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Mental Training with Youth Sport Teams: Developmental Considerations & Best Practice Recommendations

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Abstract

Working with youth athletes requires knowledge of the inherent variability in child and adolescent development that will impact the implementation of a mental training program. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of developmental considerations that should be noted when doing mental training, particularly for athletes participating in sport at mid-childhood, early adolescence, and mid-adolescence. Gender differences at these stages of development are also highlighted. Additionally, we forward best practice recommendations and learning-activities that have been tailored for each developmental stage that can be used in the provision of a mental training program in a team setting.

Keywords

youth athlete; player; mental training; services

More than 60 million boys and girls participate in organized sport throughout the United States (National Council of Youth Sports, 2008). However, the provision of sport psychology services to child and adolescent sport participants is not widespread, despite the growth in applied sport psychology. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide sport psychology practitioners wanting to extend their services to the youth sport population with an overview of youth-related developmental and gender considerations, which provide the foundation on which we forward best practice recommendations for the provision of sport psychology in team settings.

Developmental Considerations

Youth sport teams are oftentimes organized first by biological age; and, depending on the size of the league, secondarily by skill development (Till et al., 2010). Similarly, age is the most common variable used by sport psychology practitioners to generally decide interventions and ethical practices. However, if biological age is the only determining criterion, the way in which services are tailored for age-appropriateness may not be in the best interests of the client(s), and in extreme instances could be harmful (Till et al., 2010). Therefore, we suggest that age be put into the larger context of child and adolescent development. While age may serve as an initial directional beacon, there is likely to be great

variability in the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development within each youth sport team because: (a) each athlete develops at her or his own natural idiosyncratic speed, and (b) athletes' ages within a single team will be varied (e.g., a Peeewe level ice hockey team consists of both 11 and 12 year olds). Based on Piaget's (1950) model of cognitive development and Erikson's (1950) stages of psychosocial development, there are three main developmental phases: mid-childhood, early adolescence, and mid-adolescence. Knowledge of the select developmental milestones germane to children and adolescents of a particular age range that can impact the provision of sport psychology services can help facilitate a more successful mental training program for youth sport teams. Next, we highlight some of these important developmental considerations as well as the gender influences on such milestones as it pertains to service provision to youth sport teams.

Mid-childhood

During the mid-childhood years of ages 6–11, there is a tendency for children to emphasize a strong connection with parents and other significant adults, which often leads to a need to seek adult approval. This is important to note because these relational propensities could create challenges of dependency or boundary confusion in relationships involving the child-athlete (e.g., child-parent, child-coach, child-sport psychology practitioner). However, children are also working to establish and understand friendships with peers, especially same-sex peers (Sroufe & Rutter, 1984); this may be particularly noteworthy to practitioners who are working with co-ed teams, especially when trying to build team unity and promote communication, which may require a delicate balance of differing needs based on gender. For example, young girls will often focus on appearance to establish their peer group whereas boys at this early stage of development may utilize athletic ability as the criteria for establishing social status within their peer group (Brady, 2004).

In the development of self, athletes in this stage evaluate their self-worth and develop self-esteem based on a limited number of sources of competence information and from a global sense (Harter, 1990; Horn, 2004a). It is challenging for them to distinguish between effort, luck, and skill, making self-awareness and self-understanding inconsistent or incongruent at times (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). Additionally, athletes at this age are becoming sensitive to and aware of their and others' complex emotions, but they are also still limited in their ability to think abstractly and to adequately consider long-term consequences. For example, a 7-year old player may have difficulty with understanding how penalties for unsports person like behavior can impact the outcome of a game which may also preclude him from being fully aware of how his lack of participation may impact the overall team dynamic. Thus, practitioners can foster greater development of cognitive and emotional understanding by repeatedly and consistently informing players of how each of their actions has both short-term and long-term consequences, for both practices and games, as well as both on- and off-the-field.

Children at this stage are also working to understand the concepts of equality and fairness (Sroufe & Rutter, 1984), so team rules that are not consistently applied (or at least in the eyes of the athletes) may create conflict and confusion. Girls at this stage can display more sensitive emotions and may be more apt to behave in a more nurturing and cooperative way; however, boys will be more likely to exhibit noisy behavior and respond by engaging in more aggressive play (Vernon, 2004).

Early adolescence

Early adolescence, ages 10–14 years, is characterized by physical puberty, emotional tendencies marked by moodiness, an increased interest in peers, and a greater ability to think more abstractly and consider alternatives and consequences to situations (Vernon, 2004).

Therefore, compared to their younger counterparts, early adolescent athletes can be encouraged to be more directly involved in the decision-making process of team activities (Grisso & Vierling, 1978; Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). Practitioners can highlight this new developmental achievement by using discovery learning-based questions and activities, which allow the athletes to figure out the answers themselves. Additionally, athletes at this age are thus able to better understand the rationale behind mental training activities and how those activities can facilitate positive sport enjoyment and performance. However, the younger athletes in this group still may not be able to clearly understand the meaning of mental skills, with self-talk and relaxation being harder to comprehend than goal setting and imagery (McCarthy, Jones, Harwood, & Olivier, 2010). This phase of development is also marked by a considerable focus on peers and peer relationships, which could be facilitative when teammates are getting along with one another, but may also present challenges in the team setting when there are conflicts with teammates.

With regard to the development of the self at this stage, athletes will begin to establish their identity (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008) and thus practitioners are more likely to see consistency in athletes' self-referenced statements and descriptions. Their domain specific self-esteem will also begin to develop as they can more easily use multiple sources of information to evaluate their competence (Horn, 2004a); however, self-esteem is still vulnerable to external evaluation, especially from peers at this stage (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). During the adolescent years, girls are more vulnerable to lower levels of self-esteem compared to boys (Harter, 1999; Horn 2004b). This difference may be accounted for by increased body dissatisfaction by girls (Harter, 1999), which can be tied to the earlier onset of puberty for girls and the physical changes they begin experience before boys (Horn, 2004b). Although beginning in early adolescence, these gender-associated differences with regard to self-worth and self-esteem continue into mid-adolescence.

Mid-adolescence

Typically, the majority of sport psychology clientele at the youth level are within the mid-adolescence ages of 15–17 years old. At this phase of development, athletes are more physically and sexually mature, more capable of expressing feelings, able to think more abstractly, can ponder moral and social dilemmas, and have begun to increasingly demonstrate independence (Vernon, 2004). Along with their need to demonstrate greater mastery of their sport, these athletes are also likely to behave in ways that are more indicative of their need for autonomy. This is why they may be more apt to contribute to decision-making processes and more comfortable in expressing thoughts and ideas that may differ from their coach, parents, or even the sport psychology practitioner. Practitioners are encouraged to consider ways to involve athletes in consultation decisions, offering choices and options regarding topics for sessions and methods of implementing skills. Using “what if” scenarios and having athletes visualize future outcomes are appropriate for this age group (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008), and maybe used to help them become more autonomously vested in the sport psychology experience, particularly if they wish to continue playing their sport at the next competitive level (e.g., college).

In tandem with their desire for increased autonomy, there is a marked increase in the importance of peers and social relationships at this stage of development. However, there are notable gender differences in these relationships. For instance, girls will have a tendency to seek closer relationships with their peers sooner than boys and these relationships are more likely to exhibit a more advanced sense of intimacy compared to boys (Vernon, 2004). Therefore, when working with mid-adolescent female teams, practitioners would be wise to acknowledge and account for the strong emphasis placed on social relationships and how these relationships might impact the individual athlete and collective team experiences.

Lastly, mid-adolescence is also marked by a greater understanding of multiple specific domains of self (Harter, 1999), more accurate self-descriptions (Smith, Dorsch, & Monsma, 2012), the construction of possible future selves (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008), and more internal control of self (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). However, it is important to remember that a positive development of self is not automatic, rather it is a result of parental, social, environmental, and cultural experiences; therefore, practitioners should expect to see much variation within a team.

Best Practice Recommendations for Working with Youth Sport Teams

The provision of applied sport psychology services to a youth sport population, while similar in some respects to adult athletes, requires considerable adjustments in service delivery due to the variability found not only across the developmental phases, but also because of the individual differences found within a developmental phase. Based in development psychology and applied sport psychology, we forward the following select best practice recommendations when working with youth sport teams.

Determine Purposes of Mental Training Services

The purpose(s) of a team's mental training program should determine the service delivery approach for the practitioner. For youth sport teams these include a performance approach and a life-skills approach. The performance approach is focused on building mental skills to assist athletes to perform better and more consistently in competition (Hays, 2006). However, the life skills approach is primarily focused on general youth development, while fostering positive attitudes about sport through fun and enjoyable experiences (Weiss, 1991). This approach may include a focus on the transferability of athletes' acquired mental skills for sport to other coping areas of their lives (Smith & Smoll, 2002), such as school and friends. Recreational-level teams participating in the mid-childhood and early adolescent years may more likely desire a life skills approach; conversely, teams at mid-adolescence and particularly those participating at more elite, select levels (even teams at younger ages) with greater emphasis on sport-skill development and winning will likely seek the performance approach. To this end, these approaches are not mutually exclusive and intervention approaches should be matched to the needs and objectives of a team.

Use of Professional Title

Adults such as coaches and sport psychology practitioners may question what the most appropriate title to use for themselves when working with this special population of youth. For example, many sport psychology practitioners have earned terminal degrees in their field of study, earning the designation and use of the title "Dr." While a title such as "Dr." brings with it expertise and respect, when working in the youth sport community, both the practitioner's preference and the team's preference may vary given the phase of development of the athletes on any given team. For example, practitioners working with children may find it easier to build rapport or find less stigma attached to them by being referred to more informally by their first name or using a more generic title such as "Coach". A hybrid title, such as "Dr. Jane", may also communicate a level of expertise and informality, making the practitioner more relatable to the youth athletes. Whatever title is used, practitioners should carefully consider the title and name that will afford both the team and the practitioner the greatest level of comfort and rapport.

Use of Language

Recall that mid-childhood athletes are largely concrete thinkers (Vernon, 2004). Thus, compared to athletes of early- and late-adolescence, they will need information such as coaching mechanics, teamwork, or managing pre-game anxiety to be presented linguistically

in a very clear and simple manner. For example, when incorporating mental skills with coaching mechanics, short, simple cue words should be used to direct behavior, rather than complex statements. In basketball, one might use the words “rim” and then “sink” when helping athletes visualize the action and feeling of completing a successful free throw. When discussing teamwork, practitioners will want to use concrete words to describe what teamwork looks and feels like. For instance, using words such as “sharing”, “helping”, and “cheering” might allow athletes to understand the specific behaviors which make up teamwork. While using the words “high arousal” might be appropriate for adult athletes when discussing anxiety, words such as “excite” and “energize” are more easily comprehensible by younger athletes. Adaptations such as these will aid these athletes’ understanding of sport psychology concepts. It will also help facilitate their ability to begin actively and autonomously making behavioral adaptations and decisions within their sport.

Coercion and Pressure by Peers

As noted previously, early-adolescence is characterized by a marked focus on peers and peer relationships. In fact, adolescents at this stage are particularly permeable to peers’ influence, which can cause self-consciousness that may limit an athlete’s full participation in team discussions. Creating smaller working groups within the team can assist in creating a less threatening environment in which athletes are safe to share ideas without being overwhelmed by the team majority. Moreover, allowing athletes to write their thoughts and ideas down before sharing, or independently submitting their ideas in written form to the sport psychology practitioner who can then share individual athletes’ input anonymously with the team, are additional ways in which athletes at this developmental phase can be engaged. Furthermore, at this phase of social and emotional development, it is important to be cognizant of potential conflicts that may exist on the team and to actively work to create a safe and non-threatening environment for all. For example, when using small groups to facilitate a team discussion, athlete-to-athlete conflicts can be best managed through the careful placement of the athletes who comprise each group to avoid creating hostile working groups. Walking around the room, observing, and checking in with each group to monitor the group dynamic is also encouraged.

Equitable Treatment: Setting and Maintaining Boundaries

Mid-childhood athletes tend to be drawn toward adults, which may result in approval seeking behaviors. These behaviors can have the tendency to contribute to favoritism or biases (Blom, Visek, & Harris, in press). This is noteworthy because perceptions of favoritism or biases on the part of the practitioner towards athletes can undermine the effectiveness of service delivery. Further, it is not uncommon for perceived favoritism or biases by coaches to be a concern of individual or collective players on a team. Therefore, it will be important for the practitioner make a concerted effort to set and maintain equal boundaries for her or himself with each of the players on a team. This will help to ensure that a practitioner’s treatment of all athletes on a team is equitable. It is important that the practitioner be perceived as a safe and unbiased source of support.

Adaptations for Mental Skills Delivery

Compared to service delivery with adult sport teams, the implementation of a mental training program with youth sport teams requires developmental fore thought. For example, when it comes to session planning, there are necessary modifications that will need to be made to the logistics of conducting a mental training session with a team, such as the length of the session and the types of didactic and interactive activities planned. For example, a typical 45–60-minute session with a college athletic team is not appropriate for younger youth sport teams. While older adolescents may be able to participate in a session of this length, children under the age of 14 or so may be better suited for shorter (15–30 minutes),

but more frequent sessions. Furthermore, because of their cognitive development, children will need to have more activity-based sessions with experiential hands-on or simulated exercises to help them process and grasp more abstract concepts, such as concentration (see Table 1 for sample mental skills exercises). For sports youngest participants, exercises that are tactile and incorporate more physical movement and reduce sitting time are helpful in teaching mental skills. Therefore, practitioners might consider working with coaches to develop mental skills along with physical skills to assist in the cognitive application of the mental skill (McCarthy et al., 2010). Such adaptations are necessary given the limited attention spans and varied developmental growth across childhood and adolescence. It is also crucial to note that research indicates that children in the mid-childhood developmental group may need repetitive explanation of the psychological skills (McCarthy et al., 2010). Therefore, when developing a mental skills program to meet the specific needs of a team, it would behoove practitioners to anticipate moving slowly and temporally through the program, dedicating several sessions to the introduction and practice of novel skills.

Conclusion

The provision of a mental training program for youth sport teams has the potential to add an important element to youth athletes' sport experiences. However, a greater degree of developmental variability is found with youth sport teams than with their adult counterparts. Thus, effective service provision with youth sport teams requires developmental and gender-appropriate biopsychosocial adaptations. These adaptations assist in creating a more positive sport psychology experience for youth sport teams, to ensure their success. The more positive experiences athletes have with sport psychology at early ages, the more likely they will be to seek such services as they develop as an athlete, future coach, or sport parent.

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Table 1

Mental Skills Training Activities Adapted for Youth Sport Teams

PST Topic	Mid Childhood (6–11 years)	Early Adolescence (11–14 years)	Mid-Adolescence (15–17 years)	Suggested Reading
Imagery	Provide team with an object associated with their sport (e.g., a baseball, soccer ball, puck) to hold in their hand; practice recreating an image of that object incorporating its shape, color, and other tactile senses associated.	Tie a washer to a string and have athletes close their eyes, imaging the washer moving from side to side or in circles; open eyes after to see imaged movement of washer; next, practice imaging completion of one basic physical sport-specific skill.	Write a polysensory imagery script that involves coping with a challenge associated with the sport or position; place focus on creating vivid images and controlling images to see themselves successfully performing.	Munroe-Chandler et al., (2007)
Self-Talk	Have team brainstorm thoughts they have while performing well and poorly. Then, have the team associate each thought with the immediate feeling associated with it using varied smiley-type faces that depict the different range of emotions.	Utilize role playing to demonstrate their response to various activating events that they are challenged by; be sure they role play their typical response as well as more adaptive coping responses that would result in more positive outcomes.	Use white board to brain storm activating events and write-out typical thoughts and responses associated with each; then, take the same activating events and discuss alternative ways to respond to each using thought-stopping techniques.	Gonzalez et al., (2004); Roush (1984)
Relaxation	Use cooked vs. raw spaghetti to describe relaxed vs. tense muscles. Next, use bubble blowing to demonstrate tension and relaxation using short, shallow breathing vs. deep breathing.	Use a sponge or stress ball to show tension and relaxation; sponge/ball also provides a visual representation contrasting tension versus relaxation.	Teach deep breathing; follow by use of more advanced relaxation skills such as progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, or biofeedback.	Lang & Stinson (1991); Orlick (2001)
Concentration	Have athletes gather as a whole team or break into smaller working groups based on playing position. Introduce a relevant sport object, like a ball that gets tossed across the circle from player to player; keeping the same pattern, introduce another ball, making sure to keep all ball in the air, focusing on relevant cues from players when passing and receiving.	Using a deck of cards, create a “memory” game where two people compete against each other to find all the pairs of cards with only one card allowed to be turned over at a time while searching for pairs; aside from competing against each other, athletes can be timed for speed so that they are introduced to multiple relevant and irrelevant cues during the activity.	Using a concentration grid, time athletes as they complete the grid one athlete at a time while the others are creating a variety of external distractions to slow them down; can process regarding identifying relevant and irrelevant cues and strategies used to shift focus on only the relevant cues associated with the task.	Grossbard et al. (2009); Holland et al. (2010)

Note. These activities are merely a select sample of suggested activities that can be successfully used with teams at each stage. Suggested readings include references that are notable, providing scientific evidence and/or practical suggestions for PST topics.