



Coaches Can Shape Young Athletes' Definition of Success

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Newswise — Young athletes' achievement goals can change in a healthy way over the course of a season when their coaches create a mastery motivational climate rather than an ego orientation, University of Washington sport psychologists have found. A mastery climate stresses positive communication between coaches and athletes, teamwork and doing one's best. An ego climate, typified by many professional sports coaches, focuses on winning at all costs and being better than others.

"Much of life is affected by motivation and achievement," said Ronald Smith, a UW psychology professor and lead author of a new study. "Our study looked at children 9 to 13 years of age and there was no difference by age or sex. And it was also significant because it shows the influence of a mastery climate on children's achievement goals in a relatively short time, 12 weeks."

For several decades psychologists have believed that children under the age of 11 or 12 could not distinguish between effort and ability. That still may be true when it comes to academics, but the new research indicates that children as young as 9 can tell the difference between the two while participating in sports.

Frank Smoll, another UW psychology professor and co-author of the paper, said the research shows the importance of youth sport coaches at an earlier age than previously thought.

"A coach can be the first non-parental figure who is a youngster's hero. People who volunteer to coach year after year don't affect just a few kids. They can be influencing thousands at very early ages," he said.

The study involved 243 children – 145 boys and 98 girls – playing basketball in two separate Seattle leagues. The athletes ranged in age from 9 to 13 and 80 percent were white. They were given questionnaires to fill out twice, once prior to the beginning of the season and again 12 weeks later when the season was almost over.

A previously published paper by the researchers from the same project showed that young athletes who played for coaches who were taught how to create a mastery climate reported lower levels of sport anxiety compared to youngsters who played for coaches who were not trained. The research also was the first to show that a coaching intervention is as effective with girls as it is with boys.

The new study found that athletes who played for coaches who used a mastery climate showed such things as greater enjoyment of basketball over the course of the season. In addition, levels of ego orientation dropped. The opposite was true for athletes playing for coaches relying on an ego-oriented style of leadership. These findings held for athletes across all ages.

“One consistent finding of our research is that a mastery climate retains more youngsters in sports. It keeps them coming back,” said Smith. “Retention is a huge problem in some youth sports programs. An important reason to keep kids involved in sports is that it reduces obesity by helping them be more active.”

Co-author of the paper is Sean Cumming, a former UW research associate who is now at the University of Bath in England. The study was published in the journal *Motivation and Emotion* and was funded by the William T. Grant Foundation.