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Introduction

Sport participation for young people has been associated with numerous potential physical, psychological, and social benefits, including for example, enhanced self-esteem, perseverance, physical strength and agility, and the establishment of friendships [1, 2]. Despite these well-documented benefits, sport participation for children and adolescents has also been associated with detrimental outcomes such as the occurrence of injuries—the focus of this book. To-date, the attention on injuries in children’s and adolescent sport has been directed primarily at the occurrence of physical injuries ranging from growth-plate damage, concussions, and overuse injuries as examples [3].

Far less attention, however, has been devoted to the occurrences and prevention of psychological injuries in children’s and adolescent sport. Despite long-standing concerns expressed by scholars about the competitive nature of organized youth sport and its negative effects on the psychological

well-being of young athletes, many of these concerns still characterize sport experiences for young people, including as examples: an overemphasis on winning at the expense of holistic development, the instrumentalization of child athletes, and overzealous coaches and parents [4–6]. Previous researchers have highlighted psychological implications of these experiences for young athletes, including stress and anxiety, burnout, disordered eating, and identity challenges upon retirement from sport [7–9].

Augmenting these long-standing concerns about the competitive culture of children’s and adolescent sport is an increase in academic and public awareness of the potential for psychological harm to be experienced by youth athletes within their important relationships in sport—namely with their parent(s), coach(es), and teammates. This enhanced awareness may, in part, be attributed to the child-centered approach that pervades society more broadly, as reflected by child-rearing and educational practices that prioritize the holistic development of the child including physical, psychological, social, and spiritual considerations [10]. Additionally, the growth of social media has inevitably raised public awareness of sport-related practices that are psychologically harmful to young people. For example, U.S. Olympic gymnast Dominique Moceanu’s accounts of struggling with long-term psychological harm as a result of being continually belittled and degraded by her coaches were

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widely publicized [11]. Further, the media is rife with shocking stories of hazing and bullying. For example, Carson Shields, a Canadian junior hockey player, became addicted to illicit drugs and was diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder after a hazing incident that included being forced to drink excessive amounts of alcohol and having pictures taken of him while teammates performed degrading acts on him [12].

The purpose of this chapter is to review the research on harm experienced by young athletes in the important relationships within the sport context—namely, those with the coach(es), parent(s), and teammates. Using an athlete-centered perspective, research on harmful parental behaviors, emotionally abusive coaching behaviors, as well as hazing and bullying, will be reviewed with a focus on the psychological injuries caused for the young athlete. Recommendations are made for further research and applied interventions that focus on the cognitive and affective elements of empathy-building.

Athlete-Centered Perspective

In this chapter, the issue of athlete psychological harm will be reviewed from an athlete-centered perspective using a modified framework based on Hellstedt's work [13]. Hellstedt referred to the "athletic triangle" which includes the parent, coach, and athlete, and uses family systems theory to understand the influence of parents and coaches on the development of the athlete. In children's and adolescent sport in particular, the adults in positions of authority, namely the parents and coaches, have particular influence on the nature and quality of the sport experience. We are suggesting a modification to Hellstedt's framework which includes the addition of teammates to the athletic triangle. This modification is proposed because peers in sport play an important role in affecting the nature of the sport experience. While this is easily understood in sports that are traditionally viewed as team sports such as basketball, hockey, or soccer, we argue that even in sports that are typically characterized as individual sports such as swimming, track and field, or

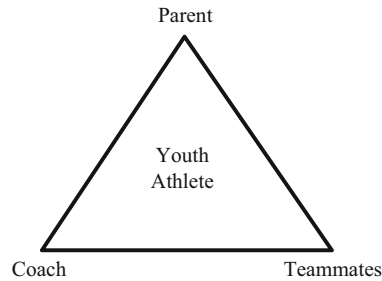


Fig. 13.1 Modified Hellstedt's athletic triangle

gymnastics, these athletes train and travel to competitions together as a group and often share important friendships. Further, it is important to consider the influence of teammates in children's and adolescent sport because developmentally, children and adolescents rely on peer relationships to learn about themselves and their competencies, to help construct their identities, and to meet needs for social connectedness and a sense of belonging [14].

Using an athlete-centered perspective, we propose that Hellstedt's model be revised to reflect a focus on the athlete and his or her overall development and athletic success in the center of the athletic triangle, with various influences from the coach(es), parent(s), and teammates on each point of the triangle. This revised framework is seen in Fig. 13.1.

The existing research on psychological harm within the relationships an athlete has with the parent, coach, and teammates will be addressed in turn.

Psychological Harm Within the Athlete–Parent Relationship

"Mary, kill the bitch!" These are the words of Jim Pierce, father of the former French and Australian Open champion Mary Pierce, when his daughter was 12 and playing a junior match. He also punched two fans at the French Open in 1992 ... Mary later acquired a restraining order against her father and hired a bodyguard to protect her; the Women's Tennis Association banned her father from all tournament sites. [15]

"My dad could be pretty intense, too. He'd needle me anytime I decided to come home after school instead of going to the recreation center to

work on my basketball game and play pickup with older kids. At high school basketball games, students who wanted a little bit of a sideshow with the main event would sit near my father, who could be counted on to yell things like, "Don't sub in Jeff! He's fucking terrible!" ... It got a little intense, and there were times when my father's exhortations made me cry, and when I said things to him that I regret ever saying." [16]

Clearly, one of, if not the most, critical relationships a young athlete has is with her or his parent(s). A plethora of literature highlights the important role parents can play by introducing young people to sport, and providing financial, instrumental, and psychological support for athletes to train and compete [17, 18]. On the other hand, researchers have also identified parental behaviors that have detrimental effects on young athletes' psychological health.

Child and adolescent athletes' perceptions of parental overinvolvement for example, have been positively associated with anxiety and burnout [19]. Similarly, perceived parental pressure and excessively high expectations for performance have been linked with increased anxiety amongst youth athletes [20, 21]. Sometimes the excessive pressure to perform well is manifested in harsh criticisms from parents; in fact, Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, et al. [22] reported that amongst 189 U.S. youth sport parents, 13 % admitted to angrily criticizing their child's performance. Similarly, in Kidman and colleagues' observations of youth sport competitions, 34 % of the verbal comments from parents were negative in nature, and included scolding the child and criticizing their child's performance [23].

In addition to having direct influences on a child's psychological health, parents play important roles in helping the child navigate important relationships with others in sport including the coach and teammates. One may intuitively assume that parents play a protective role for their children; in fact, Brackenridge [24] suggests that parents play a key role in preventing the sexual abuse of their children by coaches. Interestingly however, research on athletes' experiences of emotionally abusive coaching behaviors suggests that parents are socialized into the sport culture in such a way as to become

bystanders in their children's experiences of abuse. More specifically, Kerr and Stirling [25] reported that parents are socialized to accept the coach's authority and expertise and to relinquish control of the nature of their children's sport experiences to the coach. Further, parents learn that what they may initially deem to be inappropriate coaching methods are normalized by other parents as just "part of the game" and thus come to accept them as well.

Further research is needed to examine ways in which parents can enhance their child's psychological health in the sport environment, including the protection of their child from potentially harmful interactions with other stakeholders. Consistent with this view, Fredricks and Eccles ([26], p.145) write, "considering the potential of parents to have either a positive or negative role in children's sport experiences, it is unfortunate that research on this topic is limited."

Precipitating Influences

Although research has not directly examined the precipitating influences of harm within the parent-athlete relationship, several possibilities have been proposed. Excessively high expectations and inappropriate criticisms may be attributed to a lack of education about sport and talent identification and/or child and adolescent development. As Tofler and DiGeronimo [27] have suggested, parents may live their own unmet aspirations through their children, and in the process, lose perspective of their child's abilities and interests. Numerous researchers have discussed the powerful influence of the "win-at-all-costs" attitude or narrowly focused pursuit of excellence that so often characterizes the culture of sport, including children's and adolescent sport [6, 28]. Without appropriate attention to developmentally appropriate experiences for young people, the potential for physical and psychological harm as well as drop-out from sport increases. An overemphasis on winning also encourages parents to relinquish control of decision-making to the coach [25]. Future research is needed to better understand the influences on harm within the parent-athlete relationship.

Psychological Harm Within the Athlete–Coach Relationship

A 13-year-old male hockey player described his coach's behavior as follows:

My coach would scream and freak out over things in practices, breaking sticks and singling me out in the dressing room saying, 'You don't care about this game, you have no commitment to the team and shouldn't be playing,' He'd say, 'I told you to take that kid's head off and you didn't.' It made me not want to go to my games and practices because I was going to get yelled at. It demoralizes you. [29]

A parent told the Daily Press that Mercedes Winchester, the high school volleyball coach, forced the team to do bear crawls and push-ups on the blacktop at practice, causing the girls' hands to blister and bleed. The reported temperature on that day reached a high of 101 degrees. "The coach had them doing drills and I guess they weren't doing them fast enough or correctly, so she took them outside as punishment," Irene Castro, the mother of a 14-year-old volleyball player, told the Daily Press. "She told them their hands couldn't leave the ground and then she took them back inside and they had regular practice, so they were sliding across the gym floor and the blisters ripped open." [30]

The research on the occurrence of psychological harm within the athlete–coach relationship is characterized predominantly through the study of emotional abuse which is defined as "patterns of nonphysical harmful interactions" between a child and a caregiver [31]. Although the study of emotional abuse of young people has long-existed in the fields of child development, psychology, sociology and social work, empirical research on emotional abuse in sport has emerged only recently.

Of this work in sport, studies have focused on emotionally abusive coaching practices experienced by athletes, and usually student-athletes, aged 18 years and older. In some cases, these young adults were asked to recall and report on their experiences when they were child athletes [32, 33]. For example, a recent online survey of more than 6,000 students reported childhood experiences of harm in sport including emotional, sexual, physical, and self-harm, and body image issues [32]. Emotional harm was the most commonly reported type of harm experienced, with 34 % of the athletes indicating that their coach or

trainer was involved in treating them in an emotionally harmful manner. More specifically, both male (29 %, $n = 328$) and female (36 %, $n = 1,056$) athletes reportedly experienced emotional harm from their coach. A greater percentage of athletes from individual sports (e.g. dance, swimming, athletics) compared to athletes from team sports (e.g. netball, football, hockey, rugby) reported emotionally harmful coaching experiences.

In all of the existing studies of young adult athletes across a number of countries and sports [32–34] emotional abuse is the most commonly reported form of maltreatment within the athlete–coach relationship. The behaviors that characterize emotionally abusive coaching practices include verbal comments (e.g. yelling, belittlement, degrading comments), physical behaviors (e.g. throwing objects with the purpose of intimidating the athlete), and the denial of attention [34].

To date, the research on emotionally abusive coaching practices is limited by its focus on young adult athletes and intercollegiate student-athletes. There is a paucity of work on child and adolescent athletes' experiences of emotional abuse, and one may speculate that this dearth of research is due, in part, to ethical challenges associated with probing vulnerable populations about such sensitive topics.

Preliminary evidence of the psychological harm experienced by athletes as a result of emotionally abusive coaching behaviors has been provided by Stirling and Kerr [35] who interviewed retired elite athletes from a variety of sports. When asked to reflect on their responses to emotionally abusive coaching practices, these retired athletes reported low mood, anger, low self-efficacy and esteem, anxiety, and reduced enjoyment.

In summary, emotionally abusive coaching behaviors are frequently reported as being experienced by athletes. Preliminary research suggests that psychological harm results from such experiences although further study is needed to better understand the psychological sequelae of emotionally abusive coach–athlete relationships. In addition, future research is needed on current rather than retrospective examinations of child and adolescent experiences of emotionally abusive coaching practices.

Precipitating Influences

A significant body of literature exists on the sources of power held by the coach; this power may be used appropriately or misused in such ways as to harm young athletes. Simply by virtue of their age, size, expertise, access to resources, and ascribed authority as a coach, young athletes are in an unbalanced power relationship with the coach [36]. The abuse of positions of power is at the core of all forms of maltreatment—sexual, physical, and emotional abuse as well as neglect.

Further, some authors have proposed that coaches are ill-prepared for the role and responsibilities of the position and the power that comes with it [37, 38]. While coaches may understand the technical and tactical aspects of a particular sport, there is no guarantee they have a foundational knowledge of child and adolescent development. The latter cannot be assured because no formal educational requirements exist for coaches. In addition, it is not unusual for youth sport settings to rely on volunteer coaches, many of whom are parents from the team. Again, there are no assurances that these volunteer coaches have the requisite competencies for working with young people.

Psychological Harm Within the Athlete–Teammate Relationship

Hayleigh Abbott, a 12-year-old Quebec Junior Champion had a promising future as a figure skater until her coach allegedly kicked her out of the program after she reported repeated bullying by an older male student. “He would pass her on the ice and he would just swear at her and just call her names,” said Cynthia Ruffino, Hayleigh’s mother. According to Hayleigh, the verbal insults quickly escalated to physical intimidation. “He would cut me off right before I would jump and he would speed at me really quickly and almost hit me. When I would fall he would just charge at me.” said Hayleigh. Her parents began to fear for her safety but despite several complaints to the coach, Hayleigh’s family insists nothing was done. [39]

Some Juneau students came back from a high school wrestling meet in Petersburg a few weeks ago with injuries not common to their sport. The frostbitten hands and welts on backsides were the

result of hazing from older teammates, according to accounts from parents. The frostbite came after being ordered to hold onto ice until the skin burned. The welts came from being held down and paddled by a group of students. [40]

Peer relationships have been well-recognized in the sport psychology literature as having a significant influence on the psychological development of young athletes. According to some researchers, peers enhance perceived physical competence, motivation for engagement in physical activity, feelings of companionship, and self-esteem [41, 42]. Conversely, recent research on hazing and bullying indicates that peers can also affect a young athlete’s psychological health in profoundly negative ways; each of these will be addressed in turn.

Hazing

In 2008, a community in New Mexico was rocked with a scandal that involved a group of male junior high school football players being sodomized by senior teammates as part of a hazing incident [43]. In Saskatchewan, Canada, eleven senior high school athletes were charged in a hazing event that involved hitting younger Grade 9 and 10 team members with hickey sticks [44]. Hazing is defined as: Any potentially humiliating, degrading, abusive, or dangerous activity expected of a junior ranking athlete by a more senior teammate, which does not contribute to either athlete’s positive development, but is required to be *accepted* as part of the team ([45], p.449).

Studies examining the prevalence rates of hazing in sport have demonstrated that 17 % of adolescent athletes and approximately 80 % of intercollegiate athletes experience hazing from fellow members of their sport team [46, 47]. Examples of hazing behaviors within sport teams include, being shouted or cursed at, forced sleep deprivation, being contained in a small area, degrading comments based on race, ethnicity, or sex, serving as a personal attendant to someone, or being pressured to consume excessive alcohol or engage in sexual acts [48, 49]. Potential psychological injuries identified as a result of hazing

experiences outside of sport environments include loneliness, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, suicide ideation, and loss of self-esteem [50] although to the best of our knowledge, psychological harm caused by hazing practices in sport has not been explored.

Bullying

Milena Clarke, a 14-year-old basketball player, describes the following experiences of bullying amongst teammates:

How it [the bullying] started was during one practice, some girls restrained my arms during a drill, then it started going into verbal [taunts]. I tried to go to the coaches and [in front of the team] they told me to ‘Toughen up, act as a leader.’” Clarke said the girls teased her with ethnic slurs, which she said she had to look up because she did not even know what the words meant. She lost weight, had trouble sleeping, her grades suffered and she contemplated quitting basketball. “I was just thinking since I wasn’t given any chance [to play without being bullied] and they weren’t going to do anything to help me, I’ll just quit and it will all be over.” [51]

According to Mishna ([52], p. 9), bullying is identified as a detrimental relationship problem, which is pervasive throughout society, and tends to result in harmful consequences for those who experience it. Bullying is broadly conceptualized as a repeated behavior characterized by aggression, in a relationship where a power differential exists [52, 53]. An individual can attain power within a peer relationship as a result of personal characteristics (e.g., size, strength, age) or position within a social network (e.g., high social status) [54]. These behaviors are often employed with the intention to cause social, psychological, or physical harm on a target who is perceived as vulnerable or unable to defend oneself with repeated exposure to these behaviors over time [53, 54]. Due to the subjective nature of bullying, experiences may not require repetition over time to be considered harmful; instead, Collot-D’Escury and Dudink [55] propose that a single incident of bullying has the potential to have a strong or chronic impact.

Bullying tends to be categorized into two broad types—direct and indirect bullying—with four separate sub-types, including direct physical aggression, direct verbal aggression, indirect aggression, and cyber bullying [52, 54]. According to Olweus ([54], p.65), direct bullying involves open attacks explicitly demonstrated by an aggressor. These attacks may include physical contact (e.g., hitting, kicking, punching, or stealing) or verbal attacks (e.g., insults, taunting, or teasing) by the aggressor [52, 54, 56]. Conversely, indirect aggression is typically executed through a third party and is intended to cause damage to an individual’s peer relationships, self-esteem, or social status [57]. Examples of indirect aggression include gossiping, spreading rumors, or imitating an individual behind his or her back [57]. The final sub-type—cyberbullying—was recently acknowledged as a sub-type of bullying due to an increase in communication through technological devices [58]. Cyberbullying is particularly concerning as it allows the victimization to spread to a larger audience and can be perpetuated over a longer period of time than other forms of bullying [58–61].

To-date, experiences of bullying in the sport context have received limited empirical attention which is perplexing given the vast body of research on bullying in the school environment. One study in sport revealed that 26 % of youth athletes experienced bullying behaviors and of those, 65 % reportedly experienced bullying behaviors in other domains, such as the school environment [55]. Specific to relational aggression, Volk and Lagzdins [62] suggested that female youth athletes experience two-to-three times more relational aggression than nonathletes.

Despite the paucity of research on bullying in sport, the school-based literature clearly highlights the detrimental and often severe effects of bullying, including increased feelings of loneliness, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideations, incidences of self-harm and suicide, and acts of violence [63, 64]. Given these well-documented outcomes of harm and early indicators that the sport context is not immune from incidences of bullying, exploring these behaviors in youth sport context is a critical area for future research.

Precipitating Influences

The influences that may precipitate peer-related violence include power differentials between perpetrators and victims. Those athletes of greater age, physical size, athletic ability, seniority on the team, and social status often have power over athletes with less of these qualities. Further, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and social awkwardness often lead to victimization [47]. Contextual aspects of the sport culture cannot be overlooked when considering peer-related violence in sport. Hazing in particular has long-existed and until fairly recently has been widely accepted as a rite of passage to becoming a member of a sport team. Undoubtedly, sport's roots in the military account in part for the tradition of hazing.

Recommendations for Prevention of Psychological Harm

Numerous initiatives have been established in efforts to prevent psychological harm to young athletes and can be broadly conceptualized into the categories of research, education, policy, and advocacy. Calls for further research on healthy parent, coach, and teammate relationships with young athletes have been addressed throughout the chapter. In addition, various educational programs have been developed and implemented internationally with a focus on raising awareness of harmful coaching behaviors in particular. For example, the Safe4Athletes program in the U.S. aims to educate and prevent experiences of abuse and bullying of athletes [65]. Similarly, the Respect in Sport and the Play by the Rules programs in Canada and Australia respectively seek to educate stakeholders about the maltreatment of athletes [66, 67]; interestingly however, these programs emphasize behaviors to be avoided rather than the education of health-enhancing behaviors. Empirical evaluation of the efficacy of these programs remains an important area for future research. With respect to policy, it has become increasingly popular to have Codes of Conduct for parents, coaches, and athletes that

focus on articulating prohibited and expected behaviors (for examples see [68, 69]). With respect to hazing, most sport organizations and educational institutions have implemented policies prohibiting these acts and delineating strict penalties should these policies be violated [70]. Further, advocacy initiatives have been developed to raise awareness amongst stakeholders in sport regarding methods to contribute positively to the healthy development of young athletes. The Positive Sport Coaching initiative in the U.S. [71] and True Sport in Canada [72] are examples of such advocacy initiatives. Empirical evaluations of the extent to which these initiatives achieve their intended outcomes are needed.

Although the effectiveness of these preventative measures is unknown, anecdotal information suggests that the maltreatment of young athletes persists as incidences of emotionally abusive coaches, parents who behave badly, and incidents of hazing continue to emerge in youth sport. We suggest that findings from the research on bullying and offending may contribute to the advancement of our thinking about effective preventative measures. A frequently recommended intervention to address bullying and other offending behaviors pertains to empathy-building. Empathy, defined as “the ability to understand and share in another’s emotional state or context” ([73], p. 988) involves both cognitive and affective elements. Previous research indicates that a lack of affective empathy more so than a lack of cognitive empathy characterizes behaviors such as bullying. As Jolliffe and Farrington [74] suggest, it is the ability to experience the emotions of others and not necessarily the ability to understand the emotions of others that is important for the prevention of bullying. It is our supposition that existing measures to prevent the maltreatment of young athletes may not be optimally effective because they focus exclusively on the dissemination of information and thereby address the cognitive dimension of empathy only. It follows therefore that future measures targeted at preventing harm within key relationships in sport should address the affective or emotional dimension of empathy in addition to the cognitive element.

Although simply conjecture at this point, it is intuitively appealing to think that the ability to both understand and experience the emotions of others within a relationship would enhance the psychological health of all parties involved. Moreover, as the use or misuse of power is at the root of psychological harm of the young athlete within his or her relationship with parents, coaches, and teammates, empathy-building may help to promote an understanding of the experiences of those in vulnerable positions of lesser power, including young athletes.

Summary

For the well-documented health and developmental benefits of sport participation to be reaped by child and adolescent athletes, the prevention of injuries—both physical and psychological—must be addressed. In this chapter, we argue that there is sufficient evidence to indicate that psychological injury can occur for youth athletes as a function of harmful relationships with their parent(s), coach(es), and teammates. More specifically, child and adolescent athletes may experience psychological injury as a consequence of parents who exercise excessive pressures to perform or do not protect their children from other harmful relationships; from emotionally abusive coaching behaviors; or from bullying and hazing behaviors from teammates. Although a plethora of preventative measures have been suggested and implemented previously in sport including educational programs, policies, and advocacy, there is an absence of empirical research on their effectiveness. Further, we argue that an enhanced focus on building empathy would go a long way to prevent psychological harm of young athletes. While a lack of empathy doesn't account for all harm within interpersonal relationships, it is foundational to all healthy relationships. Empathy has both cognitive and affective components with the latter found to be more important for preventing such aggressions as bullying behaviors. We propose that the preventative measures implemented in sport currently have

been minimally effective because they are focused on the dissemination of information and therefore address the cognitive dimension of empathy exclusively. To promote healthy relationships for young athletes, the affective component of empathy or the ability to experience the emotions of others will also need to be addressed. Future theoretical and applied work should examine this proposition.

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