

## The Influence of Peer Connections in Youth Sports

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### Abstract

Youth sport teams and leagues are made up of individual athletes. These youth athletes develop peer groups and social connections throughout their time participating together. The team aspect of peer connections is often developed and not constructed. The need for positive outcomes from peers is greatly amplified in teams with players from different school systems: traveling teams, summer leagues, and youth sport camps and trainings. Peer connections are an under-utilized tool offered to every sport team, and few research studies have provided information on the effects of these connections. Peer connections have an influence on youth athlete motivation, burnout rates, and athlete behavior. Both positive and negatives effects were found depending on the level of support among peers. Positive effects correlated with the development of peer groups, working together to develop skills, and by competing with those of near skill level. Negative effects were found when social interactions and the formation of peer groups were the priority of the team, rather than common goals and skill development. The purposeful development of peer connections can have a dramatic effect on youth athletes and their success in sports.

The competitiveness and controversy that surround youth sports results in a complex framework of best practices (Merkel, 2013). Among those practices, an important topic goes under researched and is rarely seen in practice plans: peer connection. Peer connection is defined as the development of a feeling of community in sports, sharing a sense of achievement with other people, getting to know new people and developing friendships, spending time together with other people, and a positive kind of peer pressure that serves as a motivation to be physically

active (Diehl et al., 2018). The rationale for including peer connection in the growing framework of best practices is the increase in summer leagues, traveling teams, and youth sport camps.

Youth athletes who participate in leagues outside of their school system, or attend youth training camps, are often playing with teammates previously unknown to them. It appears that the combination of relatively high peer acceptance and a trend toward high friendship quality may provide some buffering against negative motivational consequences such as lower perceptions of competence and higher feelings of worry (Cox & Ullrich-French, 2010). However, the levels of peer support and connection may exceed a threshold that results in a decrease in motivation for sport specific achievement. Are peer support strategies taught in youth leagues? Should they be taught? Recent research has showed that peers are key contributors along with adults in creating a motivational climate in sport settings (Hein & Joesaar, 2014). Peer connection influences youth athletes in terms of motivation, burnout rates, and athlete behaviors.

### Motivation

Not all youth athletes are born with intrinsic motivation to satisfy the rationale for sport participation. The role of peers revolves around friendship, cooperation, and the reinforcement of rules/values among the peer group (Tome, et al., 2012). Peer connection influences motivation through competitive behaviors, collaborative behaviors, evaluative communications, and through their social relationships (Keegan, et al., 2010). Positive peer relationships have an important association with feelings of greater competence, overall physical activity levels, and low levels of worry in sport (Tome, et al.).

Playing sports involves a group experience and a shared sense of achievement. Collaborative learning among peers also influenced motivation (Poellhuber, et al., 2008). Collaborative learning refers to attempts

by peers to teach each other or practice together (Institute for Writing and Rhetoric, 2020). Motivation levels were recorded to be higher when student athletes had the opportunity to give and receive help and advice. The ability to demonstrate competent skill ability to a peer or peer group improved self-efficacy and motivation to continue to learn and develop (Allender, et al., 2006).

Peer connection was also a deterrent in motivation in some cases. In studies with participants in close sport peer groups, youth athletes sometimes focused more on peer perceptions of themselves rather than on the sport task. Studies among classes and teams that have assigned clothes to wear, often show that the top priority of youth athletes is how they look and how their peer group thinks of them. Ill-fitting sport uniforms were major impediments to girls participating in school sport. These concerns over image and relationships with peers led to an increased interest in non-active leisure (Allender, et al., 2006).

In other research, too strong of a sense of belonging can reduce the importance and value of accomplishments. Motivation levels for sport specific development decreased, when social connections of peer groups were at the highest (Luzio, et al., 2019). There is a balance to be found in creating a supportive culture among teammates and peers without losing focus of team activities.

### **Burnout**

Although burnout is a coined term in later athletics, athlete burnout is becoming prevalent among our youth (Gustafsson, et al., 2007). An environment that does not support the fulfillment of needs and influence can negatively affect well-being, and thus can result in a burnout for community members. Youth athletes with a high sport sense of community profile reported low in burnout indicators and experienced more energy, enthusiasm, involvement, and concentration. On the other hand, athletes with a low sport sense of community profile experienced less satisfaction, emotional connection, and belonging. As a result, they reacted with less energy, enthusiasm, and involvement when they were faced with difficulties related to sport demands (Luzio, et al., 2019).

Peer support was also shown to increase signs of physical exhaustion and loss of achievement in specific circumstances. Emotional connection with peers was positively linked to physical exhaustion six months later. These athletes might also be more vulnerable to pressure derived from sport, school, and relational hassles, resulting in physical exhaustion. The findings could also be explained by the possibility that too strong of a sense of belonging to the community could reduce athletes' autonomy, resulting in a feeling of inefficacy concerning sport

performance and accomplishments (Luzio, et al., 2019).

### **Athlete Behaviors**

Youth athletes are impressionable by those around them. Athlete norms and behaviors are greatly influenced by peers and peer pressure (Graupensperger, et al., 2018). As one's peers on a sport team typically are engaging in similar training behaviors, it is plausible that an athlete might simply look to what peers are doing (i.e. how much effort they are exerting) when deciding how much effort to exert themselves (Crozier & Spink, 2018). As a coach, expected effort may create a snowball effect. High effort expectations result in the perceived norm to be high effort, and those unsure about what effort level to engage with will follow the norm behavior among the group. In the research, peer normative perceptions were significantly and positively associated with individual reported effort when examined simultaneously. Peer descriptive norm for effort significantly predicted individual effort, and peer descriptive norm perceptions significantly predicted perceived effort.

Emotion connections also had an influence on the character behavior of youth athletes. Emotional connection with peers refers to the feeling of being helped and supported by other athletes in the sport community, sharing a common history that strengthens the bond among athletes, satisfying the need for relatedness (Luzio, et al., 2019). Peer relationships help facilitate an individual's moral development and prosocial behavior. Youth athletes were cited as motivating behavior through social comparisons with teammates. Association between connection and character supports the notion that prosocial interactive behaviors are positively linked with peer acceptance (Herbison, et al., 2018).

### **Implications for Coaches**

Supporting athletes in acquiring a strong sense of community could be an objective for summer leagues, traveling teams, and youth sport camps (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). Both the positive and negative effects of peer connections among youth athletes should be considered when planning a season or philosophical framework. Leaders of individual sport youth athletes may have to stress the importance of time allotted to social development. Often, individual sport athletes are secluded from teammates of other disciplines and experience less opportunity for peer support. A higher proportion of individual sport athletes reported anxiety or depression than team sport athletes. Individual sport athletes were more likely than athletes in team sports to play their sports for goal-oriented reasons, as

opposed to for fun. Individual sport athletes are more likely to report anxiety and depression than team sport athletes (Pluhar et al., 2019).

Next steps to include this best practice are outlined by the following: 1) team building exercises, 2) daily social yes and no reminders, 3) appropriate peer group free play, 4) organized peer feedback assessments, 5) competitive time with those of equal skill level, 6) rotation of partners during warm up, and 7) time to self-reflect on their recent intentions to form positive peer group connections. Barriers to implementing these next steps refer to research indicating that too strong of peer connections may decrease motivation and increase athlete burnout. Further research on the most beneficial levels of peer connection would enhance youth coaches' abilities to plan for the right time spent and number of activities dedicated to peer connection, as well as when optimal peer support has been reached for an athlete or team.

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