

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COACHES AND PARENTS IN ENHANCING THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG ATHLETES

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Abstract

This study focuses on the relationship between the coaches and the parents and how they impact on the young athlete's development. Interpersonal relationships exist in many forms within the sport environment, coaches and parents play a major role in determining the interest of sport participation and eventual development in young athletes. To foster positive sporting experiences and enable young athletes to reach their sporting potential, parents and coaches need to have positive relationships. The objective of this paper is to assist coaches in working effectively with parents by fostering better understanding and meet the goals of the young athlete's development. This paper identifies that coaches and parents endeavour to meet the developmental needs of the athlete, however their relationship is limited to incidental social interaction. To improve the relationship, this paper suggests that coaches and parents should establish an effective and open communication, set clear expectations, provide resources, offer feedback and evaluation, create a supportive environment and celebrate achievements together. The paper concludes that there is a need to develop the skills of coaches beyond their technical and physical knowledge. Coaches should understand the social needs of the parent and athlete in order to enhance the opportunities the athlete receives.

Key words: Relationship, coach, parent, young athlete, development

Introduction

The development of young athletes for success in sports goes beyond training and conditioning and other developmental programmes by the coach. The relationship between the coaches and parents of young athletes is a crucial component for success. The relationship plays a very vital role in supporting a young athlete's growth and development, both on and off the field. **This relationship needs to be a partnership for the benefit of the young athlete.**

In the educational process of youth athletics, parents are crucial. Their involvement has been linked to early sport participation, and they are in charge of introducing their children to physical education and sports. Parents are crucial to this involvement because they typically help children get started in sports and offer them tangible and emotional support throughout their athletic careers. Additionally, parents are in charge of introducing their children to physical and sporting activities (PSA) while also offering them access, transportation, education, financial and emotional support. In fact, parents have the ability to influence the children's behaviour in a number of ways (Bonavolontà et al., 2021).

It has become imperative for coaches and parents to have a positive relationship that can strongly influence the nature and quality of young athletes' sport experiences and development. The goal priorities they set, the attitudes and values they transmit and the nature of their interactions can significantly influence the effects of sport participation and development on young athletes.

Concept of youth sports

Sport refers to a set of physical activities that are structured, competitive, goal oriented, and contest-based (Crane & Temple, 2015). The term "youth sport" refers to competitive events and skill-development programmes for children and adolescents, usually those under the age of 18. Youth sport can be considered as a term which is used to describe a wide range of individual, partner and team sport activities for young people. These activities vary significantly in terms of amount of adult involvement, level and intensity of competition and reasons for participation (Harwood & Thrower, 2019). Youth sport should be designed in such a way that athletes can develop both physically and socially (Bruner et al., 2020). Sport participation can offer physical, psychological and social benefits to young athletes (Bailey, 2006). Early and continued participation in sport will increase individuals' cardiovascular and musculoskeletal fitness, improve their motor coordination and enhance their physical activity level (Vandendriessche et al., 2012). Sport not only promotes positive health behaviours among young athletes, it also contributes to young athlete's development of psychological and social well-being (Crane & Temple, 2015). Likewise, sport offers young athletes the opportunity to experience success, bounce back from failure, and improve their overall health (Russell & Limle, 2013). Sport participation also provides young athletes with the opportunity to meet and communicate with others, to take on different social roles and to learn social skills (Bailey, 2006).

Significant individuals such as parents and coaches can influence youth athletes' sport experiences in several ways. Parents and coaches play an important role in creating a motivational climate in youth sport, which is constructed through their behaviours, values, attitudes, and communication (Atkins et al., 2013). This motivational climate can ultimately affect how young athletes come to respond and understand achievement situations (Atkins et al., 2013), and subsequently influences athletes' enjoyment and desire to participate in sport (De Muyneck et al., 2020).

Parents and coaches can influence the sport experiences of young athletes through the relationships they develop with one another (Sheridan, Coffee & Lavalley, 2014). The parent-coach relationship is often initiated around sport involvement such as supporting the athlete in sport, and as a result the interactions are either focused on the shared task of supporting the athlete's development, or non-sport related topics such as maintaining the coach-parent relationship (Wall et al., 2019).

Young athletes' experiences in sport

The experiences of young athletes in sports are undeniably crucial for their development. Engagement in organised youth sports allows young individuals to enjoy themselves, have fun, and improve their leadership and social skills (Fraser-Thomas, Cote & Deakin, 2008). Additionally, participation in sports during childhood and adolescence can promote physical, psychological, and social growth (Merkel, 2013). In sports environments, participants encounter emotions that may not often arise in other aspects of life (Bailey, 2006). Moreover, involvement in structured co-curricular activities is linked to increased life satisfaction among youths (Gilman, 2001). Specifically, sports serve as a platform for teaching vital life skills such as persistence, teamwork, leadership, and character development (Weiss & Williams, 2004).

The experiences of young athletes in sports are largely influenced by their parents, coaches, and peers. For example, coaches can positively shape young athletes' experiences by having faith in their abilities, offering valuable constructive feedback, and imparting life skills (Fraser-Thomas & Cote, 2009). Conversely, a coach's intimidating demeanor, favouritism, and inappropriate behaviour can negatively affect the experiences of youth athletes (Fraser-Thomas & Cote, 2009). Likewise, parents can enhance their children's positive experiences in sports by providing unwavering support, encouraging unstructured play, offering options, and allowing their children to make their own choices (Fraser-Thomas & Cote, 2009).

Parental roles in youth sports

Parents perhaps exert the greatest influence on the sporting experience of young athletes (Dorsch et al., 2020). Parents continuously seek opportunities for growth, development, and socialisation of their children in sport environments. In this process, parents themselves become dynamically involved in their children's youth sport experiences (Fraser-Thomas, Strachan & Jeffery-Tosoni, 2013). Furthermore, as parents continue to invest a great deal of resources into the athletic achievement of their children, the way "appropriate" or "optimal" parental involvement is defined may change across different stages of development (Dorsch et al., 2020).

Considering Cote's developmental model of sport participation which was first conceptualised in 1999, it is understood that parents' leadership role during the sampling years transforms to a following and support role during the specialising and investment stages of development (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). Parents' involvement in their children's sport participation can be conceptualised on a continuum from under-involved to moderately involved, to over-involved (Cote & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). Under-involved parents demonstrate a clear lack of emotional, financial, or functional investment (Cote & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). In contrast, over-involved parents are excessively involved in the athletic

success of their children, and often demonstrate yelling during competitions and disagreements with coaches about their children's playing time (Cote & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). Moderately involved parents provide their children with firm parental directions but allow enough flexibility so that their children are involved in the decision-making process (Cote & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). Therefore, it is important for parents to modify their level of involvement as their children progress from one stage to another. Positive parental involvement is an important component of successful sport participation and can facilitate the development of adaptive outcomes for young athletes engaged in organized sport (Dorsch et al., 2020).

As athletes transition from childhood to adolescence, they may reduce the number of sports in which they participate and will become more committed to one or two sports, and participate in more deliberate practice and compete in higher-level competitions (Cote, 1999). Similarly, at the start of this stage, parents become more invested in their children's sport and make necessary adjustments in order to provide tangible (i.e., financial and time commitment), and emotional support (Dorsch et al., 2020). But, as athletes transition from childhood to mid to late adolescence, they pursue more independence from the family unit, and as a result, parental involvement may decline (Dorsch et al., 2020). However, it is still important for parents at this stage to continue to be interested, knowledgeable and involved in their children's sport, while providing a sense of autonomy (i.e., opportunities to solve problems, engage in decision making, opportunity to choose) and appropriate structure (i.e., defining clear and consistent boundaries) (Dorsch et al., 2020).

Parents can also influence adolescents' development through the motivational climate they initiate (Dorsch et al., 2020). More specifically, parents who place an emphasis on individual improvement, progress, and effort (i.e., mastery/task-oriented climates), are more likely to enhance their adolescents' self-esteem, sport competence, enjoyment and the will to continue participating in sport (Dorsch et al., 2020). In contrast, parents who focus mainly on outperforming others and social comparison (i.e., performance/ego-oriented climate), are more likely to increase their adolescents' anxiety and perfectionist cognitions (Dorsch et al., 2020). In addition to parental behaviours, and motivational climates, parents can also facilitate group functioning by encouraging their children to develop an effective relationship with their coaches and peers (Dorsch et al., 2020). Parents can do so by engaging in regular communications and working exchanges with coaches about their children's specific needs and guiding their children to resolve conflicts (Dorsch et al., 2020). Research has shown that parents not only influence children's socialisation into sport, but they have a profound impact on the psychological consequences that accrue (Smoll, Cumming & Smith, 2011).

The role of parents in psychosocial development

Parents play a crucial role in the psychosocial development of their children within youth sport contexts. Their interpretations of their roles and experiences in supporting young athletes' psychosocial development can be valuable. They can provide encouragement,

tailor feedback according to their child's needs, establish and share expectations, create an autonomy-supportive environment, and encourage participation in activities outside of the working with the coach.

The strategies employed by parents to support their child's psychosocial development can be transferred beyond the immediate sport context. For instance, the communication skills developed in the sport context can be applied in the home environment or school (The Sport Professional Knowledge Network, 2023).

Parents and coaches in youth sport

The coach-parent-athlete triad has been referred to as the "athletic triangle". The members of this social system interact with one another in complex ways and the nature of those interactions can have significant consequences for the psychological development of the child. Indeed, coaches are in a position to channel parents' genuine concerns and good intentions in a way that heightens the value of athletes' sport experiences. Furthermore, parents can influence the quality of the dyadic coach-athlete relationship, as defined by feelings of closeness, commitment, and complementarity (Smoll, Cumming & Smith, 2011). To contribute to the success of a sport programme for young athletes, parents must be willing and able to commit themselves in many different ways. Smoll, Cumming and Smith (2011) assert that the following enquiries, to which parents must truthfully respond "Yes," are crucial reminders of the extent of parental duties:

- i. Can parents share their son or daughter? - This means placing their child in the coach's care and trusting them to oversee the sporting experience. It involves recognising the coach's authority and understanding that the coach may earn some of the admiration and affection the child previously directed solely towards the parent. This commitment does not imply that parents cannot provide input, but it does acknowledge that the coach is in charge. If parents intend to undermine the coach's authority, it would be best for all parties involved for their child not to participate in the sports programme.
- ii. Can parents accept their child's disappointments? – Every young athlete experiences both "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat" throughout the competition process. In addition to celebrating wins, parents are called upon to support their children during times of disappointment and hurt. This may require not feeling embarrassed, ashamed, or angry when their child cries after a loss. When disappointment arises, parents should assist their children in learning from the experience. By doing so without dismissing their feelings, parents can help their children recognise the positive aspects of the situation and transform their disappointment into self-acceptance.
- iii. Can parents show their child self-control? - Parents must remember that they serve as important role models for their children's behaviours. It is unsurprising that parents who struggle to maintain control often have children who display emotional outbursts and lack self-discipline. Coaches can hardly be expected to teach sportsmanship and self-control to young athletes whose parents clearly do not possess these traits.
- iv. Can parents give their child some time? – Parents should evaluate how much time they can allocate to their children's sports activities. Conflicts often arise when they

lead busy lives yet wish to encourage their children. To prevent this, coaches advise parents to be upfront about their time commitments and avoid promising more time than they can genuinely provide. Coaches should suggest that parents inquire about their children's experiences in sports and make an effort to attend some of their games.

- v. Can parents let their child make his or her own decisions? – Taking responsibility for one's own actions and choices is a crucial aspect of growing up. Coaches should encourage parents to offer advice and guidance regarding sports, but ultimately, within reasonable limits, they should permit the child to chart their own path. All parents have hopes and dreams for their child, but they must recognise that they cannot dominate their child's life. Sports can provide an introduction to the larger parental challenge of learning to let go.

Coach-parent relationship

To foster positive sporting experiences and youth development in and through sports, parents and coaches need to interact and develop positive relationships. The coach-parent relationship has been cited by youth coaches as “the single most important and significant aspect” of coaching in youth sports (Knight & Holt, 2014). The coach-parent relationship typically originates around sport involvement and is defined by recurring activities and interactions between coaches and parents (Wall et al., 2019). In addition to interacting with athletes, coaches also interact with the athletes' parents.

Parents are one of the key stakeholders in youth sport and spend considerable amounts of time in sport environments (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Therefore the relationship between the coach and parent is potentially crucial in these circumstances. According to Partington and Cushion (2024), coaches ought to have the freedom to think critically and accept accountability for choices that affect their athletes.

Empowering coaches to take an increasingly proactive role within the triad, for example with the parent, may lead to more effective coaching and increased success for the athlete. Jowett and Timson-Katchis (2005) contend that parents can shape the dynamics of the coach-athlete relationship by fostering respect, trust and cooperation, and a commitment to both the coach and the sport.

Parents' responsibilities and challenges

When a young athlete joins a sports programme, parents inherently take on certain responsibilities. Some parents may not be aware of this initially and may be taken aback by the expectations placed on them. Others may never grasp their responsibilities and miss chances to aid their children's development through sports, or they may even engage in behaviours that hinder their children's growth (Smoll, Cumming & Smith, 2011).

Masud et al. (2019) identified three parenting styles which were derived from the classification of Baumrind's theory developed in 1971. These parenting styles are authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. Authoritative parents are supportive in nature.

They lay down guiding principles and try to maintain a balance in affection and discipline. Authoritarian parenting represents traditional harsh parenting in which children are required to obey the instructions of their parents. There is also the concept of punishment associated with authoritarian parenting. Permissive parents leave their children free to have their own preferences. Such parents do not restrict the social life of children and encourage them to plan at their convenience (Masud et al., 2019).

Initially, parents must understand that children have the right to choose whether or not to participate. While parents might want to motivate their children to take part, it's essential that children are not coerced, intimidated, or bribed into playing. Young athletes who feel "trapped" report diminished enjoyment, reduced intrinsic motivation, and fewer benefits from participating in sports, and they are more prone to quitting. In meeting their obligations, parents should guide their children, considering the chosen sport and the competitive level their children wish to pursue. Importantly, parents should honour their children's decisions (Smoll, Cumming & Smith, 2011).

Parents can enhance their enjoyment of their children's involvement if they develop an understanding and appreciation of the sport. This encompasses knowledge of fundamental rules, skills, and strategies. Coaches can be excellent resources, addressing parents' inquiries and directing them to community or school libraries, or bookstores for educational content (books and videos on the specific sport). Furthermore, coaches should allocate part of an early practice session to a lecture or demonstration covering the sport's basics. Parents with minimal knowledge of the sport ought to be encouraged to participate in this session (Smoll, Cumming & Smith, 2011).

Parents are entitled and obligated to ask about all activities their children engage in, including sports. Consequently, coaches should be receptive to questions and open to parents' contributions. Communication needs to be a mutual exchange. If coaches maintain open lines of communication, it is more likely they will develop positive relationships with parents. Promoting two-way communication does not allow parents to disrespect coaches verbally or through actions. Instead, it should encourage parents to share their legitimate concerns, ensuring that they will be listened to by the coach. Nevertheless, there are appropriate times and places for parent-coach discussions. This is not during practice or competitions, and it should not happen in front of the children. Coaches should inform parents about the best times and locations for conversations (Smoll, Cumming & Smith, 2011).

The primary reason for conflicts between coaches and parents stems from differing views on the abilities of the young athlete. In this context, employing a performance measurement system can provide meaningful feedback to athletes and an objective basis for performance assessment for parents. However, there will be times when parents might disagree with the coaches' approaches. The important aspect is for coaches not to become defensive. They should consider parents' opinions and suggestions, which could prove beneficial. Nevertheless, even if they do not concur, coaches should at least listen and assess the feedback. They must recognise that the final decision rests with them, and it is impossible for any coach to satisfy everyone. Coaches can only expect the same level of commitment from themselves as they ask of their athletes - striving to perform to the best of their abilities and continuously seeking improvement (Smoll, Cumming & Smith, 2011).

To build positive relationships with parents, coaches should understand that most parents are genuinely enthusiastic and care deeply about their children. However, there are times when parents might not be aware of the issues they are creating. Rather than feeling frustrated with them, coaches should acknowledge that parents are facing a challenge - one that coaches can assist in resolving. The goal is to gently and diplomatically highlight the detrimental effects of their behaviour and encourage them to be more supportive and constructive (Smoll, Cumming & Smith, 2011).

The significance of the parent-coach relationship

The relationship between parents and coaches is a critical part of a child's involvement in sports. It can significantly affect their enjoyment, motivation, and overall growth. As highlighted by Aadit and Varadayini (2023), some important reasons why this relationship is important include:

- i. Support and encouragement - Parents can offer emotional backing and encouragement to their kids, which can enhance their confidence and motivation. Coaches can also assist by providing support and guidance to parents, helping them to understand their child's needs and development.
- ii. Communication and collaboration - Effective dialogue between parents and coaches is crucial for the child's welfare and success. Consistent updates, feedback, and open conversations can help synchronise expectations and tackle any issues or difficulties.
- iii. Role modeling - Parents and coaches act as role models for children. By showing positive behaviour, sportsmanship, and respect, they can impart essential values to young athletes.
- iv. Balancing expectations - Parents and coaches must collaborate to establish realistic expectations for the child. Striking a balance between the ambition for success and the child's unique abilities and interests is essential to prevent unnecessary pressure and stress.

Strategies for building a positive relationship between parents and coaches for young athletes' development

Masters (2023) stated that the following strategies can be harnessed to build a positive relationship between parents and coaches for the development of young athletes:

1. Establish open communication - Successful collaboration relies heavily on effective communication. Coaches should initiate clear communication channels with parents from the beginning of the season, which may involve regular team meetings, email updates, or the use of a dedicated communication app. Encouraging open dialogue enables parents to voice their concerns, ask questions, and grasp the coach's expectations.
2. Set clear expectations - At the start of the programme, it is crucial for coaches to clarify their goals, expectations, and coaching philosophy. It is important to be

upfront about playing time, practice schedules, and team regulations. When parents are informed about what to anticipate, they are more inclined to support the coach's choices and create a positive environment for the team.

3. **Host parent meetings** - Arranging meetings for parents can be a useful way to collectively address any concerns or questions. In these meetings, coaches can talk about team objectives, upcoming activities, and their coaching strategies. Encourage parents to express their thoughts and concerns, but also stress the importance of respecting the coach's decisions during games and practices.
4. **Provide resources** - Coaches can provide parents with materials on youth sports, such as articles, books, or online content. These resources can assist parents in understanding the physical and emotional needs of young athletes, as well as their role in their child's sports journey. By informing parents, coaches enable them to be supportive members of the team.
5. **Offer feedback and evaluation** - Engaging parents in the process of feedback and assessments is important. Coaches can arrange regular evaluations of players and meetings with parents to talk about their child's growth. This enables parents to gain a deeper insight into their child's progress and allows the coach to address any issues that may arise.
6. **Create a supportive environment** - Coaches should promote a nurturing and inclusive team culture where every player is motivated to succeed. Coaches should also encourage parents to attend matches and support all players, not just their own. It is crucial to promote good sportsmanship and respect for teammates, opponents, and officials.
7. **Practice conflict resolution** - Disagreements can occur, whether stemming from parental disputes or issues related to coaching choices. Coaches should be equipped to address these matters with professionalism and composure. It is crucial to pay attention to parents' concerns, validate their emotions, and strive to find a solution that serves the best interests of the entire team.
8. **Lead by example** - Coaches can create a favourable environment for both parents and athletes by exemplifying good sportsmanship and respectful conduct. Coaches should be encouraged to recognise and appreciate the support and involvement of parents. When positive behaviour is demonstrated by coaches, it reinforces the significance of teamwork and respect within the group.
9. **Recognize parent contributions** - Parents frequently have a crucial part in youth sports, whether it is coordinating team activities, offering rides, or assisting during games. Coaches ought to express gratitude for these efforts. Showing appreciation for parents' contributions cultivates a sense of community and teamwork.
10. **Celebrate achievements together** - When the team succeeds, it is important to celebrate together. Coaches should acknowledge both the players' dedication and the parents' support. This collective celebration enhances the connection among coaches, parents, and players, reinforcing the notion that youth sports are a joint endeavour.

Conclusion

Coaches have a unique opportunity to make a positive influence in the lives of young athletes by working together with parents. Coaches can create an environment that encourages athletic growth, personal development, and sportsmanship. Key elements for achieving success both on the field and beyond include open communication, mutual respect, and a shared dedication to the athlete's success. When parents and coaches collaborate, young athletes have the opportunity to excel in their sports pursuits. The relationship between parents and coaches is a vital component of a young athlete's experience in sports. By nurturing a constructive and efficient partnership, parents and coaches can establish a setting that fosters the athlete's growth, development, and enjoyment of the game. Through transparent communication, defined expectations, and reciprocal respect, parents and coaches can join forces to offer optimal support for young athletes. Therefore, a strong and cooperative relationship between parents and coaches that enables young athletes to excel both in sports and in life should be developed.

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