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Triangulation in Youth Sport: Healthy Partnerships among Parents, Coaches, and Practitioners

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Abstract

Youth sport is unique because it involves communication, coordination, and maintenance of relationships among multiple adults, all of whom are vested stakeholders in a child-athlete's sport experience. This dynamic becomes even more complex when a sport psychology practitioner is added; therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide guidelines and considerations to assist sport psychology practitioners in managing the triangulation of adults who are involved in the consultation process with youth athletes. We first discuss specific dyads and considerations for the practitioner and then highlight recommendations for practitioners regarding transparency and confidentiality issues specific to youth athletes.

Keywords

youth athlete; mental training; transparency; confidentiality; relationships

In competitive youth sport, the interpersonal relationships among the parent, coach, and athlete are often referred to as the athletic triangle (Wylleman, 2000). However, when youth athletes are involved in applied sport psychology consultations, a fourth person, the sport psychology practitioner, is added into this dynamic structure, moving the athlete to the center of the triangle, with the practitioner, coach, and parent comprising the three sides of the triangle as the adult stakeholders in a child-athlete's sport experience (see Figure 1). The sport psychology practitioner's responsibility in working as part of this consultation structure is to focus on the health, both physical and psychological, and the rights of the child-athlete client while keeping the other parties informed about the process. For the purposes of this article, we focus on child-athlete clients who are from 6–17 years old. This balance must be accomplished while being mindful of: (a) the goals of the child-athlete, (b) typical reasons for participation in organized sport (e.g., to have fun, improve skills, exhibit mastery, stay in shape, and enjoy the excitement of competition), and (c) the potential for maltreatment that can occur in the sport environment (Stirling & Kerr, 2010).

In an effort to facilitate rapport and the development and maintenance of healthy partnerships among adult stakeholders, we recommend that practitioners utilize a family-

systems consulting approach that is player-centered and both coach- and parent-supported. With this approach, the practitioner focuses on the interaction of the athlete, coach, and parent(s) with each other and their interaction with the environment, while emphasizing the appropriate boundaries and roles of each part (Schultz, 1984). Further consideration in this approach is given to the evolving and dynamic nature of relationships throughout a season and athlete's sport career.

Harwood (2008) and Visek, Harris, and Blom (2009) have adapted this type of approach specifically for consulting with youth athletes. Harwood (2008) uses the "5Cs of football model," which were influenced from Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg (2005) 6Cs of positive youth development, in his developmental consulting approach with youth soccer players, coaches and parents by targeting commitment, communication, concentration, control and confidence. These were viewed as sport specific assets related to performance demands but which also supported the principles of a broader positive youth development agenda (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2005; Lerner et al., 2005). These constructs serve to guide coaches, parents, and practitioners in regards to their behavioral approach with athletes, topics of training and consulting sessions, and interactions with other adults. Additionally, Visek et al. recommends that all stakeholders involved in the process consider the developmental stages of the athletes as decisions are made and healthy relationships are built.

Using a family-systems approach, this paper is intended to serve as a reference point for sport psychology practitioners in managing the triangulation of adults who are involved in the consultation process with youth athletes. We first discuss specific dyads and considerations for the practitioner to facilitate successful interaction while prioritizing the athletes' health, rights, and goals and then highlight recommendations for practitioners regarding transparency and confidentiality issues specific to youth athletes.

Toward Healthy Stakeholder Dyads

Stakeholders have strong motivational and socialization influences on children; thus, it is our hope that in understanding more about each stakeholder, that parents, coaches, and practitioners can work together more enjoyably, with empathy and understanding for each party's contribution to the youth sport experience. Please note that while the parent-athlete and coach-athlete relationships are components of this triangle, we focus the paper primarily from the reference point of the sport psychology practitioner, so that she or he may best facilitate the interactions and relationships among the adult stakeholders.

Parent-Practitioner Dyad

Parents have been found to be the initial and most critical socialization agents in the sport environment (LaVoi & Babkes Stellino, 2008). Parents oftentimes provide the role of support-and-facilitation, which may involve motivational, material and emotional, and/or unconditional support (Keegan, Spray, Harwood, & Lavalley, 2010), influencing the achievement climate and overall motivational development (Harwood & Swain, 2001). Parental interest in a child's sport participation can be variable and expressed differently depending on their degree of interest and involvement, and may behaviorally even be expressed negatively, thus, presenting challenges in consulting. For example, parent behaviors that are commonly problematic and may undermine the consulting goals and child's sport experience include expressing disinterest, being overcritical, "coaching" from the sideline, and being overprotective of their child-athlete (Knight & Harwood, 2009).

Optimal parental involvement may look slightly like an inverted-U, with a point of diminishing returns (Power & Woolger, 1994). Otherwise stated, parent involvement is necessary for growth and development (Orton, 1997), but there is a careful balance needed

between parental control and the child's self-determination and autonomy for successful interactions to occur. To help facilitate such a process, the sport psychology practitioner can work with parents to help foster a healthy sport climate in which parental behaviors convey support and encouragement of the youth athletes' sport experience; such behaviors may be more likely to enhance the enjoyment these children experience in participant in sport (Wiersma, 2001). For example, practitioners could include parents in an educational session at the beginning of the consultation with a discussion of the common motives and reasons that children play sport (Harwood & Swain, 2002). Additionally, Harwood and Swain have found that describing the teaching principles of TARGET (i.e., task, authority, recognition, grouping, evaluation, and time) can be used to help parents identify and incorporate concrete behaviors that promote an achievement environment, especially if parents are asked to record their behaviors and practice providing useful performance related-feedback to their athletes using these principles. Finally practitioners can assist parents in learning how to lead a healthy and productive post-competition discussion (Harwood & Swain, 2002).

Coach-Practitioner Dyad

Providing both instruction and assessment, coaches are the next largest socialization factor impacting a child-athlete (Keegan et al., 2010). Coaches want to give their athletes the tools needed to succeed; however, because youth coaches might be new to coaching and/or sport psychology, coaches may be resistant or express uncertainty about engaging their team in applied sport psychology or referring an individual athlete for services. Once the sport psychology practitioner addresses common coaches' concerns, such as: (a) "how can my team benefit from mental training?"; (b) "what is involved in a mental training program?"; (c) "how will I integrate mental training into my coaching?"; (d) "how familiar are you with our sport?"; and (e) "how much is this going to cost?", coaches may be more likely to be vested in the process, thus contributing to a positive rapport and to a healthy, facilitative partnership with the sport psychology practitioner. Open communication and a strong working relationship between the coach and her or his staff (e.g., assistant coaches, team managers) will be helpful in strengthening relationships among all other stakeholder dyads within the consultation triangle. Indeed, establishing solid relationships is vital to being an effective practitioner (Barker, McCarthy, & Harwood, 2011) and coaches' perceptions and support will be crucial in the success of sport psychology services.

Significant barriers to gaining entry to youth sport include coaches' misperceptions generally about psychology and specifically regarding sport psychology, in addition to a lack of role clarity and understanding how mental training and the practitioner will integrate with the players and coaching staff (Pain & Harwood, 2004). Therefore, educating coaches about the theoretical and practical aspects of sport psychology can be pivotal in grounding coaches' understanding of how their athletes' sport experiences and performances can be improved through mental training. In fact, experienced practitioners have reported that their "best ever" consulting experiences occurred when the coaches were invested and open-minded about mental training (Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza, & Rotella, 2003; Taylor, 2008). Likewise, Harwood (2008) has noted greater ease and higher levels of respect, trust, and satisfaction by coaches, parents, and even players that are new to mental training services when incorporating all parties in the consulting process. That said, when communicating with youth sport coaches, it is important to be confident and decisive when discussing services, skills, and outcomes with coaches (Barker et al., 2011); speculative response may invoke ambiguity and apprehensive that may be counterproductive to the psychoeducational aims of the practitioner and thus to the dyadic relationship between the practitioner and coach. Practitioners can also work with coaches to incorporate the mental skills into physical practice sessions (e.g., Barker et al., 2011), which may assist demonstrating the integration

of mental and physical skills as well as the fact that both stakeholders are working toward the same goal of improved athlete performance.

The role of the coach and the nature of the coach-practitioner relationship in the consultation triangle will vary based on whether the sport psychology services are retained for an individual athlete or are intended for team-based purposes. Because coaches do not have the legal rights that parents do regarding the youth athlete, they do not have to be informed about consultation work when a child-athlete's parents or guardian pays for services. However, after meeting with the practitioner and formulation of a mental skills training plan, the athlete may decide to share information with the coach since the coach is an instrumental factor in the athlete's development and performance and may be able to assist in the practice and implementation of mental skills during practice and competition. In the event that an athlete does not choose to share information with the coach, the coach should still be considered as a relevant stakeholder (Harwood & Swain, 2002), with an indirect role. On the other hand, when the practitioner is conducting team sessions, the coach's direct involvement is significant because he or she may be one of the hiring decision-makers, although client confidentiality is still a relevant factor (Blom, Visek, & Harris, in press) for complete details on the ethical responsibilities in consulting with youth athletes).

Coaches' involvement in mental training to some degree is crucial to the effectiveness of the consultation as they can influence the achievement environment (e.g., Harwood & Swain, 2001; Krane, Greenleaf, & Snow, 1997), which youth athletes have been shown to easily notice and be able to identify (Harwood & Swain, 2001). Therefore, it is recommended to provide educational sessions to coaches on topics related to the goals of the consultation (Harwood & Swain, 2001, 2002). This information can be general and descriptive without violating the athlete's confidentiality rights, with common topics including the impact of coaching behaviors related to ego and task motivational climates (Harwood & Swain, 2002), providing effective performance feedback, setting goals, and working with parents.

Parent - Coach Dyad

The expectations and values of parents and coaches can easily sway children's perceptions and choices within sport (Brustad, Babkes, & Smith, 2001); to keep the focus on the positive development of the athlete, the practitioner should be the primary stakeholder informing and facilitating positive dialogue among the adult stakeholder groups. Thus, it is vitally important that practitioners carefully consider the roles that the parents and coach(es) are playing in the athlete's experience because both, as previously discussed, can either hinder the development of or encourage positive change within a child-athlete (Taylor, 2008). To ensure that the adult stakeholders have a positive influence on child-athletes requires the practitioner to act in the best interests of the child-athlete or team, in addition to balancing the legal rights afforded to parents.

Conducting educational sessions with coaches and parents early in the consulting process can be an effective way to bring the significant stakeholders together and model a healthy communication process (Barker et al., 2011). During these sessions, relationships within the athletic triangle can be highlighted with specific discussion on the impact of the coach-parent relationship on a youth athlete's sport experience (Murray & Blom, 2012). Information about the challenges and stressors of being a youth sport parent (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2009; Murray & Blom, 2012), as well as potential parent related coaching stressors (Knight & Harwood, 2009) can be shared and guidelines for parent-coach interaction can be established. During this discussion, the practitioner can facilitate the discussion as the mediator or neutral party as needed, and offer potential perspectives of the child as well.

Harwood and Swain (2002) have found incorporating parents and coaches into the dynamic “competitive performance triangle” to be effective. In their work, coaches, athletes, and parents received educational sessions, signed contracts regarding their behavioral expectations, and completed behavior logs to facilitate the successful implementation of the new behaviors. Furthermore, the triangle was encouraged to meet as a group to review the progress of the athlete, with the athlete serving as the chairperson. Upon completion of the competitive season, parents reported that the number of positive comments and interactions with their athletes increased, and two of the three coaches felt moderate benefits from being involved in the ‘triangle’, while the third coach felt maximum benefits.

Harwood and Swain’s (2002) study is an example of how to involve the coaches and parents in the consulting process in order to assist in the achievement of direct consulting goals. Murray and Blom (2012) recommend establishing regular parent-coach meetings to promote effective communication patterns between these important stakeholders. A third method for practitioners to facilitate the establishment of productive coach-parent relationships is to provide educational support to both groups, in separate sessions, related to the common stressors that often stem from the other party (see Harwood & Knight (2009) for details on the common coach-related parental stressors and see Knight & Harwood (2009) for common parent-related coaching stressors). An understanding of the other party’s viewpoint and the development of relevant coping skills can aid in the establishment of a healthy relationship.

Practitioner–Athlete Dyad

In addition, when working with children, it is important for the practitioner to remain cognizant that youth athletes typically participate in sport for fun, which involves learning and improving sport-specific skills; further, they drop out of sport when it is no longer fun. Therefore, it is crucial that practitioners structure consultations so that sport psychology is also a fun aspect to youth athletes’ sport experience. This may be particularly true for younger children (e.g., 6–9 years) as researchers have found this group of youth athletes to rate fun and enjoyment as the most important factor influencing their sport involvement (Brodin & Weiss, 1990). Additionally, Baumgarten (1984) suggests that children’s involvement in activities be fully maximized. Thus, for consultations to be effective, children are to be active partners in the consulting relationship (Orton, 1997) and should be the true “client” in this relationship. Common ways in which practitioners can maximize the child-athlete’s engagement is by incorporating game-like experiences as a means of teaching important mental skills so that the child-athlete is able to gain tactical understanding and decision-making skills through fun activities, which can be metaphorically generalized to sport (Visek et al., 2009). We suggest the use of a variety of dynamic and polysensory activities that engage youth athletes during the consultation and allow them to experience enjoyment whether life skills or psychological skills training serve as the predominant objectives for service provision.

Key Elements for Healthy Sport Partnerships

Healthy sport partnerships among the triangulated adult stakeholders are necessary for creating the most positive youth sport experience for child-athletes and will be instrumental for a successful sport psychology consultation. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to highlight key elements, namely the necessity for transparency and the boundaries and implications of confidentiality, which will assist in both the initiation and maintenance of well-developed and healthy relationships among the coach, parents, child-athlete, and practitioner.

Transparency

Laying a solid foundation for healthy relationships involves time, building rapport, and expressing an appreciation for the others' perspectives (Taylor, 2008). In addition, being as transparent as possible about what can be expected from the consultation will go a long way towards establishing well-developed relationships with the other stakeholders. It is possible that coaches and parents may initially be "reluctant consumers of the counseling process" (Kindsvatter, Duba, & Dean, 2008, p. 204) when it comes to applied sport psychology. Meaning, they may lack knowledge of the consulting process, not understand the value of mental training, and/or have previous negative perceptions of sport psychology. If practitioners portray the consultation process as ambiguous and/or secretive, these perceptions may only be perpetuated. It is recommended that practitioners fully disclose to both parents and coaches the general provisions of sport psychology services, while taking the time to dispel misperceptions and myths about services, as well as answer questions and address concerns.

Balancing Confidentiality with the Legal Right to Know

Persons under the age of 18 are typically recognized as minors in the United States, which implies that they are not considered legally competent to give meaningful consent to consultations/treatment. Both the parent(s) and the child-athlete are involved in the consulting process; therefore, it is crucial to determine and define the expectations for and limitations to confidentiality at the beginning of the consulting relationship. To help accomplish this, practitioners might find it helpful to view confidentiality on a continuum instead of an all-or-none dichotomy. To this end, Kaczmarek (2002) identified four levels of parent approved confidentiality: (1) complete confidentiality for the minor client; (2) limited confidentiality where the client's parents and practitioner decide jointly what should be shared with the parent; (3) limited confidentiality at the practitioners discretion; and (4) no confidentiality, where the parent has access to all records and notes. If the parents request no confidentiality and full access to information discussed during sessions, some athletes may be hesitant to fully disclose to the practitioner their sport-related experiences and challenges. However, also bear in mind that asking parents to put complete trust in a practitioner they likely do not know very well and to give up knowledge and control of their child's behaviors and experiences is in fact a considerable request, one similar to the situation with a teacher in the educational setting.

While there are legal rights that parents and guardians have to consultation records, practitioners want to "balance the child's right to confidentiality with the parent's legal right to know" (Orton, 1997, p.363). Practitioners will want to thoroughly explain the importance of confidentiality, express understanding of the magnitude of this request, and discuss ways in which the parent will stay in touch with the child's progress. It is ideal to work out a plan that involves the parents (and potentially coaches) and keeps them generally informed, without including them in every moment of the sessions. Depending on the type of parent-approved confidentiality, practitioners are encouraged to seek permission from the child-athlete prior to disclosing any session content to the athlete's parent/guardian. Doing so can uphold the ethical and legal implication of confidentiality while also maintaining an effective consulting relationship and empowering the youth athlete throughout the consultation process.

Regular progress reports and session check-ins are two recommended ways of balancing active parent involvement and a child's confidentiality. One of the ways in which this can be done is verbally through periodic informal progress reports from the athlete(s) directly to the parents and coaches. In an effort to further empower the athlete, practitioners can support the child by helping them learn how to inform their parent/guardian about the consultation's

content, going so far as to rehearse how the child will engage their parents during one of the sessions. This may be particularly important as Peterson (2004) noted that school-age children may prefer that their parent/guardian to be aware of what they are saying or doing during the consultation sessions. Thus, inviting parents and/or coaches to directly observe a session in whole or in part is another approach to balancing varying degrees of confidentiality with the legal right to know. Lastly, shared print materials (e.g., mental training newsletters, brochures, or relevant online resources) are another way in which general session content can be used to inform parents/guardians or coaches while also educating them about the general sport psychology issues relevant to the athlete-client or team (Visek et al., 2009). The ultimate goal is to get each adult youth sport stakeholder on the same page and working in partnership and harmony in the best interests of and needs of the child-athlete or team (BLINDED et al., in press).

Conclusion

For biopsychosocial and even legal reasons, youth sport participants are certainly not miniature versions of their adult-athlete counterparts. To this end, the youth sport experience is unique in to itself, in part, because of adult stakeholder influences. Strong socializing influences both independently and collectively, parents, coaches, and sport psychology practitioners each are vested in the health and needs of the child-athlete; however, navigating the didactic relationships and collective partnership toward the well-being of the child-athlete warrants careful communication and coordination among all. Practitioners can utilize a family systems approach to remain cognizant of the interactions among the stakeholders and their effects on the child's youth sport experience, in addition to the ethical and legal boundaries that are in effect when working with minor clients. By working together, and transparently, healthy, collaborative relationships can be established and maintained to positively enhance the child-athlete's youth sport experience.

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Figure 1.
The Youth Sport Psychology Consultation Triangle