

1-1-2013

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E. Whitney G. Moore

*University of North Texas*, whitneymoore@wayne.edu

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## Recommended Citation

Moore, E. W. G. (2013). Developing youth's positive view of physical activity. *Strength and Conditioning Journal*, 35(3), 49-53. doi: 10.1519/SSC.0b013e3182919eb7

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# Developing Youth's Positive View of Physical Activity

Moore, E. Whitney G MS, CSCS

Department of Kinesiology, Health Promotion, and Recreation

University of North Texas, Denton, Texas

### Lead Summary

Many youth start withdrawing from voluntary physical activity and physical education programs as they approach adolescence. Developmentally, this is also when youth can become more aware of their ability compared to others, and the amount of work it may take to improve their ability level. This focus on comparative performance standards can be affected by our coaching emphasis. This article highlights the characteristics and impacts of two coaching approaches. Particular emphasis is given to the specific behaviors adolescents have reported as fostering their effort, enjoyment, sportspersonship, and interest in continuing to be active.

*Keywords: coaching practices; motivation; climate; psychology; physical education*

“How can you not know she’s faster than you?” I wondered once in response to a ten-year-old athlete’s comments. This was perhaps the bluntest reminder I’ve had that the youth we work with do not see or interpret the world the same way we do. We have been taught how youth are not miniature adults physiologically. It is easier to forget sometimes that youth are not mini-adults psychologically, either. Understanding when and how youth’s conception of ability develops and separates from related concepts – like effort or luck – better enables us as coaches to relate, communicate, and motivate the youth we train.

Around the age of thirteen, the majority of youngsters become able to recognize and understand the distinction between their ability, their luck, and their effort at a task (9). Until this time, many youth seem to waver on their true understanding and use of these terms. Youth may seem to use these terms properly; however, when one digs deeper into their true level of understanding, inconsistencies can become apparent. John Nicholls, an education researcher, suggested that younger youths having blurred distinctions between ability, luck, and effort may act as a beneficial protectant (9). To understand what led Nicholls to this view, we will look at how understanding each distinction (i.e., skill ability from luck and ability from effort) can open the door to lower effort and motivation.

First, let’s see how distinguishing between luck and ability/skill tasks influence individuals’ effort. Most youth are not able to consistently identify and articulate, for example, that performance on free throws is a skill task, while performance at rolling snake eyes consistently is a luck task. With this understanding, youth are better able to determine the tasks they may improve at through practice, and the tasks that will not be improve with practice. This sounds like a positive development. However, it is not always. The teen years are when youngsters start to withdraw from sport and physical activity options (3). This departure parallels the ability of youth to realize that they are not normatively highly ranked in the activity, and that they are going to have to put in a lot of work to ever reach a higher skill level; perhaps more time than they are interested in giving. This is the negative side. This is when we may start to hear youngsters say, “I’m just not athletic” or “I don’t like sports.” The good news is that we can have a large positive impact on the perspective youth take with regard to their capability at different physical activities. When our primary focus as coaches is not on their normative ability, then they are usually less focused on their normative ability, too.

The second big developmental shift is the distinction between effort and ability. Until thirteen years of age, most youngsters cannot consistently identify and articulate the difference between people's effort and their ability (9). This is a tremendous understanding shift. Previously youth perceived individuals' ability to be synonymous with their effort level. In other words, those who appeared to give greater effort to a task were viewed to have a higher ability level. Once effort and ability become distinct to youths, the effort-ability relationship may be turned on its head. This means that teenagers may start perceiving that giving higher effort is an expression of having less ability; or, that achieving the same or higher skill level as a peer, while giving less effort, is an expression of greater ability. Therefore, when youth seem to not give full effort at mediocre to high skill level tasks, they may actually be trying to leave doubt in the minds of others as to their (i.e., the youth's) true ability level. In this way, not achieving a top normative level among their peers cannot be clearly identified as simply a lack of ability; thus "saving face."

These developments mean that adolescents *can* take on an outlook that defines success based upon their normative standing on tasks and their ability to outperform their peers with less effort. However, adolescents do not *have* to take on this view of success. They may instead define success by their personal effort and improvement towards mastery of a task. These individuals are the ones we often describe as our hard workers and always learning. This view of success lends itself to the development of enjoyment of the task, seeking new challenges, and the simple pleasure experienced from participation (i.e., intrinsic motivation; 4,5,8). This is the view we want our youth to hold as they move into adulthood. The good news is that we can help them adopt this viewpoint toward physical activity endeavors.

### **Psychological Responses to Training Climates**

Youth's psychological responses cover a broad spectrum, including effort, enjoyment, interest to continue, general happiness, view of success, and behaviors with others (ex., antisocial, prosocial, or bullying). Often psychological responses are revealed by individuals' behavior. It is logical, then, that the behaviors our students see from us will be interpreted as acceptable.

The training climate is the atmosphere that we foster among our class or team. What we emphasize as most important – performance ability or effort – influences which one our youth

will focus on more (9,11,15). Emphasizing performance ability, rivalry among group members, and giving unequal praise or feedback to individuals develops an ego-involving climate (9,11,15). On the other hand, when we emphasize giving high effort, individual improvement, and group members cooperating, then we are creating a task-involving climate. Youngsters' responses to these two climates are very different. After illustrating these responses, the behaviors adolescents specifically associate with each climate, plus some applied strategies for maximizing your training sessions' motivational climate will be presented.

### **Caution: Ego-Involving Climate Characteristics to Look Out For**

The ego-involving climate is sometimes mistaken as an effective climate. However, research consistently illustrates the negative effects of being in an ego-involving rather than task-involving climate (9, 10). It can be very easy to slip into having some of the ego-involving climate characteristics develop. They can even develop unintentionally. So, it is essential to keep an eye out and an ear open to how we and our youth interact with each other to help us keep a pulse on what type of climate exists in our training.

One characteristic to look out for is unhealthy competition between peers. Healthy competition occurs when we bring out the best in another (12). A task-involving climate promotes this type of healthy competition by having peers expecting each other to give their best effort and attain their highest abilities. In an ego-involving climate, however, the purpose of the competition is to show one person's superiority over another. This is unhealthy competition. When youth are practicing one-upmanship or trying to out-rank others, then we will see a small set of youth rise to the top, while the majority falls away.

Youth are not motivated by the unhealthy competition present in an ego-involving climate, because individuals' performance, not their effort or improvement, is held as the standard. The select top performers are rewarded with praise and seen as coach favorites or the "stars" of the group (1, 4, 8, 9). The existence of favorites or stars in a group is another ego-involving climate characteristic to look out for. By definition the rest of the youth in the group are not receiving much instructional feedback or encouragement and are not being treated as a "star" (13). This emphasis purely on skill performance can diminish the interest of the non-stars, and may be expressed in one of the following behaviors. A small few may decide that they are going to disprove the ego-involving coach's apparent belief that they are not skilled performers.

This may be why this climate is sometimes mistaken for being an effective motivational approach. However, there are two other options that are the responses primarily across decades of research (9). One option is they try to save face by not giving full effort to leave the window of doubt open about their true skill capabilities. Option two is they decide that the effort required for them to be able to improve is so great that it might as well be insurmountable; so they stop giving high effort. Clearly, these low effort responses are not what we want to be fostering. Focusing on pure skill performance is not the key to fostering our youth's intrinsic motivation to be physically active.

The ego-involving climate's emphasis on the skill performance outcomes also influences the use of an important training motivational strategy—goal setting. When we are setting general goals that are uniform for the entire group based on skill performance then we are short-changing all of our youth. These types of goals often appear visibly as top performer lists (i.e., Top 10 Bench Press, Top 10 Sprints, etc). Such goals also de-emphasize the importance of lifting safely with proper form and resistance/exercise progressions. Additionally, these goals are not necessarily realistic or of real interest to many of our youth, because each youth's goal is specific to that individual.

It is better for youth to achieve their goals and then make new ones, than to have unrealistic goals and lose interest in being active, because they were unable to attain those unrealistic goals. A good concept to remember from business is that if you are going to err, then err by under promising and over delivering. Rather than developing goals only a handful of your youth will be able to attain if their “training stars” align, we can help youth develop personalized goals that are appropriately challenging, so that youngsters will need to train with high effort and consistency to attain their goals.

### **Ego-Involving Climate From The Youth Perspective.**

Research with youth has revealed coaching behaviors perceived by youth in ego-involving climates (13). The most significant ego-involving coaching behavior was a lack of positive feedback. The second most significant coaching behavior was minimal instructional feedback. Based on the characteristics above, this makes sense. The majority of youth in an ego-involving climate are not receiving positive or instructional feedback, because only the few “stars” receive such feedback (1, 8). Unfortunately, the third coaching behavior reported

highlights the type of feedback the majority of youth in an ego-involving climate are getting – punishment for mistakes. It is not surprising that when youth perceive their coaches as giving little to no positive or informative feedback, and punishment for mistakes that the same youth report not enjoying physical activity, not giving high effort, and not being interested in continuing to participate in physical activities.

A disturbing side-effect of an ego-involving climate is the additional belief systems and behaviors that youth adopt. Youth who have been in a highly ego-involving climate report that it is acceptable and even expected to win by any means necessary, including rule bending, cheating, and gaining favor with referees or officials. These views have been reported by sport participants at every level and age (i.e., 10 year old recreation league to professional; 1,11). When we adjust our youth's belief systems through ego-involving climate promotion, then we inevitably adjust their behaviors away from pro-social and toward anti-social actions (6).

### **Task-involving Climate Characteristics**

To decrease the likelihood of youth potentially sabotaging their own performance through low effort, we need to promote every individual's consistently high effort and personal improvements as being more important than their normative performance outcomes. By focusing on what individuals have control over (e.g., their effort), rather than normative or performance outcomes, we put the outcome into each participant's hands. This approach consistently shows positive results (10, 15). An especially important result is an increased enjoyment of the activity; which is the primary reason most youth want to participate in the first place, and why most stop participating (3). When the fun is lost, so is their intrinsic motivation.

When we foster a task-involving climate through emphasizing effort, cooperation, and individuals' personal improvement, then youngsters have more enjoyment, give greater effort, and are more likely to continue participating (1, 8, 10). When our coaching fosters these intrinsically motivated responses, no matter youths' initial skill level, they are going to improve. Additionally, when the emphasis is on personal effort and improvement, then youth are also less likely to lose time comparing themselves to others, because they are more interested in working to improve their own skills (8). This creates a training atmosphere in which youth cooperate with each other to help each other improve. Research examining the benefits of developing this task-involving climate consistently shows strong associations with positive outcomes, including

individuals' increased effort, improvement, desire to continue participating, and expression of positive social development (e.g., increased sportpersonship and decreased rule breaking; (4, 5, 8, 11).

There are even more positive side effects from training youth in a task-involving climate. One side-effect is that they believe success comes from hard work and not luck, because they believe that to succeed is to improve, to work toward skill mastery, and to give high effort (9). They do not believe that success is based on how their performance compares to others or even to normative standards, because their success is personal, not other focused (8, 9). They also believe that rule bending and cheating are not acceptable ways to achieve success (5). We, as coaches, are able to have great positive influence on how our youth perceive physical activity and their ability to be active by influencing how they define success at physical activities and how to achieve success. All of this positive influence comes from us simply knowing our youth as individuals, and illustrating our interest in and knowledge about them.

### **Task-Involving Climate From The Youth Perspective**

Importantly, research has revealed that the specific behaviors youth perceive by coaches who promote a task-involving climate are: a) giving positive feedback, b) providing instructional feedback, and c) not punishing mistakes (13). What does this tell us about running training sessions? Our youth want quality feedback; and they have even defined the three elements that represent quality feedback. Youth want to know 1) when they are doing something right, 2) HOW to improve, and 3) they do not want their attempts (mistakes) to be punished.

First, and foremost, youth want positive feedback. That means they want to know when they are doing something right or have improved. This is not asking for sideline cheering squads. For example, when athletes are able to self-correct their own squat by bring their hips back, rather than forward, they should hear praise from us ("Good Job, you remembered to keep your hips back, Nick!"). When athletes are working hard and giving high effort attempts, then they should also be hearing praise or encouragement to keep up that high effort level ("Theresa, great focus on getting the footwork pattern down right!" and "James, way to challenge yourself with two extra reps."). When we are not praising our athletes by highlighting their effort, improvement, and personal achievements, then we may inadvertently be sending the message

that we are not paying attention to these training aspects or that we are not engaged in our athletes' training. What an uninspiring message!

Second, our youth want to know how to get better ... through specific, personal feedback. Simply saying practice more, or if you want to be stronger then lift more, is not giving our youth specifics on how to perform better. When we give specific form corrections, auxiliary exercises or stretches, explain how exercises relate to their sport performance or injury prevention, and suggest adaptations, exercise or challenge level adjustments, then our youth are interested and listen. These instructional feedback options increase youths' knowledge about how their body and training works. Giving instructional feedback is a way to connect with your athletes. When youth perceive that you care enough about them to take the time to determine what they need to improve individually, then you will have gained more than just their interest. Giving individualized feedback shows you are paying attention to your athletes, are interested, and care. Although we often see the same correction needed for many, by giving it on an individual basis we build more personal connections with the youth we train.

Third, our youth do not want to be punished for mistakes. They *did not* say they want their mistakes ignored. We already know that is not true, because they want instructional feedback. Rather, they are reminding us that mistakes are learning opportunities, and as such, fundamental to the learning process. Whenever a new skill is being learned, mistakes will be made. When we push our current ability limits, mistakes may be made. It is important for us, as coaches, to teach our youth that there are some mistakes that can be costly in training, such as different weight amounts being on the left and right sides of the Olympic bar someone is about to lift. However, other mistakes are going to happen as part of the learning and training process. If mistakes were not made, then everyone would always have perfect form for every exercise they ever attempted. Such learning mistakes or growing pains are not under people's conscious, intentional control. I like to tell my youth:

“Your body will try to find the lowest effort way to do a movement or exercise. That is not always the same as the best or safest way. So, often corrective feedback will come from me when your body starts trying to find shortcuts.”

By introducing my athletes to this idea early, I was telling them that a) I was not expecting perfection from them; b) I was expecting mistakes to happen because mistakes are normal; and

c) I would not judge them negatively for making mistakes or assume it was a conscious act of defiance; however, d) I will tell them about it, and how to correct it. Today, many youth understand mistakes to be failures and failing to be unacceptable (7). By educating our youth to understand that mistakes are a natural part of learning and, as such, failures are acceptable and even necessary, then we open the doorway for them to take on exercises and activities that actually challenge their present limits.

An additional key to developing a task-involving training climate by focusing on our youth's effort and improvement at each task they attempt is to know them as individuals. This individualized knowledge is expressed in a number of ways. One, we can use their name when we provide personalized feedback and encouragement. Two, we help our youth set realistic goals. These goals should be based on each youth's current skill level, be reasonable improvements over the course of the training period (e.g., month, semester, or year), take the youth's interests into account, and be grounded in the youth's safe progression to more challenging exercises while still having proper, safe form. When we know each youth as an individual, then it is easier to help them develop these reality based goals.

### **Conclusion/Summary**

For many youth coaches, their competition record is used to illustrate their success, and may even be connected to keeping their job. So, how does motivational climate relate to competitive performance? If we are able to create a task-involving climate that maximizes our athletes' effort, improvement, teamwork, and focus on always giving their greatest performance possible, then it seems likely that our competition record will be as good as is possible. Research has shown that when youth are in a task-involving climate, they are more intrinsically motivated to learn, to try challenging tasks, and to feel competent (1,8,11,14,15). A real-world example that illustrates the impact a highly task-involving climate can have both on athletes' character and win-loss record is John Wooden, who was declared "the greatest coach of all time;" and whose athlete was quoted as saying, "We never worried about the opponent, only about how we were going to play" (2).

As coaches and teachers we have a significant influence on our youth's interest in being physically active. To maintain or increase their interest in being physically active, we want to foster a training climate that is focused on them giving high effort and personally improving

through that high effort. We can check on success at fostering this task-involving climate by a) paying attention to how often we use each of our youth's names, b) giving positive feedback/encouragement, c) giving informative feedback, and d) treating mistakes as learning and teaching opportunities, rather than causes for punishment. When the youth we are training perceive these behaviors, then they are more likely to define their success based upon their consistent training with high effort and personally specific training goals. Fostering this outlook with your task-involving climate increases youth's effort, enjoyment, and interest in continuing to be active.

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