

# Gymnastics vs. family dinners: where should we draw the line?

by Dr. Delia Chiaramonte, [Baltimore Health Examiner](#)



Gymnastics is hot right now. Many people are excited to watch our Olympians and many little girls dream of being Shawn Johnson. My seven year old daughter is one of them.

She does handstands and cartwheels with abandon and anxiously looks forward to her weekly gymnastics class. I enjoy watching her grow in strength and confidence – so what could go wrong?

There are many wonderful things about her passion for gymnastics, but I have a nagging concern that we are on a slippery slope. I have seen friends' children slide down this very same hill. "We'll just let her go to the intermediate class but we'll never let gymnastics interfere with our lives," one friend said. It turned out not to be true. As I let my daughter advance out of her beginner class, I have uttered those very same words. Yet I've seen how seductive this advancement can be. "Your daughter is ready for the next level" may be exciting for both child and parents, but what is the price? In some local, and well-respected, gymnastics centers elementary school children are practicing gymnastics 16 hours per week or more.

They are at the gym instead of being at the kitchen table doing homework. They are at the gym instead of having lively dinner table discussions with their family members. And they are at the gym when they could be playing with their friends.

Are these children being forced into this intensive gymnastics training? No. That is the challenge. Most of them love it. Their parents might voice weak concerns about the amount of time required for their beloved sport, but the children beg and plead that they want to continue. They promise to do their homework in advance and even do their

chores without complaining if only they are allowed to move up to the next level. It can be hard to say 'no.'

Many studies have shown the importance of both family dinners and 'down time' for children's emotional and social development. Between school, chores, and homework it is hard enough to find time for these crucial moments of childhood. When you add in a time intensive sport like gymnastics, you'd have to be Houdini to fit it all in.

Right now my daughter is in a non-competitive, low-key gymnastics center and I plan to keep it that way. "You can take the intermediate class," I told her, "but we won't ever let gymnastics interfere with our family life."

That is my plan and I'm sticking to it. I'll let you know how it goes.

Be well.

Dr. C.

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(photo courtesy of thevictorsgym.com)

Dr. Chiamonte is a private Health Advocate and the founder of Insight Medical Consultants. She has been quoted by CNN, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today as an expert on patient advocacy.

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