

The influence of coaching style on player injury and participation

Coaches are an essential part of a sporting team's success.



A great coach can not only lead a team to victory, but can help players perform to the best of their ability, while still enjoying the game and staying free from injury.

In this edition of yRed, we look at how coaches can impact on young players' health and wellbeing and improve performance, on and off the sporting field. Coaching to reduce injury and increase performance is the focus of Youthsafe's new 'Front of Mind' workshop for coaches of young athletes.



IN AUSTRALIA, INJURIES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE MOST COMMONLY OCCUR DURING SPORTING ACTIVITIES ¹

Coaches are a key person of influence

Coaches, along with team mates, parents and older players act as a guide for the young person on how to best conduct themselves while training and playing sports⁴. Being new to a sport means that young people are learning from what they see and experience, and look to the coach for cues on how to act⁵ and as exemplars of behaviour⁶.

The coach-young athlete relationship is of particular significance for players aged around 14 to 16 years of age, as "...the coach may become a significant role model for a middle adolescent as they identify with non-parental adults"⁷ (p. 154).

"...[S]ome sports medicine professionals point directly to poor coaching as a factor in injury" (p. 466), which can be due to a lack of appropriate training or understanding of child development ^{6,8}.

By acknowledging their strengths and supporting their unique needs, coaches have an opportunity to use their position of influence to positively impact young people's development, performance and safety^{5,6,7,8}. The outcome will be better players, a better team and a great club.

How does young people's development impact on risk taking and behaviour in sport?

There are a few ways that young people's development can impact on the way they play sport, and therefore their risk of injury on the sporting field.

As there is generally an increase in risk taking behaviour in young people around 14 to 16 years of age, this is of course reflected in the way young people approach sports⁷. Taking unnecessary risks can lead to injury to themselves, team mates and others.

Developmentally young people may not fully understand the consequences of their actions so cannot see how their behaviour can lead to injury⁶. This also means they "...may not connect regular practice to future improvement in skills but rather attribute success or failure to their own uniqueness"⁶(p. 52). This means young people may not see the value in training or understanding the correct technique and how it can strengthen their bodies and prevent injury.



Moving into their later teenage years, young people may be grappling with conflicting work, study and relationship priorities so sports training and performance may take a back seat⁷, missing important training and conditioning sessions that help to decrease injury risk.

Physical changes at this critical growth stage can mean that young people's bodies may not be ready to take on the physical demands of high intensity training and performance⁷. It is the coach who is responsible for ensuring young people have sufficient rest and to manage the limitations there may be around their understanding of sports-related risk.

What can coaches do?

Understand adolescent development

The main strategy that coaches can implement to support young player safety and wellbeing is to understand the young players' specific "...emotional and psychological developmental stages and not treat them like 'little adults'⁸ (p. 468).

During adolescence, the brain is going through some changes that may impact on a young person's ability to assess risk and think things through rationally. This, combined with lifestyle and physical changes can impact on a young person's safety.

Coaches can limit the amount of training and modify the type of skills taught, to fit in with physical capabilities at each age⁷. Young people are then playing within their abilities, reducing the risk of injury.

In early adolescence [10 to 13 years] the concept of future time perspective is not fully matured and so the consequences of their actions, including training, practising a new skills, avoiding risks, need to be explained by the coach⁷.

The idea that once rules are explained they will be adhered to by young people isn't always the case as "...early adolescents often have difficulty extrapolating general rules of the game from one situation to another"⁷ (p. 152), and is something that coaches must take into consideration and manage.

The concept that success in sport is the result of training and practice, rather than an individual's innate ability is also something that can be unfamiliar to younger adolescents⁷. This is in contrast to those over 14 years of age who can evaluate strengths and weaknesses of themselves and fellow athletes, and develop a plan of how to improve⁷. At either stage the input of a coach is invaluable, as long as the coach is aware of the needs and abilities of each stage.

Work on Communication

The way that a coach communicates with young athletes, and what they communicate about, is key to helping young people understand sport related risks and how to manage them. Specific instructions, positive feedback and clear explanation of consequences can help young athletes play well, enjoy the sport and stay safe. To reduce injuries, clear adult instruction and guidance play a key role, particularly with younger athletes as they are developing new skills⁸.

When guiding young athletes on techniques and necessary skills, giving positive reinforcement unconditionally (so general comments such as 'good job' or 'nice try') is not effective⁸. Rather, giving specific information as part of criticism, related to building skills will have more impact. For example 'use two hands' or 'put your weight on your front foot'⁸ would be a more helpful way to positively reinforce correct behaviour. In Koester's study⁸ non-specific feedback was given to those with less ability and those with more ability received more specific, helpful critique. Giving the same type of instruction to all young players will result in team-wide improvements.

Giving specific instruction that is “error contingent, corrective instruction”⁸ (p. 468) helps young players learn the right technique, therefore decreasing injuries. For example, ‘you dropped the ball because you didn’t use two hands’⁸ (p. 468) explains what went wrong and why.



Demonstrate Leadership

Leadership style can have a very strong impact on the safety of your players and their enthusiasm for the sport.

A study of elite athletes found that *transformational leadership* rather than *performance-oriented leadership* was more effective in keeping players safe and motivated and in fact reduced the incidence of severe injuries⁹.

“Transformational leadership involves motivating and inspiring followers to go beyond their self-interest for the benefit of collective interests by providing vision, meaning, challenges and stimulation”⁹ (p. 1). This is in opposition to a performance-oriented leadership style where winning and succeeding are the focus. This leads young athletes to take a ‘win at all costs’ approach, increasing their risk of injury⁹.

The Positive Coaching Alliance has a wealth of other resources and tips to help develop a transformative leadership style: <https://www.positivecoach.org>

The Positive Coaching Alliance talks about leadership within the team – so the coach role is about recognising strengths and abilities of each player and getting them to show leadership in those areas. Creating opportunities for each team member to demonstrate their skills and support each other is a great example of transformational leadership. Asking young players to demonstrate a skill, buddy systems where stronger-skilled players support others, asking team members to recommend a warm-up exercise are a few examples. This way each player has a chance to demonstrate their unique team contribution and share their skills and abilities with others.

Coach as role model

We all want our young athletes to try their best and do well, and this can only be achieved by ensuring the team is strong and feels supported. The coach is the key person who can influence this and can foster a positive atmosphere.

Shields et al⁴ found that almost half the young athletes they surveyed said their coach has “angrily argued with a sports official” (p. 50). Of those surveyed, 35% said their coach had “angrily yelled at a player” (p. 50), with 36% of coaches self-reporting such behaviour. The latter in particular can have a devastating effect on younger players, as they may end up thinking the coach “hates them”⁷.

Keeping your cool in the heat of the game can be a challenge, but it’s key to ensuring young athletes stay safe and feel supported.

To ensure all team members have a good understanding of what behaviour is acceptable and what’s not, Shields et al⁴ suggest developing “collective norms”(p. 57) that are fostered by having “open-ended and frequent dialogue with players about what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior, seeking to develop consensus within the team” (p. 57).

As long as coaches keep it front of mind that their aim should be both “...preventing injury and maximizing enjoyment of the sport”⁸ (p. 468) young players will be safe, health and well on the sporting field. Understanding young player capabilities, as well as their limitations, will give coaches a real point of difference and lead their team to success.

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