



Mats Revisited

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The Placement Of Mats In Gymnastics

The necessity to re-write afPE's 'Safe Practice in Physical Education and School Sport' every five years recognises that safe practice is not static or fixed but evolves over time.

The emergence of new patterns relating to accidents and near misses, technological advancement in equipment and resources, contemporary interpretations about duty of care, etc. all combine to change our views as to what is reasonable and acceptable physical challenge.

In this context the wholesale adoption of the safety surface as standard beneath playground/ leisure climbing, hanging and heaving apparatus in itself obliges us to at least review our present position on the use of mats in gymnastics .

The debate about the placement of mats in gymnastics – in short whether to place mats below the climbing frame, or ropes, or any apparatus where pupils work at height – has been around ever since I can remember with two distinct (although not altogether opposing) views as to whether mats should be used in a precautionary way to protect from unforeseen fall, or as a means of suggesting to pupils appropriate dismount points from particular apparatus configurations.

As with all reasoned argument, let's remind ourselves of common ground.

There is universal agreement about the following:

- **Mats should never be indiscriminately scattered about the hall floor. This represents a hazard in itself and increases the risk of children tripping over. In short every mat needs a function.**
- **Pupils should never be asked to perform a task where there is a likelihood that they may fall. This constitutes poor teaching in the sense of pupils being over-challenged and working beyond their existing capability.**
- **Pupils need to be actively taught about, and inducted into, safe practice. We have a duty to do this. The combination of safety aware staff and safety aware pupils encourages responsible and sensible participation.**

So then, what are the pros and cons of matting below higher level apparatus?

The arguments for **not matting** frequently refer to the danger of some pupils acquiring a false sense of security in both moving about the apparatus and in making decisions about how they are actually going to leave it.

Pupils perceive the mat as a safety net, and, as a consequence are tempted to attempt agilities/actions beyond their levels of skill; similarly, some pupils may choose to exit the apparatus from too greater height believing that their landing will be safely 'cushioned'.

The rationale **for matting** stems from the knowledge that pupils in gymnastics – even when performing well-practised movement – occasionally get things wrong, misjudge actions, sometimes resulting in an uncontrolled and unplanned dismount or fall from the apparatus.

The all-purpose gymnastic mat placed below the climbing frame will not necessarily prevent a broken limb in the event of a bad fall.

As with all safety surfaces it is there to safeguard severe injury to the head.

So then, can we reconcile these views bearing in mind that our current advice in ‘Safe Practice.....’ page 96 section 8.3.26 b.. recommends ‘School staff/coaches should be wary of placing mats in anticipation that a pupil may fall.’

Returning to our common ground principles outlined above it seems to me that the key to all this resides in effective pupil safety education and training. Children and young adults need to be taught, at their own level, the reasons why mats are placed where they are, something about their impact absorbing properties, and the (limited) protection they might offer. (‘Safe Practice....’.section 8.3.26 h)

It may well be necessary, particularly with younger children to reinforce the message with practical measures and rules e.g. pupils must **always** access and exit the climbing frame with at least one body part touching the floor; coloured tape indicating safe working height and exit points etc.

However, let’s remember that, when skill levels allow, flight onto, and off, high apparatus, makes for exciting and exhilarating gymnastics – an entitlement for all pupils.

Clearly I have a view on this. In short, I could never be totally comfortable in a situation where pupils are refining movement two or three meters from the ground with nothing between them and a hard wood floor but thin air. Like many others, I have also experienced pupils falling from high apparatus – not as a consequence of poor teaching but simply because skill is never infallible (even international performers make mistakes).

At the end of the day it has to be left to colleagues to decide within their own LEAs, schools and clubs what the emphasis should be (incidentally the debate is genuinely one of emphasis rather than opposition as a re-reading of the mat section in ‘Safe Practice…….’ pp 95-96 reveals).

Whichever way you decide to jump (sic), however, please ensure that your policy is widely communicated and that ‘usage of mats’ features prominently in your gymnastic risk assessment, together with its associated control measures.

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Footnote: I remain indebted to Norman Eve (Baalpe Safety Officer for many years) for his patience, forbearance and expertise during our many discussions about mat placement.