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Perfectionism and youth sport experiences. This summary describes the findings of a study that examined the relationship between perfectionism and the experiences of junior athletes in recreational sport.

Introduction

Sport can be a popular and fun activity for young people. However, not all young people have positive experiences in sport and some may even have negative experiences. It is therefore important for coaches to understand the factors that are most likely to ensure sport is a positive experience for all participants.

Experiences in youth sport

Positive sport experiences can be seen among young people when they enjoy their participation, develop quality friendships with others in their sport, and feel good about their physical development. One personal factor that research has shown to influence whether young people will experience sport in a positive or negative manner is perfectionism. On one hand, perfectionism might lead to setting higher goals and better attainment. However, on the other hand, perfectionism might contribute to lower satisfaction and enjoyment, and promote competition and conflict with peers rather than co-operation and friendship.

What is perfectionism exactly?

Perfectionism is a personality characteristic that is thought to be learned during adolescence from parents and other important people in their lives. It includes a range of features. These features include setting high standards, a need to be organised, concerns about mistakes, and doubts about one's own actions. It can also include beliefs about what other people expect (e.g., "my coach expects me to be perfect") or the tendency to have high expectations of others (e.g., "I expect my teammates to be perfect"). The more positive features of perfectionism are collectively called "perfectionistic strivings" and the more negative features are collectively

The study

When studying perfectionism in athletes, four different types of perfectionism can be examined. These are athletes who report high levels of both perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns, low levels of both perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns, and those who exhibit a mix of both (i.e., high perfectionistic strivings but low perfectionistic concerns, and the opposite).

The purpose of the study was to examine if the four different types of perfectionism were associated with positive sport experiences (enjoyment, friendship quality, and physical self-worth) among young people. To answer this question, 219 males and females from school- and community-based sport clubs in the UK (age ranged from 11 to 19 years) completed a questionnaire to measure perfectionism and their experiences in sport.

The results

The study revealed that:

Youth sport participants who had high perfectionistic strivings and low perfectionistic concerns reported the most positive sport experiences.

Youth sport participants who had low perfectionistic strivings and high perfectionistic concerns reported the least positive sport experiences.

Youth sport participants who had high perfectionistic strivings and high perfectionistic concerns generally had a sport experiences in between the two types previously described (less positive than the first group and more positive than the second group).

Practical implications

Coaches need to be mindful that young people can have negative experiences in sport. To promote more positive experiences for all participants, coaches should consider the following:

- Promote challenging personal goals (but not unrealistic goals) as these are associated with positive sport experiences.
- Design tasks that are fun for everyone, regardless of ability.
- Encourage co-operation (rather than competition) among teammates.

This summary is based on the study below:

Mallinson, S.H. and Hill, A.P., Hall, H.K. and Gotwals, J.K. (2014). The 2 × 2 model of perfectionism and school and community based sport participation. *Psychology in the Schools*, 51, 972-985.

Other useful readings on the topics discussed are:

Duda, J. & Whitehead, J. (2015). Toward quality not quantity sport motivation. In Wallis, J. and Lambert, J. (eds.) *Becoming a Sports Coach*. New York: Routledge.

Hall, H., Jowett, G.E., and Hill, A.P. (2014). Perfectionism: The role of personality in shaping an athlete's sporting experience (pp. 152 – 168). In Papaioannou, A.G. and Hackfort, D. (eds.) *International Perspectives on Key Issues in Sport and Exercise Psychology*. London: Routledge.