

[IMAGE]

Athletics Don't Affect Girls' Growth

Many parents and coaches are concerned that intense physical training in young female athletes may slow maturity and impede growth. After all, you may notice that gymnasts, who undergo rigorous strengthening exercises, tend to be much smaller than their peers. This review in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* focused on the limited information available on a possible link between reduced growth/maturity and intense athletic participation in girls.

Growth specifically relates to increased body size; maturation relates to physically attaining adulthood. Both may occur at different rates between individuals, but while end growth varies greatly in the population, essentially everyone will attain biological maturity. While hormonal and genetic factors largely affect these processes, environmental variables like sports may also play a role.

After reviewing the related literature, the authors determined that training does not impact growth or maturity. Rather, they suggest, "It is more likely that young athletes select themselves, or are selected by coaches and sport systems, into their specific sports." Most gymnasts and ballet dancers, for example, are selected because they mature late; in these sports, smaller size can be beneficial. Small hands and feet, a low center of gravity, and short, compact limbs help gymnasts compete better. In contrast, basketball players and swimmers may be selected for their sports because they are generally larger than their peers.

Until more long-term research has been established on this subject, the available information is insufficient to blame intense training for reduced stature in female athletes. In addition, there are a multitude of advantages to getting your daughter involved with sports, such as increased self-esteem, cardiovascular fitness, weight maintenance, and participation in a safe hobby - reducing exposure to illegal drugs and other unsafe activities.

Reference:

Baxter-Jones ADG, Maffulli N. Intensive training in elite young female athletes. *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 2002;36, pp. 13-15.

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