



Families and Children: Health and Wellness

The Role of Coaches in the Mental Health of Youth Athletes

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Introduction

It is no secret technology has had a profound impact on shaping the twenty-first century. Computers are thinner, TVs are bigger, and shopping can be done from the comfort of one's living room. Despite all these changes, one thing that has remained constant is people's love of sports. Whether it was to watch the game, the commercials, or the halftime shows, the 2024 Super Bowl set the record as the most viewed telecast of all time with the 2023 Super Bowl being the previous record holder. Among these viewers were children across the country with dreams of playing in their own Super Bowl, World Series, WNBA/NBA Finals, or World Cup. To achieve these dreams, coaches can play a significant role in helping youth athletes develop mental and physical stamina to compete in sports at the highest level.

In 2020, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that 54.1% of children aged 6-17 had been involved in sports within the past year (Black et al., 2022). Despite minor differences between gender, the study indicated that over half of the youth population in America was involved in some form of organized athletic activity (Walton et al., 2022, p. 119). In theory, these statistics are encouraging as there are many psychological, biological, and social benefits associated with sport participation. Furthermore, these settings can foster important developmental skills such as responsibility, communication, and emotional regulation (Walton et

al., 2024). Unfortunately, there are also unique challenges and stressors accompanying these benefits that negatively impact a young athlete's mental health if left untreated.

A study conducted by Walton et al (2024) took a closer look at some the primary factors afflicting this population. Immense pressure to perform can lead to perfectionistic tendencies and self-criticism (ps. 120-123). Burnout, which is marked by “physical and emotional exhaustion, can lead to a reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation” (p. 123). Symptoms of burnout have been heightened by the increase in sport specialization at a young age. In addition, youth athletes are under pressure from interpersonal conflict stemming from both parents and peers. Finally, abuse/maltreatment, injury and concussion, body image and weight concerns, and disrupted sleep are causes for concern as well (p. 123-124).

Role of Coaches

It is important to note that nearly 50% of all psychological disorders begin before one reaches fourteen years old. Within this group of adolescents, over a third never pursue professional help (Ferguson et al., 2018, p. 236). This is primarily due to a lack of awareness and the negative stigma surrounding mental health services. While these statistics pertain to the youth and adolescent population, athletics present a golden opportunity to serve over half of these young Americans. Coaches can play a significant role in supporting the mental health of young athletes. If coaches are given the right tools and training, they have the capacity to facilitate change in a profound way on a national level. Fortunately, many coaches have already accepted and acknowledged the responsibility to promote and support the mental health of their athletes (Elliott et al., 2023, p. 2).

The first step towards cultivating a healthier environment for young athletes is increasing the mental health literacy of coaches. In a study conducted by Ferguson et al. (2018), they noted that “in most cases coaches were unsure of *what* help was necessary and unsure of *how* to provide that help” (p. 247). Furthermore, some coaches were hesitant to address mental health-related issues due to the negative stigma and corresponding player reactions. As it stands, some coaches in the study reported they would never use the words “mental health” to address concerns because players would “shut down” (p. 243). This kind of response is to be expected of a population whose environment so highly rewards values like mental fortitude and the concept of never showing weakness (Watson, et al., 2022, p. 125). This kind of mentality, be it overt or covert, teaches young athletes to downplay their emotional struggles or hide them completely (p. 125).

To combat the existing stigma, a greater emphasis must be placed on awareness and normalization. As it turns out, coaches already have ideas on how this can be accomplished. Those who participated in Ferguson et al. (2018)'s study suggested that a social media campaign could increase mental health awareness (p. 244). In addition, posters/flyers positioned in frequently traveled places had the capacity to garner attention. Furthermore, coaches determined that having mental health-related information readily available on a club or organization's website would be a simple and easy way for young athletes and their parents to access information when needed. Finally, the authors of the study suggested an increased emphasis on utilizing professional athletes to decrease the stigma towards mental health (p. 247). These ideas

have the capacity to take the burden of broaching the topic off coaches' shoulders by evoking change on a societal level and making the topic of mental health in athletic settings less taboo.

Beyond advocating for awareness and being receptive to conversations from players surrounding mental health, the next step for coaches is education. It stands to reason that coaches desire players to trust them with their psychological struggles, they must first strive to ensure they themselves are not the primary stressors. If used inappropriately, a coach's position of power can have a profoundly negative impact on the lives of their players. Issues like neglect, maltreatment, and abuse by coaches can result in depression, anxiety, PTSD, and eating disorders (Walton et al., 2024, p. 124). Furthermore, the athletic arena can also be a breeding ground for "sport-specific forms of abuse such as body shaming, and encouragement to dope, cheat, or play when injured/concussed" (p. 122). Accountability, awareness, and a focus on coaches' own mental health may serve to minimize these risks.

Trauma-Informed Coaching

In addition to eliminating more obvious behaviors, there is also a movement for coaches to begin adopting a trauma-informed coaching style. SAMHSA defines trauma as "a physically or emotionally harmful event that deleteriously impacts individuals' physical and mental health" (Hussey et al., 2023, p. 29). These events, especially repeated events or exposure occurring in childhood, can result in a plethora of mental health problems such as substance abuse, depression, heart disease, low self-esteem, trouble in relationships, and more (Hertzler-McCain et al., 2023, p. 1). Furthermore, they can negatively affect youth development via behavior, impulse control, attachment, and cognitive functioning (Hussey et al., 2023, p. 29). While traumatic events may not occur on the field, coaching with a trauma-informed lens has the potential to radically benefit the mental health of young athletes (p. 30).

One study conducted by Hussey et al. (2023) discussed the benefits of incorporating five trauma-sensitive principles that are tailored to youth athletics. They include "physical and emotional safety, long-term engagement, attachment focus, supportive organizational structure, and integration with local cultural practices" (p. 30). To implement these principles, a myriad of steps was suggested such as coach education, cultivating supportive and safe environments centered around relationship development, and autonomy. The results of the study generated a myriad of ideas and insights related to the implementation of these principles.

To create a safe and supportive environment, concepts like consistency and predictability were prioritized within scheduling and routines (p. 33). In addition, facilitators called for the restructuring of some of the conventional sport practices to decrease the risk of traumatization. For example, children living in a neighborhood where gun violence is prevalent may be triggered by the shooting of a gun to signal the start of a race. Changes like this can go a long way in fostering a more trauma-informed environment for youth athletes. Facilitators also described an emphasis on creating meaningful relationships that were consistent, stable, and long-lasting (p. 33). Unfortunately, these changes may be more difficult to come by as many youth coaching volunteer their time or coach specific age brackets.

Findings from the study also outlined the importance of giving a voice to young athletes (p. 35). Having more decision-making power allowed for athletes to have more of a say in the kind of warm-ups they participated in and helped to reduce the perceived authoritative power of the coaches. Coaches in the study recognized the positive impact it had on the weighted power dynamic, and stated a focus should be placed on finding areas to give athletes a choice without undermining their position as a coach. Moreover, while many of the needs addressed in the study were tailored to the pandemic, coaches discussed the importance of providing tangible assistance like information regarding transportation, internet access for homework, meals, and equipment.

Hertzler-McCain et al., (2023) also conducted a study around the effects of trauma-informed coaching on athletes at the college level. Ninety-one athletes participated in the study, with 52.7% having experienced one or more traumatic events in their life (p. 8). This is on par with national statistics, with research indicating 50% - 80% of individuals experiencing at least one trauma by the time they reached adulthood (p. 1). The most common form of trauma experienced by the athletes in the study was unwanted sexual contact, followed by witnessing a situation where someone was or could have been killed or significantly injured (p. 8). Other forms of trauma present in the study included witnessing the death or serious injury of another, risk of personal injury or death, physical attack/mugging, punishment/abuse as a minor, major natural disasters, serious accident, and threatening illness or injury (p. 8). While the participants' age range were outside the scope of our target population, the authors of the study support the notion of interventions being beneficial at the youth level (p. 3).

In the study, various therapeutic techniques were used with the aim of helping athletes “work on skills to cope with stress, regulate their emotions, and build concentration that they can use in sports and in life” (p. 2). Specifically, the trauma-informed coaching techniques used included, but were not limited to, encouraging progress over performance, time for personal and group reflection, abstaining from yelling at athletes, being receptive to input from athletes, and coaching in pairs permit individual support (p. 2). Some of the techniques implemented were already set in place; of the ten new techniques, the athletes in the study expressed a desire for eight of them to be administered to their team (p. 9),

The results of the study indicated that the two most coveted techniques to be implemented were player input (86.1%), reframing mistakes in a constructive way (80%), and coaches being available for players before or after practice (77.3%), with the latter two having already been implemented (p. 9). All 17 coaches in the study strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with reframing mistakes in a productive fashion, and 15 of them agreed that trauma-informed coaching is needed at the collegiate level (p. 9). While some techniques were less desirable for coaches, the majority of the techniques were viewed favorably. Most importantly, they study show both coaches and athletes were receptive to establishing trauma-informed coaching techniques at their program.

Despite the evidence to support trauma-informed coaching and an increased focus on the mental health of young athletes, issues regarding instillation, training, and unanimous adherence to agreed upon changes still remain. Coaches involved in Ferguson et al. (2018)'s study expressed a desire for a face-to-face educational setting followed by an optional online workshop to receive further information. Moreover, they reported wanting in-person sessions to be less than 90

minutes and trainings to be divided by sport to avoid inattentiveness towards information unrelated to their own sport. Even if these workshops were made mandatory, continued success would require financial backing and extensive collaboration with community partners (Hussey et al., 2023, p. 36).

Conclusion

In conclusion, sport environments are fertile grounds for positively impacting the mental health of many young Americans (Walton et al., 2024). Coaches perceived roles as motivators, educators, confidants, and mentors make them ideal vehicles for delivering this change (Ferguson et al., 2018). There are still logistical issues surrounding the delivery of these services, but the potential benefits they stand to provide are evident. Coaches may not have the capacity and training to treat or cure mental health problems, but the title they hold, and the trust given to them by players gives them a unique position to recognize symptoms and reduce the chances of re-traumatization (Hertzler-McCain et al., 2023). The blueprint of delivery has yet to be created, but the ideas of how to create a lasting positive impact on the mental health of young athletes have already begun to take shape.

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