

Briefing note From British Gymnastics

Gymnastics has many different forms, including activities that are accessible to those with more limited mobility. Many gymnastics coaches are highly skilled at adapting activity for all levels of ability.

Participation in community gymnastics (including trampolining) activities is enjoyable and in addition to the physical benefits, offers significant opportunities for children and young people to develop social skills, mental wellbeing (resilience, self-esteem, confidence, emotional wellbeing, reducing anxiety and depression), team-work and potential to develop leadership skills.

Despite the well-documented physical, emotional, social and wider benefits of taking part in sport-based activities, the opportunities available to children with SEND to participate in community sport are limited.

Although some British Gymnastics clubs offer high quality gymnastics activity specifically aimed at children with SEND, unlike other children, opportunities to participate are often not available in the local community and would often require significant travel to find an appropriate setting.

[Research by Variety into sporting opportunities for children with disabilities](#) reported that although 52% of children with a disability or long-term health condition took part in school sport, fewer than 1 in 5 children went to a community club and only 9% took part in a specialist sport club.

British Gymnastics and our charity, the British Gymnastics Foundation have worked with schools, including special schools to offer school-based opportunities and develop the confidence of teachers and other support staff to deliver gymnastics activity. However, there has been limited success in providing a pathway from school to community participation.

Not being included in community activities is likely to increase isolation and decrease confidence and general well-being. The Covid-19 pandemic has heightened the inequalities faced by disabled people and their families by increasing social isolation, limiting opportunities for activity and disrupting the provision of therapy and other vital support services.

British Gymnastics and our clubs do not have the sufficient resources to address the significant inequalities faced by many disabled young people, but we believe that we can make a more significant impact by working collaboratively with health professionals to support better outcomes than are currently being achieved separately.

Children and young people with SEND can be at higher risk of mental health difficulties than those without SEND (which has been exacerbated by the pandemic). The wellbeing benefits of taking part in physical activity and being part of the local community can help protect the emotional well-being of children and young people with SEND (or act as an early intervention mechanism for those whose mental health difficulties may also be a cause of SEND).

As children get older, we know that activity levels decline. For children and young people with conditions where functional activities may change or decline over time as a result of reduction in range of joint movement and muscle length e.g. cerebral palsy,

Physiotherapy treatment helps to maintain and improve mobility, range of movement, functional activities such as walking, standing and balancing and stamina and can help to ensure disabled children and young people are able to participate to their maximum potential but the need for professional support cannot be adequately met by existing services such as physio, OT.

In many cases, parent carers are faced with having to privately fund essential therapy. [Joint research by Let us Learn too and the Disabled Children's Partnership](#) found that although 26% of parent carers were spending between 1-5k on therapy for their children (speech and language, occupational or physio) and 11% were spending over 5k, 33% of parent carers were unable to afford any therapy for their child.

Participation in gymnastics activity has the potential to offer many of the benefits of physiotherapy (or to enhance the impact of physio) and is likely to be less costly for parent carers and a more accessible and enjoyable option for children and young people, particularly those who find it difficult to engage in formal therapy.

We are keen to explore the opportunity for formal and informal social prescribing in terms of provision of services for disabled children and young people. We also believe there is significant potential for supporting non-medical needs of children and young people in the SEND community.

We recognise that many parent carers spend many hours providing and coordinating care and are more likely as a group to face financial pressures. These factors add to the difficulties faced by families when trying to support a child with SEND to access community sport.

We also know that many children with SEND have additional care and support needs that would need to be addressed to enable participation in community sport. There is often an expectation that parent carers meet this need, rather than allowing the parent carer to have a much-needed break. Where this is not practical, the parent carer is then faced with the difficulty of finding appropriately skilled people who can support their children to access community-based activities.

We are keen to explore how we can work collaboratively to remove some of the barriers that would make accessing community gymnastics activity much more difficult for families of children with SEND and ultimately engaging our local clubs and coaches to provide participation opportunities in the local community. We are keen to work together to develop more skilled people who can support children with SEND both within the current gymnastics, community and the wider community, including those young people who may be interested in training as a coach or helper.

Some of the barriers to participation require creative solutions and we are keen to explore opportunities to form new partnerships so we can work together to improve future outcomes for children and young people with SEND.