



# SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

## **Sociological and Psychological Development of Your Child**

### **Sociological Development**

Children do not participate in sports in a vacuum. They are greatly affected and influenced by the social and cultural environment in which they live and by the social development challenges they face during childhood and adolescence.

Sport sociologists attempt to understand the relationship between social development and sport participation. They assume that the achievement of maturity and an adult sense of responsibility depend on the completion of important developmental tasks during childhood and adolescence. Parents should be aware of how the social relationships associated with sport participation are involved in the completion of these developmental tasks. For example:

**Children (7-9 years old) face the challenge of learning how to get along with peers and how to deal with authority figures apart from their parents.**

During these years it is important for children to learn how to stand up for themselves among their peers while at the same time understanding that their peers are different than they are. They must learn how to compromise for the sake of getting along, and how to cooperate and compete with their equals. If these social interaction skills are not learned, children may face difficulties when addressing developmental challenges during pre-adolescence and adolescence.

7-10 year olds are expressive, spontaneous, and egocentric. Adults should give them room to express themselves while at the same time establishing clear-cut norms about honesty and playing by the rules. Children during this stage are only beginning to develop the ability to see the world from the perspective of others. Because these children are in the process of learning acceptable means of achieving goals, parents and coaches should take care to make clearly explained distinctions between what is acceptable and what is not.

**Pre-adolescents (10-13) face the challenge of developing "best friend" relationships and gaining acceptance from peers.**

A development task of pre-adolescents is figuring out how they are similar to and different from others. In attempting to understand themselves as unique individuals, they go through a stage during which close relations with same-sex "best friends" are very important. During this stage, they are very loyal to friends and greatly influenced by what friends think. Unfortunately, young adolescents can also be very exclusive in their peer groups such that those who are different are shunned or mocked. Being accepted and having someone to trust and confide in is of utmost importance. Pre-adolescents must have the opportunity to interact socially with same-sex peers on a regular basis. At the same time, try to create an environment of inclusions and acceptance of differences.

**Adolescents (14-17 years) face the challenge of exploring who they are and how they fit into the world in which they live.**

During this stage, young people try to answer the question "who am I?" They go through processes of identity testing and identity formation, often to a point that can be frustrating for the adults who know them! Adolescence is a time during which young people "try on" a variety of different identities in an attempt to discover and clarify values while exploring all the possibilities of who they might become as adults. What may seem like rebellion or acting out during this developmental stage, often may be athletes struggling to find



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identities that fit with their emerging sense of how they are connected to the world. We see this search for identity in the clothes they wear, the music they listen to, the activities they are involved in, the language they speak and in the inconsistencies in their lifestyles. As a parent, be tolerant and accepting of the various identities the athlete "tries on." Allow athletes to explore and test new and different identities as long as they do not put themselves in danger and as long as their actions are not in too much conflict with your family values.

## **Older adolescents (16-19 years old) deal with the challenge of seeking independence and autonomy.**

A primary developmental task of older adolescents is to move closer to being independent, autonomous beings: connected to but separate from others, in control of one's life but aware of limitations and boundaries. If we view autonomy on a spectrum with dependence on one end (as a newborn is totally dependent on caregivers) to independence on the other end of the spectrum (adult), we can view adolescents as attempting to move towards independence. While complete independence and autonomy are not possible (nor is the individual ready for it), it is important that the athlete be allowed to make strides. If some autonomy is not allowed and encouraged, any organized sport or activity becomes a developmental dead end rather than a developmental opportunity. Feelings of independence and autonomy are derived, in part, from the sense that one has control over his or her life. Athletes who are allowed a voice in their athletic development are also more accountable.

## **Psychological Development**

Another area of development that/needs to be factored in relates to psychological or cognitive development. As with the other areas, this is an extensive area of study that we are not doing justice to when trying to condense the developmental process to a few concise points. That being said, let's try to identify and understand several elements of psychological development that may be especially important for parents to understand. These include the development of perceived competence, perspective-taking abilities and motivation.

**Perceived Competence:** The concept of perceived competence is extremely important as it profoundly affects participation in sport, motivation, anxiety and sport enjoyment. Athletes' perceptions of their athletic competence and sources they use to judge self-competence go through predictable developmental changes as is highlighted in the following:

**Children (7-9 years old) focus on outcome and effort in judging one's competence.** "I won, therefore I am a good athlete," or "I tried hard, I must be a good athlete." Winning and Losing serve as an important source of competence information for young athletes.

**With older children (ages 8-12), there is a gradual decline in the importance of feedback from parents as a source of competence information,** an increase in coach technical knowledge as a source of competence information, and a gradual increase in the importance of peer comparison in making competence judgments. "I beat Joe which means I'm a good athlete.

**Adolescents (aged 12-13) begins to recognize that both ability and effort impact performance.** Prior to this, the athlete can not distinguish between the two concepts.



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**In older adolescence (aged 16-18 years) there is a progression from focusing on peer comparison to focusing on self-comparison as a source of competence information.** A "task" goal orientation increases with age while "outcome/win" goal orientation decreases with age.

Parents need to understand what sources children rely on to provide competence information. Because outcome is so important at a young age, late maturing athletes are at risk of low competence as they are not experiencing much success. Additionally, note that coach feedback becomes an increasingly important source of competence information for athletes.

**Perspective-taking:** the ability to take another's perspective progresses in a predictable sequence and impacts how an individual relates to others as well as overall behavior in the sport environment.

**At a young age (under 8),** children are not able to take the perspective of others and, thus, have an egocentric perspective. The young athlete's thoughts, feelings, ideas and needs are correct (as far as he is concerned) . . . and everyone else thinks and feels this same way too, right?

**Gradually through adolescence,** children develop the ability to take others' perspective but still view their perspective as the correct view. The latter stage of development occurs when the individual can take and appreciate another's perspective.

Young athletes will often display behavior that is selfish and doesn't take others into account. Remember that they may not yet have developed the ability to understand others' feelings or points of view. As they develop, a parent can enhance their perspective taking abilities by pointing out how their action affects others. This can help them progress along the developmental spectrum.

**Motivation:** the direction and intensity of effort. Ideally, we want to see young athletes motivated to approach success in sport with great intensity. But, what is it that motivates young athletes?

Younger athletes (7-10) seem more externally motivated while older athletes are often more internally motivated. It appears that young athletes need external motivation, reinforcement and other "stuff" to maintain their enjoyment of sport. They look to coaches, parents and teammates to provide and structure their fun. Around age 10 and older, children begin seeing rewards as bribes which, under some conditions, can negatively affect motivation. Older athletes simply enjoy the sport: hard training for them is a primary source of fun. They are internally motivated and need fewer and fewer external motivators. They have more clarity about themselves as athletes and a clearer purpose behind their participation.