

# sports coach UK Research Summary 13

## Increasing Young People's Motivation to Play through Coaching



Fun is a key motivator for young people who play sport, but they are also looking for sporting experiences that connect with their social lives. New research illustrates how fun and positive peer relationships are interrelated, and essential in ensuring young people continue to participate in sport.

With these two factors in mind, this research summary provides a series of strategies for youth sport coaches to consider using in their coaching. After all, coaches are ideally placed to provide fun sporting experiences, and shape positive relationships between the young people they coach.



## The theory - understanding youth dropout, motivations and the role of the coach

It is well established by research that if young people's motivations to play sport are not met, they are more likely to stop playing and spend their time doing something else.

In a new study from Nicole Martin at Pacific Lutheran University in America, fun and peer affiliation were identified as two key motivations for young people. The two are fundamentally linked – if young people's relationships are positive, they are more likely to have fun playing sport and therefore be more motivated to continue playing. If the relationships they develop are not positive, they are more likely to drop out.

However, the theory is more complex than simply suggesting that young people who play sport together need to get along. Most notably, their relationships change as they get older. At the younger age of around eight, they will rely on coaches and parents for feedback on their sporting ability. However, from age 10 onwards, they are more likely to compare themselves to their peers. The results of these peer comparisons will determine how they perceive their own ability and competence, which either reinforces or destroys their motivation to continue playing.

### So where does the coach fit in?

Well, coaches can play a vital role in framing the behaviour of their players, ensuring they exhibit positive behaviours and characteristics, rather than negative ones that may lead to negative peer comparisons and an increased likelihood of dropping out.

For example, if a coach promotes companionship and an environment free from conflict, young people are more likely to enjoy playing alongside each other and be motivated to continue doing so. On the other hand, if a coach allows conflict to creep into the sessions, in the form of disagreements, insults or arguments, young people are more likely to avoid such situations by no longer attending.

While these are just two simple examples, the study provides a range of strategies for coaches to consider using in order to promote positive peer relationships that will enhance young people's motivation to continue playing sport.

## Enhancing peer relationships



Coaches can create an environment that motivates young people by developing team cohesion and a commitment to work towards appropriate goals. You can try doing this by:

- allowing young people to be with their friends during sessions and make new friends
- encouraging peer reinforcement – for example, through positive comments between teammates
- discouraging negative comments and teasing
- emphasising group goals, teamwork and team cohesion.

## Developing team cohesion

The researcher also provides specific strategies for coaches to consider using in their own practice to develop team cohesion:

- Create an environment where everyone feels comfortable to communicate – encourage young people to express their thoughts and feelings, be open with one another and volunteer for activities during sessions.
- Explain how individual roles are vital for team success – outline the role of each team member and stress the importance of them functioning as a whole in order to achieve team success.
- Develop pride between teammates with similar roles – athletes at all levels need support from their teammates so try to develop this pride. For example, in a netball team, group the defensive players together and encourage them to support and encourage each other.
- Set challenging team goals – develop team goals that are specific and challenging. This will help the team maintain focus and feel proud when goals are achieved.
- Develop a team identity – encourage young people to create a team identity that differentiates them from other teams. You might do this by developing team traditions or through social events.
- Avoid cliques – if cliques are emerging, move quickly to break them up. Cliques often arise when teams lose or fail to meet goals, or when the coach treats players differently. You could try to prevent cliques by encouraging young people to warm up with different partners and by regularly mixing groups during your training sessions.

## Setting appropriate goals



The research also provides coaches with guidance on how to set appropriate goals for young people:

- Define your long-term goals first – these may take 6–12 months to complete and may require the achievement of a number of short-term goals. It's crucial that you set a clear end point to determine success.
- Clearly define the short-term goals that lead to the achievement of the long-term goal – these might be completed in a matter of weeks and are small steps towards your main goal.
- Include all team members in the development of team goals – this will increase their sense of responsibility towards achieving the goals.
- Monitor progress regularly and make adjustments if necessary – remember to include the team in this process. Enabling them to discuss their progress will encourage them to find solutions if goals are not being met, further enhancing team cohesion.
- Reward progress by increasing free time or running additional social events if team goals are met.

Beyond the strategies for developing positive peer relationships above, the study also provides a range of techniques for coaches that aim to ensure their coaching meets young people's specific needs.

In this case, the specific needs cited by the researcher relate to young people's main motivations to participate in sport – fun and peer affiliation, excitement, skill development, fitness and success.

## Techniques to develop fun and peer affiliation

- Set realistic expectations for each individual that reflect the fact that interests, experiences and goals will differ for each participant.
- Keep sessions active, with as little time spent waiting around as possible.
- Build in socialising time to allow young people to make friends (eg before and after sessions) or run specific social events outside practice hours.

## Techniques to ensure excitement in your sessions

- Make sure there is variety in your sessions, and don't spend too much time on the same drills.
- Prioritise shorter practices – less is more when keeping young people engaged.

## Techniques for skill development

- Use a range of instructional behaviours, including providing feedback on player performance, demonstrating the skills you want players to develop, modifying activities so they match the level of your players, and allowing players time to practise individually.
- Give instructions in a positive manner by encouraging players, pointing out what they do well and being sincere when giving praise. If you need to correct mistakes, consider using the sandwich approach (constructive criticism delivered with a positive comment either side).
- An obvious one, but keep your technical and tactical knowledge of the sport up to date.

## Techniques for fitness

- Design sessions that enhance fitness and inform young people of how to monitor their own fitness. Try including different types of fitness in your sessions, such as cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength and endurance, and flexibility.
- Try to design practices that cover power, speed and agility.

## Techniques for success

- Develop an understanding in the group that winning is not only defined by beating others, but also by achieving personal and team goals.
- By developing an understanding that mistakes are part of the natural learning process, you will also reduce young people's fear of trying new skills or activities.



## Learning from the research

This new study reinforces our knowledge of fun being a key motivator for young people who play sport. However, it also raises our awareness of how influential peers are, particularly once young people reach adolescence and start to compare themselves to their peers.

If coaches understand that these peer comparisons inform young people's motivations to play sport, they can begin to build strategies into their sessions that promote positive peer relationships.

The research provides a range of strategies and techniques for coaches to consider trying in their own coaching, all of which aim to increase young people's motivation to play sport and their enjoyment of it, thereby reducing the likelihood of them dropping out.

## References

If you are interested in finding out more about this area, this summary is based on the article below:

Martin, N.J. (2014) 'Keeping it fun in youth sport: What coaches should know and do', *Strategies: A Journal for Physical and Sport Educators*, 27 (5): 27–32.

Other more general reading and references from this summary include:

Allen, J.B. (2003) 'Social motivation in youth sport', *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 25: 551–567.

Hopkinson, M. and sports coach UK (2014) 'The Impact of Coaching on Participants 2014', [www.sportscoachuk.org/sites/default/files/Participant%20Survey%202014%20final.pdf](http://www.sportscoachuk.org/sites/default/files/Participant%20Survey%202014%20final.pdf)

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Ullrich-French, S. and Smith, A.L. (2009) 'Social and motivational predictors of continued youth sport participation', *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 10: 87–95.

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Weiss, M. and Stuntz, C.P. (2004) 'A little friendly competition: Peer relationships and psychosocial development in youth sport and physical activity contexts', in Weiss, M. (ed) *Developmental Sport and Exercise Psychology: A Lifespan Perspective*. Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology. ISBN: 978-1-885693-36-5. pp. 165–196.