Raising Healthy Child Athletes: The “Good-Enough” Coach & Parent
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Raising Healthy Child Athletes: The “Good-Enough” Coach & Parent
By Joe Mannion, MS

In what ways would you like your son or daughter, or perhaps the kids you coach, to benefit from sport participation?

The answers are probably similar to what we wish for children in general: character development, enhanced esteem and well-being, physical health, social development, enhanced problem solving skills, and happiness.

Numerous researchers of children’s participation in sport have asked kids similar questions: why do you want to play sports or why do you like playing sports? Their answers are among the most consistent findings in child sport psychology literature. Among pre-adolescent youth, the most common responses are (1) to have fun and (2) to make friends.

Problems In Youth Sport

So we have a sizable group of parents, coaches, and kids with healthy, age-appropriate goals. Why, then, do we see such large numbers of kids leaving games and practices upset and showing symptoms of low self-esteem? Why do we see destructive cliques form on teams that alienate and exclude other members? Why do we see a massive drop-off in sport and fitness participation around ages 12 to 14 that, in no small way, contributes to our obesity crisis and crumbling health-care system?

When I was working with junior elite athletes in Australia, I encountered kids destroying equipment, walking out on practice, and humiliating at least one child to the point of him thinking about committing suicide. Stateside, I’ve worked with pre-adolescent kids suffering from depression and panic attacks over the thought of practice, let alone competition.

In contrast, can we imagine tolerating a grade school or even high school teacher screaming at, or humiliating, a student in front of his or her peers for making a mistake? If the behaviors of some P.E. teachers or coaches of primary or secondary level students were brought into the classroom, parents would be calling for their heads. Yet we tolerate such abusive behaviors on the playing fields.

Can we imagine a parent launching into a verbal assault with a teacher, in front of a class, because he or she disagrees with the grading system? This is to say nothing of coaches and parents physically attacking each other on the field or the parent who doses up his or her child on steroids, calling them “vitamins.” Case examples of such abuse abound in the news and the academic literature.

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Although many societal factors outside of our control (e.g., violent behavior broadcast, tolerated, and even romanticized at the pro level of sport) contribute to these problems, there are numerous reasons to be hopeful and to avoid despondency over your child’s sport participation.

The “Good-Enough” Coach & Parent

Mark Epstein, MD, is a renowned Harvard graduated psychiatrist whose insights on development are badly needed in the sport environment. In *Thoughts Without A Thinker* (2004, see reference below), Epstein describes what he calls the “good-enough parent.” This parent (or guardian) is one whose “safe” presence is felt by the child without being over-involved or under-involved in the child’s experience. Experiencing the safe presence of the parent or guardian, the child feels enough security to spontaneously explore, interact, and develop in his or her environment.

If the parent or guardian is over-involved, the spontaneity of the child’s development is disrupted and often leads to the parent’s or guardian’s needs supplanting the child’s. In the sport environment, this over-involvement might be the parent, guardian, or coach constantly yelling from the sidelines, questioning every call, and, often, making a spectacle of the athlete’s performance. In this case, the child will often develop a “false” self, or false sense of obligation, to meet the needs of the parent or coach (e.g., to reassure or appease the insecure or hypercritical parent or coach), forgetting his or her own needs and experience. This false self can persist into adulthood (e.g., the adult who takes care of everyone but his or herself, an internalized voice in one’s head disrupting the ability to relax into the moment or activity).

We include coaches in the good-enough mix not just because it seems to make sense. Sport psychology survey research has revealed children, on average, rate the influence of sport coaches in their lives as more substantial than parents and teachers.

In Epstein’s taxonomy, the under-involved parent or guardian is also detrimental to the child’s development. Without the safe, reassuring presence of the parent or guardian, the child is prematurely bereft in his or her environment, lacking the developmental capacity to cope. In the sport environment, this situation may be the parent or guardian who never attends practices or competitions and is otherwise unavailable or uninterested in the child’s experience. An under-involved coach may lose basic (i.e., not rigid or restrictive) control or organization of the child’s sport experience. In this case, children may be left with a sense of insecurity or feeling like they don’t know where they “fit.”

A worthy question is, “what leads a parent, guardian, or coach to be over or under-involved?” There are as many answers as there are unique personal histories, but we can focus on the question of adult needs and how they supplant the child’s need to have fun and make friends.
Red flags for over-involvement needs can include the parent, guardian, or coach trying to see the child succeed in athletics where they, in their sporting pasts, fell short. An underlying, sometimes less conscious need of the parent or coach may look something like this: star child athlete = good parent or good coach, or, conversely, clumsy child athlete = inadequate parent or inadequate coach. In both cases, the parent’s, guardian’s, or coach’s esteem is wrapped up in the child’s performance. This situation often leads the child to internalize suboptimal models of love: star performance = good person, star performance = worthy of love, or, conversely, inadequate performance = inadequate person. And so they grow up to be parents and coaches and often repeat the cycle.

The pursuit of lofty dreams is a wonderful and important part of childhood and adulthood. We would be remiss, however, for not addressing parental and coach attachment to developing the future professional athlete. The harsh reality of making it to professional sport is in the numbers. Based on a 1995 statistical analysis (and we can be assured the numbers are even bleaker today), the probability of advancing from high school to professional level sport in football, basketball, and baseball varies between 1 and 2 tenths of 1 percent. Even bleaker is that the majority of those 1 to 2 tenths of 1 percent will only last a few short years at a pay grade well below the fantasy and without substantial endorsement deals.

The dynamics setting the stage for under-involvement or neglect are also quite varied, but a common underlying reason is a false assumption. Too often, the glorified spectacle of sport participation reaches the point that we assume character development, enhanced esteem and well-being, physical health, social development, enhanced problem solving skills, and happiness default with simple participation. As we can see, though, many factors must be optimized in the sport environment (just like in the classroom) to reach these objectives.

Resources For Coaches & Parents

There are no “perfect” parents or coaches, but there are good-enough parents and coaches. Parents, guardians, and coaches need to be educated on the developmentally changing needs and capacities, both physical and mental, of children. Incidentally, watching Bobby Knight coach does not qualify as “education,” nor does one need a PhD in psychology and exercise science. I recommend two fantastic books: Straight Talk About Children and Sport: Advice for Parents, Coaches, and Teachers published by the Coaching Association of Canada and The Cheers and The Tears: A Healthy Alternative To The Dark Side of Youth Sports Today by Shane Murphy, PhD. See full references below.

Straight Talk includes about 100 of the most common youth sport questions, ranging from injury to early specialization, and allows experts in the respective fields to offer concise answers. Shane Murphy is the former head of Sport Sciences at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado and is an esteemed colleague of my supervisor, Mark Andersen, PhD.
In the mean time, ask yourself, “whose needs are being met in all of these sport activities… mine or my child’s?” and “which behaviors and attitudes are being rewarded in each sport environment?” Don’t beat yourself up for making mistakes. And don’t be afraid to ask your child how he or she feels about your involvement or how he or she would like to see you be involved. This straight talk could be an opportunity to model healthy problem solving with your child and reaffirm his or her intrinsic worth as a human being.

We are bombarded by images (e.g., TV sports casting) and often pathogenic views of sport, and it’s probably impossible not to harbor sub-optimal attitudes and needs on some level. Many of us remember all too well how poor sport experiences affected us as children. The difference is raising our awareness and learning how not to let these past experiences and needs interfere with our ultimate goal: raising happy, healthy children.

Joe Mannion has a Master of Science degree in sport psychology and is available to parents, coaches, league organizers, and child athletes for more information on the psychology of youth sport, for useful literature, and for personalized collaboration at 314.265.4271 and joe@AllWorldPerformance.com.


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