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About the Cover



KAHPERD retirees enjoy the "Spooky" social during the 2009 KAHPERD Convention held at Pittsburg State University. Pictured are Sally Burgess, Wayne Donaldson, Delores Olivia, Vickie Deines, Sandy Menely, Bill Stinson, Gary Patterson and Wayne Osness. Vickie Deines prepared the treats.

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KAHPERD members seek to promote and advocate for healthy active Kansans.

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Young Athletes' Perceptions of Their Coaches' and Teammates' Caring and Uncaring Behaviors

By

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ABSTRACT

Research has revealed that when youngsters perceive a caring environment in physical activity settings, they are more likely to have positive experiences (i.e., enjoy, value, & feel committed to their sport). Limited research has considered the specific behaviors coaches engage in that help athletes perceive a caring climate on their teams. The purpose of this study was to examine young athletes' perceptions of the caring and uncaring behaviors in which their coaches and teammates engage. The results offer insight to coaches who desire to create a caring climate for their athletes.

INTRODUCTION

The rates of childhood obesity have tripled since the 1960's, with more than 33.3% of children now at risk for obesity. Sadly, if children are overweight or obese by adolescence, the likelihood of remaining overweight as adults can reach 80% (US Department of HHS, 2007). Though the benefits of engaging in regular physical activity (e.g., weight control; lower risk for cardiovascular disease) are well documented, many young people are not meeting established guidelines, which has made improving the physical activity levels of youth an important public health challenge (Whitt-Glover, et al., 2009). When considering the present day epidemic of inactivity and obesity in American children, youth sport is thought to play a major role in improving children's health and welfare (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004).

Youth sport opportunities exist for almost any activity. In fact, interscholastic teams alone are available in 38 different sports and 6 adapted sports (National Federation of the State High School Associations, 2007). Participation in organized sport provides children the opportunity to increase daily physical activity (Wickel & Eisenmann, 2007), enhance health benefits, and experience positive psychosocial development (Petitpas et al., 2005). Youth sport scholars contend that sports are not in-and-of-themselves educational. Rather it is the attitudes and behaviors of coaches that determine the quality of youngsters' sport experiences (Treasure, 2007).

Many youth, unfortunately, are not encountering positive experiences in youth sport. Studies have examined the reasons youngsters give for dropping out of sport and the dominant reasons include athletes losing interest in sport, no longer enjoying themselves, and feeling like the coach played favorites/was a poor teacher (Butcher, Lindner & Johns, 2002; Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997). In addition, Hedstrom and Gould (2004) report poor leadership as a primary reason for youth dropping out of sport which suggests that coaches play a key role in athletes' youth sport experience. According to Smith, Smoll, and Cumming (2007), the quality of youngsters' experience in amateur sport is largely dependent on the environment created by the coach.

Mack and Edginton (2004), believe the need for changes in current youth sport programs is widely apparent. One critical component influencing the effectiveness of physical activity programs is creating a caring environment (Hellison, 2003). Recently researchers have begun to examine the importance of warm and supportive relationships in creating optimal environments and fostering positive youth devel-

opment. In the past, researchers in sport and physical education settings have tended to focus on achievement related characteristics of the context (e.g., effort, improvement, outcome). However, recent research in the educational domain has led researchers to focus on the supportive relationships and social interactions that exist as a possible motivator and key component in youth physical activity settings (Newton, Watson et al., 2007). In the education setting, Ennis (1999) found that even the most innovative urban school programs were not successful until teachers developed a trusting, caring relationship with their students.

The term caring climate has been operationally defined as the extent to which individuals perceive a particular setting to be interpersonally inviting, safe, supportive, and able to provide the experience of being valued and respected (Newton, Fry et al., 2007). Caring has the potential to positively influence the well-being of youngsters because such interactions can foster self-esteem, self-confidence and trust through the emotional bonds formed (Noddings, 2005). Given the reasons young athletes indicate for dropping out of organized youth sport programs, identifying ways to increase a positive and supportive atmosphere among youth sport programs is an important area of inquiry.

The purpose of this study was to examine young athletes' perceptions of the caring and uncaring behaviors in which their coaches and teammates engaged. By further understanding how athletes interpret their coaches' and teammates' behaviors, coaches will be better able to create a positive and caring environment for athletes.

METHOD

This study was conducted in a city soccer league in the Midsouthern region of the United States. Athletes (N=196; n=166 females & 39 males; M=13.12 years) completed a survey with four open-ended questions. The questions included the following: Are there things your coach does that make you feel like he/she cares about you and your teammates? Are there things your teammates do that make you feel like they care about you and each other? The other two questions asked the athletes about behaviors that their coaches and teammates display that make them feel like they do not care. Athletes provided written responses to the questions prior to a practice near the end of the season. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the director of the league, the athletes' parents, the athletes and the Internal Review Board at the lead researcher's university.

RESULTS

A qualitative analysis was conducted on the athletes' responses resulting in the emergence of different themes representing their views about caring and uncaring behaviors. Behaviors that the athletes deemed as caring by their coaches and teammates were reflected in the following themes: 1) Praise; 2) Encouragement; 3) Committed to Helping Athletes Improve 4) Genuinely Care about Athletes as People; 5) Show Concern when Athletes are Injured or Ill; and 6) Have Fun and Socialize with Athletes. Because these themes were identical for coaches and athletes, they are discussed together.

Coaches' and Teammates' Behaviors Perceived as Caring

Praise. Some athletes indicated that an important aspect of perceiving the environment on their team as caring was receiving praise from their coach and teammates. Receiving positive reinforcement for effort and improvement seemed to send the message that the coach was invested in each player on the team, and was intentional about recognizing their hard work and mastery of skills. Receiving praise

from teammates made athletes feel that their peers noticed and were supportive of their efforts. Examples of coaches giving athletes praise included, "He says 'perfect' or 'I love it' or something like that; then he'll give us a high five" and "He lets us know when we do good, even when we lose." Responses of teammates praising each other included "They compliment each other", "They tell each other, 'good play;' and when someone does a nice play we'll tell them 'good job'."

Encouragement. Some athletes reported that encouragement was a behavior they found to be caring when expressed by coaches and teammates. Encouragement by coaches and teammates enhances the athletes' confidence and motivates them to stay focused on reaching their goals. Regarding their coaches' caring behaviors, athletes stated, "He always encourages us to do our best", "He always gives us "motivational' talks in-between games and at half-time," "Whenever I feel like I have done something wrong in a game, she comforts me," and "He always supports us. No matter what the score, as long as we gave 100%, he is proud of us". By encouraging athletes to do their best in practice and games, coaches are helping athletes employ a positive approach and focus on giving their best effort even when they face difficult challenges and/or things are not going well.

Some athletes also perceived their teammates displaying caring behaviors when they offered one another encouragement. Their responses included the following: "If I do something bad and I get down on myself, my teammates won't let me. They say I am too good of a player for that."; "They say encouraging things on the field," "They encourage each other from the sidelines," and "They try to pump you up when you're having a bad day." These responses suggest that young athletes receive a positive benefit when they are surrounded by teammates who not only are tuned in enough to recognize when they are facing difficult challenges or are struggling but who also are on standby to offer support and encouragement through their reassuring words and actions.

Committed to Helping Athletes Improve. Some athletes felt strongly that when their coaches and teammates were committed to helping them improve, it showed that they cared. If athletes perceive that their improvement is important to their coaches or teammates, it reinforces for them that their individual progress is highly valued and critical for the team effort. Athletes' comments about coaches in this regard included the following: "He tries as hard as he can to push us to do our best and give us A LOT [sic] of advice;" "He says it's not about the score of the game but our intensity. He wants to help us fix the little mistakes we may have so we can get better." These comments suggest that athletes recognize and appreciate their coaches' efforts to help them improve and they see these efforts as a strong indicator that they care.

This idea of being committed to helping athletes improve seems to be equally important to both coaches' and teammates' behaviors. Athletes' responses suggest that they perceive their teammates care when they are committed to helping them improve. Since athletes significantly outnumber coaches, it follows that athletes need to be intentional about caring for their teammates by helping each other improve. Athletes' responses included the following: "Teammates tell us our flaws and what we need to work on in a caring way," "We try to improve each other's game," and "They help me out with something I'm struggling to get better at." These responses suggest that athletes want to improve and appreciate advice and instruction from coaches and teammates and perceive it to be reflective of their caring approach. If coaches make it their priority to exhibit behaviors that are focused on helping their athletes' improve, the athletes may in turn, be more likely to model their coach's behavior by exhibiting similar behaviors towards their teammates.

Genuinely Care About Athletes as People. While being an athlete is an important aspect of youngsters' lives, there are other parts of their lives that are equally important to them such as family, friends, and school. Some of the youth soccer players in the study commented that they perceived they are being cared for when their coaches and teammates demonstrate that they genuinely cared about them as people and not just soccer players. One young athlete said about her coach "He got to know each of us for who we are and teaches us thru (sic) that. He knows each of us as individuals- not just as a whole team." Other athletes said, "He takes players aside to talk to them about both their play and what's going on in their lives. He helps us with college decisions," "Our coach talks to us about things that might be creating problems outside of soccer (home, school)," and "The coach asks about our family." These comments made by the young athletes suggest that coaches do well to get to know their athletes in such big and small ways as asking them about their personal lives and how their day was. Such behaviors make young athletes feel valued and supported, and can be critical in helping athletes develop a team culture where they follow the coach's example and demonstrate their genuine care for one another.

Some athletes indicated that their teammates show they care when friendships go beyond just time on the soccer field. Sample responses of athletes include the following: "They hug me, they ALWAYS say hello, they love me like a sister," and "We like each other's company. We talk about other things than soccer." Friendships that develop among teammates help solidify the team as a group whose connection goes beyond team matters such as practice schedules and win-loss records.

Show Concern when Athletes are Injured/Ill. When athletes get hurt or feel ill, it can be a scary situation and maybe one they have not experienced. At times, this situation can make them feel very unsure and alone and it is vital that they feel cared for by their teammates and coaches. Some athletes indicated they felt their coaches cared about them when they express concern about their health and injuries: "He always makes sure we are feeling good and healthy. If you are hurt, he will sit you down until you're okay," "He cares about our health and fitness by making us run and stretch; He shows us good stretches that will help our injuries; He asks how we are feeling," "When we're hurt, he comes on the field and makes sure we're okay" and "Our coach listens when we tell him we are hurt."

Some athletes indicated their teammates were equally important in showing their care and concern after injuries. Their responses included the following: "If someone gets hurt, we all gather around them and show our support" and "when I get hurt they [teammates] care deeply." When athletes perceive their coaches and teammates care about their health and well-being, an environment is created whereby young athletes feel valued and supported.

Have Fun/Socialize with Athletes. Athletes and their coaches spend a large quantity of time together at practices, competitions and travel time to team events. When coaches make it a priority to have fun/socialize with their athletes, athletes perceive the team is more productive and the environment is more caring. An example of this was a response by a young athlete who said that her coach "makes things fun and enjoyable while learning and working." When a coach can take the time to socialize or have fun with his/her athletes, it can show athletes that their hard work in combination with times of laughter and fun, are all important aspects to the team environment.

While having fun and socializing is important for strengthening relationships between athletes and coaches, it is just as important for enhancing the bonds between teammates. Some athletes reported that laughing, joking around, having fun together at practice or hanging out together outside of practice

all indicated that their teammates perceived a fun and caring environment. "We go out to eat together and talk. They listen when I talk," "We hang out together, we joke around, we look out for each other," and "We see each other besides at practice; we bring cupcakes on birthdays."

Coaches' Behaviors Perceived as Uncaring by Athletes

With regard to athletes' perceptions of their coaches' uncaring behaviors, six themes emerged: 1) Creates a Negative Atmosphere; 2) Treats Athletes Unfairly; 3) Is Not Committed to Coaching; 4) Requires too Much Conditioning; 5) Lacks Sympathy for Injuries; and 6) Overemphasizes Winning. Each of these themes is described in the following section.

Creates a Negative Atmosphere. The negative comments and behaviors displayed by a coach can impact the overall experience and performance of players. Athletes described some of the behaviors that had a negative impact on them: "He screams, benches me and calls me out in front of other players" and "(He) yells to where you wanna [sic] cry and puts you down and calls you names." By creating an atmosphere that is perceived as uncaring by players, coaches run the risk of not only embarrassing and humiliating athletes, but also damaging the team environment. Regardless of whether these negative behaviors by the coach occur intentionally or unintentionally, they are not helpful in setting the stage for athletes to maintain a positive focus and maximize their potential.

Treats Athletes Unfairly. Responses revealed that when athletes perceive unfair expectations from their coaches, their motivation is negatively impacted. Unfair expectations were described by athletes as both unrealistically high or exceptionally low: "He puts us in positions we hate or can't do," and "He hasn't given me a fair opportunity at the starting spot." Both scenarios are perceived by athletes to create an unsupportive and uncaring environment for the team that can diminish a positive environment.

Is Not Committed to Coaching. Coaches who appeared less committed to their role with the team through their words and actions personified an uncaring environment for athletes. Some athletes stated that coaches arriving late to practice or games or who appeared nonchalant at practice were less concerned about the team. If the athletes do not perceive that the coach cares enough about them to arrive to practice prepared and on time, it may influence how serious and focused the athletes themselves approach practice and competitions.

Requires Too Much Conditioning. The conditioning exercises (e.g., "running") often used as a part of team practice and/or as required activity after poor performances in competition can be construed by athletes as a form of punishment instead of an important component of training. When athletes perceive the conditioning as a form of punishment, they are unfortunately less likely to reap the positive benefits of the exercise. Simple responses from athletes such as, "Makes us sprint" and "makes you run laps" or even "run A LOT of laps" were offered by the athletes as examples of coaches' uncaring behaviors.

It should be noted that while some athletes cited conditioning drills as an example of their coaches' uncaring behaviors, other athletes identified intense conditioning as a reflection of their coaches' desire to help them improve and develop their soccer ability. These athletes see a direct relationship between the conditioning drills to their athletic development. One athlete said "They run us really hard at practice, but that's just their drive for us to win and be the best we can be." Given that some athletes perceive

conditioning drills as a punishment and others recognize the necessity of intense conditioning (i.e., particularly as athletes grow older & engage in more competitive leagues), coaches need to make clear and reinforce that the purpose of physical conditioning is to help the team reach its full potential. Coaches should emphasize the connection between conditioning and athletes' improvement and performance, and realize that when physical conditioning is employed as punishment, coaches may be setting a negative tone for their athletes.

Lacks Sympathy for Injuries. When athletes become injured, their coach's reaction can send a powerful message. Negatively perceived messages from coaches may impact athletes' recognition of pain, injury and best self-care practices. Some athletes indicated that their coach was not sympathetic or supportive of the injuries they experienced while in play. "He tells us to suck it up and get up. He tells us that we are not hurt when we are." Coaches who assume athletes' injuries are not real or serious, and who convey to athletes that they should not seek treatment, run the risk of endangering their athletes' physical health and emotional well-being. In addition, by failing to recognize the impact of an injury, coaches may unwittingly affect their athletes' overall commitment to, and effort in, the sport.

Overemphasizes Winning. While all athletes desire to win competitions, coaches who place too much emphasis on the game outcome may create a negative environment for their team. For example, when a team member made a mistake that could affect the outcome of the game, athletes noticed their coaches were sometimes angered and upset. Likewise, athletes noticed their coaches blamed specific players for losing the game. One athlete commented, "He doesn't take into consideration our feelings sometimes & is more concerned about winning." Athletes also reported the act of yelling after a team loss as an uncaring behavior that their coaches exhibited. Because athletes have greater control over their effort and improvement, and little control over game outcomes, coaches should focus athletes at all times on giving their best effort and striving for increased skill mastery.

Uncaring Behaviors Of Teammates

In addition to coaches, athletes were asked to consider uncaring behaviors exhibited by their teammates. From this category, only one theme emerged: 1) Creates a Negative Atmosphere through Poor Communication/Social Skills.

Creates a Negative Atmosphere Through Poor Communication/Social Skills. Communication that was perceived by athletes as uncaring included yelling at, not paying attention or listening to, and ignoring and talking negatively about teammates. Yelling was one method that many athletes reported was used to communicate on and off the field. One athlete said, "When we lose control of the game, we start yelling at one another." Another athlete reported, "Sometimes people get frustrated and yell at other people," and "they yell at me but only if I'm in the wrong position."

Talking negatively about teammates was also offered as an example of uncaring behavior. The negative talk included both direct communication with another athlete and indirect communication, through cliques that formed. One athlete commented, "they talk about you behind your back and are mean to you." Whether direct or indirect, negative communication between teammates is often perceived as uncaring and can affect the degree of trust between teammates.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine young athletes' perceptions of their teammates' and coaches' caring and uncaring behaviors. The results suggest that to maximize youngsters athletic performance and development, coaches should intentionally create a positive team environment where all athletes are supported, valued, respected and treated with kindness. By intentionally creating a caring environment within youth sport, athletes will be more likely to have positive experiences and make physical activity a regular part of their lifestyle.

Results of this study align with previous research that has revealed that the actions of teachers and coaches largely determine whether children and young people experience positive aspects of physical education and sport (Bailey, 2006). When children have negative experiences on sport teams, the potential impact is a more sedentary lifestyle, with sedentary behaviors likely continuing into adulthood (Carlson, 1994).

Results of this study suggest that while coaches play a significant role in establishing an optimal environment on youth sport teams, the team members themselves also contribute to the overall experience. Indeed, athletes play a critical role in creating a warm and supportive environment where all teammates feel welcome and valued to the team. While coaches can foster and encourage positive interactions among teammates, a genuinely caring environment is one where both coaches and teammates together establish a team culture of treating one another with kindness and respect.

Whether from coaches or athletes, caring behaviors encourage the team to work hard, give their best efforts, strive to improve, and have fun along the way. Results suggest that both practice and game time is likely to be maximized when athletes perceive a caring environment. When everyone has a positive mindset and is working together, less time may be needed to focus on emotional regulation, generate high effort in practice, and respond to organizational tasks.

In addition to the positive aspects of caring behaviors, results suggest that behaviors perceived as uncaring can affect team unity. When athletes perceive a negative environment where winning is valued over effort and improvement, and where not all athletes feel valued and supported by the coaches and team, athletes are less likely to remain committed to the team. Participation on a team where kindness and respect is absent or minimal may result in athletes choosing to discontinue their involvement on the team, and possibly in sport. Coaches may consider educational opportunities (e.g., reading a book on positive coaching; request their sport league administrator sponsor workshops on positive coaching) to help them develop and employ strategies to create a more caring and positive team environment in order to help athletes maximize their experience and development through youth sport.



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