

The Safe Use of Mats in Physical Education

When considering the safe and appropriate use of mats in gymnastics it is important to note that they should be treated as a piece of apparatus. Pupils and staff need to be taught how to carry, move and place mats. The guidance offered in this document refers to the placement of mats in conjunction with other larger pieces of apparatus such as wall-bars.

Norfolk LEA follows the guidance set out in the British Association of Advisers and Lecturers in Physical Education (BAALPE) good practice guide entitled "Safe Practice in Physical Education." This is made available to all schools through the BAALPE Risk Management course that is currently being delivered across the County. *For further details, or to book a place on the course, contact Kim Read on 01603 433276.*

With respect to the placement of mats around or under wall-bars, BAALPE specifically states in section 5.11 (page 64) that:

"Teachers should understand the structure and uses of mats. In many court cases involving physical education, the way mats have been used or abused has featured very prominently."

It goes on to state:

*"The use of mats to absorb **landing** is a feature of physical education. They should be seen as equipment designed to cope with **planned and foreseen landings**. When used in this **deliberate** way, mats eliminate or greatly reduce impact shock and associated injuries. Children should be taught to recognise the need to use mats in a disciplined way."*

This section deals with controlled and deliberate landings as the result of planned activity, it does not indicate that "falls" require mats. The use of the word **deliberate** specifically implies that these are controlled activities that have been planned and designed to happen i.e. *specific teaching*.

Section 5.11.4 specifies that *"pupils should be protected against a false sense of security in the way mats offer them protection."*

The mats that are currently used by most schools would probably not be sufficient as a surface to absorb the falls that teachers worry about, falls from wall-bars. This is covered in 5.11.3. *"Pupils' perception that they are "safe" may lead to a false sense of security and to them, disregarding safety advice and attempting activities beyond their capability."* This is what is implied by the opening paragraph on page 64 (5.11.1).

Page 65, section 5.11.5 Gymnastics, goes on to state that:

*“The placing of mats is very important. They should be used where it is **expected** that children will need to cushion **deliberate landings**. They should **not** be placed around **profusely and indiscriminately** as they can produce real danger of young people accidentally tripping over them and falling.”*

The section from page 65 deals specifically with falls:

“Teachers should be wary of placing mats where it is considered there is a high probability of a child falling off the apparatus. It is better to arrange the apparatus and the demands on the child so that there is a high expectation of safe performance rather than that the child will fall.”

- **Norfolk LEA’s policy on the safe use of apparatus follows that of BAALPE, but would go further by specifying that pupils should never jump from wall-bars. Pupils should climb up wall-bars and climb down wall-bars.**

*Teachers may be aware from past experience and knowledge of their work that a mat or mats may be required by inexperienced pupils in **the very early stages of traversing apparatus** at a height, such as a ladder or bar suspended between trestles. Once pupils have developed sufficient strength to avoid **the need to drop down, then the mats may be dispensed with.***

This clearly covers pupils at the early stage of skill acquisition and development so that they can perform the activity in a safe and appropriate way. The mats are there to cushion the landing as they drop down having released their grip on a bar from which they are hanging a little above the ground.

Furthermore the guidance goes on to specify that:

“The general purpose mat of approximately 25mm thickness is adequate to meet most landing needs inherent in the usual level of school gymnastics. (Page 66 h)

*If the force of a child’s landing is increased by such factors as the weight of the child, the **height of flight** and the speed of the activity, then **thicker mats** may be necessary.*

Thick landing mattresses should not be relied upon to absorb any kind of landing and to prevent injury.”

- **Norfolk LEA does not recommend the use of “Crash Mats” or landing mattresses in Primary Schools.**

The guidance is specific and is based on safe practice. If schools still feel concerned over the safe use of apparatus in gymnastics then they should consider the need to provide staff training and INSET.

Further guidance is available from the Esinet website

at: www.norfolkesinet.org.uk/teacherzone/curriculum/physicaleducation