



## **Flexibility Training Policy**

**March 2025**

This Policy replaces any previous Stretching Policies of Gymnastics New Zealand. It should be read alongside the Safeguarding & Child Protection and Complaints policies, the Gymnastics NZ Code of Behaviour and Gymnastics NZ Training Guidelines.

### **Background**

1. Everyone in gymnastics has a responsibility to create a safe and uplifting experiences for all. Gymnastics New Zealand (Gymnastics NZ) acknowledges we all have a duty of care to safeguard the physical, emotional and mental health of gymnasts.
2. In gymnastics, flexibility is an integral part of the sport and should be encouraged as part of gymnastics training. Flexibility training performed safely and progressively will increase the range of movement necessary for many skills, increase performance potential and may reduce the risk of an injury.

### **Purpose**

3. This policy aims to help people involved in Gymnastics New Zealand understand the what flexibility training is and provides direction and guidance on how it can be safely delivered and supported.

### **Application**

4. The points in this document apply to all clubs or venues affiliated with Gymnastics NZ, and at any events affiliated with Gymnastics NZ.
5. The term 'coaches' used in this document includes all coaches, assistants and parent-helpers. 'Support practitioners' includes anyone the club may utilise to support the training of gymnasts including physios and massage therapists.
6. Clubs, coaches, and support practitioners must ensure they follow the points contained in this document within gymnastics sessions or activity, to ensure they implement safe practices in relation to flexibility training.
7. The Rights of the Coach must be respected, for example, if a club allows facilitated stretching, a coach should always be afforded the opportunity to choose not to adopt this method if they do not feel it appropriate.

### **Key definitions**

- **Flexibility Training**  
Training that intends to maintain or increase the range of movement around a joint
- **Direct supervision**  
In a direct supervision situation, the Lead Coach will not have their own group, so they can provide constant supervision.  
When working under direct supervision, you can take your own group of participants (based on your clubs participant ratio) whilst the Lead Coach supervises you and the activities that have been planned for your participants.

- **Indirect supervision**  
In an indirect supervision situation, the Lead Coach in the session will also have their own group, so they are supervising their own group and you at the same time. When working under indirect supervision you can take your own group of participants (based on participant ratio guidance) whilst the Lead Coach indirectly supervises you and the activities that have been planned for your participants.
- **Direct assistance**  
When directly assisting, you will be working with another more qualified coach and assisting them in the delivery of their session to their assigned group of participants.
- **Peer**  
Another gymnast
- **Mild discomfort**  
A feeling of not being comfortable or a slight feeling of pain
- **Gaslighting**  
Manipulating someone into questioning their own perception of reality
- **Physical preparation**  
Activities that improve the physical qualities of a gymnast to ensure they are prepared for the demands of the sport.

*Important considerations when applying this policy*

- **‘Gymnast-centred and coach-led’ approach**  
Flexibility training must be ‘gymnast-centred and coach-led’. **Coach-led** as coaches receive appropriate training on how to safely assess a gymnast’s needs and plan the training to meet these needs. It must be **gymnast-centred** as their needs are central; the gymnast’s thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and opinions must be actively sought, listened to, valued, and respected by the coach, and they must guide collaborative decisions made during training.
- **Collaborative relationships**  
The coach should proactively encourage two-way communication with the gymnast, to promote collaboration, appropriate challenge, and praise effort and improvement.
- **Maturation**  
During periods of rapid growth, flexibility is likely to decrease and/or be more difficult to develop. Longer timeframes should be allowed for flexibility improvement during this period.
- **Informational & educational approach**  
Clubs and coaches should endeavour to educate gymnasts and parents/carers on the importance of flexibility training, and should have easily accessible methods for raising questions, concerns, or requesting any adjustments to practice.

- **Amount and timing of flexibility training**  
The proportion of training spent on flexibility will be different for each participant and should be in line with the level of the gymnast, discipline requirements and meet the gymnast's specific needs.
- **Warm-up**  
Regardless of when it is scheduled for, before commencing any flexibility training, a gymnast's joints and muscles should be thoroughly warmed up.
- **Perception of discomfort**  
Flexibility training is likely to feel uncomfortable in the targeted joint structures and connective tissues involved, especially if the objective is to improve flexibility. However, flexibility training does not need to always cause any discomfort, especially if the objective is to maintain flexibility levels.
- **Monitoring & evaluation**  
Monitoring the effects of flexibility training is important to assess the gymnast's response to the stimulus, levels of soreness and adaptation. After flexibility training the coach should check-in with the gymnasts involved to ensure the activity met the desired objectives.

### *Flexibility training*

8. **Creating Safe, Healthy and Positive Environments for all Flexibility Training Methods**  
Clubs and coaches must follow the points below to create a safe and positive environment when performing any form of flexibility training method to support their practice.
  - 8.1 All activity must be practiced in an open environment where a minimum of two responsible adults are present, regardless of the age of the gymnast.
  - 8.2 Flexibility training must account for individual abilities, acknowledge anatomical differences, be progressive and achievable.
  - 8.3 Clubs must monitor flexibility training practices within their club to ensure they are aligned to the points set out in this document.
  - 8.4 Clubs must be transparent and clear regarding the flexibility training methods used at their club or facility, which must align to this document.
9. **Safe Coaching Practices for all Flexibility Training Methods**  
In addition to the points detailed in Section 8 to create safe, positive, and healthy environments, specific practices must be employed by coaches when performing any form of flexibility training or stretching methods to support their practice:
  - 9.1 The gymnast must be able to reduce the intensity of a stretch or stop a stretch entirely, at any time, if they perceive it to cause more than mild discomfort.
  - 9.2 The activity and positions must not compromise the gymnast's safety or dignity.

- 9.3 The coach must minimise any risk to the gymnast's physical, mental, and emotional health during flexibility training. If the activity causes emotional distress the activity must stop immediately.
- 9.4 The gymnast must be able to safely move out of a position whenever they choose.
- 9.5 The coach must encourage the gymnast to move through all positions performed during flexibility training in a controlled manner.
- 9.6 The gymnast must always be given choice regarding the method of flexibility training and the use of any apparatus, or training aids.
- 9.7 Discrimination, the use of threats, coercion or any behaviours that could be deemed that of gaslighting, abuse of power imbalance or emotional abuse with regards to flexibility training must not occur under any circumstances.
- 9.8 If a coach perceives a gymnast to be actively ignoring the requirement to only experience mild discomfort, subsequently putting themselves at risk of injury, they must ensure the athlete reduces the intensity of the stretch or stops as per their Duty of Care.

10. **Safe Coaching Practices – Scope of Practice and Different Flexibility Training Methods**

Coaches and support practitioners must always work within their scope of practice and only use flexibility training methods in line with club and Gymnastics NZ policy.

Different methods of Flexibility Training include:

- Self-directed stretching
- Adjustments to alignment
- Coach-facilitated stretching
- Peer-facilitated stretching
- Ballistic stretching

Within the different methods of flexibility training listed above, there are different types of stretch that may be used including:

- Static stretching
- Passive stretching
- Active stretching
- Isometric stretching
- Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation (PNF) stretching
- Dynamic stretching
- Ballistic stretching

More than one type of stretching may apply to each flexibility training method, for example whilst performing self-directed stretching, an athlete may begin with basic static stretches and then move into isometric stretches. Gymnastics NZ coach qualifications provide detail on types of stretching.

Gymnastics NZ encourages the use of self-directed stretching and adjustments to alignment (with appropriate supervision and instruction) over coach and peer-facilitated stretching wherever possible.

### 10.1 **Self-directed stretching**

The gymnast stretches themselves using their own body weight or strength, uses equipment such as wall bars and blocks or platforms, or training aids such as resistance bands. Coaches may be seen to manually facilitate adjustments to alignment during self-directed stretching. Please refer to section 3.2 for more detail on adjustments to alignment, which differs from coach and peer-facilitated stretching.

### 10.2 **Adjustments to alignment**

Verbally or manually directed adjustments to the alignment of the body during stretching activities are a critical aspect of coaching, to ensure the correct position is learnt and practised, and to reduce the risk of injury from poor technique.

- 10.2.1 Before applying manual adjustments to alignment, coaches are encouraged to use questions, give feedback, and provide visual demonstrations or cues to support the gymnast in adjusting their alignment by themselves.
- 10.2.2 It is not expected that clubs communicate the potential use of adjustments to alignment to parents/whānau (in the case of a person under 18 or a person at risk) prior to use.
- 10.2.3 Gymnasts have the right to say no and turn down manual adjustments made to their alignment at any time. However, if a coach believes a position to be 'unsafe', risky or technically incorrect they must instruct the gymnast to stop the stretch and reset or change what they are doing.
- 10.2.4 When manually adjusting alignment, the coach must ensure this does not increase the intensity of the stretch beyond mild discomfort.
- 10.2.5 Manual adjustments to alignment must not be confused with or used to disguise coach-facilitated stretching. Adjustments to alignment should be brief and must not apply force to increase the depth of a stretch. However, any adjustments to alignment may increase the discomfort and therefore a reduction in intensity may be required.
- 10.2.6 A coach can utilise a gymnast's peer to make adjustments to alignment, however the coach must deem them competent and mature enough to follow points and be fully briefed to ensure they contribute to the maintenance of a safe, healthy, and positive environment. Coaches must actively and directly supervise any peer related adjustment activity.

- 10.2.7 A coach must not directly contact: the front of the neck, between the pectorals to mid-rib cage (the chest), above the inside of the mid-thigh, on the buttocks or in any intimate areas.

### 10.3 Coach-facilitated stretching

The coach applies an appropriate force to stretch the gymnast manually.

Gymnastics NZ promotes the use of self-directed methods but acknowledges the benefits and at times requirement to use facilitated methods where coaches apply appropriate force. If a club and coach choose to deliver using facilitated methods, considerations regarding the perception of others must be made. This is where information, education, learning and development, opportunities for two-way communication and monitoring and evaluation can support clubs and coaches in creating safe and positive environments for all.

#### **Before any coach-facilitated methods are used:**

- 10.3.1 Any coach-facilitated methods must only be used if it is deemed an individual gymnast may require this.
- 10.3.2 Clubs must communicate the potential use of coach-facilitated stretching methods (including examples of body parts which may be stretched) to parents/whānau (in the case of a person under 18 or person at risk) and follow the process outlined below:
- Gymnasts and parents/whānau (in the case of a person under 18 or person at risk) must be given appropriate time and opportunity to discuss any concerns they may have with the lead coach(es), club manager(s) or safeguarding lead(s). If a gymnast or parent/carer (in the case of a person under 18 or person at risk), requests adjustments to practice, they must be able to do so without fear of consequence, or discrimination.
  - It is not expected that assent or consent is obtained from the gymnast each time coach-facilitated stretching is to be performed, assuming the club and coach has followed the process outlined in 10.3.2. However a coach must ensure the gymnast has the right to choose not to take part in coach-facilitated stretching methods at any time without discrimination.
  - If a gymnast approaches the coach and requests to be stretched, providing the club and coach has followed the process outlined in 10.3.2, the coach can proceed with coach-facilitated stretching and must follow all relevant points in this document.
  - The coach must establish, respect, and abide by a common, clear, and simple language with the gymnast, to encourage and facilitate two-way communication.

### **During coach-facilitated stretching:**

- 10.3.3 A coach must not directly contact: the front of the neck, between the pectorals to mid-rib cage (the chest), above the inside of the mid-thigh, on the buttocks or in any intimate areas.
- 10.3.4 A coach must not sit on, lay on, or stand on the gymnast.
- 10.3.5 A coach facilitating the stretch must respect the gymnast's rights, personal space, choice and be mindful of appropriate positioning to avoid any unnecessary contact or closeness.
- 10.3.6 A coach must ensure the gymnast is able to reduce the intensity of a stretch or stop a stretch entirely at any time if they perceive it to cause more than mild discomfort. Open communication and a pre-stated plan to adjust intensity should be communicated prior to start of stretching.
- 10.3.7 A coach must ensure that the appropriate force is applied in a controlled manner and the gymnast is able to counteract the force being applied e.g., pushing back against the force with active contractions or the use of their hands.
- 10.3.8 A coach must not apply force directly to a joint that is isolated e.g.; the knee or elbow joint when extended.

### **10.4 Peer-facilitated stretching**

When a peer applies an appropriate force to stretch the gymnast manually.

Gymnastics NZ promotes the use of self-directed methods but acknowledges the benefits and at times requirement to use facilitated methods where peers apply appropriate force. If a club and coach choose to deliver using facilitated methods, considerations regarding the perception of others must be made. This is where information, education, learning and development, opportunities for two-way communication and monitoring and evaluation can support clubs and coaches in creating safe and positive environments for all.

### **Before commencing or using peer-facilitated stretching:**

- 10.4.1 Any peer-facilitated methods must only be used if it is deemed an individual gymnast may require this.
- 10.4.2 Clubs must communicate the potential use of peer-facilitated stretching methods (including examples of body parts which may be stretched) to gymnasts and parents/whānau (in the case of a person under 18 or person at risk) and follow the process outlined below:
  - Gymnasts and parents/whānau (in the case of a person under 18 or person at risk) must be given appropriate time and opportunity to discuss any concerns they may have with lead coach(es), club manager(s) or safeguarding lead(s).



- If a gymnast or parent/whānau (in the case of a person under 18 or person at risk) requests adjustment to practice they must be able to do so without fear of consequence, or discrimination.
- A coach must ensure the gymnast has the right to choose not to take part in the peer-facilitated stretching methods and only self-directed methods without discrimination.
- If a gymnast approaches the coach and requests to be stretched by a peer, providing the club and coach has followed the process outlined in 10.4.2, the coach can proceed with peer-facilitated stretching and must follow all relevant points in this document.
- The coach and peer must establish, respect, and abide by a common, clear, and simple language with the gymnast, to encourage and facilitate two-way communication.
- A coach must ensure they actively and directly supervise all peer-facilitated stretching.
- A coach must ensure any peer who is facilitating a stretch has been appropriately briefed and is competent to safely take part in the activity.
- A coach must only allow gymnasts to be involved in peer-facilitated stretching if they deem them sufficiently psychologically and emotionally mature to follow the points in this document and contribute to maintaining a safe and positive environment.
- A coach must consider the relationships between gymnasts and should avoid making gymnasts vulnerable to situations where imbalance of power, or abuse of position may occur e.g., where there is a substantial age difference between partners, or between an adult gymnast and child gymnast.

**During peer-facilitated stretching:**

All the points highlighted above for ‘during coach-facilitated stretching’ also apply during peer-facilitated stretching.

**10.5 Ballistic stretching**

The gymnast uses a high degree of appropriate force at their end range of movement, therefore taking themselves past or outside of their range, with the aim of increasing the range of movement in the associated joints. It is characterised by forceful ‘bouncing’ type actions at the gymnast’s end range of movement. Ballistic stretching should not be confused with dynamic stretching which though may look ‘bouncy’ at times, by comparison is performed with a high degree of control.

10.5.1 Ballistic stretching must only be practiced by gymnasts who have a high degree of body awareness, and an excellent degree of physical preparation. Flexibility activity of this nature must be clearly linked to the needs of the gymnast, e.g., a skill the gymnast is preparing to learn requires them to take their body to an extreme range of movement under great force.

10.5.2 It is for these reasons ballistic stretching is only to be used after thorough analysis of the performance requirements and the gymnast's capability to practice in a controlled way. It must always be directly supervised, the gymnast should be briefed, and monitored for safety by the coach.

### *Considerations for specific groups*

#### **11. Pre-school gymnast considerations**

11.1 For preschool populations, coaches must only use self-directed methods of stretching and must not use extra weight or force at this age. Activity using the child's own body weight is sufficient.

#### **12. Disabled gymnast considerations**

12.1 The coach must primarily be concerned with the wellbeing, health and general safety of the disabled gymnast and must make decisions in the best interests of the disabled gymnast. As a result, the rationale for flexibility training must be clear.

12.2 The coach must ensure the method employed is suitable for the disabled gymnast based on their impairment(s), developmental age, ability and potential vulnerability.

12.3 It should be acknowledged that consent or assent may look different for disabled gymnasts' populations e.g., written consent from parent/whānau (in the case of a person under 18 or person at risk) and medical professional or use of alternative communication methods, such as sign language.

12.4 The vulnerability of the gymnast must be considered. The coach must be comfortable that the gymnast understands, has choice, and influences decisions. If the coach feels they do not understand, have not been given choice, or are vulnerable to others making decisions for them, we suggest that the coach must not employ flexibility training methods such as coach or peer-facilitated stretching.

#### **Physical disabilities and medical conditions**

- For gymnasts with physical disabilities or medical/health conditions that could be impacted by flexibility training, more information must be obtained from parents/whānau (in the case of a person under 18 or person at risk) and where appropriate from medical professionals to ensure the gymnast is not at risk of harm. For example, gymnasts with dwarfism should not attempt any flexibility

training where there is the potential to put pressure on or cause impact to the head or neck.

- A coach working with disabled gymnasts must be aware that a physical disability or medical need may mean that someone is above mild discomfort all the time, so flexibility training automatically takes them above mild discomfort. In this instance it is suggested coaches work with parents/carers (in the case of a person under 18 or person at risk) and medical professionals to establish a suitable way of identifying and ensuring participants are not harmed.

#### **Intellectual impairments and communication considerations**

- The communicative methods used must be suitable for the individual gymnast; this may include sign language, the use of symbols or another alternative or augmentative communication method. The coach must be mindful of the questioning used, the amount of questioning and the processing time given to the gymnast.
- The coach must be mindful of the developmental age of the gymnast they are working with; this may impact the response received. The coach must always be checking for facial expressions and body language, which may show that the gymnast is not comfortable with the flexibility training that is happening.