

Enhancing Coach-Parent Relationships in Youth Sports: Increasing Harmony and Minimizing Hassle

A Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

Frank Smoll and his colleagues should be commended on continuing to advance the worthy aim of making youth-sport participation more enjoyable. Indeed, the body of work generated by Smith and Smoll [e.g., 1], along with the more recent contributions of Cumming [e.g., 2], have been highly influential in coaching research and practice over a number of years. In this commentary, we focus on three of the five areas covered by the authors: i) the difference between youth and professional models of sport; ii) the goals of youth sports; and iii) parental responsibilities and challenges.

YOUTH VERSUS PROFESSIONAL MODELS OF SPORT

The authors led with a very important and increasingly concerning issue – the application of professional models to youth sport. We would advocate an even broader conceptualisation beyond the commercial aspect of ‘professional sport’ to incorporate all elite-sport models where the pursuit of excellence and explicit emphasis on winning are fundamental components. This would serve to incorporate contexts where commerce is not the primary concern, but winning and elitism are. Others have adopted terms such as ‘performance ethic’ to describe such orientations and to problematise their application to youth-sport contexts [e.g., 3].

It is our sense that researchers (and to a large extent, practitioners) may prefer to receive guidance and direction based on the findings of empirical research. Two models based on such research; the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP) [4, 5, 6] and the Junior Sport Framework (JSF) [7, 8] provide good evidence and examples to counter the attitudes of parents who would argue that elite models of sport participation and controlling behaviours get long-term results. In particular, both models of youth participation are based on evidence that later specialisation and autonomy supportive environments have positive effects on both long-term performance and personal growth [4-9].

THE GOALS OF YOUTH SPORTS

In our view, one of the strongest statements in the target article was “coaches and parents

alike need to keep in mind that young athletes are not miniature adults (p. 15)”. In keeping with this sentiment, the DMSP and JSF provide broad guidelines and recommendations for practice. For example, play and enjoyment should be the focus during the sampling years (6-12 yrs) and should remain so during the specializing years (13-15 yrs) [4-6, 9]. Similarly, the JSF advocates an enjoyable and challenging junior sport experience through an emphasis on self-discovery and self-improvement, open access and fair play, as well as skill acquisition and self-discipline [7]. As discussed by Smoll and colleagues, striving to replace ‘winning’ with aims such as those advocated in the DMSP and JSF should form the basis of goal setting in both parent and coach communication.

PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES

All recommendations regarding parental responsibilities should be geared towards enhancing the experiences of young people in sport. The exact nature of parental support, however, varies with stages of youth participation. According to Hellstedt [10], it is the middle years (13–18) where conflict can commonly arise between the parents and coach as transitions between sporting goals are negotiated. Typically, this is the phase where the child begins to specialise and become more committed to training and competition, with parental support moving from early instruction and an emphasis on play, fun and family involvement to transport and time management, with increased importance placed on the coach. Understanding and valuing the role each person plays in the development of the child is necessary for effective communication and hence the relationships between interested parties. Mageau and Vallerand [11] suggest that providing a rationale for coaching decisions makes them more meaningful for the listener (e.g., parent/athlete), subsequently increasing their endorsement of the values and processes explained. This approach can help shift the focus to the goals of the activity rather than the outcomes, helping to mitigate some of the parent-induced stress experienced by the children of over-involved parents. Related to this, the commitments and affirmations drawn from Smoll and Smith’s [1] text are valuable points for reflection. Indeed, they closely match with the specific requirements for parents listed in Auld [12]. However, instead of providing a list of do’s and don’ts for parents, perhaps it is more appropriate to provide broad guidelines (see for example supporting materials in [7]) that might inform parent behaviours and attitudes (and the subsequent coach and administrator actions).

CONCLUSION

We commend Smoll and colleagues for recognising the crucial role coaches and parents play in influencing the participation experiences of young athletes. All their recommendations are intuitively reasonable and become more convincing when explicitly supported by empirical studies in youth sport.

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