

Coaches Can Utilize Parents to Optimize Youth Athletes' Sport Experience

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Abstract:

Individuals including youth athletes have three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—outlined by self-determination theory. In sport, key social agents such as coaches and parents help satisfy these needs. Coaches, as well as fathers and mothers, can independently and interactively satisfy youth athletes' basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness by providing autonomy support and a task-involving motivational climate. It is essential for coaches to understand this to not only better the youth athletes that they coach, but also educate parents who have tremendous influence over the youth athletes and in order to help provide the best environment in which youth athletes can thrive. Coaches should listen to and communicate with parents about their youth athletes and together, as a team, work to give their youth athletes the best chance of success.

Keywords: coaching | youth athletes | youth sports | self-determination theory

Article:

Of all the leisure activities for youth, sports are among the most beneficial. The benefits of partaking in youth-sport range from better physical development to better social development (Bailey, Citation2006). One key way to continue getting these benefits is staying in sport, which is often linked to how motivated a youth athlete is in playing their sport. Sport motivation has been found to be most strongly related to a youth athlete's intention to continue (Bailey, Cope, & Pearce, Citation2013; Clark, Citation2008). Self-determination theory (SDT) is one of the most prominent theories in explaining youth athletes' motivation because of the extensive research evidence that has continued to support its merit (Deci & Ryan, Citation2000).

In SDT, there are three basic psychological needs in all humans—autonomy, competence and relatedness—that need to be met in order to be intrinsically motivated. The need for autonomy is the need for freedom of choice, being able to think independently. The need for competence is the feeling of being adequate in a task. The need for relatedness is the need to feel cared for by others. These three needs have been investigated heavily and supported in the context of youth sport (Deci & Ryan, Citation2000). Having a coach who gives youth athletes instructions open to interpretation in how to play or the freedom to play how they see fit would satisfy their need for autonomy. Youth athletes who see themselves as good, worthy players would have their need for

competence met. Youth athletes who feel connected to their coach and teammates would have their need for relatedness met. Social agents, more specifically coaches and parents, play a vital role in fulfilling these needs in youth athletes (Chan, Lonsdale, & Fung, Citation2012; Martin, Ewing, & Gould, Citation2014). Therefore, it is essential that they do not only understand their influence on youth athletes but also know the best ways to fulfill those needs. The purpose of this article is to inform coaches of the influence they have on their athletes and how they can fulfill athletes' basic psychology needs with support from parents in order to enhance their athletes' sport motivation and adaptive outcomes.

Autonomy Support as the Key Factor

Based on SDT research (Deci & Ryan, Citation2000), autonomy support is the most established strategy in supporting basic psychological needs and fostering intrinsic motivation. Autonomy support is characterized by supporting an individual's volition in doing something while at the same time allowing them to be themselves and make their own decisions (Deci & Ryan, Citation2000). In a workplace, it is about a boss supporting their employees by providing them with opportunities to be heard and to make their work their own within the reasonable guidelines. In youth sport, autonomy support is displayed when the coach is positive, reassuring and encouraging to the youth athlete. When there is a hierarchy of power, the leader will find their followers more likely to not only listen to them but also to enjoy what they are doing if that leader provides them with autonomy support.

Autonomy support is essential to youth athletes' intrinsic motivation. Research has shown that autonomy support from social agents, specifically coaches and parents, has a positive relationship with higher intrinsic motivation in sport (Amorose, Anderson-Butcher, Newman, Fraina, & Iachini, Citation2016; Hodge & Gucciardi, Citation2015; Jõesaar & Hein, Citation2011; Jõesaar, Hein, & Hagger, Citation2012). This means that the more autonomy support a youth athlete receives, the more likely they are to enjoy their sport, which in turn contributes to greater intention to continue sport (Atkins, Johnson, Force, & Petrie, 2015).

Intention to continue sport is arguably the most substantial factor that predicts the actual continuation of their sport. Jõesaar and Hein (Citation2011) investigated the effects of autonomy support, alongside other variables, on dropout rates in a sample of 659 youth athletes from a wide variety of sports. The researchers surveyed the athletes about their perceived autonomy support from parents and coaches as well as the athlete's self-determined motivation. They contacted the coaches again 1 and 2 years after the athletes completed the survey and found that the athletes who dropped out of their sport perceived significantly less autonomy support from coaches and parents than those who continued. The findings of this study are important for understanding what drives and motivates youth athletes to continue competing in their sport, highlighting the critical role of autonomy support.

The Power of Social Agents

In addition to investigating the effect of individual factors of motivation provided by social agents, researchers have -investigated the motivational climates provided by social agents to youth athletes (see Chu & Zhang, Citation2019). Motivational climates cover a broader range of factors and are useful to -determining what factors combined lead to the greatest positive effect on motivation (Ames, Citation1992). Social agents establish one of two major variations of motivational

climates, task-involving or ego-involving (Ames, Citation1992). In relation to sport, a task-involving motivational climate is a social environment that -encourages learning over winning. This does not mean completely ignoring winning, because that is the end goal in all sports; it is more so encouraging winning but not at the expense of encouraging athletes to grow in their sport and as people. Essentially, a task-involving motivational climate contributes to satisfaction of competence and even autonomy and relatedness. On the contrary, an ego-involving motivational climate stresses winning over everything else. The social agent would focus on winning at the expense of learning with a lack of autonomy, competence and relatedness support. Research has found that a task-involving motivational climate positively -correlates with adaptive outcomes in sport, such as self-esteem and perceived sport competence, and that an ego-involving motivational -climate negatively correlates with these same outcomes (Atkins, Johnson, Force, & Pétrie, Citation2013).

The role of coaches

Coaches have received a great amount of attention from researchers interested in the motivation of youth athletes (Chu & Zhang, Citation2019). Research has found that a task-involving motivational climate will lead athletes to enjoy their sport more than an ego-involving motivational climate (Atkins et al., Citation2013; O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, Citation2014). Jõesaar et al. (Citation2012) investigated youth athletes' motivational climates in a sample of 362 youth athletes by assessing their motivational climate and self-determined motivation over time. The researchers found a direct longitudinal effect of a coach-initiated task-involving motivational climate at the beginning of the year on youth athletes' intrinsic motivation at the end of the year.

There are a multitude of different ways in which coaches can practice a task-involving motivational climate. To do this, one of the major aspects of a task-involving climate is stressing learning over winning. One easy way to do this is to use mistakes that athletes make during games and practice as learning experiences. Rather than yelling at a youth athlete for making an error, the coach can use it as an opportunity to explain to them what they should do next time. For instance, when an offensive lineman blocks the wrong guy that results in a loss of yardage, instead of telling him that he has ruined the play, the coach can explain to him whom to block next time in a "let's get them next time" tone. In this way, a youth athlete will not only develop but also improve the chance for winning the next time (Camiré, Forneris, Trudel, & Bernard, Citation2011). After losing, one might think that the team should be yelled at and punished, such as doing extra conditioning after practice. Coaches may think this would motivate them to do better, as the team would not want to have to do the -extra conditioning or whatever the punishment is again. However, this would fall into the ego-involving motivational climate and would generally be detrimental to a youth athlete's enjoyment in sport. A task-involving motivational climate would be coaches gently talking to a team after a loss and explaining to them how they can improve for the next game while at the same time allowing the athletes to brainstorm on how they can improve. Youth athletes are hard enough on themselves after losing that they do not need extra fuel for that fire. Coaches should also encourage their youth athletes to set goals by either having their youth athletes write down their goals during one of the practices early in the season or assign it as homework for their athletes to do, so as to encourage them to deeply think about it. Coaches should encourage their youth athletes to express their frustrations during a practice or game in the form of "I" statements such as "I feel," so the youth athletes focus on how they are feeling rather than what is happening around them. Coaches doing such are encouraging social and emotional learning

in their athletes that can help athletes view sport as an opportunity to improve as a person as well as a player rather than merely to win and thus care more about it (Atkins et al., 2015; SHAPE America, Citation2019).

The role of parents

Parents have, to a lesser extent than coaches, received attention from researchers interested in youth athletes' motivation (Chu & Zhang, Citation2019). Similar to coaches, when parents initiate a task-involving motivational climate with autonomy support, athletes tend to enjoy their sport. O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, and Cumming (Citation2013) investigated the longitudinal -effects of parent-initiated task-involving and ego-involving -motivational climates on youth swimmers throughout a -season. They found that, over time, a task-involving motivational -climate led to higher levels of intrinsic motivation than those in an ego--involving motivational climate. They also found that youth swimmers in a task-involving motivational climate had increases in intrinsic motivation as opposed to those in an ego-involving motivational climate who experienced decreases in intrinsic motivation. Therefore, parents should provide a warm, supportive environment that encourages learning and effort over winning and criticism of mistakes in order to facilitate their children's sport enjoyment.

Parents have a different role as social agents than that of a coach. A parent is typically not the one calling the plays or running the practices, but rather a source of support or pressure from afar in the stands as well as at home. Still, research shows that parents are crucial for a youth athlete's motivation due to the parent-child relationship (Amorose et al., Citation2016; Atkins et al., 2015; O'Rourke et al., Citation2013). Parents are with their child since their child was born instead of only for a few hours of practice in sport. A parent--initiated task-involving motivational climate is where a parent is there to reassure their child that they played well after a game and stress that, even if their child loses, they are proud of their child's effort. Youth athletes are the toughest critics of themselves and often do not need the extra criticism from their parents. A parent providing a task--involving -motivational climate will provide their child with encouragement, even if it falls on deaf ears. It's important for parents to encourage their child to set their own goals and think of ways to improve on their own so that their child uses youth sports to grow as a person and carry those self-thinking ways into their everyday life. Parents should also encourage their children to think about why their coach makes the decisions they do so that the child begins to think about why other people feel the way they do. They can do this by sitting down with their child after a rough practice or game and by talking about it rather than just blaming the coach and leaving it there. This leads to more social and emotional development of the youth athlete (SHAPE America, Citation2019). In all, the best atmosphere parents can create for their child athlete to enjoy their sport is one full of encouragement and support.

Interactions of social agents

The findings about parents' and coaches' influence on youth-sport motivation led to researchers investigating the interactions between these social agents. O'Rourke et al. (Citation2014) investigated whether coaches or parents would have a greater influence on youth athletes' sport environment among swimming clubs associated with USA Swimming. They found that, while both coach- and parent-initiated climates had positive relationships with self-esteem and autonomy and a negative relationship with performance anxiety, the effect of a parent-initiated task-involving

motivational climate was above and beyond that of coaches. There are a multitude of potential explanations for these findings, such as the sample being high-level athletes whose parents were heavily involved. This is evidence for coaches to actively listen to parents when they express concerns or provide feedback, as parents see their children from a whole different light than coaches. Coaches should not get defensive even if they disagree with what the parent is saying. Listening to parents' feedback shows that the coach is doing their best to put their youth athletes in a position to succeed (Smoll, Cumming, & Smith, Citation2011). When working with parents, it is important for coaches to treat parents right in a way that allows them to build a healthy working relationship to better the youth athletes (see Table 1). It is important to understand that parents and coaches have different impacts on youth athletes and that both are crucial.

Table 1. The Do's and Don'ts for Coaches When Interacting With Parents

Do	Don't
Hear parents out and value their opinions	Disregard everything parents say
Be available to parents	Ignorant parents' presence
Establish a healthy relationship with parents	Be condescending toward parents
Explain the role parents have with their child youth athlete	Expect parents to follow their role without knowing it
Work with parents to get the best out of your youth athletes	Fight with parents over what is right for their child

Mothers and fathers are often combined and classified as parents in research regarding the parental effect on youth athletes' motivation. Ullrich-French and Smith (Citation2006) were among the first to investigate mothers and fathers as separate social agents. They assessed 186 youth soccer athletes' perceived relationship with their parents, both mother and father; their relationship with peers; and sport-related motivational outcomes, such as enjoyment and stress in sport. The researchers found that a positive relationship between athlete and mother as well as between athlete and father were positively associated with self-determined motivation in the athlete. While fathers and mothers were similar in that a positive relationship with either of them was positively and significantly related to self-determined motivation of the athlete, they were found to be significantly and differently rated by the athlete. This means that each parent was viewed as a distinct social agent compared to the other parent. Thus, it is crucial for mothers and fathers to realize that their child athlete does not view them as one. Because of this, it is important for each parent to be actively involved.

Moreover, Ullrich-French and Smith (Citation2006) investigated how multiple or lack of positive relationships might influence youth athletes' motivation. Interestingly, their results indicated that when an athlete had two positive relationships (with coach, father, or mother) that led to the most positive and significant impact on that athlete's self-determined motivation, the additional effects of a third positive relationship were minimal. This finding implies that the best environment for a youth athlete to be in is one with positive support from at least two social agents.

Amorose et al. (Citation2016) investigated the interaction of social agents further by putting mothers, fathers and coaches together when examining the effects of autonomy support from coaches, fathers and mothers on high school athletes' self-determined motivation near the end of the athlete's seasons. The study found that, independently, high levels of autonomy support from coaches, fathers and mothers were all positively related to high school athletes' self-determined motivation. When examining autonomy support from a combination of social agents, the same study found that autonomy support from any combination of two social agents led to a

greater and more positive relationship to youth athletes' self-determined motivation than any of the social agents individually. However, when autonomy support was found from all three of the social agents it did not lead to that great of an increase in self-determined motivation among youth athletes. This study further supports that social agents can have a significant impact on youth athletes' motivation. The biggest takeaway is that, while each social agent is important and impactful in their own right, social agents play an even bigger role once they combine. However, it appears that once a certain threshold of support from social agents is met, usually around two, the additional effects for each additional social agent more than the threshold are minimal.

The importance of support from social agents and its effect on youth athletes' motivation cannot be stressed enough. Because support from a combination of social agents leads to the greatest impact on youth athletes' motivation, it is important for the social agents to work together. Coaches should attempt to work with parents to help satisfy the psychological needs of the youth athlete whom they both care about. To do this, coaches should encourage parents to be adequately involved, but not overinvolved, with their child athlete in sport. The ideal involvement for parents would revolve around putting in the time to not only take their child to and from practices and/or games but to also listen to the child about how the sport is going for them. Parents should let the emphasis be on their child athlete's perspective, being there more for emotional support than trying to be another coach for the athlete. Parents must realize that this is their child's experience that they get the privilege of experiencing with them, not for parents to live vicariously through them (Smoll et al., Citation2011). In addition, coaches should establish a positive relationship with parents but reaching out to them to talk about their child to show their care for the athletes. Once the relationship is established, coaches can explain to parents how important they are for their child's sport motivation. It is not only crucial for them to know the role that they have but also for them to understand the power they have when combined. Coaches should also attempt to explain to parents, or rather mothers and fathers, they need to understand that their child views them as two different distinct social agents. For coaches, they need to understand that they are not the only social agent that has a great impact on their youth athletes and accept the role of parents (Smoll et al., Citation2011).

The Role of Coaches in Providing a Positive Motivational Climate

Coaches are the ones on the field every day who influence the physical and psychosocial development of youth athletes. Take baseball as an example. When a youth baseball player strikes out looking because he thought a pitch was clearly a ball, his coach's reaction can greatly affect how he feels about the strikeout. His coach could yell at him and punish him by making him run a lap at practice for striking out looking, or his coach could tell him, "It's no big deal, you'll get them next time by keeping your head up." His coach could talk about how everyone, even the greatest baseball players of all time, strike out often, and then explain to the athlete how, when he has two strikes, he should try and protect the plate just to be safe while stressing that if he truly thinks a pitch is a ball, then to lay off of it. The latter of the two options is one of a task-involving motivational climate. The coach uses a simple mistake as a learning experience, taking time to invest in the athlete, sitting down with him and explaining how he can do better next time. In this way, he is providing his athlete with psychological need support by reassuring him that he is capable of playing baseball (competence), showing that he cares about the athlete more than winning (relatedness), and giving his athlete the freedom of how he approaches an at bat after

giving suggestions on how to do so (autonomy). This is just one of the many scenarios in which a coach has the power to affect the motivation of a youth athlete.\

Coaches hold tremendous weight regarding the motivational climate of youth athletes. Additionally, coaches lead by example and affect the motivational climate that parents provide by modeling, whether they want to or not. If a parent sees the coach consistently triggering positive reactions from their child and sees their child thrilled to compete in their sport because of the coach, the parent would try to emulate what the coach is doing. Specifically, if a coach is providing that warm, supporting climate for their athletes, that climate can pass on to parents. However, this is a very indirect way of helping parents and is not a guarantee.

The best approach for coaches would be to educate their youth athletes' parents on how much of an impact they can have on their kids. Parents might not understand that what they say or do can be remembered by their child for years and have a great impact on their child (Ullrich-French & Smith, Citation2006). Coaches can help parents not only realize their influence but also teach them the best way to use that influence. To do this, coaches should hold a team meeting with the parents and develop a mutually agreed-on contract that they both sign and keep a copy of before the season starts. This should help coaches to establish rules with parents and help them know the role that they are supposed to play with their child as an athlete. To accomplish this, in the meeting coaches can:

- Explain that they are not telling the parents how to parent their child, but rather they are suggesting to them how they can help make sure their child enjoys their time competing in their sport.
- Explain that parents should not be attempting to coach their child during practice or competition, as that is the coach's job.
- Explain that the parents' responsibility is not to coach their child, but rather support their child and be their child's biggest cheerleader.
- Explain that parents and coaches are all part of the same team to help the youth athletes enjoy their sports and encourage parents to come and talk to them throughout the season about their youth athlete.

Coaches and parents are on the same team with regard to satisfying a youth athlete's basic psychological needs. Coaches should try to establish an environment in which parents do truly feel like they are working with the coach and that the coach genuinely cares about their youth athletes. Too often it becomes an "us versus them" mindset when it comes to parents and coaches, whereas they need to work together, as that is what is best for the youth athlete. Receiving the crucial support from a coach and a parent is necessary to maximize a youth athlete's self-determined motivation, so coaches should work with parents to establish that. Coaches should also let parents know that youth athletes see their mothers and fathers as distinct social agents and encourage both mothers and fathers to become involved in their child's sport by discussing their different roles. While coaches and parents both have a great impact on youth athletes, it is up to the coaches to help parents understand the importance of working together. If coaches successfully do that, their youth athletes will be more likely to enjoy and continue playing their sport.

In all, it is crucial for youth athletes to have their -basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness met in order to be intrinsically motivated. Often these needs are met through social agents such as coaches, -mothers and fathers. Therefore, it is important for coaches, mothers and fathers to know the role they play in youth athletes' -motivation. Coaches can

implement multiple SDT-based strategies to satisfy these needs, from how they coach an athlete to how they interact with parents to support their athletes. It is important for all social agents to realize that there are a multitude of factors that go into motivation and that every youth athlete is different. While what has been discussed are good general ways to satisfy these needs, it is important for a coach to understand their athlete's unique characteristics and find out what works best to satisfy these needs for that specific athlete.

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