



Australian
Human Rights
Commission

Change the Routine:
Report on the
Independent Review
into Gymnastics in
Australia

2021

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Change the Routine: Report on the Independent Review into Gymnastics in Australia

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Independent Review into
Gymnastics in Australia

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Australian Human Rights Commission



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Commission**



Kate Jenkins

*Sex Discrimination Commissioner
Australian Human Rights Commission*



Commissioner's foreword

The Australian Human Rights Commission's Independent Review into Gymnastics in Australia shares the voices of current and former gymnasts, their families and other members of the gymnastics community.

In doing so, it identifies systemic issues affecting athlete experience and wellbeing across the sport, particularly regarding the nature and impact of misconduct, bullying, abuse, harassment and assault on athletes, the trends and drivers for such conduct and the measures in place to prevent and respond to it.

On behalf of the Commission, I commend the bravery and determination of all those who shared their experiences throughout the Review. It can be both confronting and daunting to re-live past experiences of trauma and I express my sincere thanks to you for participating. Your experiences and insights have guided the findings and recommendations for change within these pages.

The Review found that there are significant cultural challenges within the sport of gymnastics in Australia, cutting across coaching practices, the health, safety and wellbeing of gymnasts, complaints and investigations, and governance.

Members of the community shared experiences of abuse, misconduct and bullying, but they also shared stories of hope and of their love for the sport. For all gymnasts, and particularly the girls and young women who make up the majority of gymnasts in Australia, I urge the sport to work swiftly and collaboratively to implement the recommendations included in this report and ensure child safety is considered a core responsibility at all levels.

I thank National Children's Commissioner, Anne Hollonds, for her support, and commend Gymnastics Australia for engaging the Commission to undertake this Review and for being open to hearing the hard truths about the sport. There is a spotlight on the human rights of athletes around the world and many of the lessons of this Review are critical to all sports in Australia. This is an opportunity for gymnastics in Australia to lead the way on ensuring athletes' rights are respected and protected.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kate Jenkins". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kate Jenkins
Sex Discrimination Commissioner

3 May 2021

Acronyms and abbreviations

AIS	Australian Institute of Sport
CSP	Child Safe Policy
NST	National Sports Tribunal
MAG	Men's Artistic Gymnastics
MPIO	Member Protection Information Officers
MPP	Member Protection Policy
NEDC	National Eating Disorders Collaboration
NSO	National Sporting Organisation
PBTR	Play by the Rules
PCYC	Police Citizens Youth Clubs
SIA	Sport Integrity Australia
SSO	State Sporting Organisations
WAG	Women's Artistic Gymnastics

Executive summary

Gymnastics Australia engaged the Australian Human Rights Commission (the Commission) in August 2020 to conduct an independent review of culture and practice at all levels of the sport of gymnastics in Australia.

The Independent Review into Gymnastics in Australia (the Review) was requested by Gymnastics Australia following the release of the documentary 'Athlete A'. The documentary sparked a global sharing of experiences of abuse in the sport, via social media, with several former athletes and parents of former athletes coming forward in Australia.

By engaging with members and former members across the gymnastics community in Australia, and undertaking a high-level evaluation of policy and procedures, the Review led to a comprehensive understanding of the culture of the sport, including systemic risk factors for child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, abuse, sexual harassment and assault towards athletes. Some of these risk factors also exist in many other sports, including significant power disparities between athletes and coaches and administrators. However, the Commission found that the unique facets of gymnastics, including the extremely high proportion of young female athletes, contribute to a high-risk environment for abuse and for the maintenance and reinforcement of negative societal stereotypes and ideals around gender.

Placing the voices of children and young people and their families at the centre, this report outlines the Commission's key findings and presents 12 recommendations for whole of sport change. The implementation of the Commission's recommendations requires engagement and action across all levels of the sport. Such action will be a step towards achieving transformative cultural change and ensuring that the human rights of gymnasts across Australia are upheld.

As a sport where the participants are predominantly young girls and women, there is an opportunity for gymnastics to play a societal role in driving gender equality and challenging stereotypes of how young women and girls should behave and appear. Gymnasts have always been strong, powerful and capable. It is time for gymnastics as a global sport to recognise and celebrate this fact.

The Commission also identified a 'win-at-all-costs' culture that prevailed across the sport and found that this created unacceptable risks for the safety and wellbeing of often very young gymnasts. Gymnastics at all levels of the sport—national, state and club—has a responsibility to put the wellbeing and safety of all athletes, particularly those who are children and young adults, at the forefront of everything it does. Effective cultural change for every athlete in every gym across the country will only be realised when strong leadership at all levels of the sport commit to a collaborative and holistic approach to addressing the challenges outlined in this report. Each section of the report focuses on a distinct aspect of the sport's culture and includes analysis of the main identified challenges.

A cultural snapshot

Members of the gymnastics community in Australia demonstrated a clear love of the sport, particularly at the recreational level, and an appreciation of the fundamental skills it allows gymnasts to develop. However, in the data collected by the Review, such positives of the culture of gymnastics were overshadowed by negative experiences at elite levels. The gymnastics community in Australia frequently described the culture of gymnastics in Australia as 'toxic' and the Commission heard accounts of gendered treatment of athletes. The Commission also heard that there are variations in culture between different Gymsports and between different club and training environments, and experiences of bullying, harassment, abuse, neglect, racism, sexism and ableism within the sport, both from current and former athletes and other members of the gymnastics community in Australia. The Review identified a number of key cultural risk factors that cut across experiences of gymnastics in Australia and create an environment where abuse and mistreatment can thrive. These were: a 'win-at-all-costs' approach; the young age of female gymnasts and inherent power imbalances; a culture of control; and an overarching tolerance of negative behaviour.

Coaching

Coaches play a significant role in the sport and in the lives of athletes, particularly at elite levels. They set the tone for engaging in gymnastics and have the power to shape the experience athletes have within the sport. The Commission heard that while many athletes have had positive experiences and relationships with their coaches, there was a persistent use of 'authoritarian' or highly disciplinary coaching styles. Many related this to a deeply held view throughout the sport that such styles were the best way to coach winning athletes, regardless of the impact on gymnasts' health and wellbeing. The Review also identified issues and risk factors in the relationships between coaches, athletes and their parents, including those associated with coach and parent ambition, and in the accountability of clubs within the employment and supervision of coaches.

Athlete experience

The Commission heard about significant negative experiences in the sport from current and former gymnasts and other members of the gymnastics community in Australia. Some discussed how the structure and expectations of the sport, including rigorous training loads for athletes from a young age, can heighten the vulnerability of athletes participating in the sport. The Commission also heard about a range of experiences of abuse and other harmful behaviours, including emotional and verbal abuse, physical abuse and medical negligence, sexual abuse, negative weight management practices and body shaming. The short and long-term impacts of these practices were reported to be profound, with recent former gymnasts and gymnasts who last trained in the 80s, 90s and 2000s sharing their experiences with the Review.

Complaints and investigations

The current suite of policies related to the safety and wellbeing of athletes, while comprehensive, is not actively and consistently implemented at all levels of the sport. The Commission heard that there is a lack of awareness and understanding of relevant policies across the gymnastics community in Australia, due to duplication and inconsistency, limited accessibility, and implementation challenges. Many also reported concerns about current processes for investigating and reporting child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment and assault, citing confidentiality and a lack of transparency, lack of independence, fear of retribution and limited opportunities to escalate complaints or to have decisions reviewed.

Governance and structure

Gymnastics in Australia operates within a federated model, with state and territory associations functioning as separate entities, with their own respective boards. The Commission found that there were complications within this operating model, including: duplication and inconsistency of policies and procedures across the federation; challenges with the management of complaints; and perceived and real funding pressures with associated risks on organisational culture and athlete health and wellbeing.

Summary of findings and recommendations

The Commission has made five overarching key findings and 12 recommendations. These are summarised below.

FINDING:

Current coaching practices create a risk of abuse and harm to athletes. Additionally, hiring practices for coaching staff lack accountability and there are inconsistent policies and systems to regulate their behaviour.

Recommendation 1: *Transform education to skills development for coaches*

The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia and state and territory associations transform their approach from 'educating' coaches to upskilling them, including in holistic, athlete-centred coaching practices that safeguard children's rights and form relationships based on mutual respect with athletes and their parents. The Commission recommends that all such initiatives for coaches be designed with input from relevant experts, including those outside of gymnastics, and focus on building a safe and healthy environment.

Recommendation 2: *Strengthen coach engagement and accountability*

The Commission also recommends measures to improve the engagement and accountability of coaches across all levels of the sport by:

- **Establishing a coach mentoring network:** The Commission recommends the establishment of a coach mentoring network to encourage knowledge and information sharing between coaches of different clubs, particularly at the recreational level where most athletes are participating. This could include identifying and recognising coaches who have a demonstrated record of healthy coaching practices. A particular aspect of this mentoring network should focus on young coaches, early in their careers.
- **Developing a sport-wide coach register:** The Commission recommends that a whole-of-sport register of coaches be developed, listing the current and previous location of employment for every coach working in the sport. Maintaining accurate details in the register would be a condition of coach and club accreditation. The register should be made accessible to accredited clubs, state and territory associations and Gymnastics Australia to verify references and employment history

Recommendation 3: *Develop a national social media policy*

The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia develop a social media policy to be implemented across the sport, including by all state and territory associations and clubs. This policy should stipulate that the minimum age of engagement by coaches, judges, officials and staff with any athlete via social media is 18 years old. A child-friendly version of the policy should be developed in consultation with the proposed youth advisory councils (Recommendation 5).

FINDING:

There is an insufficient focus on understanding and preventing the full range of behaviours that can constitute child abuse and neglect in gymnastics.

Recommendation 4: *Broaden the sport's understanding of child abuse and neglect*

While there is a comprehensive suite of education and training materials on child abuse, a number of these have a primary focus on sexual abuse. The Commission recommends that all staff, volunteers, parents and athletes be equipped with the knowledge, skills and awareness on the nature, indicators and prevention of all forms of child abuse and neglect. This will ensure they can focus their activities on the prevention of child abuse and neglect, and are attuned to the risks and can facilitate ways for athletes to report abusive situations where necessary. Gymnastics Australia and all state and territory associations should consolidate their training materials and resources relating to child abuse and neglect and implement a consistent approach across the sport. This should be done collaboratively to enable consistency in messaging, ensuring all affiliated clubs receive the same training material and resources.

FINDING:

A focus on 'winning-at-all-costs' and an acceptance of negative and abusive coaching behaviours has resulted in the silencing of the athlete voice and an increased risk of abuse and harm with significant short and long term impacts to gymnasts.

Recommendation 5: *Encourage and promote athlete empowerment and participation*

The Commission recommends Gymnastics Australia and all state and territory associations encourage and promote athlete empowerment and participation by:

- **Establishing youth advisory councils at state, territory and national levels:** Gymnastics Victoria has implemented a Youth Advisory Program made up of young gymnasts with a diverse range of experiences in the sport. The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia and all other state and territory associations implement youth advisory councils with the aim of voicing young gymnasts needs and concerns, including through engagement with the boards of state and territory associations and Gymnastics Australia.

- **Conducting two-yearly surveys of all athletes:** Gymnastics Australia should implement a two-yearly anonymous survey of all athletes across the sport with the support of an appropriate independent research body. Athletes across all affiliated clubs would take part in the survey, with mechanisms to confirm both their own and parental/guardian consent. Clubs, state and territory associations, Gymnastics Australia, and their associated boards would receive aggregated survey results highlighting areas of concern specific to their jurisdiction. These results should be used to identify gaps or issues in service delivery, inform training and education initiatives and provide a feedback loop for ongoing improvement.
- **Commissioning regular physical and mental health assessments:** Affiliated clubs should commission independent quarterly physical and mental health assessments of athletes to identify early signs of injuries, burnout, mental ill-health and abuse.

Recommendation 6: *Provide a formal acknowledgement and apology to all members of the gymnastics community in Australia who have experienced any form of abuse in the sport*

The abuse and harm experienced by members of the gymnastics community in Australia over many decades is significant and has had deeply felt and long-lasting impacts. In line with a recommendation made through the Independent Review of Gymnastics New Zealand, the Commission recommends that a formal apology and acknowledgement be provided to members of the community who suffered physical, emotional, sexual, verbal and psychological abuse as a result of the actions and inactions of other members of the gymnastics community in Australia. The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia be responsible for delivering this apology, and encourages institutions who have run gymnastics programs over the previous four decades to consider issuing their own apology.

FINDING :

There is an ongoing focus in gymnastics on the 'ideal body', especially for young female athletes. This, in addition to inappropriate and harmful weight management and body shaming practices, can result in the development of eating disorders and disordered eating which continue long after the athlete has left the sport.

Recommendation 7: *Develop a skills-based training and support program for all athletes to prevent and address eating disorders and disordered eating*

The Commission recommends that a therapeutic and intervention-based program be developed and designed by an independent organisation, such as the InsideOut Institute or the National Eating Disorders Collaboration (NEDC), to be rolled out alongside current and planned education initiatives. The program should be delivered to athletes at an early age and focus on:

- developing self-esteem and self-worth outside of body image
- building the resilience and emotional and self-regulation capabilities of athletes.

Recommendation 8: *Develop and refine resources relating to body image, weight management practices and eating disorders, to improve consistency and support effective implementation*

The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia oversee the:

- **Development of a protocol for responding to disclosures and signs of eating disorders:** While there are a number of resources available at the national and state and territory levels of the sport aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of healthy eating, eating disorders and how to respond, it is recommended that an independent organisation such as the InsideOut Institute or the NEDC be commissioned to develop a protocol for staff and volunteers at all levels of the sport. The protocol should cover responding to disclosures of an eating disorder and signs of eating disorders, to ensure any practice is consistent across the sport and reflects current, best practice.

- **Revisions to Gymnastics Australia's Body Positive Guidelines and sport-wide implementation**

The Commission recommends that any consent forms seek the consent from the athlete, in addition to the parent/guardian. It is recommended that the sport implement the Guidelines and associated materials at all levels of the sport.

FINDING:

Gymnastics at all levels has not appropriately and adequately addressed complaints of abuse and harm and are not effectively safeguarding children and young people. Contributing factors include a lack of internal expertise and resources and complicated governance structures.

Recommendation 9: *All matters regarding child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment, and assault be investigated externally of the sport*

The Commission recommends that all matters regarding child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment, and assault be investigated independently, externally of the sport, where possible and feasible. An external investigator and process will limit any potential, actual or perceived conflict of interest.

To realise this recommendation and address the identified resourcing issues within particular levels of the sport, with many Member Protection Information Officer positions (MPIOs) held by volunteers, the following two sub-recommendations are made:

- adopt Sport Integrity Australia's (SIA) National Integrity Framework (NIF)¹ and associated policies and complaints process
- establish a full-time Complaints Manager position at Gymnastics Australia, in addition to the current integrity staffing complement.

It is recommended that a child-friendly version of the NIF that combines the NIF's associated policies, specifically, the Complaints, Disputes and Discipline Policy, Child Safeguarding Policy (CSP) and Member Protection Policy (MPP) be designed in consultation with SIA and the recommended youth advisory councils (Recommendation 5).

For matters not eligible or referred to SIA's complaints process, the Commission recommends that the current practice—that matters are considered and handled at the level they occur—be reconsidered and that independent, external investigators be engaged to manage such matters and, where this is not possible, that they be escalated to a higher-level within the sport.

Recommendation 10: *Establish interim and ongoing oversight over relevant complaints at all levels of the sport*

It is recommended that a form of independent oversight over the handling of complaints at all levels of the sport be introduced immediately while the adoption of the NIF is being finalised. Given that some matters will not be eligible to be referred to SIA's complaints process, it is also recommended that ongoing oversight continue for complaints managed internally within the sport, including for matters where an independent, external investigator has been engaged as stipulated in the preceding recommendation.

Recommendation 11: *Establish a toll-free triage, referral and reporting telephone service operated by SIA*

The Commission recommends that SIA consider expanding their current 1300 number to provide a triage, referral and reporting service. Such a service will allow gymnastics and other sports not only to make an anonymous report, but will also provide athletes and other relevant individuals with timely supports and relevant information regarding available opportunities for investigation and redress.

Recommendation 12: *Align current governance with Sport Australia's Sport Governance Principles more consistently and effectively*

The Commission has distilled Sport Australia's Sport Governance Principles into four areas related to successful governance within the current federated model: effective partnerships and collaboration; robust engagement and participation; consistency and accessibility; and accountability and transparency. The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia and all state and territory associations work collaboratively to:

- revise board engagement with child safety matters, including oversight of child-safety audits (to be undertaken at all levels of the sport—national, state and club)
- develop shared goals and outcomes for matters relating to child safety at all levels of the sport
- prioritise athlete voices and needs at the board level
- adopt and implement SIA's child safe recruitment and screening resources
- deliver consistent and ongoing online and face-to-face MPIO training across all levels of the sport
- establish a formal mechanism to facilitate ongoing collaboration between personnel responsible for child safety and child protection at all levels of the sport
- address obstacles to escalating relevant complaints from clubs to state and territory associations and Gymnastics Australia, where appropriate, including determinations regarding employment.



Introduction

Review purpose

Gymnastics Australia engaged the Australian Human Rights Commission (the Commission) in August 2020 to undertake an independent review of culture and practice at all levels of the sport of gymnastics in Australia.

The Independent Review into Gymnastics in Australia (the Review) was requested by Gymnastics Australia following the release of the 'Athlete A' documentary² and concerns raised within the international gymnastics community, including Australia, with several former athletes and parents of former athletes³ sharing their experiences of abuse and the abuse of other athletes via social media.

The primary focus of the Review was on the experience of athletes, particularly regarding the nature and impact of misconduct, bullying, abuse, sexual harassment and assault on athletes within the sport, the systemic trends and drivers for such conduct and the measures in place to prevent and respond to it. Given the reference to child abuse and neglect within the scope of these experiences, the Commission has included this wording throughout the report. For the purpose of the Review, child abuse and neglect is defined as:

All forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.⁴

It is understood that this is the first independent cultural review into the sport at all levels, with past independent reviews, including Hayden Opie's 1995 Independent Inquiry and Suiko Consulting's 2016 review focusing on high performance programs at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) and nationally, respectively.

The Review did not investigate specific incidents or allegations of child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, abuse, sexual harassment or assault.

Global sporting context

Many of the issues identified in this report are not limited to gymnastics in Australia, nor to the sport of gymnastics. Sporting organisations across different codes are starting to recognise the key role they play in shaping broader culture, and a need for greater diversity, inclusion, and safety.

In the sport of gymnastics globally, several independent reviews have recently been commissioned to either understand the culture of the sport or to investigate specific allegations of misconduct.

- In the United States, an independent investigation into the abuse perpetrated by Larry Nassar, and the organisation's response to this abuse was completed in December 2018 by Ropes & Gray LLP. The subsequent *Empowering Olympic, Paralympic, and Amateur Athletes Act* of 2020, established a number of legislative mechanisms to support Congress' oversight and powers over the United State Olympic and Paralympic Committee and national governing bodies; prohibited retaliation against athletes, coaches and trainers following disclosures pertaining to sexual abuse or harassment; and included a number of measures to support athletes' engagement.⁵

- While a broader review into all sport, Human Rights Watch investigated the abuse of child athletes in Japan in 2020, including gymnastics, and made several recommendations for better safeguarding child athletes.⁶
- In New Zealand, an independent review of the sport's culture was undertaken, with a similar Terms of Reference to this Review. The final report was released in February 2021.⁷
- In the United Kingdom, an independent review into the sport is currently underway, following several allegations in July 2020 about mistreatment.⁸

A number of sports have also either commissioned, or had reviews commissioned on their behalf, to investigate current culture, structures, and systems. This includes: Netball Australia, with a focus on leadership, culture and governance;⁹ the review into the culture and governance of the Hockey Australia National Women's High Performance Program;¹⁰ and Basketball Australia, who engaged the Commission to undertake a racial equality review of the sport which examined the structural barriers to achieving racial equality.¹¹

While the recommendations made in this Review are specific to gymnastics as a sport, they may have broader applicability across all sports.

Human rights lens

The Commission has a longstanding involvement in sport, recognising the ability of sport to further the promotion and protection of human rights, with a particular focus on participation, diversity and inclusion, governance, and leadership.

The Commission used a human rights-based and participatory approach to ensure all aspects of the Review, from design to data collection, were founded on the principles of dignity, equality and respect. This rights-based approach was critical in ensuring the voices and experiences of children and young people were recognised, and elevated.

The Review has been guided by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), both in the development of its scope and methods and the recommendations made, particularly regarding the best interests of the child (Article 3); protection from violence, sexual abuse and exploitation (Articles 19, 34 and 36 respectively); and respect for children's views and the expression of these (Articles 12 and 13 respectively).¹² The design and recommendations of this Review are also aligned with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations (the National Principles) for the purposes of driving a child safe culture throughout the sport at all levels.

Given that the athlete population in gymnastics is predominantly young and female, a gendered understanding of experiences and the impacts of broader societal pressures and discrimination is essential. This is reflected throughout the report to highlight relevant impacts and to better understand current issues and necessary responses.

Methodology

The Review was undertaken between September 2020 and April 2021 after the Commission received ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New South Wales on 18 September 2020. The Review was conducted using qualitative research methods. All participation was voluntary, and all data was treated as confidential.

To ensure confidentiality and mitigate the potential for coercion, communication materials, including child-friendly information sheets regarding the Review and options for participation, were sent to all clubs for distribution to their members. The Commission also promoted the Review via its own channels, as did Gymnastics Australia.

Participants

Given the scope of the Review, the Commission sought to engage with current and former athletes, their families, staff, coaches, and other relevant personnel, from all levels of the sport.

The Commission heard from a broad range of participants who had engaged in the sport over a wide span of time. The overwhelming majority of participants identified as women and the most highly represented Gymsport was Women's Artistic Gymnastics. Approximately half of all participants said that they are still actively involved in the sport or had most recently participated in the sport in some capacity last year, with parents of gymnasts and people who identified as holding 'multiple roles' within the sport (including as gymnasts, coaches and judges) most highly represented within this group. While the majority of participants identified only as gymnasts or former gymnasts, many of them had most recently participated in the sport in the 2010s, 2000s and 1990s.

The Commission is confident that the wide range of responses paints a strong picture of the sport currently, how it has changed over time, and the challenges that persist.

Focus groups

The Commission offered to facilitate focus groups with three cohorts—current and former athletes; parents and family members of current and former athletes; and staff, coaches, officials and administrators. These three cohorts were selected to reduce any actual or perceived conflicts of interest or concerns for confidentiality and retribution among participants.

While promoted and offered to participants, no focus groups were conducted. Despite efforts to mitigate concerns regarding privacy and confidentiality, the lack of interest in participating in a focus groups may still have reflected these concerns, given the size and nature of the sporting community. Concerns regarding anonymity and fears of retribution were raised by many actual and prospective participants, with a number of people deciding not to participate due to the fear that their participation may have an impact on their child's involvement in the sport.

Interviews

The Commission undertook 47 semi-structured interviews with 57 participants, including current and former athletes, their families, staff, coaches, and other relevant personnel. Joint interviews with up to three participants were offered in place of focus groups, where appropriate, or at the request of participants.

The interviews focused on individual experiences, the culture of gymnastics and recommendations for improved organisational practice. Three sets of interview questions were developed to ensure they were appropriate for different age groups—children up to the age of 12; children between the ages of 12 and 18; and participants over the age of 18.



Interviews were the Commission’s main form of direct engagement with children and young people. A parent or guardian was required to be present during the interview with any participants under the age of 16, in a supporting context only. Written consent for participants under the age of 18 was provided by a parent or guardian. However, the Commission deemed it essential to seek verbal consent from all participants, including those under 18, prior to any engagement on the Review. The Commission did not engage with any participant under the age of 18, where a parent or guardian provided consent, but the participant did not. Three verbal consent scripts were used, including two for children and young people—children up to the age of 12 and children between the ages of 12 and 18.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed following both written and verbal consent and conducted via video conference due to physical distancing requirements and travel restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

All responses provided through interviews were de-identified and treated as confidential. The Commission analysed the transcription of the recordings in the qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

Written submissions

The Commission accepted written submissions between September 2020 and January 2021 via an online form and email. Exceptions to this timeframe were granted on a case-by-case basis.

A total of 138 submissions from current and former athletes and their families, staff, coaches, officials, and administrators were received. While submissions had to be made by a person over the age of 18, a parent or guardian could make a submission on behalf of a child or young person. Based on the information provided, in the case of a small number of submissions it was unclear whether they were made on behalf of the athlete or the parent, or both. In these cases a delineation for the author of these submissions has not been made.

An online submission form was made available on the Commission's website and included optional questions on the culture of the sport, risk factors and recommendations for improved practice. Participants were able to make anonymous submissions as well as attach their own written submissions.

High-level review of relevant policies and procedures

The Commission undertook a high-level review of relevant corporate policies, protocols and governance structures at all levels of the sport (national, state and club), where provided. The Commission also reviewed statistical summaries relating to recent reports of misconduct, abuse, bullying, sexual harassment and assault of athletes and the action taken at all levels of the sport. Statistical summaries, rather than actual complaints, were requested to limit any potential re-traumatisation that may have been caused through seeking retrospective consent.

To enable this work, the Commission requested the provision of the following information from Gymnastics Australia, state and territory associations and gymnastics organisations at the club level:

1. policies, protocols, procedures, or information relating to abuse, bullying, sexual harassment, sexual assault, child safety, and the safety and wellbeing of all athletes from 2015 onwards at all levels of the sport
2. education strategies, programs and resources pertaining to the safety and wellbeing of athletes from 2015 onwards at all levels of the sport
3. information and documentation relevant to reporting and complaint-handling frameworks and processes at all levels of the sport from 2015 that are relevant to the handling of allegations of misconduct, bullying, abuse, sexual harassment, and assault of athletes
4. governance and accountability structures at all levels of the sport from 2015 relating to the management of allegations of misconduct, bullying, abuse, sexual harassment, and assault of athletes
5. final and interim reports from past reviews undertaken since 2015 into the culture of the sport of gymnastics in Australia—at any level, as it pertains to the experience of athletes
6. statistical summaries relating to recent (2015–2019) reports of misconduct, abuse, bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault of athletes and the types of action taken at all levels of the sport.

Gymnastics Australia coordinated the response to this request and was provided with two templates to support the provision of statistical summaries—including the required breakdowns. It is understood that Gymnastics Australia adopted this spreadsheet and created a survey for clubs to complete that also included a number of other questions. The Commission was not involved in the development or dissemination of this instrument.

Almost 600 documents or links to documents or resources were submitted for the Commission’s consideration.

A review of relevant literature and global practice was also undertaken on the key themes that had emerged through the qualitative research, to further inform the Commission’s recommendations.

Meetings with senior executives and subject matter experts

The Commission undertook four meetings with state and territory chief executive officers and presidents, Gymnastics Australia senior staff, and the Gymnastics Australia Board. The purpose of these meetings was to provide an update on the Review and to clarify and test themes that had arisen throughout the qualitative research, including the federated model of the sport, funding and the current processes for the reporting and investigation of child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment and assault.

The Commission also met with Sport Integrity Australia (SIA) to ensure that any recommendations were aligned with current national practice and considered any work that may not yet be planned or underway to ensure that recommendations would not be dated or ineffective. The Commission met with the InsideOut Institute, Australia’s national research and clinical excellence institute in eating disorders to ensure that recommendations made regarding body image, weight management practices and eating disorders reflected best practice.

Finally, given the number of reviews into the sport of gymnastics taking place internationally, the Commission engaged in and provided advice on the independent review of Gymnastics New Zealand and the Whyte Review, currently looking into allegations of mistreatment within the sport of gymnastics in the United Kingdom.



Limitations

It is important to recognise the limitations of the Review when considering this final report. Firstly, the Commission recognises that the length and timing of the consultation period was not optimal, falling over the end of year holiday period.

The Commission understands that those who have experienced trauma of any kind may need time to consider whether or not they engage with a process like this and that this can take months, sometimes years. To try to address this, the Commission did extend consultation on an ad hoc basis in an effort to provide those in the community with an opportunity to participate. However, given the timelines of the Review, the Commission was constrained by the amount of time available.

While the Commission heard from a diverse range of participants, both currently and formerly involved in the sport, the Commission cannot confirm that the sample is representative of the sport at all levels or represents the spectrum of experiences. This is due to a number of factors, including:

- that the Commission cannot confirm whether the promotional materials and information distributed to all clubs in Australia were shared by the clubs with members as requested

- that potential participants who may have had either positive or negative experiences may not have seen the value in engagement.

While the Review examined the sport at all levels, the Commission has at times been unable to investigate or have made assumptions about certain aspects, including governance, education and policies, particularly at the club level as this information was not provided. While the difficulty in coordinating such a request at the club level is understood, the variance of documentation supplied has ultimately affected the analysis.



1. Gymnastics in Australia: A cultural snapshot

This chapter provides an overview of the spectrum of experiences reported on by the gymnastics community in Australia,¹³ and introduces the themes and risk factors that will be discussed in later chapters.

The Commission heard that the culture of gymnastics in Australia differs across levels, from recreational to elite and throughout the different Gymsports. In particular, many spoke of the increased demands and pressures of gymnastics at the elite level, and the negative impacts these had on their experiences within the sport.

The Commission found that a number of key cultural risk factors contributed to the negative experiences of gymnasts, including: a 'win-at-all costs' approach that caused gymnasts to feel as though they are 'commodities';¹⁴ the young age of female gymnasts and the inherent power imbalances in the coach-athlete relationship; a culture of fear and control instilled by coaches; and an overall tolerance of negative and inappropriate behaviours.

The Commission observed a lack of inclusive practices among clubs. While the Commission is aware that the sport has made efforts to be inclusive to the diverse needs of their members,¹⁵ this is not universal practice. The Commission believes gymnastics programs should be adapted to meet the needs of people with disability, and practices should be culturally inclusive to people from diverse backgrounds and sexual orientations across all levels of the sport.

Many former and current athletes have a demonstrated passion and appreciation for the sport and recognise the positive change that has occurred over time. However, the gymnastics community in Australia agree that greater changes are still required, and many expressed a desire to see transformational cultural change take place across the sport.



The latest statistics from 2019 show that there are approximately **231,200** athletes engaged in gymnastics around Australia. **77%** of athletes are female and **23%** male, with **91%** of these under the age of 12.¹⁶ **In 2017**, the average age of an Australian participating in gymnastics was **eight years old**.¹⁷



Gymnastics is the second most popular sport for **girls aged 5–8** after swimming and the fifth most popular sport for **children aged 0–14** overall.

More than one in five girls aged 5–8 years take part in gymnastics.¹⁸



Gymnastics in Australia is made up of eight different 'Gymsports'—Gymnastics for All, Men's Artistic Gymnastics, Women's Artistic Gymnastics, Rhythmic Gymnastics, Trampoline Gymnastics, Aerobic Gymnastics, Acrobatic Gymnastics and Parkour—each with its own technical requirements and committees and with its own culture. **In 2017**, the majority of gymnasts across Australia took part in **Gymnastics for All (59%)**, followed by **Women's Artistic Gymnastics (17%)**.¹⁹



In 2019 there were **618** affiliated clubs across the country, staffed by approximately **8,000** coaches. The Commission heard that there are a range of management models for clubs.²⁰ **In 2017**, over a third of all clubs (**36%**) were incorporated associations, nearly a quarter (**23%**) were private companies, and **13%** were run by sole traders.²¹ Clubs typically specialise in one or two Gymsports and may deliver both recreational and high performance (including international stream) programs.



Gymnastics Australia is the National Sporting Organisation (NSO) representing Australian gymnastics on the international stage, working with the Australian Institute of Sport on high performance pathways and frameworks, including by delivering national camps and employing national high performance coaches, producing sport-wide policies, guidelines and coach and judge accreditation education, and coordinating the sport at a national level.



Gymnastics Australia works closely with the eight state and territory associations who represent the sport in each state and territory. State and territory associations are responsible for promoting and developing the sport in their state, providing services to club members and clubs, coordinating state level funding and grants, organising state events, and delivering coach and judge accreditation and training. Gymnastics Australia and each of the state and territory associations are governed by respective boards.

Variations across the sport

The Commission heard that the culture across the different Gymsports varied, with one participant explaining there are ‘very different cultures within the same sport’.²² Of the gymnastics community in Australia that the Commission heard from, the overwhelming majority were female athletes or parents of female athletes. These participants expressed particular concern about gendered treatment within the sport, and the ‘double standard’,²³ as explained by a current athlete, between Women’s Artistic Gymnastics and Men’s Artistic Gymnastics athletes and competitions.

The Commission also heard that the culture varied greatly across individual clubs and that this culture was influenced by coaches and other organisational leaders. Almost all gymnastics clubs are independently run, with a limited number of high performance centres across Australia. If a child or parent is not satisfied with a club and its culture, the option to move is not always feasible. A current athlete shared, ‘it can be really difficult to access quality venues and quality coaches, so they don’t get a lot of choice, and if things aren’t going great, the other option is five hours away’.²⁴ Gymnasts are therefore left with little choice—either to leave the sport altogether or to continue at the club they do not consider satisfactory—which often leads to unpleasant experiences.

Strengths of the culture

When asked about the strengths of the culture, the gymnastics community in Australia identified: that the sport is a fun environment for children at the recreational level; the skills and abilities the sport teaches gymnasts; and the camaraderie among athletes.

Fun and pleasure are assumed to form the basic values of youth sport.²⁵ The culture at the recreational level was often, though not always, viewed as positive, with many clubs succeeding in creating a fun environment for children. However, it became evident that as athletes transitioned to more competitive or high performance spaces, they increasingly experienced added pressures and demands. A current athlete shared:

‘I think the culture at the club level is quite good. At small local community run clubs we generally aim to be inclusive and focus on participation. We tend to make sure our gymnasts are having fun, keeping fit, and staying socially connected. At my local club at least, there is no “win at all cost” attitude, which is great. Problems start to arise in gymnastics when coaches become focused on winning, and when you get tied up in the mindset that “gymnastics is life”.’²⁶

The love of gymnastics as a sport, and the admiration towards the foundational skills it allows athletes to develop, were evident across the gymnastics community in Australia with many sharing that they were internally motivated to succeed in the sport. A former athlete described gymnastics as ‘my first love’,²⁷ emphasising that ‘not all experiences are bad’. It was particularly difficult for current and former athletes who had positive experiences and good memories of gymnastics to deal with the negative public criticism of the sport.

‘I have been to doctors, and their immediate response to me when you say, you know, I was an athlete, a gymnast, was like, “Oh, I don’t believe in gymnastics. It’s torture on children.” And that’s really hard when you’re an athlete and it’s the passion you have, and that’s not—particularly if it’s not your experience, and it’s never been my experience—to have someone immediately who does not know you, does not know your experience, automatically assume that you had terrible things done to you. It’s hard because you know, you’re proud of what you do.’²⁸

The benefits for children who participate in sport are well established.²⁹ Sport is often referred to as a domain where physical, emotional and social outcomes can be fostered among young people.³⁰ Young current athletes spoke to the Commission about the ‘fun’³¹ they had during gymnastics. This fun and pleasure are enhanced when children learn valued physical and social skills that contribute in a positive manner to their social and physical wellbeing and development as adults-to-be.³² Former and current athletes referred to gymnastics as the ‘gateway of all sports’,³³ because it teaches athletes the basic, fundamental skills for any other sport,³⁴ as well as teaching skills that are ‘applicable throughout my whole life’.³⁵

When coached in a positive, child focused environment the sport not only teaches physical [wellbeing], but also positive behavioural attributes such as discipline, hard work to achieve results, setting and working towards goals, learning to cope with disappointment, resilience, learning that it's okay to fail and move forward. Furthermore, these environments can foster lifelong friendships and a love and appreciation for physical activity and overall wellbeing.³⁶

Through their sport participation, children will learn values, norms and skills that contribute to their healthy development in a positive manner, and while each of these factors can positively influence athletes' experiences and developmental outcomes, these same factors can negatively influence an athlete's sporting experience.³⁷

'Gymnastics is directly related to almost every opportunity I've been given in my life. I love the sport and I don't regret my participation but it came with costs and long-lasting consequences. My hope is that the culture of gymnastics can be improved so young athletes can have the same opportunities and privileges I did without the abuse and damage to their bodies and minds.'³⁸

Gymnastics is a recreational and competitive sport and also both a competitive and team sport, which makes navigating team relationships difficult. While competition between athletes was evident, the camaraderie that often forms among athletes, and the sense of inclusion as a result, was highlighted by participants as a strength of the culture. Children who remain involved in sport throughout adolescence and into adulthood often develop a connection to their communities and experience a strong sense of social inclusion.³⁹ Given the number of training hours required to do competitive gymnastics, gymnasts developed strong bonds with their peers, 'they become their own family and support network'.⁴⁰ The Commission heard that gymnasts also supported each other through the negative experiences, particularly at the high performance level, as 'we were all going through the same thing'.⁴¹

'The girls I trained with were amazing. The [camaraderie] and the support between us was phenomenal. Despite competing against each other, we cared deeply for each other and wanted each other to do well.'⁴²

Cultural risk factors

Despite the many potential positive health and social benefits for children and young people engaging in a healthy sporting environment, sport participation can also have inherent underlying risks which may create an environment where abuse and harassment can occur.⁴³ The Commission determined that the key drivers to what was frequently described as a 'toxic'⁴⁴ culture by current and former gymnasts were: a 'win-at-all costs' approach; the young age of female gymnasts; a culture of control, and a tolerance of negative behaviours. These intersecting themes will be introduced in this section, and discussed in more detail throughout the report.

A win-at-all-costs approach

In gymnastics in Australia, the Review heard that one of the risks for creating a negative and unhealthy culture is the focus placed on 'winning-at-all costs', 'without any thought or concern for the athlete'⁴⁵ or their mental and physical wellbeing.

The gymnastics community recognises that elite sport, including gymnastics, is 'demanding' but 'should not be debilitating'.⁴⁶ However, athletes felt that winning medals was seen as a justification for unacceptable behaviour, as 'the importance of winning medals takes precedence over everything else'.⁴⁷

The young age of female gymnasts and inherent power imbalance in the coach-athlete relationship

The Commission heard from former male and female young athletes, now adults, who reflected on their negative experiences as children in gymnastics. As children, they did not question or challenge behaviours that they later realised were abusive and inappropriate.

Children begin gymnastics at a very young age, with the Gymnastics Australia KinderGym program designed for children aged zero to five years of age. The Commission heard of athletes that were selected as young as six years of age to train in high performance programs.

The vulnerability of such young children places them at risk of harm. Children often do not understand or recognise abusive behaviour, as it becomes normalised as ‘just the way things are’.⁴⁸ Children are taught to place their trust in adults responsible for their care and physical, social and emotional development.⁴⁹ However, the Commission frequently heard that ‘there was a gross acceptance and tolerance of coaches and administrators’ unprofessional or inappropriate behaviour by everyone involved in the sport, from governing bodies to gymnasts themselves’.⁵⁰ The nature of the environment, from the interpersonal level to organisational policies and societal influences, contributes to the occurrence and perpetuation of child athlete maltreatment.⁵¹

A culture of control

In the context of gymnastics, athletes have many interactions with adults in positions of authority and trust. These authority figures include coaches and support staff, such as medical, nutritional, strength and conditioning, and psychological personnel, who are often afforded substantial and unquestioned power.⁵² The Commission was told that coaches created a culture of control, where, as one former athlete shared with the Commission, ‘we were trained to just obey orders without discussion and just get on with things’.⁵³

By virtue of their expertise, experience, access to resources, and decision-making authority, the dominance of a coach over an athlete, and the socialisation of the athlete to accept authoritative behaviours, puts the athlete in a position to be submissive, compliant, and obedient.⁵⁴ This contributed to the toxicity of the environment, where athletes did what they were told without question, often enduring mental and physical distress.

A tolerance of negative behaviour

Former athletes and parents repeatedly raised their concerns with the lack of action in response to the very visible negative and inappropriate behaviours that occurred across gymnastics in Australia, normalised through ‘organisations not having the hard conversations to stop and sanction people who perpetuate the negative culture’.⁵⁵ As one participant explained: ‘To me, it indicates there is a cultural problem ... That it’s easier to turn a blind eye or just say it’s not my direct problem or responsibility’.⁵⁶ The Commission heard that when athletes and their parents did raise issues or complaints, there was a lack of confidentiality and privacy in the process, resulting in repercussions for the gymnasts by means of humiliation, physical punishment or threats that they would not be selected for training camps or competitive teams.

‘And there’s a great deal of concern about the privacy breach that happens with every level of gymnastics, that even if you did have someone that you felt confident with, you would never be comfortable that they didn’t share it with everybody else.’⁵⁷

Inclusion

Modern sport, including gymnastics, is arguably marked by many forms of discrimination such as racism, sexism and ableism.⁵⁸ Despite Gymnastics Australia and a number of state and territory associations having inclusion policies, and a number of clubs with commendable support programs, the Commission concluded that these frameworks and approaches are not being implemented widely.

Women in sport

Gymnastics is widely recognised as a leading sport for girls, being the second most popular sport for girls aged 0–14 after swimming and ahead of netball.⁵⁹ For many girls, gymnastics establishes their attitude to sport and recreational activity over their lifetime. Across the population, adult women are more likely to be insufficiently active (59% compared to 50% for men) and less likely to engage in sport.⁶⁰ AusPlay data shows that 52% of Australian women and 68% of girls regularly participate in sport related activities.⁶¹

Research shows that from the age of seven, girls are already reporting less positive attitudes to sport, which entrench as they mature, putting them at risk of missing out on the benefits of sport and physical activity over a lifetime.⁶² Social and cultural influences are considered major barriers to sports participation among girls and women, including concerns or self-consciousness about appearance, body image and skill.⁶³ Health, fun and socialising are key motivators for girls and women.⁶⁴ Increased physical literacy, by developing the skills, knowledge and behaviours that enable people to be active, and inclusive and less competitive environments can also increase engagement with sport and physical activity. Gymnastics can play an important leadership role in promoting inclusion for women and girls, including women and girls in diverse communities or from diverse backgrounds.

The gymnastics community raised the lack of cultural diversity across the sport as an issue, with one current athlete perceiving that the sport had a 'white culture'.⁶⁵ A few participants spoke about the difference in treatment of children based on their skin colour.⁶⁶

*'Well, just to put it like super blatantly, basically, the white boys were the golden boys and the dark boys had, you know, an ongoing level of negativity that the others weren't subject to.'*⁶⁷

A current club employee noted that while some clubs may have very inclusive practices, 'I don't think they would necessarily have the skills to deal with [LGBTIQ+ related issues]',⁶⁸ which they believed could result in members of the LGBTIQ+ community feeling isolated within the club environment.

While Gymnastics Australia aims to cater for children with disability through programs such as GymAbility, designed to suit all levels of physical and mental abilities, not all clubs have the funding or resourcing capacity to run such programs. One current coach spoke about wanting to implement the GymAbility program across different gyms but was unable to because 'there's no money in it for them so they don't want to take that on'.⁶⁹ However, experiences across gyms varied.

*'So, in our gymnastics programme, in our mainstream programme, we have an option for children to be in the mainstream programme with an aid that we provide free of charge so that they can be with their peers rather than being in a programme off to the side.'*⁷⁰

*'It is not very inclusive. Despite several gyms having 'all ability' classes, the gym we were involved with had the participants with extra needs in a different room with very limited equipment and equipment provided was very old.'*⁷¹

Children who are developmentally or socially vulnerable, those who have previously experienced abuse, children from non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds and children who are same sex attracted may be more vulnerable to abuse and exclusion in sport.⁷²

It is therefore crucial for clubs to develop the skills and awareness necessary to cater to all children, regardless of their skill level or background. Clubs should establish programs aimed at attracting children from diverse backgrounds and ensure their spaces are inclusive and safe for all who participate.

Changes in the sport over time

When discussing change, and the pace of change, much of the gymnastics community in Australia felt that, while some change had occurred, it was not occurring rapidly enough, and a more profound organisational and cultural change was needed. A former gymnast said that gymnastics has an exceptionally long way to go to change the toxic culture that has been in place for many years.⁷³ Others were sceptical about achieving cultural change, particularly considering they were aware of, or had participated in, the Independent Inquiry into Women's Artistic Gymnastics at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS), completed by Hayden Opie in 1995.

*'I know that there was a review in 1996 or something like that that said a lot of the same things. We're talking decades later, and nothing has changed. Decades. So, if that review has gone to a national body and people investigated that, and at the time they took real names of real athletes and real coaches names, and they named them and shamed them in that review—and we are still having the same conversation. Why the hell would anybody go to Gymnastics Australia and say, "Will you fix it? You're still doing it", because they don't fix it. There's no point.'*⁷⁴

*'There are coaches making a change now and the community is moving in the right direction, but it isn't fast enough. I believe GA are trying to improve, however it should not have taken this long, and such significant public outcry for them to do so.'*⁷⁵

The Commission found that it is common for gymnasts to transition into coaching once their athletic career has ended, despite many having had negative experiences. There is a deep-seated desire to improve the overall culture and experiences for the next generation of athletes.

*'When I transitioned into a coach, that was one of the things for me personally was that I don't ever want athletes to suffer some of the things that I suffered.'*⁷⁶

*'I consider myself one of the lucky ones. I learnt from my experiences and knew that I wanted to be the coach that I didn't have. I wanted to change how kids experience sport. And some days I get it wrong but most days I think I make a huge difference, but the biggest problem is that many many coaches don't. They repeat what they learnt, they repeat what they experienced.'*⁷⁷

*'The reason I stay involved is because I love the sport, and I want the next generation to have an amazing experience...'*⁷⁸

Current Olympic gymnasts were frequently referred to as having a positive impact on the gymnastics community and the sport in general. These athletes, and their success, defy perceptions about a gymnast's image and behaviour.

*'I believe role models like Simone Biles have been integral to this culture shift. Simone doesn't fit the traditional 'perfect', pre-pubescent, obedient gymnast profile. She displays her personality, voices her opinions and displays a life on social media which involves other interests outside gymnastics. She is small but doesn't have the traditionally 'perfect' form of knees that are completely straight and toes perfectly pointed. Yet, she overcomes this by optimising her strengths, rather than conforming to the status quo.'*⁷⁹

While some participants pointed to 'a recent cultural shift in the sport which I see as being profoundly positive',⁸⁰ others recognised that change can only be possible if the institutional context is completely transformed, and the focus is shifted to the wellbeing of athletes.⁸¹ A positive first step is acknowledging and working towards the underlying principle outlined in the International Olympic Committee's Consensus statement:

Athletes of all ages have a right to engage in 'safe sport': an athletic environment that is respectful, equitable and free from all forms of non-accidental violence to athletes. Everyone involved in sport will benefit from a sporting environment that is free from fear or favour and are just as entitled to express their human rights in the context of sport as they are in any other setting.⁸²



2. Coaching

Coaches play an essential role in gymnastics. They are the primary person that athletes engage and spend the majority of time with across their involvement in the sport. In a sport where the vast majority of the athletes are children, who are inherently vulnerable, and particularly girls and young women who may be subjected to gendered stereotypes and ideals, it is essential that coaches recognise their responsibility for, and take active steps to safeguard, athlete safety and wellbeing.

Coaches set the tone for engaging in gymnastics and have significant power to shape the experience that athletes have within the sport. This relationship can be positive, with coaches acting as a strong role model and guide. However, the trust that athletes are required to have in their coaches, and the imbalance in power between coaches and athletes, can also create an environment where mistreatment, intimidation, manipulation and abuse can thrive.⁸³

The Review found that negative or authoritative coaching styles, and coaching styles that include behaviour that is inappropriate and abusive, continue to be accepted in the sport. This chapter explores the reasons these styles are used and accepted, including the belief that disciplinary and punishment-focused practices are 'necessary' for coaching competitively successful athletes. It also examines the relationships coaches have with athletes and parents and accountability in coaching roles.

To address the issues identified throughout the chapter, the Commission outlines a child-rights based approach to coaching and makes recommendations for improved practice. The recommendations include: transforming coach education to skill development with a focus on athlete empowerment and respectful relationships; coach mentoring, particularly for young coaches; a whole of sport coach register; and a standalone national social media policy for adoption at all levels of the sport.

Coaching Styles

The coach's main role in any sporting context is to support athletes to develop their performance, self-confidence, responsibility and autonomy.⁸⁴ Coaches are the most immediate person responsible for the safety and wellbeing of athletes, for providing instruction and guiding often extremely young athletes through difficult physical manoeuvres. As athletes progress through the sport, there must be a high level of trust between the athlete and the coach to ensure they are comfortable performing potentially dangerous skills. As a current coach explained:

*'If the athlete doesn't—doesn't trust me—and does not, you know, is not prepared, they can kill themselves. They can break their neck on, you know, the kind of moves that they're doing. So, the athlete needs to, you know, be working their way up and, you know, incrementally improving, but there is a level of trust in the relationship between the coach and the athlete, is a critical part of this.'*⁸⁵

Due to the intensity of gymnastics, even at recreational levels, the ways that coaches choose to engage with and instruct often extremely young athletes can have a significant impact on their lives. The Commission heard about a broad range of approaches to coaching, from both current and former gymnasts and coaches. Many shared stories of positive coach-athlete relationships and experiences and examples of how coaches used a coaching style that worked well and suited the gymnast. However, a significant number of athletes and former athletes identified that there is a persistent use of 'old-school' coaching techniques in gymnastics in Australia and that these styles may not support the wellbeing of many young athletes.

*'[There is an] acceptance of archaic and authoritarian coaching practices.'*⁸⁶

'Old school' was typically used to describe methods that were 'authoritarian',⁸⁷ 'fear-based',⁸⁸ 'extremely regimented',⁸⁹ 'aggressive',⁹⁰ used 'guilt'⁹¹ as a key driver, 'built on negativity'⁹² and 'focused on perfection'.⁹³ The use of these methods was discussed across all levels of gymnastics, but particularly at the more competitive stages. The Commission identified a significant gendered element to these coaching approaches, in particular in relation to the level of control that girls and young women were subjected to and the 'authoritarian' nature of techniques used. Techniques designed to maintain 'docility' and 'perfection' among female gymnasts reinforced rigid societal gender ideals that women are 'naturally' passive and submissive.⁹⁴

*'It's this very militant style of coaching, you must do as I say, and back talk or speaking up or input is really discouraged. And it can be as subtle as a coach just continually disagreeing, or shutting you down in smaller ways, all the way through to coaches who are like, "You're stupid".'*⁹⁵

Many examples of the types of conduct that people would refer to as forming part of 'old-school' coaching styles are detailed in the chapter on athlete experience including verbal abuse, emotional abuse and the use of physical conditioning or exercise as punishment. Overall, 'old-school' typically implied a negative coaching style and a commitment that coaches would do 'whatever it took' to ensure their gymnasts were successful in competitions, even when such an approach would cause physical or psychological harm to the athlete.

*'Coaches were allowed unrestrained practices and could push gymnasts to do whatever they considered appropriate.'*⁹⁶

Some coaches talked about the difficulty of finding the right balance between demonstrating authority and supporting an athlete to do their best, particularly when athletes are young and in potentially dangerous situations, and being too harsh or overly negative. Others spoke about how it was often 'easier to yell at an athlete than think of new innovative methods of coaching and problem solving' as these take 'time and hard work'.⁹⁷

*'It's very tricky because you are dealing with young athletes. You inherently have more power, and you have to try to teach them how to push through pain and fear. Gymnastics requires focus and discipline, and getting children to understand that without resorting to punishment for bad behaviour can be a balancing act.'*⁹⁸

Largely, gymnasts and former gymnasts told the Commission that the tolerance for negative behaviour from coaches was far higher than is appropriate or acceptable for an industry working predominantly with young children.

*'[The] level of acceptance of behaviours in the gym [is] not what you would expect at school, or at home, or at the shopping centre. Like, it is a completely different sort of set of rules, and yes, that's just how it runs. But it could be run so much better.'*⁹⁹

There is substantial evidence of the frequent use of authoritarian coaching practices across elite sport and in gymnastics, and in particular Women's Artistic Gymnastics.¹⁰⁰ In many sports, there is an acceptance of these methods, even when involving verbal, emotional and physical abuse, due to the perception that they produce successful athletes and that coaches have 'expert knowledge' that make techniques justifiable.¹⁰¹ Indeed, athletes in other contexts have reflected that a coach's reputation for competitive success may have some impact on their acceptance of emotionally abusive coaching practices as necessary for athletic development.¹⁰²

*'And I'm sure a lot of sports are like this, if not most of them. Because people often—yeah, they learn from somebody, like anything, you learn from the people that supposedly know the best at the top and they teach you and then that's kind of how you develop and learn and do things.'*¹⁰³

In gymnastics, many trace the rise of these techniques internationally to the success of Eastern European athletes in the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Specifically, people identify the success of Nadia Comaneci at the 1976 Olympics as heralding a new era of women's gymnastics and gymnastics coaching—one where younger female athletes are prized, technical difficulty and perfection are paramount, and extreme training regimes focused on compliance are encouraged and deemed acceptable.¹⁰⁴ Some refer to this as the 'pixie model' of women's gymnastics.¹⁰⁵ The recent emergence of older and more 'powerful' female athletes on the global stage challenges this ideal and pushes back against societal stereotypes that female gymnasts (and women in general) be highly feminine, 'dainty' and compliant. However, the Commission heard that gymnastics and coaching practices in Australia continued to be influenced by the 'pixie model' and a gendered understanding of the ideal female gymnast.

*'Because you go ... well if there's certain training practices or certain things that people do that are successful then we should all try and do those ... it comes back to the whole Nadia Comaneci thing ... where it was get really young girls, pre-pubescent [and] smash them and make them train really, really hard, because that's how you do it.'*¹⁰⁶

Members of the community talked about an ongoing and strongly held view in elite gymnastics that negative and authoritarian coaching styles are the only or best way to coach winning athletes. The significant focus on performance and success was only sometimes combined and countered with a focus on wellbeing and positive development. Beliefs that negative and abusive coaching styles are necessary for athletic success and that coaches employing them are well intentioned have been documented in relation to gymnastics elsewhere, including as being held by gymnasts themselves.¹⁰⁷

*'You know, in some cases, there were some coaches who were really caring for the athletes and I think some were caring, but just didn't know what the—the result was more important than the means to the end.'*¹⁰⁸

The acceptance of this approach was spoken about frequently regarding high performance coaches but also filtered to club and more recreational levels of gymnastics.

*'So you've got high performance and you've got coaches and in the club land, there are still some ambitious coaches and you're put into this pathway of ... "we want to produce high performance athletes, so we're going to treat you like high performance athletes..." you know, which is totally unrealistic, and ... I see that happening in clubs as well.'*¹⁰⁹

The Commission heard that despite questions and concerns being raised about the appropriateness and effectiveness of this approach and these techniques, people continued to use and support them. Some members of the community talked about the lack of evidence for the use of extremely negative or punishment centred coaching styles.

*'And it's generally that idea that punishment is effective. For some reason, I don't know, even though I've said to coaches over and over again, look at the psychological studies, punishment is one of the most ineffective behavioural change techniques you can use. It's this idea that kids learn better and they need to be punished. If they haven't gotten a skill, rather than looking at why aren't they getting that skill, it's like do 70 laps around the gym.'*¹¹⁰

Consistently, members of the community described the view that this was 'just how elite gymnastics is',¹¹¹ or that this was the way coaching should be done because this was the way it had always been done, with little regard to the costs.

*'If you really drill down or really try to do this with gymnastics people over time and say, "Why do you do it like this? Why, why, why?" And really drill it down and if they give you honest answers, a lot of the time it just comes back to, "Well, that's just how we've always done it".'*¹¹²

The Commission heard that in addition to more formal training coaches receive throughout their careers, many young coaches begin coaching while still training as athletes themselves, or shortly after they retire, and that their own training experience may become the 'foundation of their coaching style'.¹¹³ New coaches often received mentoring from, or were guided by the approach of, senior coaches around them. This cycle, and the 'insular' nature of gymnastics, where practices and styles were said to travel down through generations of coaches without outside influence, was raised as a significant barrier to eliminating abusive and harmful behaviour from the sport. This was particularly highlighted when there was a significant power imbalance between coaches, with younger or less experienced coaches 'not allowed to question older or more experienced coaches'.¹¹⁴

*'So you just have this perpetual cycle of athletes coaching the way that they were coached because that's all they know. And then trying to educate them what's actually right and what's actually wrong because your mentor and your coach is just this cycle—athlete, coach, mentor, coach, athlete.'*¹¹⁵

In 2021, completion of Gymnastics Australia's Child Safe course is a mandatory part of a coach's accreditation process and must be completed by all club personnel, both paid and volunteer. The course covers abuse in and outside the gym and describes mandatory and other reporting processes. Through a high-level review of the training, the Commission found that some of the processes described could be modified for clarity including what the 'relevant level' for reporting is and whether personnel undertaking the training are or are not mandatory reporters. The Commission was concerned that a safeguarding option of moving a child to another class following a complaint, could lead to victimisation of the complainant or further abusive behaviour from a respondent. Overall, the implementation of the child safety training, developed in partnership with Bravehearts, is a significant positive development for keeping children safe in gymnastics.

Beyond specific child safety education, the Commission heard from the gymnastics community that the overwhelming majority of coach training and education is focused on the development of technical coaching skills, rather than relationship and dispute management and working safely and appropriately with children.

Currently, Gymnastics Australia develops and provides all training material for coach accreditation education to the state and territory associations. The state and territory associations act as training providers, delivering the necessary face to face components, while Gymnastics Australia directly delivers the online component of accreditation courses through their learning management system. Additionally, of the 272 clubs who responded to Gymnastics Australia's survey to collect the data that the Commission had requested as part of this Review, 158 indicated that they did provide additional training and/or professional development to coaches. The Commission is also aware that modules on 'coaching safely', including working with children and duty of care and 'athlete management', are taught across some but not all levels of the coaching curriculum. In 2020, the Foundation Course Athlete Advisory Group developed course topics with mandatory courses to be implemented in 2021. Topics shared with the Commission include 'athlete first', 'creating a safe environment', 'coach/athlete/parent relationships'.

The Commission welcomes the development of these topics as ‘communication’,¹¹⁶ ‘psychology’,¹¹⁷ and ‘evidence based coaching methods’,¹¹⁸ were all highlighted as areas where coaching education could be improved. This was particularly raised for junior coaches who may have had ‘minimal experience working with children’.¹¹⁹

Yeah, so it would be that it's not actually within our educational programme, is conflict management. It's not even about conflict, but having difficult conversations or, yeah, receiving feedback, yeah, which is part of customer service; so receiving feedback from an athlete, a coach, a parent.’¹²⁰

They're called soft skills, but they're not really soft skills ... you know, the technical aspect gets taught, but I think more—I think more education in that space of how to handle kids and how to get the best out of them and why it gets the best out of them.’¹²¹

In addition to increased skill development on positive coaching methods and working effectively with children and young people, the Commission recommends that young coaches be further supported through the development of mentoring and cross-club knowledge sharing networks.

Relationships

The lack of focus on developing relationship management skills among coaches is a particular issue given their responsibility to engage with athletes and their parents in respectful and productive ways. Adult coach and child athlete dynamics are widely recognised as involving an inherent power disparity which can be exacerbated by the particular dynamics of different sports.¹²² In many elite sporting contexts, there is evidence that coaches are ‘afforded substantial and unquestioned power’ due to their ‘expertise, experience, access to resources, and decision making authority’.¹²³ The formal coaching role also affords coaches ‘positional power’.¹²⁴ In gymnastics in Australia, some told us that coaches were revered as ‘gods’,¹²⁵ that their words ‘were gospel’,¹²⁶ and that they were ‘idolized’.¹²⁷

Coach-athlete relationships

Underpinning negative coaching styles, many members of the gymnastics community in Australia identified a coach-athlete relationship that was more coach-led than athlete-led. Coaches were frequently described as taking advantage of the imbalance of power between themselves and young athletes to create an ecosystem of control and compliance. This was particularly the case among female gymnasts who, due to global perceptions of the ideal gymnast and domestic competition frameworks, begin training competitively at a younger age than male gymnasts. The young age of female athletes and gendered ideas about appropriate behaviour exacerbated the risk of coaches adopting authoritarian and highly controlling coaching behaviour, regardless of the gender of the coach themselves.

Many gymnasts and former gymnasts who spoke to the Commission felt they were expected to be in complete deference to their coach and that they were ‘rewarded’¹²⁸ for being docile and obedient and for obeying instructions above all else.

‘Gymnastics is a sport where young female athletes are pushed into believing that success is dependent upon compliance, punishment and restriction. At such an impressionable age, young athletes are taught that they must comply with any requests from coaches.’¹²⁹

Some referenced informal talent identification or selection processes that were based on athletes’ perceived ability and willingness to take instructions on board and not question coaches’ authority.

‘They don't select ‘those’ girls for their squads and if they do, they get rid of them pretty quickly, because they don't want to be challenged. It's a lot easier to have little robots. And that means kids put themselves at risk.’¹³⁰

This focus on compliance and control was almost exclusively discussed among female members of the gymnastics community. Members of the community told the Commission that coaches would control the behaviour of gymnasts, particularly young and teenage female elite gymnasts, on day-to-day and broader life matters including what they could eat, whether they could engage in social activities and how they would progress through their gymnastics careers. Many commented that this often involved treating older teenage and adult female gymnasts as though they were still young children.

*'I saw it on the WAG side ... they treat them like girls even though they're adults as well ... they're not allowed to go out, not allowed to talk to boys.'*¹³¹

*'And that's very true in high performance environments, coaches aren't just the coach, they become the parent ... they dictate what social events that kid can attend, what activities they can and can't do.'*¹³²

While a number of male athletes and former athletes talked about being subject to authoritarian and potentially abusive coaching styles and relationships, they did not discuss the same level of controlling behaviour that female athletes raised. Control over lifestyle is a commonly recognised feature of coach-athlete relationships and is viewed by some as a necessary basis for raising athletic performance.¹³³ However, if safe interpersonal boundaries are eroded then this control can also disempower athletes by reducing their autonomy and putting them at risk of abuse or maltreatment.¹³⁴

The Commission is particularly concerned about the focus on control among coaches working with young female athletes because of the way traits of compliance and passivity feed into gendered stereotypes. Stereotyped constructions of femininity and masculinity that uphold the view that girls and boys should behave in particular ways have been shown to be key drivers of societal gender inequality and gender-based violence.¹³⁵

*'There are lots of positives to our sports. And our coaches play amazing roles in our kids' lives. But I've seen just a complete lack of professional boundaries seems to be a bit of an issue within our sport. And I know that that's a risk factor 101, not having clear professional boundaries between children and adults can cause all sorts of issues.'*¹³⁶

This also extended to boundaries for interactions beyond the training floor. The Commission heard from members of the community that they were concerned about the conduct of coach-athlete relationships via social media. Gymnastics Australia does not have a standalone national social media policy, however the AIS did recommend such a policy in the 2019 Athlete and Wellbeing Framework.¹³⁷ Gymnastics Australia has developed guidelines for social media use, video sharing and online collaboration; and an online safety self-assessment tool, with the latter covering coaching online, in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, a number of state and territory associations do have specific social media policies that refer to online engagement between children and young people and appointed judges, coaches, officials and staff. However, differences across these policies, particularly regarding the required minimum age for contact which vary between 16 and 18, are cause for concern and were also raised during consultation.

*'There should be absolutely no social media contact between a coach and a gymnast, full stop. I don't think that that is helpful. I think that is the one tunnel that is going to send our sport down the drain.'*¹³⁸

Some told the Commission that they interpreted coaches' need for control across athletes lives as them having a lack of trust in gymnasts to do what they perceived was necessary for success.

*'The coaches thought that it was all on them to succeed and all these things and you go "These girls actually want this more than you do. They're giving up lives, they're giving up their time at school, they're giving up everything that they're giving up. They want it more than you do, so why don't you like trust them."'*¹³⁹

In this way, some members of the community spoke about coaches being driven by their own pursuit of success more than by what athletes may want from their gymnastics experience. Particularly in elite contexts, gymnastics coaches are often viewed or spoken of as ‘owning’ gymnasts and their success.¹⁴⁰ With coach success and athlete success bound closely together, there is an elevated risk that the pursuit of a good reputation as a winning coach can overshadow concern for the best interest of the child-athlete.

‘This is a very common dynamic in clubs around the country at every level ... I do believe that sometimes coaches can put their want of a good reputation above the health and [wellbeing] of the athlete. This is misguided and dangerous. As a child this was a hard thing to comprehend and understand.’¹⁴¹

While some acknowledged that this was slowly changing, gymnasts and former gymnasts still perceived that they didn’t have full control or autonomy over their own sporting careers and, particularly at elite levels, were made to feel guilty or questioned for their choice to leave the sport, even when they were no longer enjoying it.

‘Because the athletes are young, the coach is usually fully in charge of all decision making and this can leave the athlete with a lack of agency in their gymnastics career. After spending enough time in the sport, it can be very difficult for athletes to decide to leave—if they feel they are not enjoying it anymore—or speak up if they disagree with the direction their training is going.’¹⁴²

The pursuit of excellence by coaches lead to unbalanced focus on particular gymnasts who were seen as being star performers, or ‘the flavour of the month’.¹⁴³ A significant number of gymnasts and former gymnasts spoke about a culture of favouritism among coaches with preferred athletes receiving special treatment, particularly in the face of injury, reduced training or ‘physical conditioning’ loads and additional coaching and attention. Less favoured athletes would be neglected or ignored during training, or subject to ‘punishment’.¹⁴⁴

‘Gymnasts are dehumanised by their coaches. If they are winners they are celebrated and given special treatment, if they are not winning, they are thrown away, discarded, ignored.’¹⁴⁵

To many gymnasts who spoke to the Commission, the issue of favouritism had broader implications because of the influence coaches can have over athlete careers. Current and former gymnasts were concerned that not being liked by their coach would negatively impact their ability to progress in the sport, for example by not being picked to attend a national training camp,¹⁴⁶ not being selected for a team,¹⁴⁷ or having their scholarship removed.¹⁴⁸

‘You have to have a good relationship to get on the camp ... so there’s a lot of power in that position. And I think that makes it—well, for a coach to say “Well, if you don’t train hard this week, then I’ll tell [COACH NAME] not to put you on this camp”, for example, you know, because that’s the way it gets selected through me, because I’ve got a good relationship.’¹⁴⁹

Favouritism and feeling the need to be liked by one’s coach for the sake of progression in the sport also operated to reinforce the control coaches had over their young female athletes. Many female athletes spoke about constantly feeling the need to act in ways that would be likeable and would ‘please the coach’ with some reporting that this disposition was so ingrained that deference to authority, and the ‘need to please’ continued long after gymnastics.¹⁵⁰ As discussed in more detail in the ‘barriers to reporting’ section of Chapter 4 of this report, the fear of speaking up about mistreatment was so ingrained throughout the gymnastics community that it effectively created a ‘culture of silence’.¹⁵¹

Though it featured less prominently in consultation, the Commission did also hear about the risk of coaches experiencing mistreatment or bullying from athletes, particularly when gymnasts are older and exist in a small pool of elite athletes.

*That the pool gets smaller so then the number of athletes that you can draw on for a National team is finite so then ... funnily enough, sometimes it swings the other way in that the athlete's balance of power becomes higher. Quite often they'll start to deliberately press a coach's buttons because they can. Misbehave. Mistreat coaches.'*¹⁵²

The Commission considers that central to generating positive experiences for all participants in the sport, is the development of an environment of mutual respect. This concept is explored further in the positive coaching section at the end of this chapter.

Coach-athlete-parent relationships

The vast majority of gymnasts in Australia are children and young people under the age of 18 and, as a result, parents and other family members play an important part in facilitating and supporting the child's participation in the sport. Many parents also make significant contributions to the broader gymnastics community by volunteering with their child's club or with competitions. Despite their significant role, many parents expressed complex emotions about their child's experiences and their relationship with coaches and program administrators.

As seen in other contexts, parents often have multiple reasons for engaging their children in sport, and particularly elite sport. Many are driven primarily by the enjoyment and positive personal development their child derives from participating.¹⁵³ They want their children to have fun, to grow and to learn new skills. Simultaneously, some parents are driven by their desire for their child to be competitively successful or be an 'Olympic champion'.¹⁵⁴

*'My daughter is now almost the same the age I was when my wife and I first agreed to supporting and encouraging her to follow her Olympic dreams. Although in hindsight, I now ask myself, were we supporting and encouraging her to follow **our** Olympic dreams?'*¹⁵⁵

*'We want success. We entered [Athlete Name] into an elite sport, because we wanted to give her an opportunity to succeed at an elite sport. The desire for success, it's the method how you get there, which is questionable.'*¹⁵⁶

The Commission heard about a mix of parental motivations and how these motivations are often intertwined with the significant amount of energy, time and financial resources parents invest in their child's involvement in the sport. Parents and relatives often talked about the sacrifices their families had made to facilitate the athletes' involvement in elite gymnastics.

*'The parents have already put in so much money and time into getting that kid up to the standard and in that elite squad to that point. They don't want to give up on that dream either.'*¹⁵⁷

*'And like I said, you don't start off driving an hour and 15, you start off driving 15 minutes. And before you know it, you're down this rabbit hole. And you're slowly being conditioned into all of these extreme environments.'*¹⁵⁸

Other parents talked about how they felt their child's coaches and the managers of gymnastics programs emphasised competitive success as the primary positive of the sport over a more holistic sense of wellbeing.

*'I feel like it's a bit one-sided. It's like, what the gymnastic centre can get out of me for the fees and fundraising. But it's not a reciprocated relationship, it feels a bit one-way. And if your child gets a medal, that's meant to satisfy you, but I'm not doing it for the medals. If she gets one, that's great. But that doesn't tick my box. I want to know she's well.'*¹⁵⁹

Regardless of motivation, many parents told the Commission that they felt shut out from their child's training, and were asked to relinquish control of their child's sporting career to their coach.¹⁶⁰ Parents spoke of feeling 'groomed' to accept increasingly extreme practices and training loads under the guise that 'this is what has to happen'.¹⁶¹

*'Coaches normalised abuse and manipulate parents into believing the training methods were necessary for success in elite gymnastics.'*¹⁶²

As with favouritism among gymnasts, parents spoke about fearing being seen as 'annoying' to the coach for speaking up about the mishandling of injuries or mistreatment of their children.¹⁶³

*'There's been lots of times where the coaches have said "Don't say anything to your parents, otherwise we'll get another phone call from them complaining". Like if anything that our parents said would reflect on us. So it was like the parent status reflected on the gymnast status, or how the coaches liked your daughter.'*¹⁶⁴

Across the sport, the Commission heard that the involvement of parents in their children's sporting lives should be seen as a protective factor against abuse and that there should be regular engagement between coaches, parents and athletes about training and wellbeing.¹⁶⁵ The Commission understands that the focus required from young athletes during the sport is such that any distraction can be potentially dangerous. However, working in partnership with athletes to find a comfortable level of involvement for parents must be paramount.

The Commission has recommended at Chapter 4, that Sport Integrity Australia's (SIA) National Integrity Framework (NIF) be adopted, with the associated suite of policies, including the Child Safeguarding Policy (CSP). This policy stipulates that relevant organisations must conduct all training sessions in open locations and allow parents/guardians to watch their children during training, making parents/guardians aware of the standard of behaviour required when watching their child during training.¹⁶⁶ In adopting this CSP, the sport at all levels will be required to adhere to this and ensure that parents and guardians are provided with the option to attend training sessions without fear of retribution.

Roles and accountability

In addition to hearing from gymnasts and parents about their concerns with coaching in gymnastics in Australia, the Commission also heard from coaches and administrators about what they see as the challenges with coaching in the sport. The key issues raised were the lack of career pathways and lack of professionalisation for coaches; the undersupply of coaches; and the associated risks with accountability.

The Commission heard from coaches that opportunities for more junior coaches to develop and progress in their careers are limited. This issue was raised across high performance and recreational levels with some recreational coaches noting that it was difficult to access a higher level of remuneration without progressing into the high performance space. Coaches also raised the lack of professionalisation in the sport with many noting the expectation that they volunteer significant amounts of their time, or work irregular hours. Improvements in career pathways, professionalisation and work satisfaction could lead to greater coach retention and availability of coaches across the sport.

The undersupply of coaches across the sport was raised as a significant challenge that fed into associated risks with accountability. High performance and recreation were again both highlighted as areas where this is a problem.

*'High performance still a bit tricky but that's because it takes so many years to become a high performance coach that those coaches stay there. And no-one replaces them because there's no-one else that's coming up to be a high performance coach.'*¹⁶⁷

*'One of the things of if there is an ability to influence from a state association point of view that I've been thinking about is around the movement of coaches. So the repeat offender and the amount of times in my current role I see this repeat offender turn up somewhere else. And they are so excited and it's this big secret because there's such a shortage of coaches at all kind of levels.'*¹⁶⁸

As a result of the coach shortage, the Commission heard that coaches may be more likely to be 'permitted to get away with their unethical behaviour', especially coaches who have a successful competitive record.¹⁶⁹ At a club level, administrators and club owners shared that while they would rather employ coaches that they know have a positive record of training athletes ethically, they are sometimes in such need of a coach that 'if someone's there sometimes you'll take people less than you would like'.¹⁷⁰ Similarly, clubs do not always follow up on references for new coaches or check whether coaches they have dismissed for negative behaviour have gone on to coach elsewhere.

*'We are doing our sport a disservice by allowing clubs to continue to allow coaches with known histories of coaching via fear and intimidation to be coaching and influencing the lives of our children. Clubs continue to put their heads in the sand and ignore the abusive behaviour of coaches because they get results and it is applauded at the national level.'*¹⁷¹

Positive coaching styles

Members of the gymnastics community shared a range of experiences in this Review. This chapter has so far focused on gymnasts' negative and abusive experiences with coaching in the sport, however the Commission also heard about many positive experiences. Gymnasts, former gymnasts, coaches and parents all shared that they felt positive developments were transforming coaching in the sport, even if some wished things would move faster.

*'I know first hand it can be done differently. I had an amazing relationship with one of my female coaches near the end of my career as she made me feel supported and heard. That positive reinforcement was what I needed to develop self-belief and drive and results aside, enjoy my time as an elite gymnast.'*¹⁷²

There is evidence that 'alternative and healthier' coaching practices are possible in gymnastics.¹⁷³ However, the Commission heard that there are 'risks' going down a less-tested path when the approach outlined throughout this chapter has been perceived to yield competitive results. Coaches spoke to the Commission about the challenges they had faced pushing back against the view that negative coaching was necessary for elite gymnasts.

*'And I see that every day like, you know, a balance between being new, but then this, yeah, of what is perceived required to reach the highest level.'*¹⁷⁴

However, the Commission also heard that support for athlete-led styles was growing. The Commission considers that there are greater risks for coaches, clubs, the sport of gymnastics and, most importantly, athletes, if there is not a shift towards more athlete-centred approaches to coaching, particularly, while athletes are still young.

*'It's the coach's responsibility to know when and how an athlete should be loaded back from injury ... in a way that best reduces the risk of injury ... It is the coach's job to gather all this information and understand all this information before training load is introduced. It is the coach's responsibility to monitor athletes' responses to load both physically and emotionally. It is the coach's responsibility to respond to and modify the program accordingly if an athlete responds to load that may have a negative impact both physically and emotionally. Being naive, pretending to be unaware, being dismissive, ignorant and putting a coach's ambitions in place of an athlete's [wellbeing] is completely inappropriate and unprofessional.'*¹⁷⁵

In line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Commission considers that a rights-respectful coaching style would value the voices of children and young people, and particularly girls and young women, and empower them to shape activities and make decisions about their lives and their training.



When athletes understand more of the reasons behind their training, they are able to be more actively participate in it. Coaches should recognise that athletes are experts on their own bodies and their own sense of wellbeing.¹⁷⁶ Such a coaching style would put athlete health and wellbeing truly at the forefront of all gymnastics engagement. Coaches would leave behind 'taken-for-granted disciplinary coaching practices' and any need for control and transform their interactions to maximise everyone's potential and support them to reach their personal goals.¹⁷⁷ Coaching relationships between athletes, coaches and parents would be based on mutual and shared respect and transparency.

Through this, a new discourse within the sport that female athletes need not be docile, petite or highly feminine but rather, are powerful, strong and capable, including of making decisions about their lives and careers, can be crafted.

*'The athletes in women's gymnastics ... they're really scared to speak and just have a voice, and that needs to really be encouraged in the future ... and it shifts when the athlete gets a bit older, but they need to start it much younger, much younger, to change that balance a little bit.'*¹⁷⁸

Recommendations

There needs to be a greater focus, at all levels of the sport, on supporting coaches to develop skills to work appropriately and safely with children and their parents and ensuring there is accountability for coaches who have a record of inappropriate coaching styles and abuse.

Coach training and education for coaches of all levels must have an equal focus on developing technical coaching skills, and skills for managing relationships and disputes and working effectively with children.

Stronger accountability would include mandatory reference checks at the time of hiring, a commitment to hiring only candidates who have a demonstrated record of positive coaching practices and a duty of care to truthfully disclose relevant incidents or complaints to prospective new employers. The proposed coach register, outlined below, would be administered by Gymnastics Australia and would ensure there was a more robust accountability framework in place for coach employment. It is also recommended that a standalone national social media policy be developed for all levels of the sport to ensure consistency, particularly regarding engagement between coaches and children and young people.

Recommendation 1: *Transform education to skills development for coaches*

The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia and state and territory associations transform their approach from 'educating' coaches to upskilling them, including in holistic, athlete-centred coaching practices that safeguard children's rights and form relationships based on mutual respect with athletes and their parents.¹⁷⁹ These skills should be developed at all coach accreditation levels from beginner through to high performance. The Commission acknowledges the work proposed by the Foundation Course Athlete Advisory Group, and recommends that all such initiatives for coaches are designed with input from relevant experts, including those outside of gymnastics, and focus on building an environment where:

- children and young people are empowered to shape activities and make decisions about their lives and their training
- athlete health and wellbeing, including in relation to body image, are truly at the forefront of all gymnastics engagement
- training regimes are reimagined without a disproportionate focus on discipline
- the overall goal of training in gymnastics is to maximise each individual's potential and support them to reach their personal goals¹⁸⁰
- relationships between athletes, coaches and parents are based on mutual respect and transparency.

Recommendation 2: *Strengthen coach engagement and accountability*

The Commission recommends measures to improve the engagement and accountability of coaches across all levels of the sport by:

- **Establishing a coach mentoring network:** The Commission recommends the establishment of a coach mentoring network to encourage knowledge sharing between coaches of different clubs, particularly at the recreational level where the majority of athletes are participating.¹⁸¹ This could include identifying and recognising coaches who have a demonstrated record of healthy coaching practices. The Commission understands that coaches going through advanced coach accreditation require in-workplace mentors to complete their training. The Commission considers that a broader network approach, where coaches can gain access to mentoring from beyond their own club, would be beneficial to clubs, coaches and athletes. A particular aspect of this mentoring network should focus on junior coaches, who are under 18 years of age.
- **Developing a sport-wide coach register:** The Commission recommends that there be a whole of sport register of coaches listing the current and previous location of employment for every coach working in the sport. Maintaining accurate details in the register would be a condition of coach and club accreditation and the register would be accessible only by clubs and state and territory associations to verify references and employment history.

Recommendation 3: *Develop a national social media policy*

The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia develop a social media policy for all state and territory associations and clubs across Australia. The policy should stipulate that the minimum age for engagement with any athlete via social media is 18. The Commission understands that there are existing social media guidelines, however to address regional inconsistencies, a new standalone policy should be drafted and adopted across all levels of the sport. A child-friendly version of this document should also be drafted in consultation with the recommended youth advisory councils (Recommendation 5) to ensure that all athletes understand their rights and responsibilities regarding the use of social media.



3. Athlete experience

This chapter explores the experience of athletes in gymnastics. Throughout the Review, the Commission heard about experiences of misconduct, harassment and abuse, issues relating to body image and aesthetics, the perceived lack of support received by athletes, and the demanding expectations imposed onto, particularly young female, gymnasts. These experiences have had both short- and long-term mental and physical impacts on gymnasts.

Enshrined as a human right, children's participation in leisure activities, including sport, is greatly important.¹⁸² There is a growing awareness, however, that children's experience of sport is not always positive, and that abuse may occur in organised sport.¹⁸³ Athletes, and gymnasts in particular, are especially vulnerable to a variety of forms of abuse that can range from extreme diets and weight control to verbal and emotional abuse, overtraining, physical punishment, injuries resulting from repetitive stress and training, and competing while in pain or injured.¹⁸⁴

The Commission found that there are a range of risk factors in the sport for the experience of abuse and neglect and other negative or harmful impacts. These include the high training load and expected commitment of young female gymnasts, the normalisation of physical touch in training, the acceptance of training on injuries, the lack of 'athlete empowerment' and the lack of oversight by parents. The Commission found that a broad understanding of the full range of behaviours that constitute abuse and neglect was lacking and that more concerted action was required to address the risks specific to the gymnastics context.

The Commission recommends that all members of the gymnastics community be equipped with a broad understanding of the nature, indicators and prevention of child abuse and neglect, and that athlete empowerment and participation be seen as a priority to ensure a shift in focus to athlete mental and physical wellbeing. The Commission also recommends an acknowledgment and apology for past experiences of abuse.

Body image is an issue that requires significant attention at all levels of the sport. The pressure to achieve the ideal physique and the perceived detrimental impacts of puberty, have resulted in athletes undertaking or being instructed to undertake a number of weight management practices, including constant surveillance of weight, and other measures to meet the 'ideal' body shape. Alongside these weight management practices, the Commission heard from many about their own or other athletes' experiences of body shaming, particularly from or about female athletes, notably from coaches.

To address these issues, a number of recommendations are made, including the development of a therapeutic and intervention-based program by a relevant organisation, such as the InsideOut Institute or the National Eating Disorders Collaboration (NEDC), that is rolled out alongside currently planned education initiatives and is focused on protective factors, such as developing self-esteem and self-worth. In addition, it is recommended that a similar expert organisation develop a protocol to be used at all levels of the sport for responding to disclosures or signs of eating disorders among athletes. Finally, the Commission recommends changes to the Gymnastics Australia Body Positive Guidelines—specifically, the attached consent forms—to ensure athlete participation and understanding and consistent implementation across all levels of the sport.

Sporting structure and expectations

The Commission heard about the enormous pressure experienced by young female gymnasts to perform at their peak in their mid-teens. Although there has been an observable shift over recent years and Olympic cycles, it is still widely accepted within the gymnastics community that a female gymnast reaches their peak in their pre-pubescent years. This section examines how the expectations imposed on gymnasts, particularly in elite and pre-elite women's gymnastics, affect their wellbeing and long-term participation in the sport.

Female athletes are often selected to move into a competitive stream of gymnastics while they are still extremely young.

*'I really hate that we pick out these talented kids based on various things at a very young age, and then give them all the resources and the extra training and all that so they can say, "See we're right. They were the good ones."'*¹⁸⁵

As female gymnasts can compete at a senior international and Olympic level from their mid to late teens, many perceive it necessary for athletes to commence rigorous training from an early age. This is to ensure they have sufficient time to move incrementally through their training, progressively developing skills and gaining confidence. This aligns with the dominant discourse identified internationally within Women's Artistic Gymnastics and highlighted in the Independent Review of Gymnastics New Zealand, that skills are best taught to extremely young gymnasts.¹⁸⁶

*'I think there are certain things you've got to learn at certain ages. So if a gymnast walks in the gym at 10 and you go, "Well you've got eight years until you're 18, you can start later" ... there's certainly neurological pathways that need to be developed and they need to be developed at a certain time.'*¹⁸⁷

Members of the gymnastics community however, raised a number of key issues with very early talent identification processes. The Commission heard that this segmentation into different streams early on does not take into account the differences in the timing of development, both in physicality and maturity, between individual girls and young women.

*'Too much pressure for girls to be international level gymnasts at such a young age. There should only be one stream for ALL girls until age 16, then international. Not all girls develop skills at the same rate and if you look at gymnasts worldwide, there are girls still competing in their 20s.'*¹⁸⁸

The perception that gymnasts must meet certain milestones by certain ages to progress their training and gain acceptance to particular training camps and streams, also hinders non-linear pathways or the ability for athletes to move between competitive and non or less competitive streams as they would like and are able to.

*'And I do hear people in—the high-performance [space] saying "Oh, athletes perform. It's not linear"—but our structure is linear. And so, we've got—yeah, segregation, you've got these skills that need to be done by a certain age in a certain environment and the competition's fierce and intense.'*¹⁸⁹

This early selection process and restricted pathway does not acknowledge or provide the opportunity for gymnasts who might prefer or may have a more successful or healthier competitive career if they started a more intensive training regime later in their life. It also creates significant pressure for young athletes to take on an intensive training load when they are young. Members of the community referred to a discourse within the sport that the number of training hours correlates closely with the success of the gymnasts, with a higher number of hours necessary from a young age to achieve competitive success.

*'So there's this real framework around focusing on elite gymnasts, focusing on very young gymnasts ... and we're talking about eight-year-olds training 14, 15 hours a week, 12-year-olds training 25 hours a week.'*¹⁹⁰

*'I think that people perceive that training long hours is going to get the results ... the fallacy of the 10,000 hours rule, which has been thrown out of its head now, but that kind of mentality, I think, is still within the sport.'*¹⁹¹

This in turn can become an assumed approach even for gymnasts training and competing at less elite levels.

*'It concerns me greatly and I think that having a framework of that not only does the damage but it also sells the damage ... it sells that that's the way to do it, which is then implemented by less professional people and the problems then become even worse.'*¹⁹²

The Commission heard that gymnasts are sometimes being encouraged to undertake a large training load as though they are or will be competing at an elite or international level even when they may not be likely to.

*'There's also a lot of kids doing elite sport that shouldn't be there. You know, I look at certain clubs or I look at senior teams of nationals and yeah, four or five of them, they should be there. The rest of them, I don't know why they're there. What have they been promised? Why are they wasting their childhood when we just know they're never going to make it?'*¹⁹³

In high performance and non-high performance training environments, coaches can come to believe that gymnastics is the most important thing in their gymnasts' lives. Members of the community spoke about being punished for missing training sessions, even in the face of injury, and being expected to miss social events, school occasions and family holidays for gymnastics. Gymnastics was viewed as requiring 'total commitment'¹⁹⁴ and that there was 'no room'¹⁹⁵ for anything else. The pressure on female gymnasts to train intensely while they are young may lead to burnout or injury, when gymnasts may otherwise have gone on to have a successful career or enjoyable recreational experience in the sport.

*'My coach is known to backstab our work ethic and commitment to the sport when we have days off due to other commitments such as family, school work, or illness and injury. She has been overheard on many occasions by fellow gymnasts bickering and challenging a gymnast that may have had two days off to complete school work.'*¹⁹⁶

The Australian Sports Medicine Collaborative, supported by the AIS, has said that young athletes should not participate in training or competition for a single sport for a number of hours per week that exceeds their age.¹⁹⁷ For example, eight-year-olds should not train or compete for more than eight hours per week. The Commission acknowledges that some Gymsports can be dangerous and it is essential that gymnasts train an appropriate amount to be able to take part in the sport safely. However, consideration should be given to publishing guidelines for training loads for young elite gymnasts that take into account medical and child safety advice.

Intensive training regimes at a young age were reportedly encouraged by coaches and clubs, however the Commission also heard that the structure of gymnastics competitions and programs contributed to their implementation.

*'The structure of our levels programs also contributes to overtraining and institutionalisation of gymnasts from a very young age—unless you are age x training at level x as directed by the national association, you are not believed to be in contention for progression to the higher levels.'*¹⁹⁸

*'"Peak season" lasting almost 3/4 of the year. This leaves minimal time for a proper pre-season and preparation for the following year and increased risk of burnout and injury during the season. The culture seems to pressure clubs to send their kids to as many comps as possible.'*¹⁹⁹

Changes made to the competitive framework for the Women's Artistic Gymnastics Australian Levels Program in 2018 were said to have had a positive impact on raising the minimum age of participants taking part in national championships. However, many expressed a view that the minimum age requirement for senior international women's gymnastics participation was still too low and that this had flow-on effects on the expected age for taking part in selection camps and pathways. Members of the gymnastics community recommended that Gymnastics Australia modify the minimum age requirement for senior international women's gymnastics to 17 or 18 years of age, regardless of international minimum requirements. The Commission also heard that there could be greater opportunities to compete in the domestic sphere outside of international streams and pathways, with some sharing that they wished more gymnasts felt supported to continue training and competing later into life.

*'I think unfortunately the culture of women's [gymnastics] is that they're eligible to compete at senior events at 16 years of age and then there's this perception ... [that] the girls have to retire early ... there's nothing that I know of that there's any medical reason or any other reason why they do have to retire earlier. It's just that this culture ... that that's how it's done all around the world.'*²⁰⁰

*'Even with all the protections in the world, as soon as it's a national camp or a national championships or any of those things, that puts on pressure onto what are very, very young children ... [When] you start doing those international state-type events at a later age ... you have the language skills. You have the understandings. You have all those things as protections, and you also are more resilient and more able to cope and understand with those things.'*²⁰¹

Some voiced concerns that raising the minimum age requirement for competition may deny young athletes who are at their 'personal peak' earlier the opportunity to succeed. Raising the minimum age would not preclude athletes from training in a competitive way earlier, but would begin to shift the rhetoric that intensive training loads at an extremely young age are necessary for any competitive success.

*'Like it doesn't mean that kids want to train who are great—doesn't mean that we stop them, but just think there's so much pressure to be good at such a certain age, there is that pressure there that's not scientifically proven that you have to do that to be able to be achieving results. So therefore there's a lot more pressure on the younger age.'*²⁰²

There are growing examples at the international level that female gymnasts can continue to achieve at a later stage of life and the traditional view the female gymnasts need to be docile, petite and child-like is being challenged. Indeed, even some of Australia's recent international gymnastics successes have been 'older' female gymnasts who have come back to the sport after a period away. Recent research suggests that older gymnasts are able to learn new skills and undertake more efficient training sessions due to their 'greater awareness of what needed to be done'.²⁰³ Participants encouraged Gymnastics Australia to consider restructuring and reframing women's gymnastics to better support gymnasts to prolong their careers and engage in gymnastics in a way that is appropriate to their aspirations and goals.

*'And I believe the peak age for gymnastics is not set. I don't believe that it has to be prepubescent young gymnasts. You've just got to look at some of the things that are happening around the world right now that we can change our sport and have gymnasts peak later, stay in this longer, and have a much longer better career in gymnastics.'*²⁰⁴

*'I don't think it's a coincidence that some of our most successful gymnasts over the last period have semi-retired and then come back and been at their best. Once they've gone away. Had a bit of life experience. Started university. And come back as a late teenager or someone in their 20s or 21.'*²⁰⁵

The Commission heard that the practice of career planning or the development of individual performance plans in collaboration with athletes had increased in recent years, but some members of the community told the Commission that they still felt a lack of autonomy. Similarly, the ability of parents, and importantly children, to make decisions about their level of involvement in the sport, while children are very young, was raised. The decision to move from recreational training into a more rigorous or competitive stream can entail a significant commitment. It is therefore crucial that parents and children are empowered to make an informed decision.

*'No one's checking in, and no one's... "Is this really what you want? Do you understand what you're giving up? Do you understand what sacrifices you're having to make here?" No one's asking that question—and when you're that young you don't know. I know I wouldn't have. I would re-do it. I wouldn't do it again.'*²⁰⁶

The Commission heard that there was an expectation that girls who were assessed as having the ability to move into pre-elite or elite streams of gymnastics were often highly encouraged to do so, even when the child may have had a more enjoyable or rewarding experience continuing in recreational gymnastics. This was reportedly exacerbated by the significant focus placed on high performance at the state and national levels of the sport.

*'Gymnastics is more concerned with elite athletes than those competing for fun and fitness.'*²⁰⁷



Similarly, the Commission heard that some felt the design and implementation of the judging structure may be more negative than needed for the less competitive and younger participants of the sport. This could result in an unnecessarily intense environment for some children and young people with some sharing that they would like to see it become 'more encouraging and more compassionate'.²⁰⁸

*'Judging in itself is just so negative and it's not by the fault of the judges, it's by the fault of the system, which judges get the blame for ... And is there a way we can create models or different competition events based on the goal that we're trying to achieve? Because I don't know if it's helpful having a ten-year-old feel like they're not good enough by losing marks.'*²⁰⁹

The Gymnastics Australia High Performance Plan 2018+ for Men's and Women's Artistic Gymnastics and Trampoline Gymnastics identifies that clubs and high performance centres should be annually recognised based on athlete performance outcomes. While Gymnastics Australia has advised that this is no longer in place, the Commission is of the view that moving forward any 'recognition' should be tied to outcomes of athlete wellbeing, and that a similar recognition system should be in place for non-high performance daily training environments where athletes report a high level of wellbeing and satisfaction with their involvement in the sport.

In 2019, the AIS, in consultation with Gymnastics Australia, developed a national Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement Framework that included 20 recommendations for supporting high performance athletes competing at the elite level. The Framework highlights a number of the issues discussed throughout this report. The Commission welcomes the recommendations and the 24 month timeframe Gymnastics Australia has set to implement key actions. However, the Commission considers that a more serious commitment to athlete health and wellbeing must be made across all levels of the sport to ensure gymnasts training in the full range of environments are adequately supported.

Experiences of abusive and harmful behaviour

Over the last decade, abuse of athletes has received a great deal of attention.²¹⁰ The experiences recounted by the gymnastics community in Australia are unfortunately not unique to the sport. The language used to define abuse in sport varies, but consistently recognises the key domains of abuse as:

emotional abuse, which includes degrading, bullying, teasing and threatening; self-harm; physical abuse, which includes aggression and violence as well as training while exhausted or injured; sexual harassment, including sexist jokes, leering and sexually inappropriate behaviour and sexual abuse as a continuum of behaviours involving sexual activity with a child.²¹¹

The Commission heard from current and former athletes of experiences relating to misconduct, harassment and abuse that occurred across all levels of gymnastics. Such experiences were, however, more prevalent among elite athletes. Coaches were most frequently named as the perpetrators of physical, verbal and sexual misconduct and abuse, although it was repeatedly mentioned that the normalisation of such behaviours across the sport exacerbated these negative experiences. Isolated training environments, the power of authority figures, and the lack of safe, accessible places to report concerns, increases the vulnerability of athletes to abuse.²¹² Societal norms of acceptable behaviour towards young women and girls are recognised as key drivers of gender-based violence and the Commission considers that this broader context also informs the experiences of women and girls within gymnastics.

*'The culture in elite gymnastics allowed and encouraged systematic physical, emotional and [psychological] abuse and the coaches caused and/or witnessed this abuse. We believe some administrators, medical professionals, sports physicians, physiotherapists, sports psychologists, nutritionists, etc also participated, witnessed or ignored the negative practises employed.'*²¹³

*'Overall, the culture of gymnastics in Australia is one of silence, obedience, abuse and an immense lack of respect for athletes. These characteristics have been more prominent on a high performance level but are still in existence at a club level—it is ingrained within the sport.'*²¹⁴

*'A lot of inappropriate and abusive behaviour was normalised in the gymnastics community: minors were restricted from communicating with their parents for days or weeks at a time; strength and conditioning was frequently used as punishment; being yelled at was common and expressions of emotion were further ridiculed and punished; disordered eating was normalized as necessary to success in the sport; athletes were regularly made to train through and compete on injuries.'*²¹⁵

The abuse and mistreatment many former athletes experienced had such a profound impact on their lives that they formed a sense of hatred and rejection towards the sport.

*'I loved gymnastics; I hate the culture. I use past tense because the abusive and inhumane treatment I experienced ultimately [led] to my hatred of the sport. I might currently hate gymnastics, but I longed for it. I needed it. I could not live without [it]. I did not know who I was without it; it defined me.'*²¹⁶

Emotional and verbal abuse

Emotional abuse consists of systemic non-contact behaviours towards a child, such as shouting, belittling, name-calling and comments that humiliate, degrade or intimidate.²¹⁷ Both current and former athletes frequently spoke to the Commission about the constant yelling from coaches. As a coping mechanism, one former young gymnast reported that they would 'dig our fingernails into our legs as hard as we could to distract ourselves from the yelling'.²¹⁸ Former gymnasts recounted that they were 'not allowed'²¹⁹ to cry and were taught to suppress their emotions.

*'And you weren't allowed to cry in the gym, so you'd be sent out of the gym. It was also common, we had to go through the foyer to go to the loo or whatever. There'd be tiny little kids just standing there, sobbing their eyes out, sort of thing.'*²²⁰

*'I was called stupid. I was called a [derogatory expletive]. I was laughed at when I provided reasons for wanting to quit gymnastics. I was negatively compared to other gymnasts. This amounts to verbal, emotional abuse.'*²²¹

*'Prior to entering the program, I was bright, bubbly ... Over time, I was conditioned to accept being yelled at, be berated, humiliated, submissive, follow orders, not laugh, be emotionless and worst of all, condition[ed] to accept that the coach[']s behaviour was normal, acceptable.'*²²²

The gymnastics community spoke about coaches often ignoring gymnasts and using silence as an abusive coaching practice. Even though it was not verbal abuse, athletes and their parents explained that the lack of attention and silent treatment 'did just as much damage'²²³ to athletes as the abusive comments and yelling experienced by others.

Whilst much of the gymnastics community felt there was camaraderie among athletes, the Commission also heard about instances of bullying among athletes, often encouraged by coaches and parents.

*'Coaches will often pit gymnasts against each other, not just in competition but whilst training as well. This leads to toxic behaviour between the gymnasts that they coach and increases the frequency of bullying. I have also experienced a parent of another gymnast tell me on multiple occasions in private that I "should just quit" because I am "a terrible gymnast" and "do not deserve" the placings that I won whilst competing against her daughter.'*²²⁴

*'Toxic culture, bullying and jealousy [among] gymnasts and families the more you get into it.'*²²⁵

The risk of abuse in sport is further increased by the general reluctance to report inappropriate coaching behaviours,²²⁶ making it common for children not to disclose experiences of misconduct or abuse and leaving many parents unaware of such occurrences and the impacts on their children. Even when parents were informed, there was often nothing they could do to improve the situation. One parent spoke about the guilt they felt as a result:

*'My daughter was bullied by an older girl for 3 years. After numerous complaints to the club (of which the bully's parents and the bully's best friend's parents ran the club) she was told she needed to stop being a victim ... When it got to the point that the coach also started bullying her (the bully's parents manipulated the situation) she was told she was a waste of talent ... as a parent the guilt I have of dropping her into that environment every day was horrible. She stopped telling me what was happening as the girl used to threaten her and say go and tell your mum.'*²²⁷

Physical abuse and medical negligence

The Commission observed that physical abuse and medical negligence were prominent forms of abuse endured by athletes. Current and former gymnasts spoke to the Commission about being forced to undertake intense and often strenuous exercises as a form of punishment when a gymnast did not want to perform a skill, made a mistake during their routine, or spoke back to the coaches.

*'One of the methods that coaches used to keep us under control was the constant threat of being punished with "strength", or excessive strength training. There were so many injuries that happened from fatigue and exhaustion ... because of the strength training dished out to us as punishments.'*²²⁸

'I recall being asked to complete strength exercises my body literally could not manage. An example would be completing a handstand against a wall for over two minutes, until my arms could not hold my weight any longer.'

*If I fell, I would have to try again and was not allowed to move on until I could do so ... I was told to sit on the floor and keep going until I had finished it. I was there for the entire 3 hours session, humiliated in front of my teammates as I was unable to physically perform the exercise.'*²²⁹

Certain skills require a level of technique that athletes often felt they did not have. Instead of receiving the necessary support to perform such complex skills, one athlete recounted that 'it was common to see girls standing on the beam, arms in the air for half an hour, crying, because they were too scared to do a thing'.²³⁰

Flexibility and strength are necessary for gymnasts to perform routines without injury. Athletes shared that overstretching techniques were commonly used to increase the range of motion of gymnast's hips and shoulders. These exercises can be extremely painful for gymnasts. Some former athletes considered these overstretching exercises a form of physical abuse, as they described coaches being unsympathetic towards their pain.

*'When they stretched us, the rules were, you know, if you cried the stretching would last longer and it would be more painful.'*²³¹

*'I had a grown adult sit (with all of their weight) on my kneecaps while my heels were placed on an object 30–50 cm tall, for minutes as a time, on a daily basis. This provides an example of a training practice—hyperextension of developing joints—that does not fit within safe strength, fitness, and flexibility training for a child.'*²³²

*'She [the coach] stretched me to the point I wanted to die. The pain was excruciating ... If I tensed up or cried from the pain, she counted slower. I had to relax and hoped she would speed up the counting, or I wished I would pass out.'*²³³

*'During training I was stretched physically by staff so much that I begged them to stop. So much pain was endured during stretch sessions that I would cry. It was done so routinely that it became normal for me to just think this was ok.'*²³⁴

Physical abuse may also be characterised by neglect and negligence. For example, coaches and other adults in positions of authority may fail to prevent athletes from overtraining or training on injuries.²³⁵ The Commission heard of current and former gymnasts being made to train with, often severe, injuries, and broken bones. Training programs were not adapted to manage injuries. Gymnasts were not given time off training to recover appropriately but were instead expected to continue training.

*'No matter how serious an injury, I was never able to take time off away from training, I was still required to come into the gym each day, I just didn't complete the regular training program.'*²³⁶

*'So, I wasn't allowed to train on my elbow because it was bad, so pretty much every day I just had strength training. So, for hours they just, you were ignored, you were isolated, you're just over in your little thing, and you're just doing strength for hours.'*²³⁷

Athletes shared that they were so commonly instructed to continue training while injured that there were instances where they were made to believe 'my injuries were not real'²³⁸ and 'were frequently called liars when we reported pain/injury'.²³⁹

*'I began to second-guess every thought, opinion, feeling and judgement. My knee would be so sore that I could barely walk on it, however when I got a scan nothing showed up. I was told I was going crazy and was weak and sensitive. Years later, I was diagnosed with juvenile arthritis.'*²⁴⁰

*'Very rarely did coaches believe that our injuries were real.'*²⁴¹

*'It got to a point where I wouldn't tell them I had injuries because they wouldn't believe me.'*²⁴²



Athletes were 'actively discouraged from reporting injuries'.²⁴³ This lack of transparency and communication relating to injuries was raised as a major concern by parents. Many parents of current and former gymnasts shared that permission was not sought for children to attend health appointments or take pain killers or any other form of medication. Young gymnasts were asked to see doctors, physiotherapists, massage therapists or psychologists unsupervised and without the knowledge of parents. Medical results were then given to coaches instead of parents, where medical advice was often ignored.

*'But I never intended that my daughter had medical consultations with a doctor without me being there, and not know about it unless I happen to find a with compliments slip in the bottom of her bag. And I don't even know if she'd got one all the time. I, to this day, do not know how many times she saw a doctor. And when I complained about that, I got in trouble.'*²⁴⁴

*'I was seen by national doctors and physios (males) without any parental supervision as a child, administered injections and medications without ever consulting with my parents.'*²⁴⁵

*'Getting letters from physios and professionals saying you can't do certain skills, or can't train for a week or something like that, and then still being forced and pushed through those injuries, and then they just become worse obviously. When you are visibly in pain or crying, and you are still made to do the things that they want you to do.'*²⁴⁶

One former athlete recounted the common overuse of pain killers and medication:

"Just have another Naprosyn," which apparently has really bad long-term effects and we were on Naprosyn, as children, our whole time. Chuck another cortisone injection in there ... I was 15 and had cortisone injected into my back under an x-ray and things like that. It was just shove you full of cortisone and put you back out on the floor, sort of thing.

*So, I think parents were not reported to sufficiently, when it came to psychologists or doctors or anything because I think there was certainly a filter of information going through and they only heard what the coaches wanted them to hear.'*²⁴⁷

Many elite sport contexts encourage making sacrifices and accepting few limits in order to reach selection or success. In Women's Artistic Gymnastics, this culture includes striving for perfection, which results in the athlete 'choosing' to train despite pain, compete when injured or sick, neglect recovery, or eat too little, practices widespread in elite Women's Artistic Gymnastics.²⁴⁸

*'Injuries are a part of elite sport and it would be naive of anyone to think there wasn't [sic] situations in which you can train through pain. What it comes down to is, will training on this injury cause further harm?'*²⁴⁹

Coaches would undermine the severity of injuries and the extent of pain gymnasts were in. Athletes would not question their coach's advice and instruction, causing them to become 'desensitised'²⁵⁰ to pain. As one athlete explained, 'tolerance to pain on a daily basis was just part of life'.²⁵¹ A parent of a young female gymnast shared an experience where a child completed an entire routine on a broken ankle, an experience that was not uncommon. She recalled:

*And then we walked in and [doctor] said, "Oh, my goodness, I cannot believe you competed on that ankle. It's broken". Broken. And [gymnast] said, "Well, that would explain it, then, why I'm in so much pain, every step". And [doctor] said "The fact you could do four routines ... It's astounding to me. But because you gymnasts have such high pain tolerances for all you've gone through, this is what happens, you can actually keep going, even though for any normal person, there's no way they could even walk on it.'*²⁵²

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse in sport is defined by the International Olympic Committee as 'any conduct of a sexual nature, whether non-contact, contact or penetrative, where consent is coerced/manipulated or is not or cannot be given'.²⁵³ Consent for sexual activity does not apply to children given their inability to understand the concept.²⁵⁴ The gymnastics community shared experiences of sexual misconduct and abuse that occurred during training sessions, in both public and hidden spaces, in changerooms and bathrooms, while receiving physical treatment, and during car rides to and from training sessions.

The perpetrator of sexual abuse that occurs in an elite sport is likely to be a sporting official, for example a coach or someone else with perceived authority over the junior athlete.²⁵⁵ Wherever there is a power imbalance, then there is a potential for abuse to occur.²⁵⁶ The young age of gymnasts and the power imbalance in the coach-gymnast relationship serve as the 'perfect grooming process to take advantage of children or abuse children'.²⁵⁷ Grooming is the term applied to the gradual preparation of a child by the abuser through the normalisation of harassment and sometimes, sexual abuse.²⁵⁸ There are three types of grooming methods:

Physical grooming that may lead to and include inappropriate touching of the athletes' bodies; psychological grooming of the athlete and family, that may occur for example when a coach tells an athlete and their parents that they need to spend more time with them for practice; and grooming of the social environment or the community, for example, a coach building such a good reputation for competitive success that s/he becomes an unquestioned authority in the sport domain.²⁵⁹

The term 'grooming' was used repeatedly by the gymnastics community, by current and former male and female gymnasts alike, when sharing experiences of abuse or misconduct that were sexual in nature.

*'I was with this coach from a really young age and I don't think I really understood what was happening. It wasn't until I got some counselling after I left the gym. They must've thought some of the things I have said were a bit off and I kind of very vividly remember them putting the grooming process down in front of me and as I read through that, a lot of it was very apparent for me of what I had experienced with my coach.'*²⁶⁰

*'So, I can't say I have ever experienced any sexual abuse or assault or anything, but there was definitely grooming going on.'*²⁶¹

*'My coach had a special attachment to me and had a grooming thing going on there.'*²⁶²

Many of these inappropriate behaviours were asked of children in open or public spaces, including being asked to 'strip out of their leotards to their underwear and get dressed again in a space that was essentially public'.²⁶³

*'I have also had the experience of my coach displaying unwanted affection, such as thigh grabbing ... and often times when we were being stretched in the gym he would have an erection, which I would feel him pushing repetitively on my hips or back while grunting and sighing. He would often stretch me for much longer than the other girls. This was all done so publicly, at an age when you aren't sure exactly what's right or wrong or even normal, by someone your own parents respected and told you to respect, that you wouldn't dream of saying anything because you'd already learned that how you felt didn't matter—all that mattered was the performance and that your coach was satisfied.'*²⁶⁴

*'At 12, I was very underdeveloped, physically. The other girls who were further into puberty and had boobs really copped the sexual abuse even worse than I did. As a group we tried to have signs and signals to help us avoid it even slightly. We whispered things like "he's got wandering hands today, try and avoid him if you can."'*²⁶⁵

Athletes believed the abuse was able to occur because parents were not allowed to watch or be present during training sessions, and that such incidences would not have taken place if a parent were present. Perpetrators seek out opportunities to abuse in environments where there is little supervision or oversight.²⁶⁶

*'Parents were discouraged to watch training.'*²⁶⁷

*'Our parents had no idea what was going on as they weren't permitted to watch, so this made it harder still to talk to them about what was happening.'*²⁶⁸

*'Even though their policy is suggesting, so if you went and read their policy you'd go, 'Oh, yeah, OK, parents can watch here and here,' no you can't. The reality is, you could not watch. So, that closed door meant that I had no idea as a parent, I had no idea what was going on.'*²⁶⁹

The gymnastics community in Australia also highlighted the risk of one-on-one coaching and having children interact with adults alone, in private. Child sexual abuse disproportionately happens when perpetrators are alone with children in spaces that are not visible to others.²⁷⁰

*'It is not uncommon for gymnasts to be in the gym with their coach (male or female) with minimal other supervision. High level gymnasts have frequent physiotherapy and massage, again being left alone with the therapist.'*²⁷¹

*'That was one thing that I really wanted to put out here was the extreme discomfort that I had with young girls seeing a male physician without a parent present. I had issues at the time. And I still have issues now. And I never saw anything that made me ... query any wrongdoing. However, the fact of a 12-year-old girl seeing a male doctor without any other parent in the room or any other adult in the room ... was fraught with issues and not OK.'*²⁷²

However, the Commission heard of abuse that occurred in both public and private spaces, including where other adults were present. One former gymnast shared an experience of being sexually abused by a massage therapist while her mother was in the room:

*'I was sexually abused by a massage therapist who was treating me for a gymnastics injury. The abuse occurred over a period of time around the age of 8-9 years old. Abuse, sex and advocacy were completely foreign to me at this time. This man abused me in various ways, often with my Mum in the room. I would lie face down on the massage table with tears streaming down my face in silence. I remember it being incredibly painful, but I did not want to complain.'*²⁷³

While it seems that club organisations are increasingly aware of the risks associated with leaving children unsupervised, the Commission heard of instances where coaches continue to travel alone with underage athletes. Age restrictions were introduced in November 2019 in Gymnastics Australia's Travel Policy and Travel Guidelines, which state that children under 12 cannot travel without a parent or guardian, which affiliated clubs must adhere to. These documents also establish risk assessment processes, and supervision ratios.

Some state and territory associations have also evaluated their own travel practices. For example, while Gymnastics NSW adheres to Gymnastic Australia's Travel Policy and Best Practice Travel Guidelines, they also have their own Travel Policy. Gymnastics NSW established a working group to provide recommendations that included guidelines for the safeguarding and wellbeing of children and young people while traveling. The recommendations have now been implemented, which include a list of procedures and assessments that must be undertaken before travel occurs.

Athlete experiences while travelling varied.

*'Last year they said anybody under the age of 12 doesn't stay in the team hotel and has to come and stay with their parents. That copped a lot of flak, people said, "How do you do that? It's too expensive." And they're going, "Sorry, don't care. This is where we've drawn the line. We've said we need to be safe for kids." So I think that's a real tick for the organisation to do that type of stuff.'*²⁷⁴

*'Coaches going on trips to competitions with underage athletes. Even though there are so called "policies" in place, I know that coaches still take children in their car, travel to competitions with underage children and only 1 coach, and even have a male coach travel internationally with underage female athletes. Even though these are clear violations of the child safety policy, it still happens within the sport of gymnastics.'*²⁷⁵

Gymnastics involves a lot of physical touching, normalised through practices such as 'spotting'—when a coach physically assists a gymnast in completing a skill to avoid injury—and assisted stretching. Often, coaches have legitimate reasons to touch to correct a child's technique.²⁷⁶ Current and former athletes spoke about the lack of respect for personal boundaries from coaches, identifying coaching behaviours that left them feeling uncomfortable.

*'He did this groin stretch, one of the stretches. He would pull one leg up here, and the other leg down on the other side of the box. He would press his hips like right up against you, and then with his other hand, he would rub along your groin, but it would be just that bit too close for comfort, and you are like oh.'*²⁷⁷

*'Coaches touch places inappropriate during spotting too often and there is not much you can do about it.'*²⁷⁸

*'I also have known of girls that have been touched in their private area while being spotted during skills. As the coach didn't say anything they feel helpless and feel like reporting it won't do anything, they also feel like reporting will make them feel uncomfortable in the gym.'*²⁷⁹

*'I did tell my Mum but she didn't understand what I meant. She thought that obviously he was touching me because he needed to spot me. I used language of touching me because I didn't have the words at that age to make her understand that I meant he was molesting me. I was only 12 at the time, I didn't know how to disclose to her that I was being inappropriately touched.'*²⁸⁰

There is a high risk of sexual abuse in sporting cultures that deny, ignore or accept abuse as the norm; a sport culture where athletes have no power or voice and are commodified in a 'win at all costs' environment, facilitated by a sport culture of secrecy and deference.²⁸¹ Athletes are often silenced by their abuser, reluctant and frightened to disclose.²⁸² For sport organisations, sexual abuse represents a significant risk for loss of sponsorship, early athlete dropout, reputational damage and a loss of both fans and talent pool.²⁸³ The growing evidence of misconduct, harassment and abuse in youth sport highlights the urgent need for safe, harm-free sport environments as a fundamental prerequisite for positive developments to be realised.²⁸⁴

*'Life as a gymnast is hard, no doubt. The skills we do defy gravity and test the limits of the human body. This can be achieved without physical, mental, emotional and verbal abuse. It needs to be achieved without this abuse. In my opinion, the only way things can change is for organisations to stand up for the victims and not covering for the abusers and enablers which is what has been done for decades. It is not just the gymnasts who are suffering its some coaches as well. The coaches that are trying to do the right thing are often treated the same way I was. People need to be held responsible for their actions and a new standard needs to be introduced. Gymnasts should not be afraid of their coaches, they should feel comfortable talking to their coaches and parents about what happens in the gym.'*²⁸⁵

An increasing body of research shows that young people represent a significant portion of perpetrators of 'harmful or abusive sexual behaviours' against their peers and other children.²⁸⁶ Though the Commission did not hear about experiences of this nature as part of the Review, responses to the risk of sexual and other peer to peer violence must include sufficient and appropriate supervision of children during their engagement with the sport.

Athlete support and empowerment

The Commission observed that the level of support athletes and their parents experienced varied. While some parents and athletes were very satisfied with the support they received, most athletes who trained in the 80s, 90s and 2000s expressed that they felt little to no support or care from clubs and their staff.

*The experience we've had with our club has been exceptional. They have been very supportive of our daughter's development and participation ... They have been supportive of her individual needs whilst respecting her privacy, and have helped us to raise queries ... They have always made us feel our daughter is safe.*²⁸⁷

*I felt like I had no support and was actively discouraged from seeking the support of our parents, who would have been in a much stronger position to ensure my wellbeing.*²⁸⁸

A former club employee spoke to the Commission about the positive relationship they felt they had developed with their athletes, using training time as an opportunity to converse with gymnasts about their concerns.

*And the girls could come into us and, you know, complain or vent their frustrations or whatever they were feeling. Knowing that unless it was something that was, we needed to communicate to the coaches about injuries. You know, we weren't going to go out and just, you know, that we were an outlet for them.*²⁸⁹

However, positive professional relationships were uncommon. Many athletes, both past and present, felt distrust towards their organisation's staff. They felt athletes' best interests were not central. For example, a former athlete stated the psychologists provided were there 'to funnel stress and anxiety into drive and ambition to achieve in sport. They were not there for the child's wellbeing'.²⁹⁰ Many athletes felt there was nobody within the club context that they could confide in, or they were at least not aware of who to seek support from, resulting in feelings of isolation. Once athletes feel isolated, it makes it difficult for them to reach out to third parties to seek support.²⁹¹

*You know, it's shocking now how left to our devices we were ... there was this profound isolation. Yeah. There was no tether to the real world, you know. There wasn't this person you could go to, say, a chaplain, like in a school context, you know. The closest thing was maybe the physios. But then, they were working ... And, like, yeah, I'd like to confide in her, but I only saw her very occasionally, when I could have a physio appointment. And then, you know, she was just being a physio, it wasn't like she was responsible for my care, you know, in any other, larger capacity than that appointment for 30 minutes there. So no, that was the real struggle.*²⁹²

The Commission heard from members of the gymnastics community in Australia across all levels of the sport, including within clubs, that there was an overarching need for greater 'athlete empowerment'.²⁹³ Some raised that this would include creating safer environments for children and young people to speak up about their concerns about the sport and their treatment in it, and fostering a culture where this was valued and encouraged. Others discussed the need to empower athletes to be at the centre of decision-making about their involvement in the sport.

Central to both recommendations was a view that athletes, even when very young, must be equipped with information about what is and is not acceptable behaviour, and what will be expected of them if they progress through the sport to different levels, including potential impacts on their physical health. Increasing the power of the athlete in the coach-athlete relationship through education and decision-making will reduce the vulnerability of young athletes to abuse.²⁹⁴

*'Start giving power and choice to the athlete. They might be young, but they are capable. Stop treating them like they're not capable. Treat them like they are capable of making a decision, and whether that's with being well informed and with support ... if you feel like you are making the decision, you have ownership and ... you can take [responsibility] when you make poor choices, but you can also take the responsibility when you make all the right choices, and it gives you a healthier relationship with your coaches and with your whole environment.'*²⁹⁵

Gymnastics often becomes an integral part of an athlete's identity, particularly due to the high level of hours needed to commit to the sport, which does not permit gymnasts to take part in any other hobbies or sports. Gymnastics was described as 'all consuming',²⁹⁶ making it very difficult for some athletes to leave the sport and transition to 'normal life'.²⁹⁷ The lack of support experienced by former athletes validated their view that they were 'a commodity, not a person'²⁹⁸ 'disposable'.²⁹⁹ Athletes particularly felt a lack of support when leaving the sport.

*'There was no transition management, and certainly no one telling me what to do with the forty-five hours every week that I now had back.'*³⁰⁰

*'And then, you know, we know that athletes transitioning out of sport who have their whole life in sport, they've never done anything else prior. So, they've built their whole life, they've built their identity and then, all of a sudden, your identity's gone. That's a huge shock to the system. And it takes a while to figure out where you're going to go next.'*³⁰¹

*'And I would also say that one of the negatives that I meant to bring up before in that cult-like experience is that departure from gymnastics is made almost impossible. These kids don't know who they are without gymnastics, and whilst I respect that, they're not training for the Olympics. It's a little shitty club ... and they're just going away to comps with other kids. But their whole existence is based around this.'*³⁰²

*'At the time there was no support for gymnasts leaving the sport to transition into "normal" life.'*³⁰³

The gymnastics community suggested that during their involvement in the sport and upon retirement, athletes should receive 'support mechanisms',³⁰⁴ 'follow-ups' and 'check-ins',³⁰⁵ 'access to confidential support',³⁰⁶ 'transitional support or guidance'.³⁰⁷ Gymnastics Australia provides 12 months of support and contact to retired national squad athletes under their Athlete Transition Guidelines, with further ongoing access to the Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement Manager and AIS supports also available, as required. If not already in place, all levels of the sport should similarly consider developing systems and processes to support athletes stepping back from the sport.

Impacts of gymnastics and abusive behaviour

Although public awareness of child abuse is growing, there is a marked absence of empirical data on violence against children in sport and a lack of analysis on the most effective ways to prevent it.³⁰⁸ There is, however, evidence beyond sport that highlights the significant consequences for abuse and mistreatment during childhood and adolescence.³⁰⁹ Abuse in a sporting context can lead to the onset of eating disorders, depression or other severe mental health challenges, and can lead to lasting impacts on work, study and relationships.³¹⁰ The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Australia found that the experience of child sexual abuse in a sporting context can have 'devastating' mental health impacts, as well as other effects, on survivors and can cause them to disengage and become isolated from the sporting community.³¹¹

The Commission heard from members of the community that their experiences of abuse and mistreatment in gymnastics often had profound and detrimental impacts on their lives in the short and long term—on their physical and mental health, on their education and their employment into adulthood. Beyond mistreatment, members of the gymnastics community, particularly female former gymnasts, also spoke more generally about the impacts of their involvement in the sport as a result of the high number of training hours they were expected to undertake from a young age and the culture of obedience and silence they were subjected to. As training practices were identified as being gendered in nature, so too were the impacts of these practices.

In the short term, while still involved in the sport, or recently after they had left, the impacts of mistreatment and abuse on gymnasts' mental health were often profound with respondents reporting experiences of self-harm and suicidal ideation and feelings of low self-worth.

*'At the age of about 13 it all became too much. My body was constantly in pain from over training and I was a mess mentally.'*³¹²

As a result of their training program and coaching styles, gymnasts often felt the need to leave the sport earlier than they otherwise would have. For some, this also resulted in not wanting any involvement in the sport whatsoever once they had left.

*'I identified coaching habits that were not ideal for children and I ended up having to quit the sport. I couldn't do it another day.'*³¹³

*'My coach has caused complete and absolute stress ... which has impacted and resulted in the loss of my passion for the sport of Rhythmic Gymnastics by negatively tainting my experiences throughout the past years of dedication ... my mental wellbeing and perception of the sport has been so crippled and destroyed that I NO longer wish to have any involvement in participating in the sport!'*³¹⁴

Gymnasts spoke about the short-term physical costs of the rigorous training regimes and overall involvement in the sport. The Commission heard about significant and sometimes debilitating injuries to knees, hips, hands, ribs, feet, elbows, shoulders, wrists, backs and spines including some which were exacerbated by a lack of medical care or continued overuse.

*'But yeah it was very much normalised. So, there was a lot of injuries as well that were, I think could be avoided, injuries that were from over use, a lot of over use injuries, and injuries of when we were so tired and couldn't perform and then we would get injured and things like that.'*³¹⁵

Several former gymnasts also discussed the long-term physical impacts and damage of their involvement with the sport. Gymnasts spoke about their bodies being 'broken' and suffering from long term injuries and pain.³¹⁶ Some told the Commission that they believe the impacts on their bodies are particularly pronounced because they undertook intensive training loads while children with little or no consideration for their long-term health.

*'And the main issue for me is the physical toll on our bodies is permanent. Like, I'm limited in a lot of what I can do based on the impacts of gymnastics ... your body is growing and all that sort of stuff ... so having to put that much strain on your body at such a pivotal time I think is ... not really considered enough. They don't think [about the] long term harm.'*³¹⁷

Gymnasts also spoke about the physical exhaustion and fatigue that resulted from their high training load and the associated impacts on other aspects of their lives, including delayed menstruation,³¹⁸ challenges sustaining relationships, and difficulty focusing or concentrating at school.³¹⁹

The impacts on gymnasts' education that resulted from the high number of training hours was also raised. Recent members of the gymnastics community shared that they felt coaches and gymnastics programs created a culture where 'school is last, gym is first'.³²⁰ Some felt that their coaches didn't 'care about anything but [their] value as a gymnast' and that this flowed through to having no consideration for their year 12 exams, 'their future, getting into university ... [or] finding jobs'.³²¹ Others raised that child gymnasts were seen as 'not serious' about the sport if they weren't prepared to take time off school.³²²

Many female elite gymnasts who were training in the 80s, 90s and 2000s, shared that they missed a significant amount of schooling due to gymnastics, that they received little support to attend and that this in turn affected their academic performance. The Commission heard that missing school or having a reduced focus on education had long-term impacts on employment, social skills and the ability to develop friendships.

*'My only thing is like training at that level from a really young age it hinders like a lot of just normalities of your childhood. Like we were only going to school for two and a half hours a day, so even things like learning social skills.'*³²³

The Commission observed that a poor balance between gymnastics training and life outside the sport affected gymnasts' development of other skills. Some spoke of being completely 'sheltered' and isolated from opportunities to engage with peers their age and having limited experience with the world beyond gymnastics, including regarding personal relationships.³²⁴

*'There was little regard for having a life outside of gymnastics and I believe this was detrimental to the development, especially socially. After retirement, young women are sent out into the real world having not had much experience outside of gymnastics.'*³²⁵

While many highlighted the skills they had gained through their involvement with the sport, including 'discipline',³²⁶ 'time management',³²⁷ 'resilience'³²⁸ and 'dedication',³²⁹ they questioned the cost to their wellbeing and the abusive nature of the practices and behaviour used by coaches to develop these traits.

*'A few potential strengths that may be considered are accomplishment, dedication and resilience. However, all three of these potential strengths can never be fully justified when they are only achieved in conjunction with the aforementioned culture of silence, obedience, abuse and an immense lack of respect for athletes.'*³³⁰

*'I loved gymnastics, it was my life and I am grateful that it was a part of my life for so long. However, the sport didn't give me skills for free, I was to give back in the form of emotional damage.'*³³¹

Consistent with research on the impacts of abuse and trauma, many former gymnasts shared that the mistreatment and abuse they experienced during training also had a profound impact on their long-term emotional and psychological wellbeing and sense of self-worth.³³² In particular, the Commission heard about how the perfectionistic and authoritarian training regimes female gymnasts were subjected to as girls led to ongoing feelings that they were 'never good enough'³³³ or 'worthless'.³³⁴ Others talked about being plagued with 'self-doubt',³³⁵ 'anxiety',³³⁶ 'depression',³³⁷ psychological 'scars',³³⁸ a 'fear of failure'³³⁹ and an unrelenting drive for 'perfection'.³⁴⁰ One former gymnast shared that 'being engrained in a culture that celebrates training through injuries and using whatever means available to ensure you can perform', led to a long term 'fear of failure' and feelings of 'shame' for taking time off from training. She shared that she 'continue[s] to train through injuries because it is more comfortable than the psychological discomfort of not exercising for a day'.³⁴¹

Some told the Commission that they had sought psychological support, including from trauma specialists, in the years and decades following their gymnastics careers.

*'It is **despite** gymnastics that I've had a good life, but I've had to work through the physical and psychological ramifications. Needless to say, if I had my time over, I sincerely wish I'd never done elite gymnastics.'*³⁴²

Many drew a direct correlation between the way they were 'personally attacked',³⁴³ 'yelled and screamed at'³⁴⁴ and subject to 'psychological torment'³⁴⁵ during their crucial child development years, and their ongoing mental health challenges. The Commission also heard that some former female gymnasts felt the focus on obedience and compliance during their training had led to long-term issues in inter-personal relationships. Expectations that women be 'submissive' and 'deferential' are underpinned by gendered social norms that, among others, are increasingly recognised as drivers of gender-based violence and broader gender inequality and this was identified by one former gymnast who told the Commission:³⁴⁶

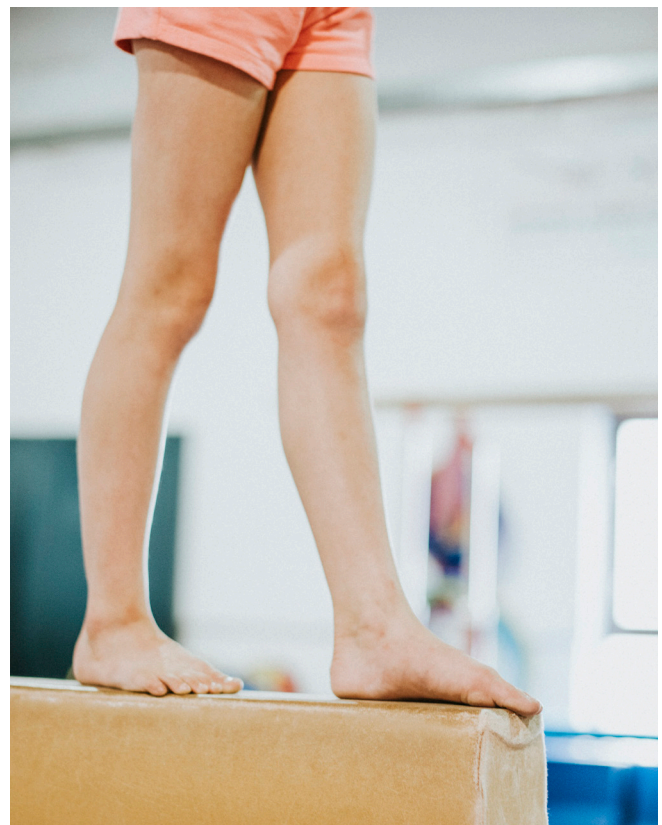
*'I think just the way that we were trained to be really obedient ... without any kind of personality or any kind of individual traits ... always doing what was expected of us so that we didn't get punished. I think that's had a huge impact on my life as an adult far beyond the years when I was doing gym and I think it's really been problematic ... I think makes us ripe for abusive relationships.'*³⁴⁷

While many told the Commission that young female gymnasts are often treated like children and are subject to high levels of control even into their late adolescence, the Commission also heard that young gymnasts are expected to manage their emotions as if they were adults. Elite sport environments are frequently seen to be 'gruelling, relentless and full of sacrifice',³⁴⁸ however many former gymnasts felt that the impacts of the sport on them was particularly pronounced because they were children.

*'We were treated like adults and expected to behave as adults also. I think there was no thought into the fact that the way we were treated as children and the coping mechanisms we developed would effect us well beyond our gymnastics career and into adulthood. Looking back, I feel there was no thought into ensuring our mental health was ok.'*³⁴⁹

In response to the harm they experienced, former gymnasts told the Commission that they felt there needed to be an acknowledgement or apology for abusive behaviour within the gymnastics community over the last decades. Adult women are already less likely than men to participate in sport in Australia.³⁵⁰ The Commission is concerned that the negative impacts experienced by those participating in gymnastics may contribute to the long term health risks faced by adult women who are inactive.

*'They can say they're going to do things to make it better going forward, but all the people that have been affected by it, an apology helps, even if it's not from the perpetrator, it should be from the organisation. We are sorry this happened to you. And then hopefully this sort of stuff can never happen again.'*³⁵¹



Recommendations

The Commission commends the comprehensive suite of education and training resources that have been developed across the national and state and territory levels to safeguard children within the sport, including the Gymnastics Australia Child Safe Course, and the Gymnastics NSW Child Protection Essentials Program. The Commission recommends however, that the focus of education and training across all levels of the sport, and for all participants, be broadened to ensure detailed coverage of all types of abuse and neglect, including emotional, verbal, physical, and medical negligence. A broader approach will empower all members of the gymnastics community in Australia with knowledge about the signs and risk factors for abuse, the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, and how to report unacceptable behaviour, complementing the existing codes of behaviour.

It is essential that, in addition to coaches, judges, other officials and parents receiving this information, specific education is designed for children and young people involved in the sport. Research has found that the potential normalisation of abusive behaviour in sport, including by athletes witnessing experiences of emotional abuse towards peers, can affect athletes' 'critical thinking' about abusive behaviour and make them more vulnerable.³⁵² Children and young people must be equipped with knowledge about a full range of potentially abusive behaviours and an understanding that all that is unacceptable outside gymnastics is also unacceptable at the gym.

The Commission welcomes the adoption by Gymnastics Australia and state and territory associations of the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations and recommends that all policies and procedures continue to be underpinned by these. To ensure the continued implementation of the National Principles, the Commission recommends all staff, volunteers and club members across the organisation complete the Commission's suite of e-learning modules on the National Principles as a proactive step towards creating an organisational culture that fosters child safety and wellbeing.

Healthy sporting cultures flourish when athletes are empowered to speak up about their experiences, feelings and goals. The Commission considers that in combination with empowering members of the gymnastics community through education initiatives, participants across all levels of the sport should be encouraged to share their experiences of the sport in safe and supportive environments. For example, in the US, the *Empowering Olympic, Paralympic, and Amateur Athletes Act* of 2020 established mechanisms to support athlete engagement, including an annual anonymous survey of amateur athletes. The Commission recommends that across all levels of the sport there should be avenues for athlete feedback, including opportunities to share experiences with other athletes, and opportunities to share concerns and feelings anonymously.

Recommendation 4: *Broaden the sport's understanding of child abuse and neglect*

The Commission recommends that staff, volunteers, parents and athletes at all levels of the sport be equipped with the knowledge skills and awareness on the nature, indicators and prevention of child abuse and neglect so that they are attuned to risks and can facilitate ways for athletes to report situations where necessary. Gymnastics Australia and all state and territory associations should collaboratively consolidate their training materials and resources relating to child abuse and implement a consistent approach across the sport. This will enable consistency in messaging, ensuring all affiliated clubs receive the same training material and resources.

Training, resources and materials on child abuse and neglect across the sport should:

- include clear definitions of child abuse not only focusing on sexual abuse, but all forms of bullying, misconduct, sexual harassment and abuse and neglect, including emotional and psychological, verbal, and physical abuse
- include indicators and risk factors for child abuse and information on prevention and how to respond to disclosures of child abuse and neglect
- be consistent, simple, accessible and easy to use
- include child-friendly versions appropriate to different age groups who participate in the sport
- be culturally responsive and adapted to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people from diverse backgrounds, people with a disability and the LGBTIQ+ community.

Recommendation 5: *Encourage and promote athlete empowerment and participation*

The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia and all state and territory associations encourage and promote athlete empowerment and participation by:

- **Establishing youth advisory councils at state, territory and national levels:** Gymnastics Victoria established a Youth Advisory Program made up of young gymnasts with a diverse range of experiences in the sport. The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia and all other state and territory associations establish youth advisory councils with the aim of giving young gymnasts the opportunity to voice their needs and concerns. The youth advisory councils should:
 - include gymnasts across different levels and experiences
 - act as a safe avenue for gymnasts to raise issues and concerns
 - promote participation and engagement
 - provide support and information to the gymnastics community, with a focus on young athletes
 - provide quarterly updates to their respective boards (state, territory and national)
 - act as a conduit between clubs and state and territory governing bodies and Gymnastics Australia.

-
- **Conducting two-yearly surveys of all athletes:** Gymnastics Australia should implement an anonymous survey of all athletes across the sport every two years with the support of an appropriate independent research body who would be able to ensure a confidential and ethical process and assist in the design of a child-friendly survey, appropriate for all participants in gymnastics. The purpose of the survey would be to:

- give athletes an opportunity to anonymously share their experiences and feelings about participating in gymnastics
- measure satisfaction and wellbeing among athletes
- understand systemic concerns about child safety and wellbeing among athletes throughout the sport
- understand systemic barriers children may face speaking up about their concerns
- understand what athletes enjoy about gymnastics and how these strengths could be further heightened.

Athletes across all affiliated clubs would be contacted to take part in the survey, with mechanisms to confirm both their own and parental/guardian consent. Clubs, state and territory associations, Gymnastics Australia, and their associated boards would receive aggregated survey results highlighting areas of concern specific to their jurisdiction. These results should be used to identify gaps or issues in service delivery, inform training and education initiatives and provide a feedback loop for ongoing improvement.

- **Commissioning regular physical and mental health assessments:** Affiliated clubs should commission independent quarterly physical and mental health assessments to identify early signs of injuries, eating disorders, burnout, mental ill-health and abuse. Results of these assessments would only be provided to gymnasts and their parents. Medical professionals, counsellors and psychologists should be made available where necessary to support gymnasts who raise any issues during assessments. Recognising early signs of mental and physical stressors and working towards improving them will improve overall athlete wellbeing.

Recommendation 6: *Provide a formal acknowledgement and apology to all members of the gymnastics community in Australia who have experienced any form of abuse in the sport*

The harm experienced by members of the gymnastics community in Australia over the last decades is significant and has had deeply felt and long-lasting impacts. In line with a recommendation made through the Independent Review of Gymnastics New Zealand, the Commission recommends that a formal apology and acknowledgement be provided to members of the community who suffered physical, emotional, sexual, verbal and psychological abuse as a result of the actions and inactions of other members of the community. The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia be responsible for issuing the apology but encourages institutions who have run gymnastics programs over the previous four decades to consider the introduction of their own processes of acknowledgement and apology.

Body image and weight management

The 'ideal body' and the 'problem' with puberty

Body image is an issue that requires significant attention in aesthetic sports,³⁵³ such as gymnastics. The pressures to reach and maintain an 'ideal' physique have many short-term and long-term impacts on athletes. While body image issues can affect anyone, the majority of experiences heard by the Commission were from and about female athletes.

Descriptions of the 'ideal body' shared throughout the Review reflect the 'pixie-style' model described in the literature. As mentioned previously in Chapter 2, this concept arose in the 1970s, whereby to be successful female athletes were to be young, small in length, free of fat and sexually undeveloped.³⁵⁴

'I was frequently told that I was too tall and if I didn't stop growing I would be useless.'³⁵⁵

*'For artistic our 6 year old was told by one club that whilst she had the skill to compete, she was too tall and too old to start competing.'*³⁵⁶

*'As far as the AIS was concerned, the smaller and more petite you were, the better gymnast you made.'*³⁵⁷

*'A core belief within gymnastics is gymnasts need to be small, light & effectively pre-pubescent.'*³⁵⁸

Tied to this pixie-style model is a fear of puberty and its impacts on this ideal physique, with the physical changes such development causes assumed to reduce perceived performance prerequisites,³⁵⁹ with some gymnasts undertaking greater body surveillance, to monitor the changes.³⁶⁰ The experiences of puberty appear to be gendered, with puberty identified as a positive experience for male athletes, with such development changes seen to result in greater muscle strength and control.³⁶¹

Many current and former gymnasts spoke to this fear of puberty.

*'Signs of pubertal growth were considered a failure to control weight.'*³⁶²

*'Puberty was feared in gymnastics and no one spoke about menstruation. I was the first girl in my gym to go through puberty, even though there were other girls my age. I always understood that once I went through puberty, I needed to watch my weight even more.'*³⁶³

*'We were constantly judged for our physical appearance, our weight, any development of 'womanhood/puberty' was a sign that you weren't training hard enough or eating properly.'*³⁶⁴

*'Constantly seeing the coaches praise the skinny younger girls that haven't gone through puberty yet mentally takes a toll on older girls because we can't healthily look like the younger girls yet we are constantly compared to them.'*³⁶⁵

These problems are not new and have been raised previously by the gymnastics community in Australia, including recently in the development of the AIS's Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement Framework, which referred to an identified need for an evolved conversation about body changes and the process of puberty.³⁶⁶ Similar findings were reported on in the independent review into New Zealand Gymnastics which found that there was a poor understanding by coaches, parents, and gymnasts of the impact of puberty on performance.³⁶⁷

The notion of the 'ideal body' and concerns regarding physical changes experienced during puberty appear to be reinforced by a number of factors, including the required attire for female athletes and how the sport is judged. While these are not limited to gymnastics in Australia but are a feature of the sport of gymnastics itself, they are important to recognise. The stipulation that leotards be 'skin-tight' for female athletes in some Gymsports,³⁶⁸ reinforces the features of the female gymnast body ideal—young and lean with no fat or adult curves.³⁶⁹ While the rationale for this attire is based on the need to be able to see body shapes and forms, including those that merit deductions, such as bent legs,³⁷⁰ the same argument is not made for male athletes, with some Gymsports allowing pants or shorts that are not skin-tight.³⁷¹

In addition to raising concerns regarding the gendered nature of attire in the sport,³⁷² many participants also spoke to the discomfort that the attire bring, particularly during puberty,³⁷³ an issue similarly raised in the independent review into New Zealand Gymnastics,³⁷⁴ with a number also suggesting that current attire increases the child's risk of harm.³⁷⁵

Discussions regarding required attire continue to take place internationally within the sport, including the recent 'Finding solutions for a respectful culture and safe training environment' facilitated by the International Gymnastics Federation in October 2020. Most recently, a number of British gymnasts have spoken out against current regulations regarding leotards, describing them as outdated and sexist.³⁷⁶ Some countries have taken steps to address these issues over the last few years, including the Royal Dutch Gymnastics Federation, who revised leotard rules in competitions for girls in 2018,³⁷⁷ and Gymnastics New Zealand, who in late 2020 allowed female gymnasts to compete in bike pants and shorts.³⁷⁸ While it is stipulated in Gymnastics Australia's 2021 WAG Technical Regulations, that the sleeve and leg length of leotards may vary,³⁷⁹ the Commission is of the position that replicating the changes made in the Netherlands and New Zealand, including the introduction of bike pants and shorts will better address the concerns raised by members of the gymnastics community in Australia.

Weight management practices

To achieve and maintain the ideal physique of a gymnast, the Commission heard from current and former gymnasts of strict dieting and other weight management practices. This included being weighed on a daily basis³⁸⁰ or multiple times each day,³⁸¹ and at times in front of other athletes.³⁸² The Commission heard from several former athletes about the pressure to maintain an ideal physique and the monitoring of their weight which resulted in a number of practices, including not drinking water.³⁸³

Just before we were weighed, we all ran to the toilet to try and do a wee to get everything out of our system. If I couldn't wee or if I was particularly scared, I would spit into the sink to try to get some weight off of me.³⁸⁴

Girls would go to great lengths to reduce the smallest number on the scales, such as trying to go to the toilet beforehand and even taking out hairclips and scrunchies.³⁸⁵

'Sometimes on a Sunday, I got mum to wrap me in Glad Wrap to make me sweat more. For some reason, I also thought this would help to change my lines.³⁸⁶

'Actually, they were forced, not on their own, they were forced to go into a sauna, tracksuits, everything to sweat it out and they could only come back to the gym when they were under this weight. And this was some magical number made up. This wasn't based on any kind of physical criteria.³⁸⁷

The Commission was told that such practices were more extreme when in other settings, such as competitions or training camps.

'We were not allowed to eat a large amount of food when away at camps or competitions, unless we were 'skinny' enough and made it apparent we needed some extra fuel (like I had on a few occasions).³⁸⁸

'Sneaking out in the middle of night to jump barbed wire fences to find a service station to try and buy some food. I remember doing cartwheels in an aeroplane to get a biscuit, like a monkey or something.³⁸⁹

At training camps, you were weighed every day, and then your skin folds were taken, and your food would be adjusted. So your food intake would be monitored, and your food adjusted according to that. And they'd base it—it's just on aesthetics. It's not like it's done by a dietician.³⁹⁰

'I'm always the mother on the trip, to my detriment. I'm the one who smuggles food. But I shouldn't have to smuggle food either, you know? It's always horrified me that kids eat normally at home and then they go to camp for a week and their food's restricted. Why would you do that? It doesn't bring out the best in a gymnast.³⁹¹

While the frequency of other anthropometric, or body measurement testing, such as skinfold measurements differed for some participants, a number of current and former gymnasts noted the impacts of such testing.

The more I was told to get my skinfolds down the worse my diet became, it was not helpful, it was all backwards and I only learned how to fuel properly when the pressure was off, and I started to gain my control back.³⁹²

'It definitely gives us body image issues sometimes. Like, there's been a couple times that I've done skinfold testing ... which like, I don't think they should have done, and I was only 10.³⁹³

Despite the recommendation that such testing only be done proportionately and when absolutely required, due to the associated risks,³⁹⁴ which have subsequently been reflected in Gymnastics Australia's Body Positive Guidelines, the Commission has some concern that there remains a lack of awareness or indifference to the impacts of such testing within the gymnastics community in Australia. For example, one consent form used by a state and territory association for anthropometric testing as part of its High Performance Welfare Policies states "my understanding that the only foreseeable risk of participation is minor discomfort at the sites of the skin folds, where the assessor will firmly grasp the fold the skin to obtain the measurement".³⁹⁵

The Commission heard throughout the Review that weight management practices were undertaken for the purposes of injury management.³⁹⁶ This rationale has also been found in the literature, although in one study coaches reported that injury would not be a problem if the athlete could carry their weight.³⁹⁷

Body shaming practices

Alongside these weight management practices, the Commission heard from many, including current and former athletes about their own or other athletes' experiences of body shaming, particularly from or about female athletes.

'But there's one girl at one of my trainings, she was body shamed in front of everyone, and she was only 7—she was too young to even know what body shaming is.³⁹⁸

'When I was nine or 10, I was told that I wouldn't look nice if I put on weight. This was probably when I started to really watch what I ate and restricted my food.³⁹⁹

'The first time I was called fat at the AIS, I was 11 years old and weighed 22 kilograms. There was another girl in my group who was called fat at nine years old when she weighed 18 kilograms. It goes to show that it really didn't matter what we looked like or how little we weighed, we were called fat regardless.⁴⁰⁰

'Over the years I was told that I looked as if I'd 'swallowed a watermelon' and "like I was pregnant".⁴⁰¹

Many participants, including current and former athletes, specified that the body shaming was done by coaches,⁴⁰² which is consistent with findings within the literature regarding pressures for thinness and negative comments.⁴⁰³

'So other girls continued and I know that that coach, she moved to Victoria and took part in the coaching in Victoria and half her team ended up hospitalised with anorexia or bulimia or both—and that's at the point where they took her out of rhythmic.⁴⁰⁴

Following concerns raised in 2019 by a national athlete regarding body shaming practices by a coach, Gymnastics Australia developed the Body Positive Guidelines. Gymnastics Australia should be commended on taking this step and developing a resource for coaches, parents, judges, and other staff that establishes boundaries and principles for acceptable language and behaviour and in doing so addresses a number of risk factors for the development of eating disorders⁴⁰⁵ or disordered eating⁴⁰⁶ within the sport. The implementation of the Guidelines has been supported by additional education and the development of specific resources for coaches, parents and families and sports dietitians.

However, despite the critical and informative nature of the Body Positive Guidelines, concerns were raised throughout consultation that they were not being implemented across the sport, with Gymnastics Australia noting the difficulty in overseeing this based on the federated structure of the sport.

*'From recent conversations with current elite artistic gymnastics National team members, I gather the girls are extremely disappointed that after their complaints about body image and how their coaches deal with their weight on daily basis, GA's response was to make a booklet on how to stay body positive. The gymnasts pointed out that nothing has changed and that the coaches and judges still make the same comments and make them feel worthless, without giving any actual constructive [and] healthy tips on how to lose weight and why it's required.'*⁴⁰⁷

*'There are still many coaches within Australia that despite new National Guidelines and Policies being taught – coaches ignore them.'*⁴⁰⁸

*'I know for a fact that this [Body Positive Guidelines] is not upheld in gymnastics clubs, because body shaming and coaches weighing athletes still occurs in gymnastics clubs (especially in the rhythmic community).'*⁴⁰⁹

Impacts of weight management and body shaming

Eating disorders have been found to be more prevalent in aesthetic or 'lean' sports, such as gymnastics,⁴¹⁰ with the prevalence of eating disorders and problematic weight management practices much higher among female athletes.⁴¹¹

Such prevalence is largely due to the number and significance of risk factors in the sport. Body dissatisfaction is one of the biggest predictors for developing eating disorders and is amplified by the co-occurrence of dieting behaviours.⁴¹² For adolescent females, social pressure around thinness and body 'ideal' has also been identified to predict a number of eating disorders⁴¹³ with research into the sport of gymnastics identifying the impacts of such pressure from coaches.⁴¹⁴

There is some discussion on how risk factors are understood within the sporting context compared to the general population, particularly regarding aesthetic and lean sports, such as gymnastics.

For example, certain behaviours that would be considered disordered or pathological behaviour in the general population, including the surveillance of dietary intake and weight, have been deemed as a requirement of the sport⁴¹⁵ and a means of enhancing sporting success.⁴¹⁶ Irrespective of these 'requirements', the lack of autonomy that athletes have in relation to these practices both as a result of their age and the dynamics between athletes and coaches is of concern.⁴¹⁷

The Commission heard from many participants about the impacts of body shaming and weight management practices experienced during their time in the sport. In an interview with recent former gymnasts, the Commission was told:

*'I mean, we know people that have like attempted suicide, people that harm themselves, people that are bulimic, anorexic, because of this. People have been admitted to hospital, been involved with the police, developed psychosis.'*⁴¹⁸

While it has been identified that the long-term impacts of eating disorders in the sport of gymnastics requires greater research,⁴¹⁹ a number of participants shared their experiences of developing eating disorders, both while in the sport⁴²⁰ and once they had left.⁴²¹

*'At 40 years of age, I continue to struggle with disordered eating and exercise behaviour as a direct result of my time as a [name of program] gymnast.'*⁴²²

*'I have only disclosed my eating disorder to one friend a few years ago. I have never sought treatment and I find it very difficult to talk about it even today. I feel disappointed in myself, vulnerable and embarrassed, and I see my eating disorder as a weakness.'*⁴²³

*'It was enough to send me into an eating disorder that I haven't ever told my family about and I struggle with even at the age of 23.'*⁴²⁴

While not explicitly referring to experiences of a long-term eating disorder, many disclosed that they continue to have long-term problematic relationships with food and body image, particularly with their weight as a result of past experiences and practices in the sport.⁴²⁵

Recommendations

The Commission supports the recommendations made in the AIS and NEDC 2020 position statement on disordered eating in high performance sport, particularly regarding the need for comprehensive psychological assessments, periodic evaluation, and body composition assessment that are only purposeful and necessary to optimise performance and that include a consent process and end-to-end support.⁴²⁶ In addition to Recommendation 5, which includes a recommendation for regular physical and mental health assessments, the Commission makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation 7: Develop a skills-based training and support program for all athletes to prevent and address eating disorders and disordered eating

Given the nature of gymnastics and requirements for anthropometric testing, as well as the age of athletes, the Commission recommends that a greater focus be placed on protective factors for all athletes, including those who may not yet be on the spectrum of an eating behaviour. To achieve this, the Commission recommends that a therapeutic and intervention-based program be developed and designed by a relevant independent organisation, such as the InsideOut Institute or the NEDC, to be rolled-out alongside current and planned education efforts.⁴²⁷ The program should be focused on developing self-esteem and self-worth,⁴²⁸ outside of body image which has been found to result in fewer disordered eating symptoms, less body surveillance and less body shame.⁴²⁹ The program should also focus on building the resilience and emotional and self-regulation capabilities of athletes including the ability to disengage from problematic and negative thinking⁴³⁰ and strategies for effectively responding to social pressures, including for thinness.⁴³¹ The format of this program should be proposed and developed by the chosen organisation in consultation with relevant personnel from all levels of the sport.

As recommended in both the Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement Framework developed by the AIS and their position statement with the NEDC, both the proposed program and any education should be delivered to athletes at an earlier age.⁴³² This is essential given that most risk factors are present and observable already in early adolescence.⁴³³

Recommendation 8: *Develop and refine resources relating to body image, weight management practices and eating disorders, to improve consistency and support effective implementation*

The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia oversee the:

- **Development of a protocol for responding to disclosures and signs of eating disorders:** While there are a number of resources available at the national and state and territory levels of the sport aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of healthy eating, eating disorders and how to respond,⁴³⁴ it is recommended that an independent organisation such as the InsideOut Institute or the NEDC be commissioned to develop a protocol for staff and volunteers at all levels of the sport responding to disclosures of an eating disorder and signs of eating disorders, to ensure any practice is consistent across the sport and reflects current, best practice.
- **Revisions to Gymnastics Australia's Body Guidelines:** The Body Guidelines are an excellent resource and first step in addressing risk factors. To enhance the Guidelines, the Commission recommends that the consent forms be revised to ensure all forms require consent from the athlete in addition to the parent or guardian, as per the 'physique assessment' form. It is recommended that the use of these forms be implemented at all levels of the sport, including all state and territory associations and all clubs.



4. Complaints and investigations

This chapter details the findings of the Commission's high-level review of organisational policies and procedures relating to the processes for reporting and investigating complaints of child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, abuse, sexual harassment and assault of athletes and identified barriers to reporting.

The Commission found that current policies relating to reporting and investigating child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment, and assault, while comprehensive, are not being implemented at all levels of the sport, with some duplication and inconsistency across the policy landscape. The Commission also determined that there is a lack of awareness or understanding of these policies in the gymnastics community in Australia due to factors such as limited accessibility for children and young people, recent implementation, limited implementation and visibility at a club level, and the volume and duplication of policies across all levels of the sport. Throughout the Review many also reported concerns about current reporting and investigation processes, primarily regarding confidentiality and transparency, fear of retribution and the ability for matters to be escalated.

To address these issues and barriers to reporting, the Commission has made a number of recommendations to ensure there is greater consistency and transparency in policy and practice for responding to and handling matters regarding child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment, and assault at all levels of the sport.

A core recommendation is the primary use of external investigation processes for relevant matters. This in part can be achieved through the adoption of Sport Integrity Australia (SIA's) National Integrity Framework (NIF) and associated policies, including their complaints process, and utilisation of SIA's list of external investigators. The Commission also recommends that there be greater flexibility in how matters are escalated within the sport given the current barriers to reporting for athletes and that a full-time Complaints Manager position be established to implement and oversee these recommendations on an ongoing basis.

It is also proposed that a toll-free number be considered to receive anonymous calls and reports and to improve access to support and referrals and that a form of independent oversight over the handling of complaints at all levels of the sport be introduced. The latter should be undertaken in collaboration with SIA while the preceding recommendations are implemented. For best practice, it is recommended that such oversight continue for matters that are not referred to, or heard in, SIA's external process.

Policy landscape

Gymnastics Australia has two cornerstone policies that cover reporting and investigating complaints related to child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment and assault:

- Member Protection Policy (MPP)
- Child Safe Policy (CSP).

The MPP outlines the procedures that support the organisation's commitment to eliminating discrimination, harassment, physical violence, and other forms of inappropriate behaviour from the sport, and includes a number of codes of behaviour, complaint procedures and investigation processes. The CSP is a separate but aligned policy, developed in 2019 to reinforce Gymnastics Australia's commitment to child safety. It provides information on supporting children and young people, including reporting and responding to allegations of child abuse. Gymnastics Australia advised that they were one of the first National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) to develop a standalone child safe policy.

In accordance with Gymnastics Australia's 2021 National Affiliation Standards, all clubs must accept and comply with both policies in addition to other relevant by-laws, regulations and policies.

A by-product of a federated sporting model, there is also some inconsistency and duplication across the policy landscape of the sport. A number of state and territory associations have discipline, grievance or complaints handling policies, in addition to the adopted MPP and CSP. Some outline penalties for matters relating to bullying, harassment, grooming and sexual assault, and outline processes for complaints management. Most of these do not refer to the MPP and CSP, and there are some discrepancies between these policies. It is not clear how these policies or those held by clubs run by organisations such as YCMA and Police Citizens Youth Clubs (PCYC), interact with the MPP and CSP. Gymnastics Australia's view, when asked, was that their policies always take precedence, however, there are still concerns that the presence of these policies may be causing some confusion regarding process.

In addition to these policies, some state and territory associations have supplementary documents or resources, particularly around safeguarding. For example, Gymnastics NSW has both a Child Protection Strategy and a supplementary Child Protective Behaviours Framework, aimed at embedding child safety and athlete wellbeing practices into all areas of operation.

Reporting and investigation processes

While the general investigation and complaints handling process remains in the MPP, including informal and formal approaches to making a complaint, child safety and the process for handling child abuse complaints is now outlined in the CSP.

The CSP stipulates that procedures for reporting and responding to child abuse allegations are to be managed at the level at which the allegation took place. As a result, most of the matters from the last five years have been handled at a club-level. Based on the statistical summaries provided by Gymnastics Australia, approximately 69% of complaints were handled at a club level and approximately 30% by a state or territory association. Matters are able to be escalated to Gymnastics Australia where they occur at a national level or for 'the most serious cases', with the latter threshold not defined. The absence of such a definition has likely led to confusion among the community, with a number raising concerns about the existing process or their disappointment with past experiences of unsuccessfully trying to escalate their matters.⁴³⁵

As outlined in the CSP, all matters where a child is or has been at risk of being the subject of physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional, or psychological abuse, neglect, or exposure to family violence must be immediately reported to the relevant child protection authority. The matter can be referred to senior personnel or to Gymnastics Australia who will ensure that the incident is reported. The club must then report the allegation to the relevant association member in their state and territory who will report the allegation to Gymnastics Australia, who may report it to the Gymnastics Australia Board.

A risk assessment will then be undertaken by an applicable person from the organisation handling the complaint to determine whether immediate or interim safety measures should be put in place, including the suspension of the respondent or redeployment to a position where they do not work with children.

Once the relevant safety measures have been put in place, further action may be undertaken through the investigation and complaints handling process outlined in the MPP. It should be noted that an investigation will not continue once a matter has been referred to police. However, if the matter is not investigated nor progressed by police, Gymnastics Australia, the state and territory association or a club may undertake an investigation and impose their own sanctions.

Under the MPP, as part of a formal approach to dealing with a complaint, a decision on how to respond will be made based on the nature and seriousness of the complaint. Potential actions include mediation, internal investigation, independent external investigation, referral to the Gymnastics Australia Discipline Committee, or referral to police or other appropriate authorities.

While anonymous complaints can be made, with steps identified in the CSP, the limitations of responding to anonymous complaints are detailed in the MPP.

Implementation

While Gymnastics Australia's 2021 National Affiliation Standards require compliance with all relevant policies, it is unclear whether this is being done across all clubs. Gymnastics Australia acknowledged the difficulty of monitoring compliance and implementation within the federated structure, noting that it is the responsibility of state and territory associations to oversee club compliance.

Based on a survey designed by Gymnastics Australia to collect information from clubs in response to the Commission's request for information, Gymnastics Australia reported that 23.5% of clubs who had responded reported that they amend and develop or implement their own MPP and CSP.

Further, one club disclosed that they do not have a MPP or CSP. The Commission cannot comment on the potential consequences of these changes, as the nature and extent of the amendments were not detailed, however the potential lack of consistency is of concern.

Inconsistency in or lack of implementation of policies appears to be reflected in how allegations of child abuse and neglect are responded to across the sport. Despite a requirement that matters of child abuse be reported to relevant law enforcement and child protection authorities, data available in the statistical summaries provided by Gymnastics Australia indicates that only 50% of matters involving sexual assault were referred to law enforcement.⁴³⁶ While Gymnastics Australia confirmed that this figure may be due to a lack of understanding regarding the question posed in the survey by Gymnastics Australia or an understanding of the difference between sexual assault and sexual harassment, it should be noted that a number of states and territories have recently introduced 'failing to report child abuse' legislation, as recommended by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and that such a failure to report could now be deemed a criminal offence.⁴³⁷

Throughout consultation, the Commission heard from both current and former members of the gymnastics community in Australia that policy was not implemented nor translated into practice.

*'I can from experience confirm that despite these new policies and procedures being taught that they are not followed. Within months of a coach being put through the training on the new policies and procedures that we know the coach attended our daughter was subjected to bullying, weight shaming etc.'*⁴³⁸

*'I am aware of all of the policies and procedures. Just because I am aware of them and others are aware of them doesn't mean they are practiced. Child safety is one that's often brought up but not actually followed through with more than it should be.'*⁴³⁹

*'The policies themselves are okay but not easily available the main problem is the policing and application of policies at a club level.'*⁴⁴⁰

*'Gymnastics Australia have done very little to implement actions around athlete protection and their policies, it is just a tick the box approach and a culture of silence with little process.'*⁴⁴¹

*'There are all these "policies" and "guidelines" in place, but when coaches abuse children, and it is reported, and not taken seriously, or followed by appropriately.'*⁴⁴²

*'However from my own personal perspective, when the Commitment Statements and Child Safety Commitment Statement came out in about March 2019 signed by GA and all the state heads, I had hope that there was going to be a positive change but actions speak louder than words and I don't see our state body in particular even being prepared to talk about it. If they do they certainly don't let the community know and make us feel like they are truly interested.'*⁴⁴³

*'I said, "Oh, like Gymnastics Australia has actually changed their like rules, their child safe policy. I have actually just done a course on it. You are not actually meant to push down gymnasts anymore." She goes, "I don't believe that", and proceeded to push me down. I said, like, "You should have to do it too". She's like, "No, like I don't believe it".'*⁴⁴⁴

*'No gyms I've worked at have explained their policies to me or given them to me until I have had to find it. Will say that I don't think the policies are being followed anyway. I had to document possible family abuse on my own because the gym wouldn't help me or tell me what to do.'*⁴⁴⁵

Some acknowledged that this was at times due to resourcing constraints.

*'I just think expecting every single club to be able to respond to such difficult complaints is so unrealistic, and they're never going to have the resourcing, like, it's community sport, you know, 50% of our clubs don't turn a profit.'*⁴⁴⁶

Community awareness and accessibility

Many in the community, including athletes, parents, coaches, and other staff, do not have a solid understanding or awareness of the policies relating to child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment, and assault. A lack of awareness was not only explicitly mentioned but evident in the lack of understanding current and former athletes and other members of the gymnastics community in Australia had of current reporting processes and investigation procedures.

*'I am not familiar with any athlete wellbeing or bullying and harassment policies and procedures.'*⁴⁴⁷

*'I am not familiar with their specific policies and procedures though I have seen them promote their Safe Sport Policy on social media.'*⁴⁴⁸

*'It seems that the communication from the club administration to the coaches is sometimes disjointed in relation to policies.'*⁴⁴⁹

*'Obviously, the problem with that is that even though Gymnastics Australia says they have child protection policies and [expletive], no one's informed on it, no one.'*⁴⁵⁰

This lack of awareness appears to be based on a number of factors, including, recent implementation, implementation and visibility at a club level, and the volume and duplication of policies across all levels of the sport.

While it is understood that Gymnastics Australia's Codes of Behaviour have been translated into more accessible formats, such as a poster, guide and videos featuring athletes, the limited accessibility for children and young people of existing policies was raised throughout the Review by current and former athletes and other members of the gymnastics community in Australia.

*'Gymnasts are young and not into reading policies and protocols. They don't know their rights and are relying on adults around them to do the right thing by them.'*⁴⁵¹

*'There is no age appropriate accessibility at any of the levels. So I don't see anything for younger children.'*⁴⁵²

*'From a gymnasts perspective, again, we had it in our member handbook. Could it have been clearer, yes. Did all the members read the handbook? Absolutely not, no.'*⁴⁵³

Barriers to disclosing and reporting child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment, and assault

Confidentiality, anonymity, and transparency

While the practice of dealing with complaints at the level they occur is currently recommended by Play by the Rules (PBTR),⁴⁵⁴ the Commission considers that this approach is unsuitable for gymnastics or small sporting organisations and communities, for a number of reasons. These include an actual or perceived lack of independence, confidentiality concerns, and fears of retribution. These issues are not new, with the problems and possible conflicts of interests associated with agencies investigating child abuse allegations made against their own staff first identified in the Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service (Wood Royal Commission).⁴⁵⁵ These concerns were raised by many throughout the Review, including by both current and former gymnasts.

*'And I think that the issue is it's all tied in together again with the same people in the same positions; gymnast coming up to be coaches in the same club that they've trained at; I think that becomes an issue with reporting.'*⁴⁵⁶

*'It's always "Try and fix it yourself" or "Talk to your nearest adult or someone who you trust". But there's no near adult we can trust.'*⁴⁵⁷

*'I believe there is a lack of trust as to who you may be telling if you have a concern. Will it merely be the buddy of someone you have concerns about?'*⁴⁵⁸

*'You could be complaining about the person that you have a problem with to that person.'*⁴⁵⁹

*'When you complain to Gymnastics Australia, your complaint is sent to Gymnastics New South Wales, then Gymnastics New South Wales sends your complaint to look at, to the club, to the actual abuser, against whom you made a complaint.'*⁴⁶⁰

*'If you have any complaints its often the same people that you are making the complaints about as to who you are complaining to. If you go any higher than your club you are pretty much ignored or brushed under the table because it is a club issue. There really is no where to go.'*⁴⁶¹

*'Although clubs are supposed to have a complaints person in place, in reality many gyms are volunteer run, and the people available to complain to are fellow parents, who are aware that the club needs to keep the coaches happen, or risk them moving to another club which impacts the financial viability of the club and the success of their competitive program.'*⁴⁶²

*'At the AIS I felt that there was no one I report anything to. Every adult was on the coaches side. There was no one I trusted.'*⁴⁶³

*'My manager is the person I should go to if I feel [bullied]/harassed or discriminated against. That's doesn't help when it is your own manager making comments that are [discriminatory].'*⁴⁶⁴

The Commission considers that such community concerns are compounded by a perceived or actual lack of transparency, including the withholding of information or advice following an investigation. The MPP currently stipulates that Gymnastics Australia and state and territory associations are not required to provide advice as to the outcome of an investigation. It is unclear why this is stipulated, with Gymnastics Australia unable to provide a rationale for this when asked. The impacts of such a directive can be seen in the 2018 independent review into the now non-existent National Centre of Excellence Victoria program, where the final report and determinations were not shared publicly nor with the concerned parties.

While the Commission will not make judgements on individual matters or cases, as outlined in the Terms of Reference of this Review, the Commission considered it necessary to refer to this example, given the apparent impact such a decision to withhold information has had on those involved and the broader gymnastics community. The Commission does not support the relevant clause in the MPP and considers that, in keeping with principles of natural justice, complainants and other affected parties, such as parents or guardians, should always be informed about the progress of the complaint, including the outcome of the investigation.⁴⁶⁵ The Commission considers that information relating to a determination can be provided with both appropriate confidentiality protections and in the spirit of natural justice.

Tolerance of negative behaviours, the context of sport, lack of trust, and fear of retribution

The Commission heard about an 'organisational tolerance of negative behaviours' that has had a dampening effect on formal and informal reporting by many members of the community, including gymnasts, parents, coaches and administrators.⁴⁶⁶

Members of the gymnastics community in Australia spoke about their concerns not being taken 'seriously',⁴⁶⁷ being 'brushed aside'⁴⁶⁸ or 'under the rug'⁴⁶⁹, stating that clubs, state and territory associations, and Gymnastics Australia would 'turn a blind eye',⁴⁷⁰ with little to minimal 'accountability'.⁴⁷¹ There is a perception that reporting takes 'a lot of emotional and time-consuming energy' and 'leads to nothing'.⁴⁷²

Current and former gymnasts reported that their concerns were often dismissed by reference to the perceived necessity for intense or negative coaching styles in elite gymnastics.

*'Complaints were made by my parents ... for various instances; instances where I was made to train through an immense amount of pain, or I had an instance where it was a little bit sexually inappropriate, and that was reported. But everything is just—it's put down to being, well, this is what you have to do to be an elite gymnast. And if you want to go to an Olympics, then this is what you have to do.'*⁴⁷³

Even when complaints were passed on to the police or other external authorities, such coaching practices were justified as 'normal'.

*'Even when I spoke to the police about what had happened with the coach, they eventually after, you know, doing all the interviews, said it can just be perceived as normal coaching techniques. And I mean, given that over 10 years ago, but yeah, definitely I can see why nobody would've kind of wanted to say anything.'*⁴⁷⁴

These experiences are aligned with research that found that performance may be used to justify coaching behaviours that normalise abuse in order to produce winning athletes.⁴⁷⁵

The view that gymnasts must be 'strong enough to handle' anything, the young age of gymnasts, the normalisation of physical touch in gymnastics, and the perceptions and expectations of the sport all feed into the uncertainty about what constitutes abuse or whether concerns should be raised.⁴⁷⁶ Research has found that separation from family and peers, and a perception that what happened at sport was different than what happened outside of sport can affect athletes' 'critical thinking' about abusive behaviour.⁴⁷⁷ One former gymnast shared that, at the time, she believed it was 'not that bad'.⁴⁷⁸

*'Unfortunately, I was at such a young age that I did not understand or perceive such treatment to be wrong ... [When] gymnasts are young, they may not understand the red flags in that may arise in their coaches behaviour, causing them to be more susceptible as they truly do not understand what is happening.'*⁴⁷⁹

Others reported a real or perceived risk that their complaint would not be believed. This aligns with international experience. In the case of Larry Nassar, the former USA gymnastics national team doctor who has been convicted of several counts of criminal sexual conduct with minors and possession of pornographic images, a number of complainants did not initially come forward due to fears they would not be believed.⁴⁸⁰ Indeed, a number of prominent gymnastics community members in America did not believe the allegations against Larry Nassar, even after several gymnasts had come forward.⁴⁸¹

The Commission heard reports of complainants not being believed and of complainants choosing not to speak up for fear that they would not be believed.

*'My child told me about an inappropriate situation ... when we got back to the club I told the head coach who said my child was lying and the person would never do what she said as he had been in gymnastics for 16 years.'*⁴⁸²

*'So, I'd hate to think how big the problem is, especially when you've got team managers that turn around and say, "Well, you can't believe them, they're only little girls." It's like, this actually happened. I was here.'*⁴⁸³

A significant portion of participants also discussed the threat of retribution or backlash as a reason members of the gymnastics community in Australia chose not to report abusive or negative behaviour at any level of the sport. Gymnasts, parents, coaches and administrators all raised concerns about victimisation in the sport. A number of gymnasts and parents recounted experiences of retribution in the form of increased training loads, physical punishment or emotional abuse for reporting concerns, with others choosing not to report or say anything out of fear that this would also happen to them.

*'And then if we said anything to our parents about an injury or abuse or something and they said anything to the coaches, we would then spend two weeks in the gym being punished. Whether it was you had to do more rope climbs. You were punished harder. You were yelled at more. So, I think you very quickly, your parents would say, "Oh, how was gym today?" "Fine."'*⁴⁸⁴

*'They're so strict and rigid and the retribution is so, so tough, they are petrified to the point that they're begging parents, 'Please don't tell them I have a sore foot,' and the kid's actually got a broken foot. So, there are things like that, that it is out of desperation that the parent and the child starts concealing relevant information from those clubs.'*⁴⁸⁵

Fear of retribution through the loss of employment or opportunities was also raised as a concern by coaches, judges and club employees.

*'Probably around our own fears of like, oh yeah, of being, you know, wanting to speak up on things that I was seeing and observing in all the rest, and it's like, are you going to be employed, are you going to keep your job if you speak up, and you're just continue balancing that.'*⁴⁸⁶

There was also a reported risk that making a complaint could jeopardise a gymnast's career. As discussed in Chapter 2, coaches can have significant influence over selection processes for programs, teams or training camps. The authority of particular members of the gymnastics community in Australia and the subjective nature of judging for the sport, combined with concerns of confidentiality, were raised as significant risks for increased victimisation of athletes. The higher up the sporting ladder the athlete climbs the greater the investment and, therefore, the greater the costs of leaving.⁴⁸⁷

*'Our scoring is quite subjective, so it's not like football, where you kick a ball between two posts and get a goal, judges score you based on technical aspects, but it's so subjective. And a lot of our judges are also coaches or club owners. So I've heard over and over again in complaints about this fear of speaking up because they're not going to get selected for state teams because the person they're making a complaint about has an incredible position of authority within the community.'*⁴⁸⁸

*'It was an internal, first of all, process but then you had people who they already knew weren't going to listen, and they had people who, in the questioning stage, who were, who can affect their selection on national squads.'*⁴⁸⁹

Concerns about victimisation were raised as a particular challenge in areas where there were few other gymnastics clubs to train at or few clubs with programs at the appropriate level for the gymnast.

*'I think there are still definitely programs happening where athletes would 100% feel that way. And I think parents also can sometimes feel extremely frustrated because they've got an athlete—their child loves the sport and they don't even know where to go, what options they have because maybe there are no other options other than to just have what they're dealing with.'*⁴⁹⁰

Recommendations

There needs to be greater consistency and transparency in policy and practice of responding to and handling matters regarding child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment, and assault at all levels of the sport. The Commission acknowledges that there will be resourcing implications attached to the following recommendations. However, child safety and athlete wellbeing must be prioritised and it is expected that the implementation of these recommendations will see cost benefits over the long-term. The recommendations made are underpinned by Sport Australia's Sport Governance Principles, specifically, Principle 8, 'the best and fairest—a system for ensuring integrity'. Implementation of the Commission's recommendations will ensure that most of the proposed recommendations under the Sport Governance Principles are met and will aid Gymnastics Australia in achieving its goal of 95% compliance with all principles, as stipulated in their recent Strategic Plan.⁴⁹¹

Recommendation 9: *All matters regarding child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment, and assault be investigated externally of the sport*

The Commission recommends that all matters regarding child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment, and assault be investigated externally of the sport, where possible and feasible. The Commission considers that an external investigator or process will limit any potential, actual or perceived conflict of interest or loyalty to organisation rather than the individual that may be felt within the community.⁴⁹²

This direction was recently supported in the Independent Review of Gymnastics New Zealand, which recommended that some form of national body, independent of all NSOs be established to operate for all sport rather than continuing to ask volunteers at a club level to carry out the responsibilities.⁴⁹³ The availability of external complaints process has been implemented in sport elsewhere. In 2019, an Investigative Unit was launched in Canada through the established Sport Dispute Resolute Centre of Canada (SDRCC) enabling sport organisations to use this service to ensure that investigations of harassment, abuse, and discrimination complaints are carried out in an independent fashion.⁴⁹⁴

This approach was also recommended and proposed by many throughout consultation.

*'Reporting of abuse should be external to clubs and their personnel. Child protection roles should be external to clubs and independent, not a role held by a parent on a voluntary basis.'*⁴⁹⁵

*'So I think what I'm suggesting they do in the interim is get a complaint handler in, someone who's completely independent, trained to deal with complaints.'*⁴⁹⁶

*'So I think it needs to be a complete separate body of people who we complain to, in my opinion. Something like a Commission like you guys would be fantastic, where you can anonymously tell your story and, maybe, actually, be believed. I've complained about many people, and it's just been ignored, or the process wasn't accurate enough to actually figure out what was going wrong sort of thing.'*⁴⁹⁷

To realise this recommendation and address the identified resourcing issues within particular levels of the sport, with many Member Protection Information Officer positions (MPIOs) held by volunteers, two sub-recommendations are made.

- **Adopt SIA's National Integrity Framework (NIF) and associated complaints process:** The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia, and all state and territory associations and affiliated clubs, adopt SIA's NIF and associated policies. The framework takes a proactive approach to mitigating threats to sports integrity and to providing a safe, fair, and trustworthy environment for participants at all levels of the sport. The policies attached to the NIF, include the Complaints, Disputes and Discipline Policy, CSP, MPP, Competition Manipulation and Sport Wagering Policy, and Improper Use of Drugs and Medicine Policy and reflect best practice.

Once the policies have been adopted, it is recommended that a child friendly version that combines the Complaints, Disputes and Discipline Policy, CSP and MPP be designed and developed in consultation with SIA and the recommended youth advisory councils (Recommendation 5) to ensure the policies and procedures are accessible to all children and adults connected to an institution who may have varying communication needs.⁴⁹⁸

The adoption of the NIF will provide all levels of gymnastics with access to an external complaints process, as well as an alternative dispute resolution process, where eligible, with the National Sports Tribunal (NST). The adoption of these policies and access to an external complaints process will address concerns outlined in this chapter, including issues of transparency and will also require other changes to current practice which are discussed at relevant points throughout this report.

For matters relating to child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment and assault that are not eligible or referred to SIA's process, the Commission recommends that the current practice of matters automatically being considered and handled at the level they occur be reconsidered. It is recommended that the agency and the comfort and preference of the complainant be considered, particularly where concerns of transparency and confidentiality are raised and that the matter is progressed to a higher level within the sport.

Further, the Commission recommends that an external investigator be engaged for these matters, and that Gymnastics Australia and all state and territory associations utilise the list of external investigators compiled by SIA for all future matters and that this is shared with affiliated clubs. Given the list was collated by an independent government body, it is expected that this will ensure the person appointed to investigate will be impartial and objective, with no actual, potential, or perceived conflict of interest.⁴⁹⁹

- Establish a full-time Complaints Manager position at Gymnastics Australia:** SIA's NIF requires that all NSOs have an Integrity Unit that is headed by a National Integrity Manager. The Commission understands that Gymnastics Australia's previous role of National Child Safe Manager has now recently been turned into a full-time equivalent National Integrity Manager that will be supported by the newly created National Integrity Coordinator at 0.8 full-time equivalent, and that this team forms this unit. The NIF also stipulates that a Complaints Manager be appointed, and that, where appropriate, this role can be held simultaneously with that of National Integrity Manager. However, the Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia hire a full-time equivalent Complaints Manager, in addition to the current integrity staffing complement. The Complaints Manager will ensure that all complaints are handled in a timely way and that the resourcing burden on state and territory associations and clubs can be reduced where matters are escalated. Further, as the contact for the SIA, the role will ensure there is consistent engagement and will (or the National Integrity Manager will, depending on recruitment) be responsible for coordinating the implementation of Recommendation 10.

Recommendation 10: *Establish interim and ongoing oversight over relevant complaints at all levels of the sport*

The Commission recommends that a form of independent oversight over the handling of complaints at all levels of the sport be introduced in the interim while the preceding recommendation is implemented. Independent oversight can help institutions better identify and manage risks to children and can improve its competency, transparency and accountability in complaint handling.⁵⁰⁰ Further, independent oversight of complaint handling complements other regulator schemes that contribute to making institutions child safe, including Working With Children Checks, Child Safe Standards and mandatory reporting.⁵⁰¹

It is recommended that an agreement or Memorandum of Understanding between Gymnastics Australia, state and territory associations and affiliated clubs and SIA be drafted to give SIA oversight to monitor all complaints until matters are able to be referred to the new external complaints process. It is also recommended that this continue for matters that are not referred to SIA once the process is established. Continued oversight will be subject to SIA's available resourcing and reflects best practice given that sporting organisations are not deemed a 'relevant organisation' under state and territory reportable conduct schemes.⁵⁰² In addition to this, the Commission is supportive of Gymnastics Australia's identified outcomes under Strategic Priority 4.5 in its Gymnastics in Australia Strategic Plan 2020–2023, including oversight of complaint-related data at all levels of the sport. While this does not replace the Commission's prior recommendation, it does improve consistency in oversight.⁵⁰³

Recommendation 11: *Establish a toll-free triage, referral and reporting telephone service operated by SIA*

The Commission recommends that SIA consider expanding their current 1300 number to provide a triage, referral and reporting service. Such a service would allow gymnastics and other sports not only to make an anonymous report, but will provide athletes and other relevant individuals with timely supports and relevant information regarding available opportunities for investigation and redress. This will ensure that athletes do not engage with irrelevant or inappropriate avenues, which consequently require them to unnecessarily re-live their experiences, and will also offer an opportunity to find relevant supports if they chose to engage in the external complaints process. A similar measure was implemented in Canada, alongside an Investigative Unit, with the helpline providing a professional, listening and referral service that diverts callers to appropriate resources.⁵⁰⁴ This measure was also recommended by participants throughout consultation.⁵⁰⁵



5. Governance and structure of gymnastics in Australia

This chapter examines the governance and structure of gymnastics in Australia and its impact on ensuring athlete safety, wellbeing and empowerment.

Gymnastics in Australia operates within a federated model, with state and territory associations functioning as separate entities, with their own boards. There is some variation within this federated model, with a 'one management' model in place between Gymnastics Australia and Gymnastics Tasmania and Gymnastics ACT. Due to the level of information provided, the Commission had limited insight into the governance and structure of clubs across the sport but was advised on the variance in operation types, including not-for-profit, commercially run, and those within larger not-for-profit organisations, such as PCYC.

The Commission found that a fragmented governance model has significant implications on the capacity for gymnastics as a sport to ensure child and athlete safety and wellbeing. These implications are evident in a number of areas, including current leadership practice, with concerns raised regarding both accountability and current collaborative practice. While the strategic plans across the sport reinforce a commitment to child safety, they also highlight the potential issues that can occur within a federated model, including the duplication of resources and processes. Further, despite a number of bodies having comprehensive recruitment and selection policies and processes, not all do, and it is difficult to determine whether these are being implemented at all levels of the sport given the challenges of oversight. In addition, there is some concern regarding the availability of Member Protection Information Officers (MPIOs) across the sport and a number of implications of managing complaints within a federated system are detailed, including limitations regarding sanctions. Finally, the impacts of funding pressures, perceived and actual, are discussed for the purposes of highlighting potential impacts on organisational culture and athlete experience only.

The Commission has distilled Sport Australia's Sport Governance Principles into four areas related to successful governance within the current federated model and makes a number of sub-recommendations to realise these and to ensure that child safety is embedded and the centre of the governance of gymnastics at all levels of the sport:

- effective partnerships and collaboration
- robust engagement and participation
- consistency and accessibility
- accountability and transparency.⁵⁰⁶

It is imperative for Gymnastics Australia and the state and territory associations to work collaboratively to improve the governance of the sport within the federated structure.

Governance and structure overview

Gymnastics in Australia operates within a federated sporting structure.⁵⁰⁷ Under this model, Gymnastics Australia, the NSO, is responsible for developing the sport from community participation to high performance, with the state and territory associations, the State Sporting Organisations (SSOs), responsible for the same in their respective jurisdictions.⁵⁰⁸ The business model supporting this structure is characterised by the state and territory associations, all with their own board of directors, operating as individual businesses.⁵⁰⁹

In gymnastics in Australia, there is some deviation from a strictly federated model, with two state and territory associations, Gymnastics Tasmania and Gymnastics ACT operating within a 'one management' model, since 2011 and 2016, respectively. A one management model is a predominantly federated governance structure that is underpinned by a business model where a National Sporting Organisation's centralised services and management structures support the organisation, but the state and territory association in question is still governed independently.⁵¹⁰ It is understood that the one management model was also tabled by Gymnastics Australia for Gymnastics Northern Territory in 2015 but that this did not continue due to concerns for government funding.⁵¹¹ Gymnastics Australia has advised the Commission that these funding restrictions are no longer in place.

While functioning independently, under this federated model, all state and territory associations and affiliated clubs are required to comply with Gymnastics Australia's 2021 Affiliation Standards. These standards include a number of child safe requirements, including Working With Child Check compliance as well as the completion of an annual child safe self-assessment and relevant mandatory training.⁵¹²

Both Gymnastics Australia and each state and territory association have a board of directors, that typically consist of a president and elected and appointed directors. The roles of the boards are to provide strategic advice and oversight of the governance of the sport. Some boards are supported by additional committees with a specific focus or oversight for a particular area. For example, Gymnastics Australia established the Integrity Committee in November 2020 to assist the Gymnastics Australia Board in fulfilling its responsibilities relating to issues of ethics and integrity within the sport, with the current primary function being engagement with this Review.

In addition to the board, a number of state and territory associations have sport management committees for individual or all Gymsports that include a technical director, a judging coordinator (for competitive sports only) and general members. The functions of such committees can extend to the coordination of competitions to the identification of gaps or needs in support and education for coaches and judges.⁵¹³

The documentation provided by Gymnastics Australia and the state and territory associations did not include detailed information on club-level governance. The difficulty of both state and territory and club-level oversight, however, was noted, and provided some insight into current practice and implementation. Despite this, it is expected that there would be differences in the governance of clubs, given the diversity of operation types across the approximately 600 affiliated gymnastics clubs, including not-for-profit clubs; private clubs, including family-owned businesses; clubs operating on a commercial basis; and clubs run by larger organisations such as PCYC and the YMCA. Further, it is understood that there are a number of clubs operating outside of the affiliated federated structure.

Shared strategic goals

A review of available current and past strategic plans for state and territory associations revealed a consistent inclusion of child protection and safety, with a number identifying identical strategic goals, albeit with differing measurables or outcomes.⁵¹⁴ Some of the plans also refer to engagement and partnerships across all levels of the sport. However, while the inclusion of child protection and safety is consistent, the identified actions and outcomes are not, and highlight the need for greater consistency and shared outcomes across all levels of the sport for this area.

There also appears to be consistent engagement and prioritisation of matters regarding child safety by respective board of directors. The Commission has been advised that child safety is a standing item for the Gymnastics Australia, Gymnastics NSW, Gymnastics Tasmania and Gymnastics ACT Boards, and appears to also be a regular item for the Gymnastics Victoria Board. In alignment with Gymnastics Australia's CSP, these updates likely include reports about current complaints. While the Commission commends such engagement, for the purposes of confidentiality and privacy, and given the strategic focus of the board, the Commission does not believe that detail of individual complaints should be provided to them.

Accountable leadership

Throughout consultation the Commission heard about the community distrust of current leadership of gymnastics in Australia.

The foundation of this distrust appears to be around a perceived or real absence of accountability.

*'So I definitely think the people within positions of power need to be held accountable for their actions.'*⁵¹⁵

*'It's all this big hierarchy, where they've put themselves on their own pedestal that they've created. And so they're only really interested in people that will look up to them, and continue this mentality.'*⁵¹⁶

*'From where I sat, the [National Leadership and Executive] played favourites. They protected some people and dismissed any concerns about them, but then would go hard slog on others. It was definitely not an equally playing field.'*⁵¹⁷

The Commission mentions a perceived absence of accountability as there seems to be some confusion regarding the nature and scope of roles and powers within the federated model, both within the community and current senior management.

There also appears to be some friction between leadership, particularly at the national and state and territory levels, which may be impacting overall collaboration and consistent service delivery.

*'In terms of the culture, probably, as we talked about before that some of the issues that come out because of federation type model and the different levels of cooperation at times, I think I would like to see that change and I think that would help a lot to make a more cooperative community or one-direction community. Rather than communities that might be going in slightly different directions because different CEOs in different states have different ideas.'*⁵¹⁸

*'So, you've got two governing bodies with differing views, and differing opinions.'*⁵¹⁹

The Commission also heard of a lack of trust among management within the federated structure, with concerns regarding staff turnover, suitable expertise and reduced engagement both at senior management and board levels.

While such challenges will always be present, both in and outside of a federated structure, the impacts of this need to be monitored, particularly for matters relating to child safety. Upholding and responding to matters regarding child safety require consistent responses across all jurisdictions. Given the apparent limited resources, greater utilisation of cross-jurisdiction resources appears essential, and will ensure consistent service delivery and avoid duplication of materials.

Recruitment and child safe focused roles

In alignment with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations,⁵²⁰ Gymnastics Australia and Gymnastics Victoria have comprehensive child safe focused recruitment, screening, and induction processes for all staff and volunteers, with other state and territory associations having broader documents that capture Working With Children Requirements. Additionally, Gymnastics NSW has developed a number of child safe recruitment resources for clubs. While resources are made available to clubs, neither Gymnastics Australia nor the state and territory associations were able to comment on compliance at club-level, although Screening and Working With Children Check requirements are outlined in the CSP.

To meet affiliation standards, all clubs must have a fully-trained MPIO or Complaints Handler which includes completion of both the online and face-to-face training developed by PBTR.⁵²¹ However, as per the MPIO principles and implementation timelines, if it is not possible for clubs to have a fully-trained MPIO, clubs should have a 'MPIO-informed person' within the club, who has undertaken the online PBTR training, or access to a trained MPIO from any sport within the region or from the relevant state and territory association.⁵²² There are also a number of ongoing exemptions to the requirement of a fully-trained MPIO, including a club having less than 100 registered gymnastics members.⁵²³

The Commission is not aware how many 'fully-trained' or 'informed' MPIOs there are across the sport, outside of the current three fully-trained MPIO high performance staff at the national level, as this data was not provided. However, the Commission stresses that the need for fully-trained MPIOs is critical given that over the last five years 69% of complaints were handled at a club-level.

In addition to MPIOs, Gymnastics Australia and some state and territory associations have or recently had roles dedicated to child safety and child protection. In 2019, Gymnastics Australia appointed a full-time Child Safe Manager, which has recently been turned into a National Integrity Manager Position whose primary role will be leading the integrity, member protection and child protection frameworks, policies and process. The role will also be supported by a newly created 0.8 full-time equivalent National Integrity Coordinator. Across state and territory associations, Gymnastics Northern Territory has a full-time Education, Participation, Workforce and Child Safety Co-ordinator, responsible for the delivery of programs and activities that educate the gymnastics community on child safe issues.

Until recently, Gymnastics Victoria and Gymnastics NSW had roles dedicated to child safety and child protection, both of which engaged regularly with Gymnastics Australia staff. Gymnastics Victoria previously employed a full-time Child Safe Manager, whose primary responsibility was education and complaints handling; and Gymnastics NSW previously employed a dedicated Compliance Manager, to oversee their implementation of child safety. Gymnastics Australia advised that these roles have not been filled with associated responsibilities absorbed by other staff. While further detail on this was not provided, the Commission has concerns that the absence of these roles reduces the impact and prioritisation of child safety in the sport and ongoing collaboration within the federated structure.

Management of relevant complaints

The Commission has recommended in Chapter 4, that complaints regarding child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment, and assault at all levels of the sport be investigated externally of the sport, and where not externally investigated, escalated to a higher level to ensure greater independence. The implementation of this recommendation requires a whole-of-sport commitment across its federated structure. For example, the Commission heard throughout consultation about matters not being able to be escalated due to limitations on the types of sanctions that can be imposed, including the termination of employment and that decisions regarding matters such a technical membership can only be made following the conclusion of club-level investigations.

*'So if I get a phone call and it's a parent making complaint about a coach at a club, it's really under our policy, it gets pushed back to the club to handle in the first instance. And that's because I can't do anything, I can't suspend an employed coach, I don't have that authority. And we've gotten into hot water with lawyers before as well, when we've gone to impose suspensions and stuff on people because we don't really technically have the authority.'*⁵²⁴

The Commission has concerns that such a fragmented approach to handling complaints may be time-consuming and carries risks as a result, particularly where there are child safety concerns that should be responded to quickly.

Funding pressures

While no comprehensive review of the funding arrangements at any level of the sport was undertaken, the Commission heard about the way funding pressures, whether perceived or actual, create challenges for ensuring athlete wellbeing across all levels of gymnastics.

At the national level, Gymnastics Australia receives some of its funding from the AIS to provide support to a pool of high performance athletes, including for athlete wellbeing and engagement. Gymnastics Australia also develops policies and frameworks to guide the sport at all levels. Despite developing the Body Positive Guidelines and CSP in recent years, the Commission heard that funding pressures limit the amount of support, by way of policies, guidelines, and inquiries, Gymnastics Australia is able to provide to the broader sport.

The Commission also heard that the introduction of Australia's Winning Edge funding strategy had a negative impact on athletes wellbeing and that this impact continues to be felt today. Winning Edge was a funding strategy developed by the Australian Sports Commission (now Sport Australia) following the 2012 Olympics which prioritised funding towards sports likely to achieve international success. Before Winning Edge was brought in, sports were largely funded based on high participation rates and strong elite pathways.⁵²⁵ The strategy was in place over the 2016 Olympic cycle.

Members of the community reported that high performance gymnastics was greatly affected by the strategy and that it put increased negative pressure on athletes to perform at the Olympic and international level.

*'I would say that there were many sports that suffered in that ... I'm talking on the pressure that that athletes personally felt to perform. I think that was a negative pressure instead of the excitement of going to the Olympic Games and doing your best for your sport. I think the whole rhetoric changed and I think Australian sport is poorer for it.'*⁵²⁶

Despite the Australian Sports Commission (now Sport Australia) stepping back from the Winning Edge strategy in 2017, the NSO Investment for 2020–21 confirms that high performance investment is still aligned to sports with the 'greatest potential of contributing to delivering sustainable international success'.⁵²⁷ The Commission heard that members of the gymnastics community in Australia perceived that the 'push for podium positions to get funding'⁵²⁸ continues to place real pressure on often young female gymnasts to perform. The Commission also heard that this can result in coaches, program and club administrators, and parents holding competitive success as a 'higher consideration than wellbeing'.⁵²⁹ As discussed in Chapter 2, coaches under personal pressure to perform or who see their own success tied up with athlete success may be at risk of employing abusive coaching techniques.

*'It seems Gymnastics in Australia were under a lot of pressure for us girls to receive medals and to place well in our competitions as it was directly linked to funding for the sport and the programs. At least this is my observation. This pressure trickled down and it is ultimately what I feel contributed to the toxic culture that created this haze around people's judgments of what were healthy and ethical ways to achieve these goals.'*⁵³⁰

The funding pool assigned to high performance athletes at a national level was also reported to create pressures at a state and territory level with some sharing that they were concerned about gaps in support for state level high performance athletes. The Commission heard that funding arrangements between Gymnastics Australia and the state and territory associations have changed over recent years and created pressures within the sporting federation. Though state and territory associations reported that they were proud of developments they had made in the child safety space over recent years, the Commission also heard that some state and territory associations did not always feel well enough resourced to provide necessary support to clubs or to satisfy desired levels of education and training.

Clubs were also reported to experience challenges delivering high quality child safety and wellbeing outcomes. Some members of the gymnastics community in Australia shared that due to funding pressures they felt some for-profit clubs prioritised their business success over the wellbeing of their athletes. Implicit in this was the suggestion that athletes committing to a higher training load at a more competitive level would increase revenue for the programs.

The Commission also heard that the accreditation model for clubs which, as outlined in Chapter 4 requires administrators and coaches to undertake education on child safety, placed a significant financial burden on clubs. Due to the cost, some clubs were choosing not to undertake full accreditation for their coaches.

The Commission cannot verify the legitimacy of either of these claims but considers that they would create significant long-term risks to individual clubs, to Gymnastics Australia and most significantly to the athletes involved in the sport. The Commission understands that funding constraints create challenges for achieving best-practise in the child safety and wellbeing space. Moving forward however, it will be a greater human rights and reputational risk that will affect participation and retention, if not acted on.

Recommendations

Recommendation 12: *Align current governance with Sport Australia's Sport Governance Principles more consistently and effectively*

The Commission has distilled Sport Australia's Sport Governance Principles into four areas related to successful governance within the current federated model: effective partnerships and collaboration; robust engagement and participation; consistency and accessibility; and accountability and transparency.⁵³¹ The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia and the state and territory associations work collaboratively to improve the governance of the sport within the federated model. The following sub-recommendations are made in an effort to achieve this in relation to athlete safety, wellbeing, and empowerment.

- **Revise board engagement with child safety matters:** The ongoing commitment to child safe matters at the board-level across the sport is commendable. However, the Commission proposes that individual matters should not be discussed at this level to ensure the privacy of those involved and the strategic focus of the board. Good governance requires a strong separation between governance and management and a clear delineation between strategic and day-to-day business while maintaining strong lines of communication.⁵³²

Instead, information on how the complaint was handled should be provided to the board, including the time-taken and the outcome for the purposes of the board's feedback and scrutiny and to support their role in overseeing prevention activity and the mitigation of systemic risks. Further, if not done so already, the Commission recommends that the results of all child safety compliance self-audits undertaken annually throughout the sport—at all levels—be presented to all respective boards for consideration. This will require state and territory associations to collect the outcomes of these audits from affiliated clubs within their jurisdiction.

Both approaches offer greater opportunities for transparency and enable all boards to effectively support and challenge management, particularly given concerns about current leadership practice.⁵³³ These proposed changes should be reflected in relevant policy documents, including but not limited to the CSP, and be included in Gymnastics Australia's National Affiliation Standards as a requirement for affiliation.

- **Develop shared goals and outcomes for matters relating to child safety at all levels of the sport:** To improve consistency throughout the sport at all levels and to address potential and actual duplication of strategic planning and reporting due to administrative layers,⁵³⁴ the Commission recommends that all strategic plans across the sport be revised to include mutually agreed shared goals and outcomes for matters relating to child safety. The Commission acknowledges that some state and territory associations and Gymnastics Australia may have additional goals or outcomes, however, a consistent approach will mitigate risks and allow for consistent measurable outcomes to be monitored across the sport. Such an approach is aligned with Gymnastics Australia's recent Strategic Plan 2020–2023, which identified the priority of an appropriate, sustainable and compliant governance and management structure that minimises fragmentation and duplication.⁵³⁵

- **Prioritise athlete voices and needs at the board-level:** It is recommended that all state and territory associations boards and the Gymnastics Australia Board ensure that their board memberships includes a Director with past experience as an athlete, similar to the position identified as an 'Athlete Director' in the recent review of Netball.⁵³⁶ The Commission also recommends that all boards seek to engage with either the entire, or a representative from the, Youth Advisory Council in their jurisdiction (Recommendation 5) on a quarterly basis to ensure their ongoing participation in strategic decision-making and to ensure that any issues or resourcing needs identified by the athlete community are considered.
- **Adopt and implement SIA's child safe recruitment and screening resources:** Gymnastics Australia, Gymnastics NSW and Gymnastics Victoria should be commended on their efforts in developing guidelines and resources for child safe recruitment. However, for the purposes of ensuring consistency, the Commission recommends that these be superseded by the information and resources provided in the Child Safeguarding Policy attached to SIA's National Integrity Framework and that any training or policies be refined to reference or include these.
- **Consistent and ongoing delivery of online and face-to-face MPIO training across all levels of the sport:** The Commission is recommending that all matters regarding child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment, and assault be investigated externally of the sport or escalated, however there is still a significant need for fully-trained MPIOs given they are likely to be the first responders to reports. The Commission recommends that Gymnastics Australia and state and territory associations map where MPIOs are currently placed and design a phased roll-out of both the online and face-to-face training to ensure every club has access to at least one MPIO-informed role. Given staff turnover, both Gymnastics Australia and state and territory associations should monitor this as part of the child safety compliance self-audits. The Commission understands the resourcing implications attached to this recommendation, however it is imperative that in a sport such as gymnastics, where over 90% of athletes are under the age of 12, that child safety is central to practice.
- **Establish formal mechanism that facilitates ongoing collaboration between personnel responsible for child safety and child protection at all levels of the sport:** The Commission recommends that collaboration between personnel responsible for child safety and child protection be formalised through the development of an ongoing committee or group consisting of relevant personnel at all levels of the sport for the purposes of overseeing consistent implementation of education and training and the sharing of resources. It is expected that the group will be key in overseeing the consolidation of training materials and resources proposed in Recommendation 4.

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- **Address current obstacles to escalating relevant complaints:** While best practice, there are operational issues that need to be considered when escalating complaints of child abuse and neglect, misconduct, bullying, sexual harassment and assault within the sport. These issues will be in part resolved by the availability of the external complaints process and the use of external investigators as outlined in Chapter 4, but Gymnastics Australia, state and territory associations and affiliated clubs should have agreements in place to enable matters to be escalated where necessary. If matters are escalated, any interim safety measures and determinations from an investigation, including regarding employment matters, should be accepted and implemented by the organisation responsible. The Commission recognises that how this is implemented, including policy revision and development, is best decided within the sport.

Appendix 1: Child-friendly summary

What does the INDEPENDENT REVIEW INTO GYMNASTICS IN AUSTRALIA say?

It's our job at the Australian Human Rights Commission to make sure everyone in Australia knows their rights and are treated fairly.

Gymnastics Australia (the organisation that looks after all the children and adults that do gymnastics in Australia) asked us to find out how to make gymnastics safer and more fun for you. We put everything we heard into a report, called the *Change the Routine: Report on the Independent Review into Gymnastics in Australia*.

We especially wanted to hear from children because you are the ones who go to gymnastics classes the most! We wanted to find out what you thought were the good things about gymnastics, and also the parts that you didn't enjoy as much. This included some bad experiences, like when you might have felt sad or unsafe.

The main ideas

After listening to you and other people in gymnastics, we have suggested some ways that gymnastics can be made safer and more enjoyable for everyone. The most important thing is to give you, and all gymnasts, a greater say in what you do. You should always feel okay about telling people what you don't like or what you do like to do.

To make sure you always feel safe, we asked Gymnastics Australia and other gymnastics organisations to do some things, such as:

- ★ create groups in every state and territory for children and young people to meet and share their views and to be heard
- ★ make sure children and young people understand all the different rules inside a gym and while doing gymnastics
- ★ have a separate group of people that will listen to and take care of problems and complaints about bullying, abuse, and sexual harassment
- ★ ask for your permission when adults need to do exercises with you or do check-ups with your body
- ★ do regular tests to make sure your mental health and body are healthy
- ★ make sure coaches and staff treat you well and know how to keep you safe.

Thank you for helping us make sure gymnastics is safe and fun!



Endnotes

- 1 While it is understood that the National Integrity Framework is referred to as 'the framework' in some relevant documentation, the acronym NIF has been used in this report to avoid confusion with other frameworks discussed.
- 2 Released in June 2020, *Athlete A* is a documentary that focuses on the gymnasts who experienced abuse by former USA Gymnastics national team doctor, Larry Nassar, and the reporters involved.
- 3 The terms 'athlete' and 'gymnast' have been used interchangeably throughout this report and represent the same diverse group within the gymnastics community in Australia.
- 4 Australian Institute of Family Studies, *What is child abuse and neglect?* (Web Page, September 2018) <<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/what-child-abuse-and-neglect>>.
- 5 *Empowering Olympic, Paralympic, and Amateur Athletes Act of 2020* (US).
- 6 Human Rights Watch, *"I Was Hit So Many Times I Can't Count" Abuse of Child Athletes in Japan* (Report, 2020).
- 7 David Howman, Lesley Nicol and Rachel Vickery, *Independent Review of Gymnastics New Zealand* (Report, February 2021).
- 8 *The Whyte Review* (Web Page) <<https://www.whytoreview.org/>>.
- 9 Australian Netball, *State of the Game Review* (Report, 12 November 2020).
- 10 Bruce Collins QC, Gabrielle Trainor AO and Moyo Dodd, *Even Higher Performance: A review of the culture and governance of the Hockey Australia National Women's High Performance Program (Recommendations)* (Report, March 2021).
- 11 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Racial Equality in Basketball Australia Review* (Review, 2021).
- 12 Convention on the Rights of the Child, opened for signature 20 November 1989, 1577 UNTS 171 (entered into force 2 September 1990).
- 13 'Gymnastics community in Australia' is used throughout the report to describe current and former athletes, their families, staff, coaches and other relevant personnel from all levels of the sport.
- 14 Submission 52; Submission 57; Submission 123, *Change the Routine: Report on the Independent Review into Gymnastics in Australia*.
- 15 Gymnastics Victoria was recognised in 2017 with the Australian Sports Commission's Play by the Rules Award for making a significant contribution to safe, fair and inclusive sport. The award highlighted initiatives designed to support the inclusion of young athletes with a disability.
- 16 Gymnastics Australia, *2019 Annual Report: Celebrating 70 Years* (Annual Report, July 2019) 8.
- 17 Gymnastics Australia, *2017 Gymnastics IN Australia Statistics* (Web Page) <https://www.gymnastics.org.au/ga/Posts/News_Articles/2018/02_Feb/Gymnastics_IN_Australia_stats.aspx>.
- 18 Australian Sports Commission, *AusPlay Focus: Children's Participation in Organised Physical Activity Outside of School Hours* (Report, April 2018) 4;6;7.
- 19 Gymnastics Australia, *2017 Gymnastics IN Australia Statistics* (Web Page) <https://www.gymnastics.org.au/ga/Posts/News_Articles/2018/02_Feb/Gymnastics_IN_Australia_stats.aspx>.
- 20 Gymnastics Australia, *2019 Annual Report: Celebrating 70 Years* (Annual Report, July 2019) 8.
- 21 Gymnastics Australia, *2017 Gymnastics IN Australia Statistics* (Web Page) <https://www.gymnastics.org.au/ga/Posts/News_Articles/2018/02_Feb/Gymnastics_IN_Australia_stats.aspx>.
- 22 Interview 47, *Change the Routine: Report on the Independent Review into Gymnastics in Australia*.
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