

PSYCHOLOGY

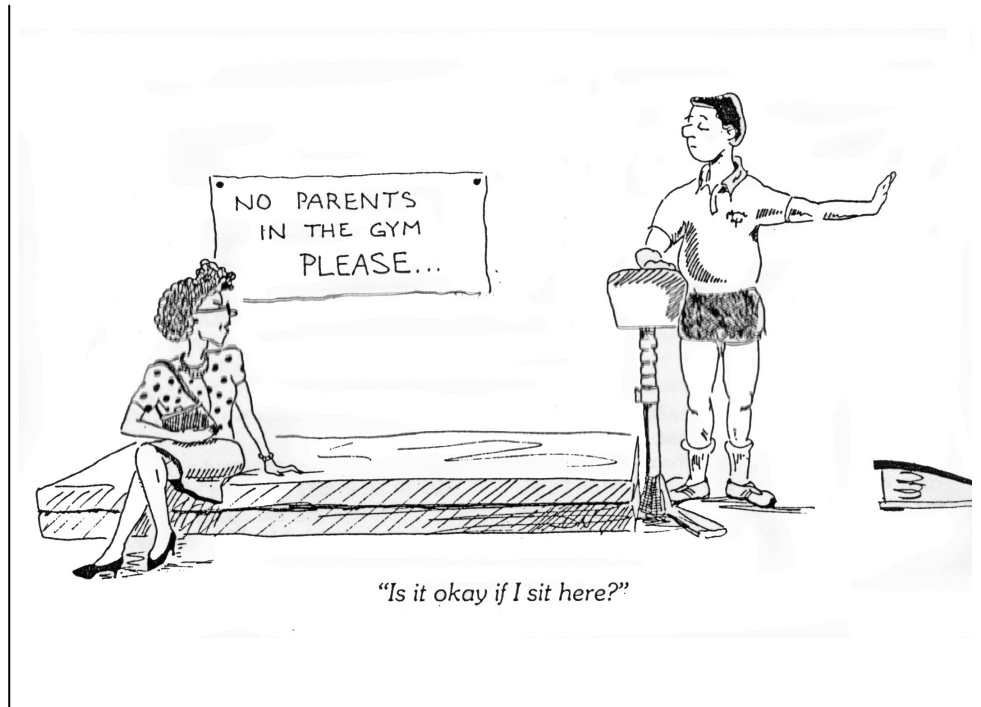
This article is somewhat different from others that have appeared in the Psychology department because it is directed primarily to the parents of female gymnasts.

Its focus is on the relationship between female gymnasts and their mothers around gymnastics. The issues raised herein are rarely seen with male gymnasts, although they have occurred. This is most likely the result of culturally-determined beliefs concerning gender and child rearing.

Some of the observations apply to both parents, but the mother-daughter interaction is emphasized since the

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mothers usually do the endless chauffeuring to the gym and are generally more involved in this aspect of their daughter's lives. However, the influence of both parents is significant



Mothers, Daughters, Gymnastics

for children of either sex, and their respective roles in the upbringing process will determine the nature of this specific input.

We will examine only the daughter-mother-gym constellation here. My comments are based on many years of direct observation, active intervention, and careful follow-up. Some may find them controversial while others may breathe a sigh of relief and/or agreement. In any event, I trust they will serve as useful food for thought.

The most critical thing to realize, although some of us may deny it, is that mothers usually have a substantial emotional investment in the activities of their daughters. I do not mean to imply that this is unnatural or harmful: it is all a matter of degree and underlying parental motivation.

There are those mothers who share the joy of their children's accomplishments, support them at times of disappointment, encourage them to persist, and provide an ongoing model for commitment and good spirit. On the other hand, there are those mothers (parents) who have become overly involved in the athletic lives of their youngsters. They see the child as the ultimate extension of themselves and take the gymnast's successes and failures as very personal reflections of their own performance record. This kind of living-through-

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child interaction can place pressure on the gymnast and is usually counter-productive, often resulting in an uptight and unhappy youngster.

Of course, there are girls who thrive on this type of psychological connection, use it all too effectively to manipulate adults, rely on it to keep going, and generally reverse the process to the point where their pre-conscious and sometimes even conscious motivation is to please their mothers.

I have known gymnasts who have remained in the sport because they didn't want to let their "Mom" down (or Dad for that matter). Such justification is ordinarily not in the best interest of the child. Wanting to please others is a healthy aspect of the motivational system of many athletes. When such desire is neurotically determined, however, and no other clear and rewarding reasons appear to exist, trouble may very well be on the horizon for everyone involved. There is not a great deal that can be done about these situations once they have been entrenched. Every case is different. Perhaps the most important thing is to recognize that it can, and does, happen.

There are some signs of potential over-involvement: constant inquiry into how the gymnast's skills are progressing; continual pressure to "move up" to the next level; the presence of "gymnastic talk" in and out of the gym; an over-reaction to scores received at a meet, high or low, and dramatically sharing the elation or anger with the daughter; constant presence at competitions; derogatory remarks about other gymnasts' performances; overt statements questioning the coaches' judgment or ability; and many others. Recognizing such symptoms early can help prevent severe difficulties later.

A big problem is the mother (Parent) who is convinced she has another Mary Lou Retton on her hands. This is the most common in the younger years when a naturally fearless youngster is constantly doing cartwheels of sorts on the front lawn or in the living room. In the ambitious parents' mind, she has limitless potential and extraordinary talent.

Alas, this is not always - or even often - the case. Enthusiasm and energy are important, but it is crucial that evaluations be accomplished by

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professional coaches and that parents keep things in perspective. If you imagine right away that your seven-year-old is a potential Olympian, you will be very disappointed when reality hits, especially if you have built unrealistic dreams.

Most gymnastics schools have rules about parents being present during lessons or training. Some mothers find these very hard to tolerate. These controls are established for various reasons; avoiding showing-off; preserving concentration; and others. Experience has shown that parents in the gym can often mean problems for the youngster, directly or indirectly. Again, it is important to emphasize that there are always exceptions, but generally speaking it is a bad idea for parents to be in the gym during these periods. Watching through a one-way mirror or from a balcony may be somewhat better, but in some cases even that degree of distance is too artificial.

I have talked to gymnasts in such settings who know full well that their mothers are watching them and discussing their work with other mothers. For many daughters this is very uncomfortable, while others aren't the least bit bothered.

Coming into the gym occasionally at the child's request and with the coaches permission to see a specific skill, etc., is a different kettle of fish altogether and very appropriate. Often, mothers will take on a light job in the gym. This, too, is quite a different matter and a legitimate avenue for a kind of vicarious participation in the daughter's sport, provided it is kept rational in nature and degree.

Although attendance at competitions is a fun thing for many parents and their children, I strongly recommend that from time to time no parent be present during a meet. Let the gymnast be on her own completely as far as parents are concerned. The presence or absence of the parents may or may not influence performance. Currently, this is a matter of speculation and would surely be a most interesting study for the future.

What is the most appropriate level of involvement and how does it get established? I don't have the answers nor would I be so presumptuous to tell parents what they should do in this regard. However, there appear to be some basic guidelines, supported by my experience with parents and gymnasts, which might be of assistance to concerned parents.

Important Guidelines

1. Remember, this is your child's thing. If you feel you can get into her gymnastics anyway you wish because you pay the bills, then I suggest you are 100%

incorrect and it would probably be better to try something else. There are times, however, when obvious strong intervention by parents is called for and timely. In most cases, once you have checked out the credentials of the program and coaches who are in charge of your child, you should back out gracefully. Coaches and parents need to remember that although the youngster is not the coach's child, she is the coach's gymnast. This is a subtle but important difference in a sport as demanding as gymnastics.

2. Your involvement, at any level, should be on the child's terms. This is most difficult to determine when we are speaking of six and seven year olds. However, even at this age there are clues that will come from the youngster. For latency and adolescent gymnastics, let the child make the majority of decisions about her gymnastics and your participation in it.

3. Encourage, transport, show interest but not intrusion. Your child may very well quietly resent interference while tolerating it on the surface. Please try to avoid any prolonged "whisper sessions" with the coach!

4. Don't hesitate to ask the youngster if they want you at competitions. Don't presume you know the answer, as it will change over time. If they say they don't care or they would like you to come, fine, enjoy it. If they don't, try not to make them feel guilty or show hurt feeling. In the long run you will be doing your daughter a special service she may not overtly thank you for but will appreciate inside on an emotional level.

5. At competitions, if your daughter has had a bad meet, let the coach handle it. Stay off the floor, away from the judges and other gymnasts. (I actually heard a parent say to another gymnast, "My kid really got a raw deal, don't you think so?") It might appear an insult to the intelligence of my adult readers but such things do occur.

6. The best thing to do when poor days come, in workouts or competitions, is to be as supportive as possible, low-keyed and cool. I'm not recommending that you restrain all emotion, for that would be unnatural. Share disappointment but keep it all in perspective. Also share the pride of success but avoid slipping into a depression when things don't go just right. Be positive, and a simple "Better luck next time, sweetheart" vs "You better work harder" can go a long way. It is the coach's job to analyze what happened or didn't it terms of the

youngster's gymnastics, not yours.

7. Monitor yourself. From time to time review your involvement and your feelings about yourself in relation to your daughter and the gym. This is easier said than done since many of us are often blind to our own true motivations. It is surely worth the effort, for you might just recognize a problem before it becomes serious. Keep an open mind to input from your child, husband (or wife), and the coach.

8. If you have more than one daughter in the sport, avoid making comparisons. Their individuality in terms of gymnastic competence will be self-evident. Treat them as separate entities but equally in terms of your investment in their efforts.

The most difficult challenge parents face is to master the art of leaving off. Separating from our children is one of the hardest things we must face in the process of child-rearing. Holding on, in the long run, is not an act of love but rather a selfish behavior designed to perpetuate our "parent" role and our own need for control and to feel needed. Letting go, on the other hand, represents a true act of caring and sacrifice, the seeds of which we and our children will reap in later years.

For a very long time I have been an advocate for appropriate parental involvement in a child's gymnastics. To some degree I remain so, but with the passing of years and increased experience in this area I have become convinced that it is far better to err on the side of neutrality than to immerse yourself in the athletic activities of the youngster.

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