.
I no longer train like a younger gymnast. But in many ways, I train better.

What Adults Often Misunderstand
"Becoming weaker is just part of getting older."
This is one of the most common beliefs adults have, and it is only partly true.

Yes, some changes occur naturally with age. Recovery may become slower. Muscles may respond differently. Strength can gradually decline.

But much of the weakness that many adults experience is not caused by age itself.

It is caused by inactivity.

When people stop moving, stop challenging their muscles, sit for long periods and gradually become less active, the body adapts to that too. Muscles become weaker because they are used less. Joints become stiffer because they move less. Balance becomes less confident because it is practised less.

The encouraging news is that the opposite is also true. Adults can still become stronger later in life.

GYMNASTICS FOR LIFE

Research consistently shows that people in their fifties, sixties and even older can make significant improvements in strength, balance and physical confidence when they train regularly and intelligently.

The body may adapt more slowly than it did at 20.

But it still adapts.

London Reality Box
The Commute Problem
Many adults in London spend hours every day sitting.

We sit at desks. We sit on the Underground. We sit in traffic. We work from home, then spend the evening sitting again.

The body adapts to what it does most often.

If we spend most of life sitting, the muscles gradually become weaker, tighter and less responsive. The hips become stiff. The shoulders round forwards. The back becomes less mobile. Over time, even simple movement can begin to feel more difficult.

This is one reason why so many adults in London say that they “feel old” earlier than they expected.

Often, it is not age itself. It is the absence of movement.

The encouraging part is that even small amounts of regular movement can begin to reverse this. A few short sessions each week, more walking, more stretching, more strength and better posture can make a remarkable difference over time.

Key Takeaway
We do lose strength with age, but we do not have to accept weakness as inevitable. Gymnastics-style movement helps us maintain muscle, control and confidence — not so that we can move like younger people, but so that we can continue to move well throughout life.

The goal is not to move as you did at 18.

The goal is to keep moving well at every age.

Looking Ahead
In the next issue, we will explore another physical quality that quietly changes with age: balance.

Why do adults become less steady and more fearful of falling? Why does confidence in movement sometimes disappear before strength does? And how can gymnastics help preserve coordination, balance and confidence for decades longer?

LONDON & THE WORLD

Gymnastics in London

Small Spaces, Big Movement: How Children Learn Gymnastics in a City Without Giant Gyms

When people imagine gymnastics, they often picture enormous training centres filled with rows of apparatus, foam pits and vast open spaces. Those places do exist in some parts of the world. But for many children in London, gymnastics begins somewhere much smaller.

It may begin in a church hall after school. It may begin in a school gym with benches pushed to the side. It may begin in a local hall tucked between busy streets, where children arrive carrying school bags and water bottles after a long day.

In a city like London, gymnastics is often shaped by the city itself. Space is limited. Buildings are expensive. Families travel long distances. Yet despite this, thousands of children still discover movement, confidence and joy through gymnastics every week.

The lesson of gymnastics in London is an important one:

Great gymnastics is not created by the size of a building, but by the quality of the opportunity inside it.

LONDON & THE WORLD

Why London Looks Different

Unlike some countries where large gymnastics centres are common, much of children's gymnastics in London takes place in smaller community spaces.

A child may learn in a church hall in Kensington, a school hall in Knightsbridge, or a community venue in Chelsea. Across the city, local clubs often use whatever space is available: schools, leisure centres, community halls and shared sports facilities.

At first glance, these places may not seem impressive. They may not have permanent equipment or giant spaces. But that does not mean they cannot provide excellent gymnastics experiences.

For younger children especially, what matters most is often surprisingly simple:

- enough safe space to move
- clear structure
- patient coaching
- small groups
- regular practice
- the feeling that they belong

Children do not need an Olympic arena to learn how to balance, roll, jump, climb, hang, coordinate and become more confident in their bodies.

Why Smaller Spaces Can Sometimes Help

There is a common belief that the biggest club must automatically be the best club. In reality, smaller environments can offer important advantages.

In a smaller hall, children are often easier to see and support. Coaches may know every child personally. Sessions can feel calmer, less overwhelming and more individual.

For many children, especially those who are shy, nervous or new to sport, a smaller environment can make the first experience of gymnastics feel safer and more welcoming.

A child who is one of hundreds in a giant centre may sometimes feel lost. A child in a smaller group may feel noticed.

This is especially important in a city like London, where many children already spend long days surrounded by noise, crowds and pressure. Sometimes the most valuable hour of the week is not the loudest or most spectacular one, but the hour in which a child feels calm enough to try, fail, learn and improve.

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What Families Often Misunderstand
Many families assume that if they cannot reach a huge gymnastics centre, their child will miss out.

But gymnastics development does not begin with the building. It begins with movement.

A child who learns good shapes, balance, coordination, strength and confidence in a small hall is building the same foundations that every gymnast needs.

The earliest years of gymnastics are not really about advanced skills. They are about learning how the body moves, how to listen, how to concentrate, how to persevere and how to enjoy movement.

Those things can be learned almost anywhere.

London Reality Box
A child may leave school in Chelsea, travel through traffic or by Tube across London, arrive at a small hall in Kensington or Knightsbridge, and spend their most important hour of movement in a space far smaller than people imagine.

The journey is part of the story.

Why This Matters
Children's sport in London will probably never look exactly like it does in places with more land and larger sports facilities. But perhaps that is not entirely a disadvantage.

The city has created a different kind of gymnastics culture: one based on local spaces, careful coaching, small groups and communities.

In London, small spaces can still create big movement.

Key Takeaway
Children do not need a giant gymnastics centre to begin. What matters most is that they have somewhere safe, welcoming and well-coached to move. In a city like London, the most important opportunities often begin in the smallest places.

In the next issue, we will explore why some parts of London have many gymnastics opportunities, while others have very few — and what this means for families trying to find the right place for their child.

LONDON & THE WORLD

The World of Gymnastics

Why Some Countries Become Gymnastics Superpowers

Why do some countries seem to appear again and again whenever gymnastics is on television? Why do certain flags become familiar at the Olympic Games, World Championships and major competitions? And does that mean that children in those countries automatically have a better experience of gymnastics?

For many London families, the wider world of gymnastics first appears on a screen.

A child may come home from class in Kensington, Chelsea or Knightsbridge, switch on the television and watch a competition filled with famous countries: the United States, China, Japan, Romania, Russia, Great Britain. They may ask why those countries always seem to be there. They may wonder whether gymnasts in those places train in enormous buildings, begin at the age of three and spend every day trying to win medals.

The answer is more complicated than that.

Some countries do become famous for gymnastics. They often produce more Olympic champions, more world medals and more well-known gymnasts than others. But this rarely happens because one country is simply “better” than another.

Instead, gymnastics success usually grows slowly over many years. It comes from a mixture of history, culture, schools, coaching, facilities, money, opportunity and the way a country thinks about sport.

Most importantly, medals do not tell the whole story.

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A country may produce brilliant gymnasts but still place huge pressure on children. Another may win fewer medals but create a healthier, happier experience for young people. The purpose of understanding the wider world of gymnastics is not to compare children. It is to understand the sport more clearly.

The world of gymnastics is much bigger than any one club, country or competition.

Why Do Some Countries Become Famous for Gymnastics?

Gymnastics is one of the oldest and most global sports in the world. Yet certain countries have shaped it far more strongly than others.

Over the last hundred years, a small group of nations has repeatedly influenced the way gymnastics is taught, performed and understood. They have done this in different ways.

Some countries built large national systems with specialist sports schools. Others created strong local club networks. Some focused on discipline and repetition. Others encouraged creativity and individuality.

What they all have in common is that they created an environment where many children had the chance to begin gymnastics, stay in the sport and improve.

Countries often become gymnastics "superpowers" because they have several of the following:

- A long tradition of gymnastics in schools or clubs
- Large numbers of trained coaches
- Good facilities and equipment
- Enough funding to support the sport
- A culture that values gymnastics
- Competitions and pathways that help children continue
- Successful gymnasts who inspire the next generation

When these things exist together for many years, a country becomes known for gymnastics.

The United States: Big Opportunities and Big Numbers

The United States has become one of the most successful gymnastics nations in the world, especially in women's gymnastics.

Part of the reason is simple: the country is very large. Millions of children take part in gymnastics every year, which means there is an enormous pool of talent.

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The United States also has a huge number of clubs, coaches and competitions. Children can often begin through local recreational classes, then move into more advanced groups if they want to continue.

University sport is also very important. Unlike in many countries, gymnastics does not have to end when children become teenagers.

American gymnastics is especially influenced by the college system. Many gymnasts continue training while studying at university, and college gymnastics has become one of the most popular parts of the sport.

The United States is also helped by visibility. Olympic gymnasts such as Simone Biles, Gabby Douglas and Nastia Liukin became famous far beyond gymnastics. When children see gymnasts celebrated on television, more families become interested in the sport.

However, even the United States shows that medals are not the whole story. In recent years, there has been much more discussion about safeguarding, pressure and the importance of protecting children in sport. Success alone does not automatically create the healthiest environment.

Japan: Precision, Patience and Men's Gymnastics

Japan has long been one of the most respected countries in men's artistic gymnastics.

Japanese gymnastics is often known for beautiful technique, precision and calm movement. Rather than focusing only on the most difficult skills, Japanese gymnasts are often admired because they perform with extraordinary control.

This approach comes partly from culture and partly from history. Gymnastics has been important in Japanese schools and universities for many decades. Children often begin through school clubs, and there is strong respect for practice, patience and doing things properly.

Japan also helped shape many of the skills and techniques that are now used around the world. Famous gymnasts such as Kohei Uchimura became known not only because they won, but because they seemed to perform gymnastics almost perfectly.

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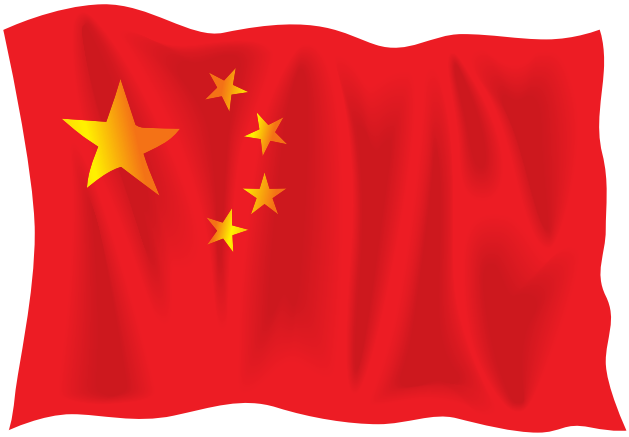
For families, Japan is a useful reminder that success is not only about doing more. Sometimes it is about doing simple things exceptionally well.



China: Structure and Extraordinary Difficulty

China is another country strongly associated with gymnastics.

Chinese gymnasts are often famous for extraordinary flexibility, precision and technical difficulty. China has developed a highly organised national system, with specialist schools and training centres in different parts of the country.

In this system, children with talent may be identified early and given the chance to train much more seriously.

This has helped China become one of the strongest gymnastics nations in the world, especially in events such as parallel bars, rings and beam.

However, China also reminds us that there is no single perfect way to do gymnastics. The training system in China is very different from the experience of most children in London.

A child attending a weekly class in a church hall in Kensington or a school hall in Chelsea does not need to train like an elite gymnast in a national centre. They are not supposed to.

The purpose of children's gymnastics is not to copy the most intense system in the world. It is to help children move, grow, learn and enjoy the sport safely.

Romania: How One Small Country Changed Gymnastics

Romania is one of the most interesting gymnastics stories in the world.

Romania is much smaller than countries such as the United States or China. Yet for many years, Romanian gymnasts were among the most successful in the world.

LONDON & THE WORLD

The country became famous partly because of Nadia Comaneci, who scored the first perfect 10 in Olympic gymnastics in 1976. Suddenly, people everywhere were watching Romanian gymnastics.

But Romania's success did not begin with one gymnast. It came from decades of coaching, national pride and a system that encouraged talented children to continue.

Romanian gymnastics showed that a country does not need to be rich or large to become important in the sport.

At the same time, Romania also shows how difficult it can be to remain successful forever. In recent years, the country has found it harder to produce the same number of champions. Coaching systems change, facilities change and the world changes too.

This is another reason why families should not think of gymnastics only in terms of medals. Success in sport rises and falls. What matters more is what children gain from the experience.

Russia and the Former Soviet System
For many decades, the Soviet Union was one of the most powerful gymnastics nations in history. After the Soviet Union ended, countries such as Russia, Ukraine and others continued to influence the sport.

The Soviet system placed enormous importance on gymnastics. Children often trained in specialist sports schools, and the country invested heavily in coaches and facilities.

Many famous skills, methods and ideas came from this system.

At its best, Soviet gymnastics produced movement that was strong, elegant and technically brilliant. But the system could also be extremely demanding.

Today, families often see old videos of Soviet or Russian gymnasts and imagine that this is the "correct" way to do gymnastics.

LONDON & THE WORLD

In reality, modern children's gymnastics is changing. Around the world, there is now much more attention on wellbeing, safeguarding and making sure that children enjoy the sport.

A country may have many medals and still have important lessons to learn.

Great Britain: A Growing Gymnastics Nation

Great Britain has never had the same long history of gymnastics dominance as countries such as Japan or Romania, but it has changed enormously in the last twenty years.

The success of gymnasts such as Beth Tweddle, Max Whitlock, Jessica Gadirova and others has helped more children discover the sport.

The London 2012 Olympic Games were especially important. Suddenly, gymnastics felt more visible across Britain. More families saw that gymnastics was not only something that happened somewhere else.

Yet Britain still has its own distinctive challenge.

Unlike some countries, Britain has relatively few very large gymnastics centres. Many children learn in smaller spaces: church halls, school halls, community centres and local clubs.

That is especially true in London.

A child may leave school in Kensington, travel through Chelsea or Knightsbridge, and spend their most important hour of movement in a small hall rather than a giant sports centre.

And that can still be enough.

In London, small spaces can still create big movement.

What Families Often Misunderstand

One of the most common misunderstandings is this:

"The countries with the most medals must automatically provide the best experience for children."

This is not always true.

Medals tell us which countries have been successful in elite competition. They do not tell us whether children feel happy, safe, supported or confident.

LONDON & THE WORLD

A child does not need to live in a gymnastics superpower to enjoy gymnastics or benefit from it.

Some of the happiest and most positive gymnastics experiences happen in ordinary local clubs, with caring coaches, small groups and realistic expectations.

Children everywhere need the same things:

- Safety
- Encouragement
- Opportunity
- Time to learn
- Coaches who understand them
- A feeling that gymnastics belongs to them

Different countries teach gymnastics differently, but children everywhere need the same things: safety, encouragement and opportunity.

World Reality Box
Giant National Centre or Small Local Hall?

A child in Japan, China or the United States may train in a large specialist gymnastics centre with dozens of apparatus and hundreds of gymnasts.

A child in London may train once or twice each week in a church hall, school hall or community venue.

These experiences are very different.

But bigger does not always mean better.

For many children, a smaller class with more individual attention, less pressure and a strong relationship with their coach may be exactly what helps them enjoy gymnastics and continue.

What matters most is not how impressive a building looks, but what a child experiences inside it.

Key Takeaway
Some countries become gymnastics superpowers because they have long traditions, strong coaching systems and many opportunities for children.

But medals are only one small part of the story.

The purpose of understanding world gymnastics is not to compare children. It is to understand the sport more clearly – and to remember that great gymnastics can begin anywhere.

A child's first cartwheel in London is connected, in its own small way, to a much larger global story.

In the next issue, we will explore how children begin gymnastics around the world – and why there is no single "perfect" age or pathway into the sport.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPORT

The Language of Gymnastics

The Basic Words Every Gymnastics Family Hears

The first gymnastics words are often the most confusing, but once families understand them, classes become much easier to follow.

A child comes out of gymnastics class and says: *"Today we did a warm-up, stretching, shapes, body tension, cartwheels and bridges!"*

For many parents, that moment feels familiar. You smile, nod, and say "That sounds great!" — while secretly wondering what half of those words actually mean.

Gymnastics has its own language. Coaches use short phrases and familiar words in very specific ways. Children often learn the meaning naturally over time, but for parents the vocabulary can sometimes sound confusing, technical or even slightly mysterious.
The good news is that the first words children hear in gymnastics are usually the most important. Once families understand these basic terms, it becomes much easier to follow what happens in class, understand what coaches mean, and feel more connected to the whole experience.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPORT

The purpose is not to turn parents into gymnastics coaches. It is simply to make the sport feel clearer, more welcoming and more enjoyable.

The Key Words of This Issue

Warm-Up
A warm-up is the first part of the class. It prepares the body and mind for movement.

In gymnastics, a warm-up usually includes light running, simple movements, small jumps, balance tasks and easy exercises to gradually increase heart rate and body temperature.

Why coaches use the word: Because muscles and joints generally move better when the body is prepared. A warm-up also helps children settle into the class and focus.

Real-life example:
"We started with a warm-up and then moved to the apparatus."

That usually means the children spent the first few minutes preparing before moving on to the main part of the lesson.

Stretching
Stretching means gently moving the body into positions that improve flexibility and range of motion.

In children's gymnastics, stretching is usually simple and age-appropriate. It may include reaching for the toes, opening the hips, stretching the shoulders or making long body shapes.

Why coaches use the word: Because gymnastics often involves moving through large ranges of motion. However, stretching is only one part of gymnastics. Strength, control and coordination matter just as much.

A common misunderstanding is that gymnastics is "just stretching". In reality, flexibility is only one piece of the puzzle.

Real-life example:
"Your child may say they spent ten minutes stretching before beam or floor."

That does not necessarily mean they were trying to become more flexible immediately. Often, it is simply part of preparing the body for movement.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPORT

Shapes
"Shapes" is one of the most important words in gymnastics.

A shape is simply the position of the body.

Children may hear coaches talk about:

- straight shape
- tuck shape
- star shape
- hollow shape
- arch shape

Almost every gymnastics skill is built from a small number of basic shapes.

Why coaches use the word: Because good gymnastics usually begins with good body positions. Before a child learns a more advanced movement, they first learn how to hold the right shape.

For example, a child may not yet be learning a handstand or cartwheel, but they may already be learning the shapes that those skills require.

Real-life example:
"You have a lovely straight shape."

This usually means the coach is pleased with the child's body position and control.

Tension
Tension does not mean stress or nervousness.

In gymnastics, body tension means holding the body strong, controlled and firm.

When coaches ask for more tension, they are usually asking children to keep their body still and strong rather than soft or floppy.

Why coaches use the word: Because almost every gymnastics movement becomes easier when the body stays controlled.

Children often understand this idea more easily when coaches compare it to being "as strong as a pencil" rather than "as floppy as a noodle".

Real-life example:
"Try to keep more tension in your legs and tummy."

This usually means the child needs to hold their body more firmly during the movement.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPORT

Pointed Toes
Pointed toes are exactly what they sound like: stretching the feet so the toes point away from the body.

This may seem like a small detail, but in gymnastics it matters a great deal.

Why coaches use the word: Because pointed toes help create longer, neater and more controlled body lines. They make movement look more finished and more elegant.

Young children often forget their toes because they are concentrating on much bigger things, such as balancing or remembering the skill itself. That is completely normal.

Real-life example:
"Beautiful jump — now try it again with pointed toes."

The movement may already be correct, but the coach is encouraging the child to improve the quality of the shape.

Cartwheel
A cartwheel is one of the first side-to-side movements many children learn in gymnastics.

The hands and feet travel over the floor one at a time, while the body turns sideways.

Many parents think of a cartwheel simply as a fun trick, but in gymnastics it is much more than that. A cartwheel helps children develop balance, coordination, shoulder strength and awareness of where the body is in space.

Why coaches use the word: Because the cartwheel is often one of the first important foundation skills. It also prepares children for many future movements.

Real-life example:
"We practised cartwheels on the line today."

That often means the children were learning to move in a straight direction and control the skill more carefully.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPORT

Forward Roll
A forward roll is one of the earliest gymnastics skills children learn.

The body rolls forwards along the floor in a controlled way.

Although it may look simple, a forward roll teaches many important ideas:

- body awareness
- balance
- confidence
- moving safely from one position to another

Why coaches use the word: Because forward rolls often help children become comfortable turning upside down and moving through space.

Real-life example:
"Your child is becoming more confident with forward rolls."

This often means they are learning to move more smoothly and independently.

Bridge
A bridge is a curved body position where the hands and feet are on the floor and the tummy lifts upwards.

Children often enjoy bridges because they feel unusual and dramatic. In gymnastics, however, the bridge is not only about flexibility. It also helps develop shoulder movement, body awareness and strength.

Why coaches use the word: Because the bridge is an important shape that later supports many other gymnastics skills.

Real-life example:
"Today we practised bridge shapes."

That may mean the children worked on simple, gentle versions of the position rather than trying to do anything complicated.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPORT

Balance
Balance means keeping control of the body without wobbling or falling.

In gymnastics, children practise balance in many different ways:

- standing on one foot
- walking along a line
- holding shapes
- moving slowly and carefully

Why coaches use the word: Because balance is one of the foundations of almost every gymnastics movement.

Children do not need to be naturally "good at balance" to improve. Like every part of gymnastics, balance develops through practice and confidence.

Real-life example:
"She is developing excellent balance."

This usually means the child is becoming more controlled and more confident in their movements.

Apparatus
Apparatus is the gymnastics word for equipment.

Different types of gymnastics use different apparatus.

For younger children, apparatus may include:

- mats and benches
- low beams
- boxes
- bars

In artistic gymnastics, apparatus also includes events such as beam, bars, vault, rings, pommel horse, and floor.

Why coaches use the word: Because "apparatus" is the word used throughout gymnastics rather than simply saying "equipment".

Real-life example:
"Today the children worked on three different apparatus."

This means they moved between three different pieces of equipment or activity areas.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPORT

Why These Words Matter
At first, gymnastics language can make families feel as though everyone else already understands a secret code.

In reality, almost every family begins in exactly the same place.

Understanding a few simple words can make a surprisingly big difference.

It helps parents:

- understand what children are talking about after class
- follow feedback from coaches more easily
- feel more confident watching lessons or competitions
- reduce unnecessary worry when unfamiliar words appear
- become more involved in their child's experience

When a coach says:
"Your child has lovely shapes and is developing better tension."
that can sound confusing at first.

But once the language becomes familiar, the message suddenly feels clear and encouraging.

What Families Often Misunderstand
One of the most common misunderstandings is this:
"If my child does not understand these words yet, they must be behind."

This is not true.

Gymnastics language takes time. Children often learn the meaning gradually through experience. One week they hear the word "balance". A few weeks later they begin to recognise it. Months later, they use it naturally themselves.

The same is true for parents.

No family is expected to understand everything immediately. The purpose of this series is simply to make the language of gymnastics feel less intimidating and more familiar, one issue at a time.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPORT

Gymnastics Translation Box

Warm-up - getting the body ready to move

Shapes - the positions the body makes

Tension - holding the body strong and controlled

Pointed toes - stretching the feet to make the body line longer

Cartwheel - a sideways turning movement

Forward roll - rolling forwards in a controlled way

Bridge - a curved shape with hands and feet on the floor

Balance - staying controlled without wobbling

Apparatus - gymnastics equipment

Key Takeaway

Gymnastics has its own language, but families do not need to learn it all at once. The first words children hear in class are often the most important because they describe the basic ideas that sit underneath every future skill.

The more clearly families understand the language of gymnastics, the more clearly they understand the sport itself.

Looking Ahead

In the next issue, we will explore the shapes that build almost every gymnastics movement.

Words such as tuck, pike, straddle, hollow and arch may sound unusual at first, but they are the building blocks of the entire sport.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPORT

Questions We're Asked

Clear answers for families

Every month, parents ask thoughtful questions about gymnastics. Some are practical, some are emotional, and some come from things they have heard from other families, schools or the internet. In this section, we answer a few of the questions we hear most often at Kensington & Chelsea Gymnastics Academy (KCGA).

Is my child too old to start gymnastics?
This is probably one of the most common questions we hear.

The short answer is almost always: no.

Many parents worry that if their child did not begin gymnastics at three or four years old, they have somehow "missed the chance". This idea usually comes from seeing very young children in gymnastics classes or watching elite gymnasts on television.

But children do not need to start extremely young in order to enjoy gymnastics or benefit from it.

At KCGA, many children begin between the ages of 5 and 10. Some even start later. They can still make excellent progress, become strong and confident, and develop impressive gymnastics skills over time.

What matters much more than the exact age is:

- whether the child enjoys it
- whether they feel supported
- whether they are learning in the right environment
- whether the teaching matches their stage of development

Gymnastics is not only about producing elite athletes. It is about helping children become stronger, more coordinated, more confident and more capable in their bodies.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPORT

A child who starts at seven may never follow exactly the same pathway as a child who started at three — but that does not mean they are "behind". They are simply starting from a different place.

In fact, older beginners often bring some advantages of their own. They may listen more carefully, understand instructions more easily and feel proud of improving quickly.

The most important thing is not whether your child starts "early enough". It is whether they start at all.

How often should my child do gymnastics each week?
Parents often ask whether one class per week is enough.

For most children, especially in the early years, one good-quality gymnastics class each week is absolutely enough.

Children do not need to train many times per week to enjoy gymnastics or to make meaningful progress.

A regular weekly class can already help improve:

- balance
- coordination
- confidence
- strength
- listening and concentration

Young children often learn best when they have time between sessions to rest, play and process what they have learned.

As children become older, more interested or more experienced, some families choose to add a second class. That can be helpful for children who are especially enthusiastic or who would like to progress more quickly.

However, more is not always better.

Too many activities, too much pressure or too little rest can make children feel tired or overwhelmed.

For most children, the best approach is: *enough gymnastics to enjoy it and improve, but not so much that it stops being fun.*

There is no perfect number that suits every child. The right amount depends on the child's age, energy, confidence and interests.

My child is not the best in the class. Should I be worried?
No.

It is completely normal for children to develop at different speeds.

In every gymnastics class, there will be some children who find certain skills easier and others who need more time. This can happen for many reasons:

- age
- confidence
- previous experience
- coordination
- personality
- simply having a good or bad day

Children often notice these differences less than adults do.

Parents sometimes become worried when another child seems to move faster, achieve a skill sooner or appear more confident.

But gymnastics is not a race.

The most important question is not:
"Is my child the best in the class?"
The more helpful question is:
"Is my child making progress compared with where they were before?"

A child who is becoming braver, more controlled, more focused or more willing to try is making excellent progress — even if that progress looks different from someone else's.

Some children improve quickly at first and then slow down. Others seem to take longer, and then suddenly make a big leap forward.

This is one of the reasons gymnastics can be such a valuable activity. It teaches children that improvement comes through patience, practice and confidence, not simply through being "the best".

Will gymnastics help my child in other sports?
In many cases, yes.

Gymnastics develops many of the basic abilities that children use in almost every other sport.

These include:

- balance
- coordination
- strength
- flexibility
- body control
- confidence in movement

Because of this, gymnastics is often described as a foundation sport.

Children who have done gymnastics often find it easier later to learn sports such as:

- football
- tennis
- athletics
- dance
- martial arts
- swimming
- rugby
- cricket

This does not mean that gymnastics is "better" than other sports.

Instead, it gives children a strong base that they can carry into many different activities as they grow.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPORT

For example, a child who learns how to balance, land safely, coordinate both sides of the body and move with confidence often finds many other sports easier and less intimidating.

Even children who eventually leave gymnastics usually keep the benefits for years.

Key Takeaway
Parents do not need to have all the answers before their child begins gymnastics.

Most of the questions families ask are completely normal, and almost every family wonders the same things at some point.

The most important thing is not finding the “perfect” age, number of classes or level of ability. It is helping children enjoy movement, build confidence and feel proud of their own progress.

Looking Ahead
In the next issue of “Questions We’re Asked”, we will answer some of the questions that often appear as children become more involved in gymnastics, including:

- Should my child compete?
- What if my child is nervous?
- How do I know if a gymnastics club is the right fit?
- Does gymnastics help at school?

UNDERSTANDING THE SPORT

Gymnastics Myths

Who Gymnastics Is For

Most families arrive at their first gymnastics class carrying at least one idea about who gymnastics is “for”. Sometimes these ideas come from television, from our own childhood, from social media, or simply from what we see around us.

But many of the most common beliefs about gymnastics are not really true.

In reality, gymnastics is far more varied, welcoming and flexible than people often imagine. Children do not need to look, think or behave in one particular way to enjoy it.

In this issue, we explore five of the most common myths about who gymnastics is for — and what is actually true.

Myth 1: “Gymnastics is only for girls.”

Why People Believe It

Many people grow up seeing more girls than boys in gymnastics classes. Television coverage also often focuses on women’s artistic gymnastics, especially during the Olympic Games. In schools, girls are sometimes encouraged towards gymnastics while boys are encouraged towards football or rugby.

What Is Actually True

Gymnastics has always been a sport for both girls and boys.

Around the world, millions of boys take part in gymnastics. Men’s artistic gymnastics is one of the oldest Olympic sports, and some of the most famous athletes in gymnastics history have been men.

Boys often enjoy gymnastics because it develops strength, coordination, balance, confidence and body control.

These are useful not only in gymnastics itself, but also in football, rugby, martial arts, athletics and almost every other sport.

For younger children especially, there is usually very little difference between what boys and girls enjoy in gymnastics. Most children simply enjoy climbing, jumping, balancing, rolling and learning new challenges.

The idea that gymnastics is “for girls” says more about old stereotypes than about the sport itself.

Parent Takeaway
Gymnastics is for children, not for one gender. Boys and girls can both benefit enormously from the movement, confidence and physical skills that gymnastics develops.

Myth 2: “Boys should do football instead.”
Why People Believe It
In Britain, football is often seen as the “normal” sport for boys. Many families feel pressure to choose football because it is familiar, easy to find and popular among friends.

Because of this, gymnastics can sometimes seem unusual or less important.

What Is Actually True
Children do not all enjoy the same sports, and they do not all need the same experiences.

Some boys love football. Others do not. Some prefer a sport where they can move in many different ways, work on their own skills, and feel proud of small personal improvements.

Gymnastics is especially valuable because it builds the foundation for almost every other sport. It develops balance, coordination, agility, strength, mobility and confidence in movement.

Many children who later enjoy football, tennis, martial arts or athletics first benefit from the movement skills they learned through gymnastics.

In fact, many professional footballers, rugby players and athletes use gymnastics-style exercises as part of their training because body control and coordination are so important.

Children should not feel that they must choose the sport that everyone else is doing. The best sport for a child is usually the one that makes them feel happy, engaged and excited to return next week.

Parent Takeaway
Football is not the “correct” sport for every boy. Gymnastics can be just as valuable — and for some children, it may suit them even better.

Myth 3: "You have to be small and slim to do gymnastics."

Why People Believe It

When people watch elite gymnastics on television, they often notice that many gymnasts have similar body types. Over time, this can create the impression that only children with a certain shape or size belong in gymnastics.

What Is Actually True

Children do not need a particular body type to enjoy gymnastics.

At beginner and recreational level, gymnastics is about learning movement, confidence and control — not about fitting a certain shape.

Children come to gymnastics with many different heights, builds and strengths. Some are naturally strong. Some are naturally flexible. Some are tall, some are small, and many are somewhere in between.

Different children often find different parts of gymnastics easier at first. A smaller child may find balance easier. A taller child may be naturally powerful. A child with strong legs may enjoy jumping. A child with long arms may enjoy climbing and hanging.

The most important thing is not what a child's body looks like, but what their body can gradually learn to do.

When gymnastics is taught well, children are encouraged to improve their own movement rather than compare themselves with someone else.

Parent Takeaway

There is no single "gymnastics body". Children of many different shapes and sizes can enjoy and benefit from gymnastics.

Myth 4: "Only very active children enjoy gymnastics."

Why People Believe It

Some children seem to arrive at gymnastics already full of energy, running, climbing and jumping from the moment they enter the hall. Parents may then worry that quieter or less active children will not fit in.

What Is Actually True

Children do not need to be endlessly energetic to enjoy gymnastics.

Some children love gymnastics because it gives them a chance to move more. Others enjoy it because it gives them structure, routine and achievable challenges.

Many quieter children enjoy gymnastics precisely because it is different from chaotic or noisy environments. A well-run class has a clear structure: children know where to go, what to do and what comes next.

Gymnastics also allows children to progress at their own pace. A child does not need to be the loudest, fastest or most energetic in the room to feel successful.

In fact, children who seem cautious or less active at first often make some of the steadiest progress because they listen carefully, concentrate well and enjoy mastering skills one step at a time.

Parent Takeaway
Gymnastics is not only for children who are "full of energy". It can suit many different types of child, including those who are calm, thoughtful or cautious.

Myth 5: "Children with different personalities do not fit in gymnastics."
Why People Believe It
Some families imagine that all gymnasts are naturally confident, fearless and competitive. If their child is shy, sensitive, cautious or easily worried, they may assume that gymnastics is not the right environment.

What Is Actually True
There is no single "gymnastics personality".

Some children are loud and adventurous. Others are quiet and careful. Some love performing in front of others. Some prefer to work quietly and build confidence slowly.

All of these children can belong in gymnastics.

Good gymnastics classes do not expect every child to behave in the same way. Instead, they help children grow from where they are.

A shy child may slowly become more confident. A nervous child may learn that it is possible to be brave in small steps. A child who struggles to join in at first may eventually discover that they love the feeling of learning something new.

Often, the children who seem least confident in their first class make the most meaningful progress over time.

Gymnastics should never be about changing who a child is. It should help children feel more comfortable, capable and confident as themselves.

Parent Takeaway
Children do not need a particular personality to enjoy gymnastics. Good gymnastics helps different personalities grow in different ways.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPORT

Key Message
Gymnastics is not only for one kind of child.

It is not only for girls, for boys, for naturally sporty children, for outgoing children or for children with a certain body type.

Gymnastics can offer something valuable to many different children — because every child deserves the chance to move, explore, grow and feel proud of what they can do.

Closing Reflection

What We Understand, We See Differently

At first glance, gymnastics can seem simple.
We see a cartwheel, a handstand, a child hanging from a bar or balancing on a beam. We notice the movement itself. We notice whether it looks easy or difficult.

But after reading this issue, perhaps gymnastics looks a little different.

Perhaps we now see that every movement has a story underneath it.

Behind a handstand are small muscles around the shoulder blade working quietly to keep the body stable. Behind a confident child is often a long process of learning, trying, resting and returning. Behind progress is not only practice, but also food, sleep, recovery and time.

This issue has explored the parts of gymnastics that are often hidden.

We have looked at the body and how children become stronger. We have looked at food and why growing children need energy, not restriction. We have looked at recovery and discovered that children often improve after training, not only during it. We have explored the language of gymnastics, challenged common myths, and travelled from local halls in London to the wider world of the sport.

Together, these chapters tell the same story:
Gymnastics is not only about learning skills.

It is about understanding how children grow.

It is about creating places where children feel capable, safe and included. It is about helping families see beyond the surface of the sport and recognise that gymnastics belongs to many different children — not only the most talented, the most flexible or the most confident.

In a city such as London, where children grow up surrounded by so many opportunities, pressures and distractions, that understanding matters.

Because when families understand more, they can choose more wisely. They can look beyond impressive photographs or quick results and instead ask deeper questions:
What kind of environment is this?
Will my child feel supported here?
Will they have time to develop at their own pace?
Will they leave stronger, happier and more confident than when they arrived?

Those questions matter far more than any medal.
As this magazine continues, we will keep building that understanding, issue by issue.

There is still much to explore: how children learn skills, how confidence develops, how gymnastics changes through the teenage years and adulthood, and how the sport is connected to the wider story of movement, health and life.

But for now, perhaps the most important idea from this issue is this:
The more we understand gymnastics, the more we realise that its greatest value is often found in the things that cannot immediately be seen.

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Dr Stefan Kolimechkov is a London-based sports scientist and gymnastics coach whose work brings together long-term coaching experience and scientific research. He founded Kensington & Chelsea Gymnastics Academy to offer a boutique programme built on structured progression, careful technique, and evidence-informed teaching — helping children learn not only skills, but how to move well, safely, and confidently for life.

Why this magazine exists

Gymnastics can feel complex from the outside — full of terminology, pathways, and opinions. This magazine exists to bring clarity: the science, the culture, the rules, and the real-world decisions families face, written in a calm, practical way for London parents and gymnasts.

Selected credentials

- Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Physical Education (research on children's physical development and nutrition in gymnastics).
- Over 20 years of coaching experience, working with children, adults, and families across Bulgaria and the UK.
- British Gymnastics Level 3 coaching qualification (Men's Artistic) (awarded 2018).
- Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) for teaching in schools in England (awarded 2014).
- Active Masters gymnast, continuing to train and compete, bringing lived understanding of progression, recovery, and long-term development.

Professional standards

Kensington & Chelsea Gymnastics Academy operates within recognised professional and safeguarding frameworks, informed by formal training and verified qualifications. Professional memberships listed include MCIMSPA (Chartered), ECSS Fellow, and ACSM Member.

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