



CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PRESERVATION

A CORE ISSUE IN THE FIG DEVELOPMENT POLICY

By Dr Michel LEGLISE (FRA), Vice-President of the FIG and President of the FIG Medical Commission

Opening lines of the FIG Statutes and article 2.1:

To coordinate efforts for safe and healthy physical and moral development through the teaching of gymnastics... in order to understand the importance FIG places on the health of its gymnasts, for whom it organises events.

This one core message applies to gymnasts of any age, of any discipline or practical level, but through the lens of **development**; we deal with organisms during their years of growth, children and teenagers whose **moral and physical needs** must be met and safeguarded.

With this publication I would like to shed light on the fact that commitment to that development is waning in word and deed and that alongside its affiliated federations the FIG has been actively defending the protection and well-being of its young gymnasts.

I would first like to talk about **certain ideas** that have surfaced, phrases that continue to circulate which are without any scientific basis, mere rumours spread, at times, voluntarily.

Must I remind you that that the practise of gymnastics in no way hinders normal physical or biological growth and development? The practise of artistic gymnastics has never kept anyone from growing just as the practise of rhythmic gymnastics has never accelerated growth; natural selection dictates that there are more gymnasts with a genetic predisposition to a small frame in artistic gymnastics and to a taller frame in rhythmic gymnastics. With few exceptions, these gymnast rank at the top since they are equipped with the morphological qualities that facilitate the practise of their respective discipline. It is the hereditary disposition coupled with a natural selection of morphological traits, period.

It is, however, true that high-level training punctuated with a few overly rigorous sessions can bring about stunting in growth (height, etc.) and maturity (menstruation, notably), but in almost every case the body catches up without any long-term consequences or effects. **Growth may be slowed down and suspended, but remains normal at the long-term.** Gymnastics is not the only sport affected by this phenomenon; most high-level sports show the same.

Nonetheless it is important to maintain a realistic balance, which our Medical Commission has been doing for years now through research and statistics.

We must remain **vigilant** in matters concerning minors.

The growth period is an **ideal learning time** for psychomotor development but we must not forget that a child's ability to learn swiftly can be deceptive and lead us to believe that the child can do anything, rapidly and without permanent damage. Growth, remember, is a time to **build** so there is a good amount of physical and psychological **instability and**

fragility. We've seen careers cut short and **physical, psychological damage** done at the medium, long to very long-term.

It is a mistake to think of a child as an adult with quantitatively reduced capacities and suggest an adult-targeted training programme that has simply been scaled down.

Training must be founded on physical and physiological capacities, endocrinological data, and must respect the stages of child development.

Daily habits, training, hygiene and diet, social, affective and psychological environment: a child's entire life must be carefully guided.

We have always held to the fact that while under normal training conditions the late onset of puberty, meaning stature and sexual development, is not necessarily alarming, we do need to remain extremely vigilant at the articular level, specifically for **fracture, dislocation or chronic articulation disorders during the growth period** and where inadequate treatment has been administered or insufficient sleep has been the case.

We must expose **major psychological and ethical abuse**, often stemming from incompetence and irresponsibility on the part of coaches, at times an athlete's entourage or organizations responsible for a child's education and sporting career.

These are also unscrupulous individuals devoid of any kind of moral or ethical compass, who see gymnasts as a means to selfish end. Various forms of physical and psychological disorders give rise to serious issues with hygiene and nutrition, very often associated with educational, social or affective deficiencies that at the long-term lead to physical and psychological damage. Children have both a lesser ability to assess situations and a limited autonomy, which makes it our job to safeguard their psychological fragility.

Childhood must be preserved. People need their childhood in order to cope with their adult lives.

Fortunately, these situations remain few and far between, but it is important to address the issue since too often our sport is mocked in caricatures and misconstrued by those who have no appreciation or understanding of it, or of sport in general. The images are distributed by a media that gives a false image of gymnastics as we know it.

Our sport and its image have nothing in common with the message they convey.

It is easy to see why the FIG is up in arms; its ethics and moral values are the impetus for **specific regulations** and an **educational programme** based on known and scientifically proven principles and hands-on experience geared toward youth. The FIG must communicate its values.

Children and teens need a very specific and privileged place in our value system.

ETHICAL AND LEGAL ASPECTS. CHILD AND TEENAGE RIGHTS.

Children have rights.

They are also accountable, but keeping in mind that minors technically bear no responsibility.

For child rights, the following apply:

- the right to physical and sportive activity,
- the right to be a champion
- the right not to be a champion
- the right to personal technical guidance,
- the right to physical health,
- the right to basic moral and psychological protection,

the right to an education, support and professional integration assistance,
the right to an appropriate environment.

These rights are the responsibilities of the athlete entourage: namely parents, coaches, clubs, national and international sport federations, educators, medical teams, media; anyone who comes in direct or indirect contact with the athlete, whether on a daily basis or sporadically, and who is aware that athletes structure their lives around their practise of sports and are dependant upon it.

FIG RESEARCH PROGRAMME “GYMNASTICS AND GROWTH”

In 1997 the FIG Medical Commission launched a research programme in the aim of better understanding physiological, particularly hormonal, and morphological development of high-level gymnasts; documentation was taken mainly from volunteers at the World and European Championships using strict medical ethics in adherence with international norms. We were able to compile thousands of data, to interpret training methods and publish articles in globally recognized periodicals (Journal of Clinical Endocrinology, USA). This information is vital to the training methods used with young gymnasts.

To **conclude**, the FIG has given as much attention to making general policy decisions as it does to administrative and technical strategies. The reason behind that? To underpin the sport practise of young gymnasts. That's **FIG policy**, period.

The same goes for sport and health. Injured gymnasts who are uncomfortable in their childhoods vehicle an image that is completely opposite the mission stated by the FIG. We have countered this practice by emphasising the physical, biological and psychological limits of children practicing at the elite level.

The most important thing is to give it time. Our young talent will mature in gesture and body expression but their health should not be put at risk to get there.

Our closely allied international institutions, partners such as the IOC, the UN (Resolution 1386 of November 20, 1959), UNESCO, UNICEF, Panathlon International, are a reminder of this and propel us to this end.

In a world of violence where hundreds of millions of children and teenagers miss out on a childhood as they strive to survive day after day, we the international and national federations can offer a few, perhaps many, a new reason for living. Let us welcome them. It matters little whether or not they are champions, let us offer them an education that goes beyond basic technical or performance training; let us teach them the true virtues of sport, our sport, a sporting culture; of those who give meaning to life. Only then will we have fulfilled our mission.

“AGE AND COMPETITION”, REGULATIONS

Statutes, regulations and recommendations, information – all FIG activity must seek to respect the principles of **universality and equality** with regard to the affiliated federations and our gymnasts. The idea of **competing side by side** is an ideal. In light of the various gymnastic traditions, organisations and methods employed by our federations, the task is not an easy one. Age is a good example of this. Finding a universal age for competitions or games among gymnasts of the same legal or chronological age (passport indication) is far from easy, but the **gap in maturity**, meaning development and physical or psychological capacity, among certain populations, whether northern or southern, (genetic factor stemming from sun exposure) can span years chronologically, which is

disappointingly the only logical point of reference for an international organisation such as FIG.

It is easy to read a date of birth printed on a document, but to evaluate real biological age through extensive medical examination and more or less complex interpretation is impossible, materially speaking. This difference in maturity may be detrimental in competitions, especially for the lower age categories; for this reason it would seem wiser and more judicial to have tournaments with young category gymnasts coming from the continental unions or continental regions, thus bringing together gymnasts of a more similar developmental stage and maturity level.

To date, the FIG offers no Junior level World Championships or Cups

This does not mean the FIG cannot propose **World Age Group Games** in certain disciplines with **rules and codes tailored to fit the capacities** of young gymnasts and giving precedence to technical quality over sporting achievement or risk taking.

FIG remains attentive to the initiatives of every one of its national federations and regional groups looking to organise tournaments for youth. It supports educational initiatives that respect child physiology and psychology with a specially designed programme and technical regulations that have been approved by our technicians and educators.

In short:

In order to access the highest level later on it is important to acquire the basic automatic reflexes early on, but with attentive and competent guidance during the learning period. We must **offer them competitions or games that give precedence to technical quality** and, wherever possible, among gymnasts of a similar developmental, physical and biological level. Early exposure to a pre-defined technical preparation has its limits, physical most certainly, but can also lead to psychological saturation in the early adult years, especially when professional, social or affective concerns come into play.

Striking the right balance for each gymnast is a challenge that we need to take up, and we will take it up!

FIG AGE GROUP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

It is true that a good number of national federations have an excellent development programme for a variety of age categories: education, general regulations and age-appropriate competitions.

The FIG has, however, developed a **universal** programme geared toward filling in any gaps in their programmes and, more importantly, incorporating other federations yet to organise development programmes.

The FIG Academies were tasked to handle the educational programme; with their extensive expertise, **Academy collaborators provide an education that is both foundational and specific to gymnastics.**

Educating educators is one of its core missions.

Three main sectors fall under the Age Group programme umbrella:

The concept of growth and maturation by age group; this document is unique in that we compare physical development with capacity.

The ideal time to learn a given activity; by completely stepping back from the notion of chronological or legal age.

The technical programme per age group.

FIG TECHNICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE REGULATIONS

Any rule can be detrimental to health so it is important to keep a watchful eye from the outset; damage often becomes evident at the long-term only.

The FIG reminds vigilant in this regard, particularly for administrative or technical decisions governing youth.

The Code of Points is a core example of this. Strict scrutiny helps to eliminate physiological overload and dangerous biomechanical elements that border on the impossible anatomically speaking, and which put a strain on the fragile joints still developing in children and adolescents.

IOC CONSENSUS STATEMENT

The IOC has launched a programme geared toward protecting children and adolescents in sport.

In 2006 and 2010, the IOC published two consensus statements based on approved scientific research: the **IOC Consensus Statement on Training the Elite Child Athlete** and the **IOC Consensus Statement on Age Determination on High-level Young Athletes**. FIG closely collaborated on both texts.

The statements indicate the following:

- Basic scientific principles surrounding child training at the elite level,
- Problems specific to children training at the elite level,
- Recommendations for child training at the elite level.

It has become clear that the IOC intends to exert its political, moral and ethical influence over international federations with regard to **child preservation**.

FIG requirements are in perfect alliance with this programme and its mission.

In this context, certain individuals were astonished to see the IOC organise **Youth Olympic Games**, but there is no paradox here. It is important to note that both the IOC and the FIG imposed a fully adapted technical programme for these competitions.

We know that the YOG are an incredible opportunity for young athletes to get together in cultural and educational surroundings.

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Annexes:

A. FIG Technical Regulations – Gymnast Age

B. World Age Group Competition

C. Average age of participants in World Championships and Olympic Games (Artistic)

Annex A – 2012 FIG Technical Regulations – Art. 5.2 PARTICIPANT AGE

For official FIG competitions and Olympic Games, participants must be of the following minimum age the year of competition:

SENIORS

Artistic and Rhythmic Gymnastics: 16 years

Trampoline Gymnastics: 18 years for the Olympic Games, 17 years for all other competitions

Acrobatic Gymnastics: 15 years

Aerobic Gymnastics: 18 years

For all disciplines, any gymnast having participated in a World Championship, Continental Championship, World Cup stage or Multi-sport Games as a senior will not be permitted to participate in a subsequent junior competition.

JUNIORS

Men's Artistic Gymnastics: gymnasts must be at least 14 and not older than 18 years of age (16 as of 2013).

Women's Artistic Gymnastics: gymnasts must be at least 13 and not older than 15 years of age

Rhythmic Gymnastics: gymnasts must be at least 13 and not older than 15 years of age

Trampoline Gymnastics: Age for Continental Junior Championships 13 - 17 years

Acrobatic Gymnastics: 12 – 19 years (maximum 6 year age difference for pairs and women's groups, 7 years for men's groups)

Aerobic gymnastics: 15 – 17 years

AGE GROUPS

Acrobatic Gymnastics: starting 11 years

Aerobic Gymnastics: starting 12 years

Trampoline Gymnastics: starting 11 years

YOG:

Men's Artistic Gymnastics: 16 – 17 years

Women's Artistic Gymnastics: 15 years

Rhythmic Gymnastics: 15 years

Trampoline Gymnastics: 16 - 17 years

Annex B

WORLD AGE GROUP COMPETITION

AEROBIC	National Development: 10 - 12 years
	Group 1: 12 - 14 years Group 2: 15 – 17 years
TRAMPOLINE	11 - 12 years
	13 – 14 years
	15 – 16 years
	17 – 18 years
ACRO	Top 11 – Base 16 years
	Top 12 – Base 19 years

Annexe C

ARTISTICS GYMNASTICS OLYMPIC GAMES - WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS									
AGE STATISTICS									
YEAR	EVENT	HOST CITY Team Format	CTY	MAG total	WAG total	TOTAL gymnasts	TOTAL FED	Age Ø MAG	Age Ø WAG
1987	WC	ROTTERDAM	NED	176	201	377	42	22.46	16.75
1988	OG	SEOUL	KOR	89	90	179		22.08	17.08
1989	WC	STUTTGART	GER	190	191	381	48	21.35	16.67
1991	WC	INDIANAPOLIS	USA	212	189	401	51	21.92	16.37
1992	OG	BARCELONA	ESP	93	91	184			
1992	WC	PARIS	FRA	128	126	254	47	21.38	16.90
1993	WC	BIRMINGHAM	GBR	123	97	220	57	21.64	16.71
1994	WC	BRISBANE	AUS	163	88	251	46	20.80	16.49
1994	WC	DORTMUND	GER	145	109	254	33	22.,11	16.50
1995	WC	SABAE	JPN	214	195	409	58	22.73	16.57
1996	WC	PUERTO RICO	PUR	157	96	253	52	22.42	17.13
1996	OG	ATLANTA	USA	112	104	216	32		
1997	WC	LAUSANNE	SUI	280	149	429	66	22.81	17.43
1999	WC	TIANJIN	CHN	293	260	553	73	21.94	16.85
2000	OG	SYDNEY	AUS	98	98	196	43	21.30	17.58
2001	WC	GHENT	BEL	309	172	481	60	21.85	17.72
2002	WC	DEBRECEN	HUN	177	80	257	56	22.62	17.76
2004	OG	ATHENS	GRE	98	98	196	42	24.34	17.46
2005	WC	MELBOURNE	AUS	189	95	297	67	22.19	18.27
2006	WC	AARHUS	DEN	315	223	548	70	22.60	18.10
2007	WC	STUTTGART	GER	281	214	495	84	23.17	17.68
2008	OG	BEIJING	CHN	98	98	196	69	24.90	18.60
2009	WC	LONDON	GBR	250	150	400	71	23.11	18.79
2010	WC	ROTTERDAM	NED	334	238	572	70	23.10	18.14
2011	WC	TOKYO	JPN	288	244	532	81	24.34	19.12
2012	OG	LONDON	GBR	98	98	196			
2013	WC	ANTWERP	BEL						
2014	WC	NANNING	CHN						
2015	WC	GLASGOW	GBR						
2016	OG	RIO DE JANEIRO	BRA						