

Effects of Adult Behavior on the Youth Sport Participant

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Abstract

Sports rage in youth athletes is occurring at an alarming rate. The current focus on the issue has been placed mainly on the psychological, social, and economical aspects of the youth athlete. There has been little comparative research in the adult aspect of influence on the youth athlete. The following review of 15 studies addresses three themes: (1) the role of coaches in the youth athletes' mental stability, (2) the role of parents in the youth athletes' mental stability and (3) the ability of the youth athlete to filter the background anger of peers. The studies reviewed all had one major limitation, in that they could not account for any preconceived biases towards the subjects before the study began. Another challenge for research in this area is the ability of younger athletes to overcome fears of speaking about a peer or mentor. Even with the challenges to the methods used, a clear picture has been made of the relationships and actions between adults and youth athletes. A better understanding of how the youth athletes perceive adult behavior will help plan corrective measures in the training of coaches and parents who attend and are a part of youth athletic teams and events.

Keywords: youth sports, coaching, background anger

Youth participation in sport is commonplace in the United States, with more youths participating in athletes than ever before. The added participation in youth sport also means that there is an increase of adult activity surrounding those athletes and youth athletic events. There are two areas of concern with the recent boom in youth athletics. The first concerns the parents. The youth athletic sector has become a major business, with parents paying large amounts of money for the development of their children. The parents, becoming more of a legitimate consumer, begin to become more vocal about the product. A large majority believes that as the consumer, they should have some say in the direction of the product. This often causes conflicts with the philosophies of the coaches and the organizations they represent (Horn, 2011). The second area of concern with the growth of youth athletics is in the quality of coaching. The increased numbers of youth players and teams means that there is higher demand for coaches. Coaching spots are often hard for organizations to fill due to the low pay, high time requirements, and stressful situations required of coaches (Petitpas, 2011).

While there has been comprehensive media coverage concerning the actions of parents and a coaches in the general public, there has been little research on how those actions affect the youth players who witness the behavior. One study (Felton & Jowett, 2013), specifically investigated the relationship between the youth athlete and their parents; and the youth athlete and their coaches. While the study does not specifically address negative environments, it does address the power that adult peers have on youth athletes. The long-term effects of adult behavior on youth athletes are researched in two studies (Atkins, Force & Petrie, 2013; Rottensteiner, Laakso, Pihlaja, & Konttinen, 2013) that produce similar results pointing to a high rate of participation dropout.

It has become evident that the more involved adults become in youth sports, the higher likelihood there is of negative influences being presented to the youth participants (Peter, 2011). The research presented in this literature review produces a clearer picture of short and long-term effects of these negative influences. The future of youth athletics is dependent upon research like that presented in this review to ensure the safe and responsible growth of not only the sports in general, but the youth participant as well.

Problem Statement

There are three major concerns facing the current youth athlete; parents have become more active and vocal in the development of youth athletes, and coaches are under more pressure to develop players, teams, and winning programs. Lastly, youth athletes are now subjected to more adult feedback and opinions than in the past. This literary review is developed to study the effects of adult behavior on the youth participant.

Literary Review

The dynamic between a youth athlete and adults such as coaches and parents explored in the study *Attachment and well-being: The mediating effects of psychological needs satisfaction within the coach-athlete and parent-athlete relational contexts* (Felton & Jowett, 2013). The study involved 439 athletes ranging from various sports and levels. The question being explored was the level of sport performance in relation to attachment theory and self-determination theory with adult relationships (Felton & Jowett, 2013). The athletes were presented with an *Experience in Close Relationships Scale - Short version* (ECR-S) questionnaire. The ECR-S is a 12-item self-report questionnaire used to measure an athlete's attachment style by assessing how they generally experience close relationships (Felton & Jowett, 2013). The ECR-S was used to examine how athletes perceive the value of

relationship and their effects on the mental focus in sport participation. The need to produce results for the satisfaction of relationship, such as pleasing teammates, coaches and parents was a key component of the ECR-S survey. While the study was broad across many psychological aspects of the athlete, the implications on vitality and self-esteem due to the player-coach and player-parent relationship was at the forefront. Bootstrap mediation analysis revealed that while there was a direct link between performance results and the perceived relationship between the player and coach, the effects were not as influenced as with the player-parent relationship (Felton & Jowett, 2013). Those athletes who perceived a healthy relationship with their coach showed higher levels of self-esteem and production than those players who viewed the player-coach relationship as unhealthy. The range of self-esteem and production from the athletes fluctuated at higher levels when the player-parent relationship was explored (Felton & Jowett, 2013). The final conclusion of the study is that the integration of attachment and self-determination theories can promote understanding of relational process in sport (Felton & Jowett, 2013).

Exploring the systematic review *Are Perfectionistic Strivings in Sport Adaptive? A Systematic Review of Confirmatory, Contradictory, and Mixed Evidence*; more data is presented about the youth athletes relationship with adult figures and the need to live up to perceived expectations of those adults (Gotwals, Stoeber, Dunn & Stoll, 2012). The review examines 31 studies that were performed on athletes ranging in age from 12 to age 26. The purpose of the study was to view the affects of perfectionism in youth sports in relation to adaptive and maladaptive characteristics of the participant. While there was a lot of contradictory evidence in the 31 studies reviewed, one of the conclusions found by Gotwals

(Gotwals et al., 2012) were that players who felt perfectionism pressure from adults tended to lean towards more maladaptive attitudes.

The previous studies helped to lay the foundation in understanding how youth athletes relate and react to adult relationships like the player-coach and player-parent relationships. Understanding those relationships is key to understanding the effects of those relationships during an athlete's career. Omli and LaVoi explored the concept of background anger at youth sporting events (Omli and LaVoi, 2009). The focus of the study was how background anger (BA), which is defined by Omli and LaVoi as angry verbal, nonverbal, and physical conflicts that are not aimed directly at the participant (2009). Using a self-survey that was provided to 192 athletes, 417 parents, and 145 coaches performed the study; Omli and LaVoi presented some staggering details. While the study showed varying levels of BA effects on the players, two areas scored the highest as having the largest effects on those players. Omli and LaVoi presented data showing that parents coaching from the sidelines combined with parents/coaches berating officials were the two top actions of BA that effected the youth players the most (2009). These two actions accounted for over 80% of reported BA issues that effect players (Omli and LaVoi, 2009).

Mazer, Barnes, Grevious, and Boger looked at how a coach is perceived by players and the effects on their performance motivation based on the coaches' methods of direction (Mazer, Barnes, Grevious, and Boger, 2013). The study produced two hypotheses: Athletes would report lower levels of motivation when exposed to verbally aggressive coaches than when exposed to coaches who have an affirming style; and Athletes would report lower levels of perceived credibility when exposed to verbally aggressive coaches than when exposed to coaches who have an affirming style (Mazer et al., 2013). The results of the study

supported both hypotheses presented. The study also showed that younger athletes showed a larger decrease in motivation than the older athletes; while the older athletes showed a larger effect on coaching credibility than the younger demographic (Mazer et al., 2013).

Francisco, Narciso, and Alarco focused their research more on the player-parent relationship and the physical effects on the youth player (Francisco, Narciso, and Alarco, 2013). The study specifically looks at the relationship between parental involvement and body image. While the study was not designed directly for the purposes of this literature review, there is one statistic that appears to be relevant to the current topic. According to the results produced by the study (Francisco et al., 2013), male adolescents are more likely to be affected by the actions of an adult male; while female adolescents are more likely to be affected by the action of an adult female.

Looking directly at the player-parent relationship, Sanchez-Miguel, Leo, Sanchez-Oliva, Amado, and Garcia-Calvo presented a study on parental effects on youth motivation and sport enjoyment (Sanchez-Miguel, Leo, Sanchez-Oliva, Amado, and Garcia-Calvo, 2013). They study showed an interesting relationship between practice motivation and player enjoyment with the attitudes of the parents who were more involved with their children. The study produced results showing that as the parents' involvement at practice grew, so did the motivation of the player to do better, while the enjoyment factor of practice declined (Sanchez-Miguel et al., 2013).

Continuing to look at the player-parent dynamic, Atkins, Johnston, Force, and Petrie look at parental influences in the decisions of youth females continuing to play sports. One of the major takeaways from this study was the evidence that the level of play (high school, middle school, varsity, etc.) did not have an effect of the outcome of the study (Atkins,

Johnston, Force, and Petrie, 2013). In a similar manner to the Omli and LaVoi (2009) study, Atkins et al. (2013) shows that the more positive of the atmosphere around a youth athlete, the more likely they are to enjoy the sport and continue to play.

The player-parent relationship was researched in a slightly different manner in the Domingues and Gonzalas study. Often times, players are coached as if they all come from the same type of parental household. The research produced in this study looked at the family makeup in relation to youth sports. The study concluded that motivation and achievement levels in youth sports are tied to not only the level of parental involvement, but the makeup of the family unit i.e. single mother/father (Domingues and Gonzalas, 2013). The research showed that players with positive family involvement from multiple peers/parents had higher motivation levels (Domingues and Gonzalas, 2013). Keeping inline with the previous studies in this review, the study also showed a direct link between parental negativity and lower enjoyment levels/motivation of the sport (Domingues and Gonzalas, 2013).

The final study reviewed looks at the outcomes produced by aggressive peer involvement. Palou, Ponseti, Cruz, Vidal, Cantallops, and Borra examined two hypotheses: Athletes will express greater willingness to engage in gamesmanship than in cheating, differing with the type of sport practiced, and ego-oriented motivational climates generated by coaches and parents will be associated with more gamesmanship than motivational climates that are task-oriented (Palou, Ponseti, Cruz, Vidal, Cantallops, and Borra, 2013). The study showed many aspects on adult influence on youth athletes, while also examining the player-peer relationship. The study produced research that shows that youth athletes' views on cheating and ego are closely tied to the actions and beliefs of the adult influences surrounding them (Palou et al., 2013). Another important note from this study was the youth players are

more likely to accept fair play and gamesmanship from their peers than cheating (Palou et al., 2013).

Conclusion

There has been many in studies between the player-parent and player-coach dynamic (Atkins et al., 2013; Nunomura et al., 2013; Domingues et al., 2013). The purpose of this review was to look at those studies in relationship to the performance, motivation, and desire to participate in youth sports. The study produced by Omli, and LaVoi (2009), presents a rather clear picture of the psychological effects of Background Anger (BA) by adults on the youth athlete. Parents and coaches who produced negative atmospheres during competition saw a lower motivation rate and performance level (Omli et al., 2009). Coaches also saw their competence questioned in direct relationship with their aggressive attitudes towards their players, as suggested in the study by Mazer, Barnes, Grevious, and Boger (2013). There has been enough research and results produced to see that negative atmospheres produced by parents and coaches not only effect the performance levels of the youth players, but also the desire to work hard and continue to play (Felton & Jowett, 2013; Gotwals, Stoeber, Dunn & Stoll, 2012; Domingues & Gonzalas, 2013).

Clinical Implications

The research studied in this review reinforces the underlying training methods that being presented by many of the governing bodies of youth sports. The methods mentioned in the study by Dwedor, Jubenville, and Phillips (2012) and the use of the STAR training concepts for parents is a proven starting point. Mazer, Barnes, Grevious, and Boger (2013) produced compelling research that shows how coaches interact with their players has a direct effect on their perceived expertise of the sport. Coaches must begin to look at not only how

they run their programs, but the way in which they communicate their knowledge to the players.

Future Research

There are two areas of future research that must be explored. Training methods for adults who are involved in youth athletics, which are not only productive to the sport, but also productive to the life skills of the athlete. Lastly, research needs to be conducted to investigate the lasting effects of adult behavior on youth athletes and possible corrective measures that can be taken for those youths exposed to negative sport surroundings.

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