DIFFERENT SPEEDS AND DIFFERENT NEEDS

HOW TO TEACH SPORTS TO EVERY KID

Gary Barber B.H., P.G.C.E., M.A.
St. Michael's University School—Junior School
Victoria, British Columbia

·P·A·U·L·H·
BROOKES
PUBLISHING Co.®

The individuals described in this book are composites based on the authors' experiences or real people whose situations are masked and used with permission.

The information provided in this book is in no way meant to substitute for a medical or mental health practitioner's advice or expert opinion. Readers should consult a health or mental health professional if they are interested in more information. This book is sold without warranties of any kind, express or implied, and the publisher and authors disclaim any liability, loss, or damage caused by the contents of this book.

Contents

Attitudes, Participation, and the Development of Friendships in Sports

Students understand only too well the relevance of attitudes in their sporting lives. They quickly learn that having a "good attitude" is rewarded—usually by praise from coaches and parents. They have learned that coaches will encourage them to bring a "positive attitude" to a challenge and how easy it is to develop a "negative attitude" toward sports. Sometimes, we confuse our young athletes by telling them to "lose the attitude!" The study of attitudes is a science in itself with such a vast amount of information available that it could overwhelm a reader and take us off topic. My purpose here is to help coaches, teachers, parents, and young athletes and their peers understand how attitudes about sports are formed and how they can either promote acceptance or reinforce exclusion.

What Are Attitudes, and How Are They Formed?

An attitude has been described as "a relatively lasting cluster of feelings, beliefs and behaviors directed toward specific persons, ideas, objects or groups" (Rajecki, 1982, as cited in Baron & Byrne, 1984, p. 126). When we have created an attitude, we have evaluated a situation and decided what it means to us. Based on our interpretation of that situation, this belief will then carry a connotation in our mind; it will either be viewed favorably, as in a positive attitude, or with concern, as in a negative attitude. The attitude may be a simple one based on personal experience, such as "I don't like doing push-ups; they make my arms sore." Or the attitude may be a more complex belief that has developed from discouraging experiences when feelings and beliefs were amplified by other people: "I hate sports; everybody laughs at me when I make a mistake."

There are many features of attitudes:

- They can be brief or long lasting.
- They may be deeply entrenched or easily changed.
- They can be highly personal or shared by a group.

We often develop our attitudes by observing others and being influenced by their attitudes, a process that is termed *social learning.* Positive role modeling is an important way to promote healthy and respectful attitudes and can have a long-lasting effect on the attitudes of young students.

We often participate in situations (sports) that are consistent with our attitudes. If our experience is a good one, it will strengthen the attitude and increase the likelihood that we will participate in similar situations in the future. If sports are fun and the environment promotes acceptance, the young athlete will likely continue to participate. The converse is also possible.

Adopting or imitating the views of a powerful figure (e.g., the most popular student in the class) can increase the possibility of acceptance. Conversely, taking a different stance may increase the chance that the individual attracts criticism. The implication is that a child struggling in sports may seek acceptance from peers by adopting attitudes that he or she does not necessarily believe. Group pressure to ridicule a child facing challenges can be self-perpetuating unless there is intervention from an influential figure (e.g., the coach, a popular peer).

What Makes an Attitude Toward Sports Positive or Negative?

Numerous studies emphasize the importance of having a positive attitude toward sports (Fland, Blair, & Blumenthal, 1992; McGinnis, Kanner, & DeGraw, 1991), but exactly what makes an attitude positive? The sporting experience can be defined in many ways. A positive experience for some children will be fully linked to outcome—if they win (or at least perform very well), then the assessment is viewed as favorable. Other young athletes with a different set of expectations may have a positive view if they simply get to play with their friends, or perhaps if they are praised for their effort. In a sad paradox, there are some participants who may find they had a positive experience in a practice (or game) when they were either left alone or not jeered by their teammates.

Attitudes are closely tied into the motives of participation; if these needs are not met (on a repeated basis), then the attitude (or reason for participation) may change. The negative attitudes that should concern parents and coaches are those that are firmly held and make the child believe that sports are something to avoid. Sports environments that expose the challenges that a child faces, then holds the child up to ridicule, can create negative experiences in the mind of the athlete. If a child is resilient, he or she may be able to cope for a while, but eventually it becomes too much, and the negative attitude creates avoidance behavior.

The Influence of Attitudes on Coaching and Teaching

The attitude of coaches or teachers toward the program that they are leading or the students that they are working with has been identified as a critical variable in the quality of their coaching effectiveness (Aicinena, 1991; Smith, 1993). Not surprisingly, a coach or teacher holding negative attitudes about the sport or the particular students playing in it undermines the students' quality of experience (Faucette & Patterson, 1989; Xiang, Lowy, & McBride, 2002). Although the formation of attitudes about students and performance can be developed from any number of sources, Doolittle, Dodds, and Placek (1993) noted that a coach's personal experiences in sports (either in school or the community) can often be resistant to self-examination. However, other studies have shown that a coach's attitudes can be changed by experiences while coaching, especially if the individual becomes reflective (Clarke & Hubball, 2001; Curtner-Smith, 1996).

How Can You Change or Influence Attitudes that Inhibit Participation or Make a Student Feel Excluded?

It is all very well identifying the origin of the attitude and its strength, but concerned parents and coaches may feel that they need to help the child change the restrictive attitude. How is this done? Persuading people to change their views is a lucrative field in the study of human behavior. The advertising industry relies on its ability to persuade you to choose a particular product; political parties rely on persuasion to change your view and encourage you to vote for them. Parents and teachers draw on the same skills to help encourage a child to take a healthy risk in learning. But can you change the attitude of a child who absolutely refuses to take part in sports?

What are the characteristics of persuasion? What makes some people very good at persuading others to change their attitude, whereas other communicators fail to achieve their goal and only make their targets become even more entrenched in their view? The following example demonstrates an approach to convince a reluctant child to participate in sports.

Barry is an 11-year-old who likes to play on the computer but is reluctant to join in sports. The only time he tried a team sport—baseball—he lasted four practices before being asked to leave by the coach. He was disruptive, disinterested, and argumentative. Barry cannot concentrate for too long, and many of his teachers suspect that he has ADD. This is probably inaccurate, because when Barry finds something interesting, he can concentrate for extended periods and can produce some good work. His attitude toward sports has hardened (maybe as a result of his baseball experience), and he has not been encouraged to be active by his teachers. His parents have always assumed that he just prefers solitary activities—playing computer games—and that Barry is

just one of those children who doesn't like sports. On a recent trip to the family doctor, Barry's parents were informed that Barry is putting on weight. His parents have decided to enroll him in the local soccer team. Barry is refusing to go. "Why should I? I hate sports!" What can Barry's parents do to change his attitude?

The Features of Persuasion

There are three areas that determine the power of persuasion:

- Who is doing the persuading? Will this person be influential or ineffective?
- What will they say, and how will they say it?
- How will the message recipients respond?

In Barry's case, the individuals who are most likely to influence or change his attitude are his parents, teachers, or new coach. A close friend may also have some sway over Barry. As his attitude toward sports is set, he has bad memories, and he sees no purpose in participating, a careful plan will be needed to bring the desired attitudinal change. It should be noted that people with a strong need for social approval (they want other people to like them) are easier to persuade than those who don't really care what others think of them. Research also suggests that individuals with low self-esteem are easier to persuade than those with high self-esteem (Brockner, 1983).

Who Is Doing the Persuading?

Effective communicators use their knowledge in clear and efficient ways to change beliefs. But knowledge alone is not enough. Charismatic communicators use their speech—in tone, style, and speed—to sway the minds of the listeners. Liking the communicator also determines how effective the attempt at persuasion will be. The individual who works with Barry will need to be able to understand his needs and look for ways that will encourage Barry to take a risk. If this person is someone whom Barry trusts and is friendly with, the attempt has a greater chance for success.

What Will They Say, and How Will They Say It?

It is highly likely that Barry is going to resist initial attempts to persuade him. Sometimes parents connect emotions, behavior, and consequences in one broad sweeping message: "How will you ever have friends if you don't join this team?" This is hardly going to strike an agreeable chord in Barry! The message may carry more persuasive power when a commitment to participate is linked to a reward. Barry is not intrinsically motivated—given the choice, he will avoid sports. There has to be something else that will change his defiant attitude; words alone will not achieve that aim. As soon as you mention reward or incentive systems, the connection to bribery is made,

which evokes emotional responses from critics. Obviously the desire is to have Barry participate because he wants to, because it is fun, and not just because he is going to get a reward. The effectiveness of a reward system is all in the design. Behavioral psychologists are highly skilled at shaping behavior by using reinforcers for positive changes; this might include stickers, ink stamps, paper certificates, and points that can be accumulated and then cashed in for a reward (preferably something that is not food based).

A series of incremental steps, with built-in recognition for any positive changes that Barry makes, may be designed in the following manner:

- Barry's parents just happen to drive past the sports field where the other children are practicing. They stop the car and watch for a few minutes. Barry's parents make no comments.

- The following week, the process is repeated. Barry's parents comment about the fun that Barry's friends seem to be having. No attempt to have Barry participate is made.

- Discussion around the family dinner table is led by the parents. They detail how the sports club is going on a trip—not sports related (the movies, and so forth)—and how much fun this club seems to have.

- Barry's parents invite a child who plays on the sports team over for a playdate.

- On the day of the next practice Barry is told that they are going to watch the team play. Barry can then ask a few people on the team to join him for a treat.

- Increasingly the parents are preparing and gently directing Barry toward taking the risk to participate. The parents need to counsel the coach on Barry's needs. The coach can use a few influential and popular kids to greet Barry and look after him in the practice.

- The parents should observe from the sidelines and lend a quiet but reaffirming voice of support. Hopefully, Barry will see out the practice. Give him lots of praise—not saccharine; that particular currency has little value—to recognize his effort and genuine accomplishment by taking a risk. Reward Barry with something that he likes to do and that has to be earned—more computer time? Barry may now see a connection among sports, friendship, and his other hobbies.

- If the sporting environment is well balanced, blending competition, fun, friendship, and social opportunities, the chance of Barry changing his attitude toward participation increases.

- The coach and Barry's parents will need to support him for quite a while as his confidence is fragile at best and his resilience to setback is limited.

How Will the Message Recipients Respond?

The power of persuasion fades when it either undermines or is disconnected to the athlete's motives for participating in a sport. A young athlete who just

wants to be part of a team and does not have a very strong desire to achieve high levels of performance may well be resistant to a message that tries to persuade him or her to behave in a different way. Conversely, persuasion is very effective when an athlete has motives for participating that match the intentions behind the message. For example, an athlete with a strong need for achievement and who may be recovering from injury would embrace a persuasive message about his or her athletic capabilities.

The Role of Conformity in Excluding or Accepting Young Athletes in Sports

There are occasions when young athletes change their attitude or behavior so that they may conform to social norms. Conformity is a powerful process that creates pressures on an individual to follow a set of social rules or behaviors (something that is also called social norms). These norms can be positive rituals that welcome all athletes into a sport; for example, the coach may expect all athletes to join in a team cheer. Perhaps the team has a special way of making a newcomer feel welcome. Participation in the traditions of the club increases the possibility of acceptance.

Sometimes the social norms are unwritten, and this can present a challenge for young athletes lacking confidence or a child with special needs. Students with an ASD are not skilled at picking up subtle social cues; this can present difficulties for them to find acceptance in groups where such codes exist.

Sometimes the social norms pressure individuals to behave in ways that perhaps are discordant with their personal belief systems. Hazing is a well-known initiation practice in which new members of an organization have to comply with requests before they are accepted. Some of these rituals are fun and do not subject the individual to abuse (physical, verbal, and so forth). The predominant view is that hazing is team building and enhances the cohesion of the organization. Few sports outwardly sanction hazing behavior, but many still allow initiation ceremonies. These need to be monitored, for this is fertile area for exclusion, discrimination, and bullying to take root. Sometimes the initiation practice is demeaning to the individual, and this is clearly unacceptable.

If acceptance into the sports club involves either coercion or the perception of threat, this constitutes a hazing practice. Hazing is particularly damaging when it appears to have the sanction of the coach. It is great to make children feel welcome and make their entry into the club a memorable experience, but it is completely unacceptable to force them (either through coercion or through subtle pressure) into hazing activities. It is strongly recommended that a sports organization's risk management policy refer to hazing and give coaches a clear guideline as to what is acceptable.

The effects of conformity on athlete behavior are influenced by a number of principles, including group size, similarity, and expertise (credibility).

Group Size

Group size is an interesting feature of conformity. It is a principle that has been extensively studied in business in attempts to understand what group processes are at play in research and development. Three people in a group exert a significant effect on conformity, but the relationship is not linear; that is, the more people in the group, the greater the conformity (Wilder, 1977). What is important is the profile of the three or so individuals in the group that have influence. People who are perceived by others to be "low status" will exert only a limited influence on the group norms of behavior. Students with challenges—especially in the areas of social interactions—will likely have to conform to things they do not necessarily believe just to gain acceptance. High-status individuals can exert a significant influence on a group; this influence can be used to promote acceptance or to exclude.

Similarity

When athletes feel that they "belong" in the group and are surrounded by like-minded people, there is a greater degree of conformity. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that membership in a group boosts the athletes' feelings of personal identity as well as provides a connection to the group identity. This is of importance to young athletes, especially those with recognized challenges, who have experienced difficulty being accepted in other social circles (school, clubs, and so forth). Social comparison theory (Goethals & Nelson, 1977) suggests that people will interact more positively when they meet someone who seems to be like them and in a different way to people they perceive as being dissimilar.

Respect and Expertise

An athlete's respect for the coach and teammates is built on trust, credibility, and the level of expertise. Coaches who are strong communicators, who have a good level of technical knowledge (expertise), and who can be trusted to act in a manner that supports and leads all athletes will be influential figures. Coaches who are respected are likely to have athletes who conform more than athletes who do not respect the coach.

Why Do Some People Not Conform?

From *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1945) to *Rebel without a Cause* (Lindner, 1944), literature has long celebrated the uniqueness of someone who wants to be remembered as an individual. Young people with special needs are intriguing individuals. Although their behaviors, their needs, and their way of living are sometimes not easily understood, they have strengths and talents just like any other children. Many of these children do not easily conform to

the social norms associated with sports, often because they don't understand them. Some sports have unwritten rules. For example, in ice hockey it is expected that you protect the goalkeeper; in soccer, it is expected that players kick the ball out of play when an opponent is injured, and so forth. Children with learning challenges may fail to pick up the subtleties of these "codes," and this failure tends to marginalize them even more.

Conformity and the Halo Effect

Getting along with your peers is an important motive for children who participate in sports. Everyone wants to be liked, and if possible, to be very popular. Invariably, popularity in sports is closely connected to ability: Children with well-developed sports skills are highly regarded by their peers.

Conforming to the group norms has always been a powerful motivator. The army understands this only too well and builds in all kinds of traditions and rituals that reward and demand conformity (thus, following orders). Children involved in sports will recognize that performing to a high level attracts recognition and popularity. Unfortunately, it is more difficult to be popular if your skills are underdeveloped. Children tend to exclude kids who are lacking in skill and perceived as being "different," and these children tend to either remain alone or participate on the fringes of the group.

The desire to be accepted sometimes translates into inappropriate behavior from the excluded child. This child may mimic the actions of the popular child or the peer group in order to gain recognition. The child may take greater risks to win approval; these risks, sadly, may include bullying another child.

When children (and adults) want to achieve popularity, sometimes they believe that "hanging out" with the most popular and powerful individual will win them the respect that they desire. This phenomenon is known in psychology as the *halo effect*. This may be advantageous if the popular child is welcoming and excludes nobody; it does, however, give the influential child a sense of power and control over other children, and when misused, this forms the core of bullying behavior.

Guozhen, Jinghai, Yimin, and Shaoqiu (1992) investigated the effects of conformity on moral judgment. They found that a situation directed by an authoritarian adult conveys the greatest influence on the judgments of children (ages 8–12 years). A coach who demands that his players act aggressively and disrespectfully to children who have lesser abilities would be influential. This is not surprising, as the moral development of these kids is nowhere close to being complete. Children are often interested in playing with those who are similar to them in appearance. This phenomenon becomes especially pronounced in the teenage years when the desire to "fit in" or "belong" gives rise to group subcultures. In my teenage era (1970s–1980s England) groups clustered around different music styles (rockers, punk, mods), fashion styles,

and preferred methods of transportation. Sports are not much different—in fact, in North America it is a subculture in itself: the jocks. Regrettably, to be fully accepted as a jock requires a high level of athletic competence. Children who have difficulty in sports may not wish to be identified as a jock but just want to play a game that they like. Children who deviate from the norms of group behavior are more likely to be rejected.

Seconds Out! Play Sports!

My teammates at my rugby club certainly didn't know what to make of me! I would show up to practices on a bike my grandma gave me, complete with the shopping basket hanging on the front. I really liked that bike as it was easy to carry my equipment in. My dad couldn't drive me to games or practices, so I needed to cycle everywhere. We couldn't afford brand-new equipment, so I made do with shirts passed on by the coach. I even bought my rugby boots secondhand at a garage sale. For a while I had the nickname "Seconds," as in secondhand. I hated that name, I really did!

Does Athletic Skill (or Lack of It) Influence a Student's Popularity?

It is likely that we all have memories of children in our PE classes who had poor athletic skills. Ask yourself, were they the most or least popular children? The chances are these children were marginalized. A lack of athletic success does reflect well on a child's popularity; sadly, the converse is also likely to be true. Children are attracted to other kids who are outgoing, have good conversational skills, excel in valued activities such as sports, and are lavish in dispensing praise and approval.

Not a Fading Memory

My memories of school sports are not great, to be honest. I was always lapped in the fitness run. I couldn't kick the soccer ball with any accuracy, or make a lay-up, and I was always the last to be picked for each game. No one ever wanted to partner with me. Why would they? I was useless.

Friendship and Sports

Research has shown that children consider sports as a significant way to develop friendships. Weiss and Duncan (1992) suggested that emotional support for athletes, the affirmation of their athletic ability, and the promotion of self-esteem were important reasons for a child to participate in sports. Companionship, loyalty, and intimacy are important motives for participation. Research has suggested that lonely children are likely to be less active than children who have well-developed friendships (Page, Frey, Talbert, & Falk, 1992).

Friendship has also been recognized as a very important component of girls' participation in sports (Duncan, Boyce, Itami, & Puffenbarger, 1983). Companionship was considered to be more important than a game's outcome for girls ages 10–15 years. Clearly, if we want to build on a child's interest in sports, we need to acknowledge that friendship and social opportunities are meaningful sources of motivation. A sports culture that excessively emphasizes performance and competitive outcomes may actually undermine some athletes' main reasons for participation.

Research has shown that children who are either neglected or rejected by their peers are more likely to engage in solitary play and be at risk for internalizing disorders such as anxiety or depression (Rubin, 1985). Children who are completely rejected (and on an ongoing basis) have been found to be at risk of aggression from other children (Coie & Kuiper-Schmidt, 1983).

Smith (1999) reported that young athletes (middle school age) who indicated that they had a close friend in the sport were more likely to embrace challenges and be physically involved than athletes without a close friend. McNeal (1995) noted that interaction in extracurricular sports provides "fringe" students with connections to students who have a positive outlook on sports. It also helps these children to find a venue of access to the more popular members of the school population.

Final Thoughts

Children with poorly developed skills often experience peer rejection and difficulties in their social and emotional development (McKay & Keyes, 2001). Research has confirmed what we have long observed in our school clubs and sports organizations: Peer culture can either articulate effective inclusion and the acceptance of athletes with challenges or promote exclusion (Corsaro, 2003; Fernie, Kantor, & Whaley, 1995).