Considering a Relationship Between Dysfunctional Coaching Styles in Youth Sports and the Development of Hazardous Attitudes in Players

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Coaching styles can have a profound impact on the psychological health of young athletes. Negative coaching styles may reinforce negative traits that encourage the development of so-called “hazardous attitudes” in players of youth sports. The effects of negative parenting behaviors are predictable, and when a youth coach imposes such behaviors onto the team atmosphere, the impact on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individual players can be observed. Children coached in such a paradigm may feel unsafe in the team setting. Alternatively, attachment theory posits that children who do feel safe are in a more optimal condition for exploration and learning. Both parenting and coaching styles range from firm to unstructured and from critical to positive. The intersections of these characteristics create a dimensional model that explains overarching parenting and coaching styles. Research suggests that the firm-positive parenting model is preferred to create an optimal atmosphere, where children become optimistic and motivated. The purpose of this paper is to explore the theory behind the impact that various styles have on the individual youth athlete as well as the team. Additionally, the authors illustrate a model of understanding the parenting and coaching style combinations, including key characteristics and examples that can help to identify these styles.

Keywords: coaching, sport, leadership, hazardous attitudes, attachment theory, coaching style, parenting style, permissive, authoritative, competitive

Introduction

The so-called “hazardous attitudes” (machoism, impulsivity, invulnerability, antiauthority, resignation, and overconfidence) have received an increasing amount of attention for their impact on professional pilots in the United States and Canada, in addition to negative medical outcomes among surgeons who possess them (Bruinsma, Becker, Guitton, Kadzielski, & Ring, 2015). There is other evidence that these attitudes are generally problematic in societies, families, and working environments (Tyrer, Reed, & Crawford, 2015). Research on the dark triad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy), which certainly overlaps with the
hazardous attitudes, also illustrates the lifetime of problems these traits create for oneself and one’s close associates (Jones & Paulhus, 2011).

When looking at sources which likely spark the development of these negative characteristics, it is conceivable that these traits are frequently reinforced by coaches in youth sports, with or without intent. This article considers how unhealthy youth coaching styles influence players to acquire the hazardous attitudes as a result of psychological defense mechanisms or behavioral reinforcement. Because of the significant influence that youth coaches have in the lives of children and adolescents, a paradigm of healthy and unhealthy youth coaching styles is presented. The authors observe that coaching styles are very similar to parenting styles and can be viewed dimensionally to educate and create self-awareness during youth coach training. The goal of the authors is for coaches to utilize methods that commonly result in robust psychological development in youth and avoid reinforcement of the hazardous attitudes.

**Background**

Most children play sports, and almost two thirds of them play team sports. Athletic teams are very similar to families. Teams possess many of the same interpersonal dynamics and affections which lead to the development of “atmospheres” and function much like families (Stein, 2014). Youth coaches spend more time with children than the majority of parents (Parker-Pope, 2010). Moreover, coaches are considered “caretakers” of children whether they realize it or not (Cogburn & Horton, 2012). Volunteer youth coaches, who are almost always the parent of one or more players on the team they coach, typically use the same type of parenting style at home as they do when they coach their team (Bloom, Loughead, & Newin, 2008; Weiss & Frewell, 2005). Therefore, parenting is an embedded dynamic in most volunteer youth coaching. Most youth coaches have no formal training in coaching or parenting (DeKnop, 2007). Sadly, the same unhealthy parenting styles that they use at home will profoundly affect the players and teams they coach.

One of the core principles of Alfred Adler’s writings on child development centered on the predictable effects of specific negative parenting behaviors and how those behaviors led to unhealthy “atmospheres” in homes (Stein, 2014). Research has shown that there is an interactive effect between the parenting styles of volunteer youth coaches at home, and the subsequent psychological impact on individual players and team atmospheres (Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Miller, 2006; Juntumaa, Keskivaara, & Punamaki, 2005). These dysfunctional atmospheres impede normal child development and influence children and teenagers to develop neurotic thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Flett, Hewitt, & Singer, 1995).

Attachment Theory and its call for children to have a safe and secure base from external threats are often cited as a prerequisite for normal child development (Bowlby, 1969). Parent Acceptance-Rejection Syndrome, another hallmark in child development theory, insists that children must feel unconditionally accepted by parents and other adults in order to thrive (Rohner, 2004). Children who receive significant exposure to hostility, indifference, or neglect ultimately feel rejected. This is profound since evidence indicates that a child’s perception of being rejected or accepted by a caregiver accounts for at least 26% of the variability related to psychological adjustment (Rohner, 2004). Paul Gilbert provides evidence that when players do not feel safe on a team, they use avoidance strategies (Gilbert, 2010). Gilbert notes that when a team atmosphere is

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perceived as encouraging and prone to praise effort more than results, children feel more comfortable exploring options and making mistakes. He believed that safeness creates the conditions for exploration and learning under conditions of playfulness and low threat is optimal (Gilbert, 2010).

**Parenting and Teaching Styles Are the Foundation of Coaching Styles**

Diane Baumrind, a pioneer in parenting research, developed a parenting theory focusing on how parents control their children (Baumrind, 1966). The authoritative parenting style, which is preferred, was first defined along with a proposed system for classifying parents. According to Baumrind’s model, there are four major approaches to parental control: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and rejecting-neglecting. Three of the parenting approaches have unintended negative consequences to the children who are exposed to them.

Permissive parents are reluctant to impose rules and standards, preferring to let children regulate themselves. Authoritarian parents demand a blind obedience from their children. Rejecting-neglecting parents are often self-centered, set few boundaries, and do not support or respond to children. These children often develop problems such as antisocial behavior, low academics, anxiety and depression, drug abuse and risky sexual behavior (Hughes, 2017).

Authoritative parents take a different and moderate approach. This approach emphasizes the need for high standards while being nurturing, responsive, and respectful. It is linked with the most successful child outcomes. In this balanced approach to guiding children, the atmosphere created by the parent fosters independence, self-reliance, and behavioral regulation from self. These children experience less anxiety and depression and seldom participate in antisocial behaviors like delinquency and drug use (Dewar, 2013).

Reasoning with children, though considered by authoritarian parents as a waste of time, was found in a multi-country study to be the key element for success (Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen, & Hart, 1995). Specifically, explaining the reasons for rule, and talking with children who misbehave are effective. This aspect of the authoritative parenting style has been called “inductive discipline”, and there is evidence that it helps children become more empathic, helpful, conscientious, and kind to others (Krevans & Gibbs, 1996; Knafo & Plomin, 2006).

**Coaching as Teaching**

Coaching is the teaching of a sport. Because teaching is an essential component of coaching, teaching styles are reviewed as a means to develop young athletes. Again, Baumrind’s parenting style theory can be used to provide a theoretical framework that views student-teacher interactions within a socialization context. Like teachers, coaches’ demanding characteristics result in adolescents exhibiting specific behaviors and attitudes that are important for player success. Teachers’ responsive behaviors communicate to students their value and level of acceptance within the academic community. Thus, teaching styles, like parenting styles, create an educational environment that guides students’ behaviors, beliefs about self, and motivation patterns (Walker, 2008). Therefore, teaching styles, parenting styles, and coaching styles can be measured against the dimensions of demandingness and responsiveness in the context of children in families, students in school, and players on teams.

Specifically, teaching styles are conceptualized in the same manner as parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and rejecting-neglecting. Walker reports that authoritative teachers, who are preferred, exhibit high levels of demandingness and responsiveness (Walker, 2008). Authoritative teachers focus on
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building students’ competence, and they recognize the importance of establishing strong emotional connections with students. The term “warm demander” was coined by Kleinfield and this term refers to teachers who exhibit personal caring and active demanding within the student-teacher relationship. Authoritative teaching is similar to the teaching style patterns of “warm demanders” (Kleinfield, 1975). Control and warmth are qualities commonly identified in addition to demanding and responsive behaviors (Baumrind, 1989, 2005; Walker, 2009; Wentzel, 2002).

Development of the “Hazardous Attitudes” Through Youth Sports

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Canadian Air Transport Administration have incorporated training lessons and screening of pilot attitudes and behaviors that are incompatible with safe flight (Hunter, 2005). Subsequent research has explored how surgeons also have problems with these psychological constructs: machoism, impulsivity, worry, low resilience or resignation, over-confidence, and resistance to authority (Bruinsma et al., 2015). The authors suggest that certain parenting and coaching styles are contributors to the unhealthy formation of these hazardous attitudes.

Specifically, we suggest that the Firm-Critical Coaching style evokes machoism, impulsivity, and anxiety in players. Machoism is a known result of coaches who constantly minimize player’s complaints of pain and fatigue and question a players’ “manhood” or “toughness”. Unstructured-Positive coaching leads to low resilience and low determination in players. These coaches place no demands on players, and a lack of effort is tolerated. Additionally, because these players experience an overly permissive approach, they learn little respect for authority and develop a sense of entitlement born from the coach indulging their demands.

Because of difficulties found with the typology approach, much of the parenting style and teaching style literature uses the dimensionality approach (Bean, Barber, & Crane, 2006; Rivers, 2008; Wentzel, 2002). Cogburn and Horton initially developed a dimensional parenting model that underscored the Adlerian precepts presented by Manaster (1983) (see Figure 1), and then they modified the model with verbal descriptors to identify common coaching statements associated with each style in Figure 2 (Cogburn & Horton, 2012).

Youth coaches necessarily create atmospheres (or “attitudes”) by the way they interact with the young players on their teams. Research supports teaching youth coaches a Firm-Positive parenting model to use when coaching their teams that will create an optimistic, motivated, child athlete. Moreover, the authors have further developed this model to also illustrate the potential negative consequences of other team atmospheres that result when coaches do not use a Firm-Positive approach. These negative parenting approaches often result in anxious, angry, or narcissistic athletes who struggle to find self-discipline and have little appreciation for teamwork.

Emotional climates, or atmospheres, created by parenting and teaching styles act as filters through which adolescents interpret parents’ and teachers’ behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs (Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Walker, 2008, 2009). The same interpretations are made by players receiving adult coaching. If adolescents who play sports feel respected, accepted, and supported by the coach, they carry out achievement-related tasks in a more autonomous manner, and they are more likely to internalize the educational values and beliefs of parents, teachers or coaches (as cited in Deci & Ryan, 2004). Autonomous functioning and internalization of positive educational values and beliefs are associated with better academic achievement (Davis, 2011; Joussemet, Landry, & Koestner, 2008).
Figure 1. Dimensional parenting model underscoring the Adlerian precepts presented by Manaster.

Figure 2. Modified dimensional parenting model adapted for coaching styles with verbal descriptors.

The term “Firm” is used here to describe coaches who are highly structured and have clear expectations.
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These coaches resist chaos, and they are often rigid and strict. Rules are important to them. “Critical” is a construct that expresses the amount of warmth provided to players. “Unstructured” illustrates a lack of rules and predictability that often lends itself to chaos on teams. “Positive” suggests that the coach is warm, emotionally supportive and actively kind to players. It is a benefit to children and adolescents involved in sports to be coached with a firm and positive coaching style. These children develop normally and should rarely present as being overly macho, antisocial, or anxious. They would be expected to have enough self-confidence and self-control to be effective athletes.

When considering the Firm-Critical coach, one sees a coach on the extreme end of demandingness and lack of warmth. Players view them as unapologetically controlling, competitive, and perfectionistic, with extremely high expectations. The Firm-Critical coach is punitive when players do not perform well and is often observed as verbally demeaning, and prone to forcing players to perform difficult physical tasks as punishment for mistakes. Parents often describe this coach as having a Type A personality that often specifically includes little empathy and impulsivity. The goal is to win, and they attack this goal with great fervor. Parents and players view this coach as having a “short fuse” and someone who gets upset over small things. Time urgency drives them, and any activity that wastes time in practice is not tolerated.

The Unstructured-Critical coach is viewed by players as moody and unpredictable. This coach uses emotional manipulation to control players and get results. The use of guilt, blame, and shame is common. These coaches frequently hold themselves out to the team as martyrs and insist that players acknowledge all of the sacrifices that they are making for the team, e.g., leaving work early, buying equipment, and missing important family gatherings. They constantly complain, even when the team is doing well, yet provide little teaching. This type of coach will always find a problem and is viewed by others as pessimistic. Any small failure can result in a “sky is falling” response.

The Unstructured-Positive coach has no rules and few expectations and is comfortable with chaos. The coach is usually not process-oriented, so players are taught very few skills and usually are not required to have any physical conditioning in order to play. The Unstructured-Positive coach’s goal is to have fun, never compete and always be a friend to the players. Practices are viewed as social gatherings and very little teaching takes place. It is very important to this coach that the players like him or her, and conflict is perceived as something to be avoided at all cost. The result of this type of coaching is a pampered athlete who may present as a macho adult to the public but is developmentally immature (Glick, Stillman, Reardon, & Ritvo, 2012).

Firm-Positive Coaching is ideal. The coach has clear expectations for players and the players understand them. Consequences are clearly defined and seen by players as teaching moments instead of punishment. There is no yelling or verbal abuse. Rampant encouragement that focuses what the player is doing correctly is a part of all instruction. The goal is teaching the player how to improve instead of winning. Players and parents perceive this coach as fair and a good role model. The Structured-Positive coach has very good self-control and is not prone to anger. This coach has enough flexibility to teach in multiple formats in an effort to adapt to the learning styles of the individual player and to motivate players in a variety of ways. There are few coach-parent conflicts with this approach.

Future Considerations

This paper is an attempt to establish the metastasizing effects of pathological coaching on young athletes. Malignant coaching can be eradicated by intervening at the tertiary level with better youth coach instruction.
The model presented above serves as its own intervention. The authors have found that simply explaining the model to parents and coaches motivates adults to move toward the Firm-Positive approach in coaching and parenting. Moreover, parents and coaches easily identify their current approach and where they learned it (typically their own parents or coaches during childhood). Figure 2 serves as a set of comments to avoid saying and conversely teaches the coach the preferred verbalizations to instruct their players and teams.

With appropriate coaching in youth sports, children can grow to be psychologically healthy and avoid the development of hazardous attitudes.

References


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