

How Parents and Coaches Influence Youth Footballers

Ben Stephenson, MSc

Recent research has looked into how the environment created by parents and coaches can either positively or negatively influence how a youth footballer is motivated, the friendships they form and how they feel about their own abilities. Past research found that parents and coaches can create either enjoyable or stressful sporting experiences for youth sportspeople and this can often determine whether they quit sport or continue to participate.

The Research

677 Norwegian youth footballers, both male and female, aged 10-14 filled in questionnaires based on how they perceived their parental and coach support, their motivation to play football, how much they liked their teammates and how they rated their own ability.

Winning verses Mastering

It is believed that there are two forms of motivation in sport; winning and mastering. Those who play only to win tend to believe that they must become the perfect player, can never make a mistake and are only good if their team wins. Coaches who create this “play to win environment” are often critical of players, demand high playing standards and praise only the top players. This contrasts to those who play sport because they enjoy it and enjoy learning and mastering new skills. Coaches who create this “play to master” environment often praise players for trying hard, always encourage and make all players feel part of the team.

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The research found that if parents and coaches had high expectations of players and were highly critical, i.e. adopted a largely play to win style, this had a negative effect on players. These players were overly concerned with mistakes, had low beliefs about their own ability and had less friends on their team. A lack of teammates who were friends occurred often if the coach created a feeling of high interteam rivalry where everyone was “playing for their place”.

However, if coaches were supportive of players, i.e. adopted a largely play to master approach, it was found that players had high beliefs about their own ability and had many friendships amongst teammates. It was also interesting to find that even if players had parents who were highly critical but coaches who were supportive then players still had high beliefs about their abilities and teammates as friends. Therefore whilst it is important for parents to be educated in the importance of supporting and not pressurising their child when playing sport; it is vital that coaches understand the need to reinforce positive behaviours and create an environment where players are enjoying football and the process of learning.

Why is this Important?

Playing in an environment that has high expectations and is highly critical can lead to negative thoughts and behaviours in youth footballers and these negative thoughts and behaviours can have wider reaching effects. Youths who believe that they have to be perfect in everything and never make a mistake can develop poor psychological health as they go into adolescence. Players who do not get on well with teammates, showing poor peer relations, may later develop antisocial behaviour. Finally, players who feel that they are not very good are unlikely to want to play football and will eventually drop out of the game, something that nobody wants.

The Importance of Perceptions

Many coaches may feel that the above is nothing new to them and that they strive to make sure that players are enjoying football however it is important to note that the current research was based on perceptions by the players. As a coach what you think you are doing and acting like may not be the same as how a child interprets your actions and it is important to make sure every player feels valued and is enjoying themselves.

Summary

If parents and coaches solely focus on winning and being the best then youth players are likely to also share these views and in turn are more likely to think less of themselves in terms of ability and develop less friendships with team members. If coaches provide more support and make the player feel like they are valued then the player is more likely to enjoy playing football and in turn have a more positive belief about their ability and develop many friendships with teammates.

Play to Win Coaching Behaviour	Play to Master Coaching Behaviour
Score line is the most important thing.	Learning the skills of the game is the most important thing.
Being critical of mistakes.	Encouraging and supporting players when they make mistakes.
Promoting “play for your place” mentality.	Giving every player a fair chance regardless of ability.
Expecting high standards from players.	Encouraging an it’s ok to lose mindset.
Giving special attention to elite players	Treating all players as equal.

Questions to Reflect on

This article does not want to suggest that coaches who focus on winning are some type of “tyrants” who purposely try to knock the confidence of young players. With the nature of football sometimes parents and coaches can get carried away in the moment. The questions

below are for coaches to reflect on and hopefully think of ways to make the environment their players are in more supportive and enjoyable.

How does the way you act when your team wins differ from when you lose?

Is there a player or group of players who you praise more often than others?

Do you promote a “play for your place” mentality where players see team mates as rivals?

What ways could you promote the importance of learning and mastering a skill?

What does a good balance of coaching to win and coaching to master look like?

Original Research conducted by:

Yngvar Ommundsen, PhD, Glyn C. Roberts, PhD, Pierre-Nicolas Lemyre, PhD,
and Blake W. Miller, PhD

Parental and Coach Support or Pressure on Psychosocial Outcomes of Pediatric Athletes in
Soccer

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Please contact matthew.pain@thefa.com for the full article.