Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology
A comprehensive guide for students and practitioners
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Children

Publication details
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Published online on: 13 Oct 2010

How to cite :- Melissa A. Chase. 13 Oct 2010, Children from: Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology, A comprehensive guide for students and practitioners Routledge
Accessed on: 20 Jul 2023
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Parents and coaches often believe that participation in sport provides children with opportunities for improvement in physical, social, and self-development skills. Nevertheless, involvement in sport, in and of itself, does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes for children (Smith & Smoll, 2002). A positive sport experience that is focused on enjoyment, age-appropriate needs of the participants, and intentional practice of mental skills training can make a difference in the overall sport experience for children. The literature has typically defined children as individuals 6–12 years of age and adolescents as 13–18 years of age (Weiss, 1991). In this chapter, the focus will be on the practice of applied sport psychology with children aged 6–12 years.

### Mental skills training research with children

Research supporting the effectiveness of applied sport psychology with children has been sparse (Tremayne & Newbery, 2005). As prominent sport psychology consultants have noted, most psychological skills training (PST) programs are geared toward elite athletes, and much of the research has been conducted with young adults, non-elite athletes, and recreational sport participants. Since the early 1980s, practitioners in the field have strongly advocated for PST with children given the millions of children who regularly participate in sport and the ease with which they can learn mental skills (Gould, 1983). Nevertheless, there is limited experimental evidence directly examining the effectiveness of PST with children. Haddad and Tremayne (2009) found that the use of a centering breath by children aged 10–11 years did improve free-throw shooting percentage. In 1998, Atienza, Balaguer, and Garcia-Merita found that imagery training and video modeling improved the tennis serving performance of girls aged 9–12 years. Zhang, Ma, Orlick, and Zitzelberger (1992) found that table tennis players aged 7–10 years who received training in relaxation, video observation, and mental imagery significantly improved their performances. Wrisberg and Anshel (1989) found that boys 10–12 years old improved their free-throw shooting percentages when they practised an imagery and arousal regulation strategy.
In addition to these research studies, support for PST with children is evident from reports of practical and personal experiences, well grounded in psychological theory, from experienced sport psychology professionals. Orlick (1993) has proposed that seven conditions should be in place when conducting PST with children: (a) a fun environment, (b) concrete PST techniques (e.g., place your worries in a bag), (c) individualized instruction, (d) multi-modal instructional approaches, (e) an optimistic outlook, and (f) the use of role models. Gould (1983) and Weiss (1991) have also written extensively on the potential for PST with children and have advocated for a developmental perspective that includes developmentally targeted content and practices. The following sections address their recommendations.

**Developmental factors to consider**

Special considerations are needed when working with children as compared to working with adults. The popular saying “children are not miniature adults” suggests that techniques that work with adults may not necessarily work with children. Most experienced consultants have recommended using a developmental perspective that encompasses the influences of psychological, biological, social, and physical factors within the social context of youth sports (Weiss, 1991). Gould (1983) wrote:

> to be effective, the objectives and strategies identified for developing psychological skills must be appropriate for the developmental level of the athlete. It is essential that the developmental level of the athlete be considered since children of varying ages have been found to vastly differ in the ability to attend, comprehend, and retain information.

(p. 9)

Several developmental factors affect children’s abilities to use and benefit from PST. Weiss and Williams (2004) cautioned that one has to be sensitive to age-related attentional and motivational capabilities of children. Lessons need to be short and interesting to hold their focus. This caution is especially relevant for younger children because attentional processes start to improve from 7–8 years old and mature by about 12 years old (Sherman & Poczwardowski, 2005). Nevertheless, as early as five years old, children may have good memories and self-monitoring skills. Orlick and McCaffrey (1991) have employed some of the same PST approaches used with adults, but modified the approaches so children can understand. Specifically, they adapted the strategies to be simple, concrete, individualized, and fun for children.

Tremayne and Newbery (2005) pointed out in their discussion of developmental issues when conducting PST with children that the field is somewhat limited in understanding at what age (or age range) specific mental skills are most effective. These authors cited the work of Piaget’s (1950) cognitive development theory as one way to determine when children are developmentally ready for PST. For example, six-year-old children in the pre-operational stage (think egocentrically and have difficulties taking the viewpoints of others) are different to 7–11-year old children in the concrete operational stage (think and solve problems that apply to actual concrete objects or events, capable of taking the viewpoints of the others), who are different from 12-year-old children in the formal operational stage (have the ability to think abstractly, reason logically, and draw conclusions from the
information available). For example, a child 6–7 years old who may still be in the pre-operational stage will have difficulty following PST that uses primarily verbal instructions about actions the child has never seen or done (Tremayne & Newbery, 2005). Children 7–11 years old who may still be in the concrete operational stage may have difficulty thinking abstractly about what they can achieve (e.g., goal mapping). Despite the limited experimental results that pinpoint age-specific PST methods, effective interventions with children do exist and should be implemented with developmental factors in mind.

**Suitable PST content for children**

Vealey’s (1988) view of PST has been well-supported in the literature. She suggested that sport psychologists should focus on skills that individual athletes need to develop and then choose the best methods to deliver the skills. Keeping in mind Vealey’s recommendation, there are numerous mental skills that children may use to improve their sport experiences. The following section focuses on an example of one method (goal mapping) and two skills that are developmentally designed for children.

**Goal mapping**

“Goal mapping is a systematic approach to acting and thinking in purposeful ways to achieve specific accomplishments and personal fulfillment” (Vealey, 2005, p. 149). Goal mapping can be implemented with children by taking them through four simple steps: planning, setting, evaluating, and resetting.

**Step 1: Planning**

Invite the children to identify their sense of purpose for playing the sport. At this time children can dream big and express their passion for playing. Try to get to the “why” children want to play sport and their answers may reveal something about their motivation. For example, if an athlete’s purpose for playing sport is to “win a big trophy,” then there may be some reflecting and refocusing needed before the child moves on to setting goals. Help children tell their stories of what makes them happy about playing sport, what makes them feel energized, or what makes them excited about going to practice. Understanding and stating their sense of purpose will allow children to develop and set meaningful goals.

**Step 2: Setting**

Setting goals can get complicated for children if the different types of goals are described, such as, short-term, long-term, outcome, performance, and process goals or in the language of goal mapping: milestone, challenge, or focus goals. Are all of these types of goals really needed for children 6–12 years old? They are probably not all needed at once but can be added over time as goal-setting techniques improve. Children will likely set outcome goals (short- and long-term) because we live in a goal-oriented society and children can easily identify specific outcomes they want to achieve. One or two outcome goals are fine as long as the goals flow into specific performance or process goals (see Chapter 51).
Step 3: Evaluating

Adults can help children map their goal achievement strategies and think of daily behaviors in which they can engage to evaluate their goals. For example, a few goal achievement strategies for a ten-year-old soccer player aiming to improve her kicking and dribbling skills might be: (a) take 20 shots on goals, (b) practise five penalty shots without a goalie, and (c) do two-minute dribbling drills with a friend before practice. Some children enjoy writing down their goal achievement strategies on a chart and checking off their progress (a goal map). Other children who are not developmentally ready for this task may require a coach or parent to keep track and share their progress periodically. The key is for children to think about and engage in daily activities that will help them meet their goals.

Step 4: Resetting

The last step is resetting or revisiting step 1 so children remember “why” they are playing the sport. By revisiting their passions for playing, children can keep in touch with their internal motivation. Consultants can ask children to reflect upon why they play, what makes them happy about playing, and then discuss how the goals they have mapped are helping them stay passionate about their sports.

Relaxation

There is a common misperception among parents, coaches, and some practitioners that children do not get stressed during sports. The belief that children are not stressed is generally not true and many experts suggest that different forms of arousal control for children are beneficial during sport and everyday life. For example, progressive muscle relaxation techniques have been linked to a reduction in arousal and muscle tension; meditation and distraction control help to quiet counterproductive thoughts and refocus; and guided visual imagery and verbal prompts reduce worry (Vealey, 2005). A simple technique that can be quite beneficial for children is relaxed breathing, combined with self-talk. Relaxed breathing helps children to physically relax by controlling their breathing and reversing the effects of anxiety. Self-talk allows the children to talk themselves into calming down and relaxing with “trigger” relaxation words, such as “breathe easy,” “I’m OK,” or “take it slow.” Children need to recognize that they are experiencing stress before they implement relaxation skills. For example, one way for children to recognize that they are experiencing stress is to recognize that their muscles feel tight and even sore in their necks and shoulders. Suggest that they push two fingers into their shoulder muscles to see whether the muscle feels hard like a chair or soft like a couch. Hard muscles can be one way of their body saying they are experiencing stress and need progressive muscle relaxation. Another symptom of stress in children is an upset stomach. Suggest that children monitor how their stomachs feel. When their stomachs feel like they have been doing flips and are hurting, they may be experiencing too much stress.

Imagery

Imagery is defined as using all the senses to recreate or create an experience in the mind as an internal representation (Vealey & Greenleaf, 2006). Children, more so than adults, seem to have a keen ability to use their senses and imagine real-life and pretend situations.
Weiss (1991) described children’s use of imagery as “a natural strategy that is used to rehearse skill sequences.” Consultants can ask children to imagine something and discuss: what the image looks like and how to add different senses to enhance their imagery. Imagery with a kinesthetic sense, the feel of their bodies as they move, may be difficult for some young children because they have not yet learned the correct movement pattern so each skill attempt feels different. Children should still try to recognize how their bodies feel during movement. Awareness of their kinesthetic sense may help to provide internal feedback that leads to better technique when learning new skills. Refer to Chapter 50 for a thorough description and implementation ideas of imagery.

In addition to defining and describing imagery techniques to children, it is important to let them know the best times to practise their imagery. For imagery to be effective, children need to systematically practise it just like they practise their physical skills. The best times for imagery practise may be during a cool-down after practice, where they can reflect on the skills they practised that day, or at night as they are getting ready to fall asleep.

These three examples can be effective with children, in addition many other methods and skills should be considered when consulting with young athletes. Orlick’s (1993) work has shown that children can use relaxation, imagery, and refocusing through play and fun-oriented games. Gould (1983) has suggested that positive thinking, stress management, focusing, and confidence building are important. Weiss (1991) has advocated problem-solving, self-talk, goal-setting, relaxation, and mental imagery when working with children. Important to keep in mind is that one purpose of interventions with children is to assist them in fulfilling their reasons for participating in sport. Some of the top reasons children participate in sport include: (a) to learn and improve their skills, (b) to have fun, (c) to be with friends, (d) to experience the excitement of competition, (e) to enhance their physical fitness, and (f) to demonstrate competence. For example, goal mapping may assist children in fulfilling their desire to learn and improve their skills or enhance physical fitness. Providing fun-oriented games that teach various PST skills to a team may fulfill their desire to have fun with their friends.

**Consulting with children**

In addition to considering developmental factors when working with children, there are several issues consultants face that are unique to children. Orlick and McCaffrey (1991) stated:

> To be effective with children we must draw from their qualities and strengths, listen to their perspectives, use their input and, perhaps most important, care about them; otherwise we will never give them the special treatment they need and deserve. More than any other group, children want to know that you care before they care what you know.

(p. 324)

To gain rapport, build trust, and communicate effectively with children, consultants need to be honest and demonstrate they care about the needs of their athletes. Communication with children includes verbal and nonverbal. For example, speaking on the same level as children involves constructing language in terms that they can understand, and physically lowering oneself to a level that is “eye to eye.”
Suggestions for how an intervention can be structured and implemented

There are many ways to structure and implement PST with children. Some of the nuances have to do with the personality and strengths (or weaknesses) of the consultant. Table 39.1 illustrates one example of a consulting sequence for PST with children. These general guidelines are suggested as a possible structure for implementing PST with children.

It is probably best to keep strategies simple with a lot of hands-on, real life, tangible examples. For example, if the strategy is for children to stop worrying or change their behaviors, ask them to physically go through the motions of taking the worry or behaviors and putting the worry or behavior somewhere. A bag, backpack, or box can work well as a place to “hold” whatever they are moving. Have the children design a paper “worry bag” – personally decorated – to function as their place to deposit their worries. Another example is asking children to relax their muscles. A simple, real-life example would be the use of objects that children know are relaxed. Orlick (1993) used the example of uncooked and cooked spaghetti to illustrate being tense and being relaxed, respectively. Other examples of relaxed objects would be earthworms or jump ropes. Presenting objects as examples that they can see and touch will help children transfer the concept to how their bodies should look and feel when relaxed.

To promote children’s attention and participation, practitioners should construct PST in a way that is viewed as fun by children. Making PST fun may be one of the most difficult aspects of working with children. How can PST be fun and still educational? One suggestion is to use activities that children consider fun, such as pretending, using their imaginations, physically moving (not sitting still), or playing games. Another recommendation by Orlick and McCaffrey (1991) is to use multiple approaches until the one that works is found: so persistence and creativity are also important.

Another guideline found in the PST literature is the use of positive role models. Positive role models include the consultant, significant others, or highly respected athletes. Children respond to seeing and hearing about role models who have overcome obstacles and experienced self-development. The next section focuses on the role of parents during PST with children.

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**Table 39.1** Steps representing the sequence of a PST intervention with children.

1. Have a discussion with parents or coaches about their expectations for what PST can accomplish.
2. Provide a clear explanation about what you can provide in a PST session and privacy policies with athletes, coaches, and parents.
3. Observe the sport environment, and athletes’ interactions with coaches, teammates, and parents to gain an understanding of the social context.
4. Meet with children to answer questions and learn about their goals, strengths, and weaknesses; begin to demonstrate a caring attitude, and discuss privacy issues.
5. Develop an individualized plan to meet the specific needs of children which is age-targeted and enjoyable.
6. Meet weekly with children to discuss progress, make refinements, and add new skills while encouraging the daily practice of mental skills when practising physical skills.
7. Share with parents or coaches the daily mental skills so that they can help reinforce, model, and integrate these skills into their normal daily routines.
8. Regularly evaluate whether the PST session is fun for children and meeting their needs.
9. Revisit numbers 1 and 2 with parents or coaches so expectations and implementation are congruent.
Role of the parents

The role of parents in children’s sport experiences is important because children usually view their parents as their most significant adults. Consultants sometimes have a difficult balancing act between dealing with parents and their goals for their children, and the children’s goals. A good place to start with parents is to discuss their expectations for their children’s sport experiences. One goal for practitioners is to work with parents so that they try to base the success of their children’s sport experiences on their children’s happiness and not their children’s performance successes or failures.

How much should parents be involved in consulting work?

Parents should be involved in their children’s PST. There should be a clear understanding from the start about what parts of the conversations between consultants and children are confidential and what parts will be shared with parents. Privacy policies need to be established for all parties to understand what is private, why it is private, and when privacy policies might be renegotiated. Without a clear understanding and agreed upon policy, children may feel they cannot confide in a consultant without everyone hearing their thoughts and parents may worry that they are being left out of the conversation. Children also need to understand that they can talk to their parents or everyone they want about what goes on in a PST session. Parents can also serve as good role models to practise and reinforce the messages the consultant provides and can help reduce unnecessary stress in the environment (Orlick & McCaffrey, 1991).

What happens when the parents are the problem?

For problematic, controlling parents, consultants should provide clear expectations of the parents’ roles in the consultation process and try to engage them in interactive communication, while encouraging realistic goal setting with their children. Parents need honest feedback from consultants so they feel informed and educated. It is a good idea to have an established procedure for dealing with individual problems that might arise with parents who do not understand their roles or violate the outlined expectations. For example, some parents might expect the consultant to be available to conduct a PST session immediately after their child’s poor performance in a competition. To avoid the parent’s emergency phone call, define the word emergency and establish business hours when parents can call with questions or concerns. Stainback and La Marche (1998) have several suggestions for positive, productive parent involvement:

- Encourage parents to understand that fun and family should be emphasized in youth sports.
- Talk with the parents to identify problems, dilemmas, or areas needing improvement.
- Focus on the child’s needs and concerns.
- Help develop family communication patterns that facilitate enjoyment and mastery experiences (e.g., the first comment after competition is always about enjoyment of competition and not who won or lost).
- Keep open lines of communication between children, family, and coaches.
Children’s situations are difficult to evaluate and understand without understanding the roles of their parents and the communication patterns in the family. Before intervening, have a clear understanding of the family structure and roles of the parents (see Chapter 19).

**Role of the coach**

Youth sport coaches, even more than parents, need to judge the success of their players’ sport experiences on the players’ happiness and not competition outcomes. Research has shown that coaches for whom athletes enjoyed playing the most, and who were most successful in promoting children’s self-esteem, actually had win–loss records that were about the same as coaches who were less liked and less effective in fostering feelings of self-worth (Smith & Smoll, 2002). Another finding suggested that winning made little difference to children, but they knew that it was important to the adults in their lives.

**How much should coaches be involved in consulting work?**

The objective of PST is to empower athletes and coaches to reach their goals and enhance their sport experiences. The best relationships between consultants and coaches involve a shared purpose to help children. PST is not intended to undermine the authority of the coach. A coach can and should be involved in consulting work to help reinforce and model the suggestions put forth and provide practice opportunities. Gould (1983) suggested some strategies that coaches can use to assist in the development of mental skills in young athletes:

- Define the objectives of PST.
- Convey the objectives of PST to athletes via individual and/or team discussions.
- Implement systematic goal-setting procedures.
- Use effective role models.
- Employ a positive and sincere approach to communication.
- Develop educational programs for parents of young athletes.

**What happens when the coach is the problem?**

Similar to the recommendations made for dealing with problematic parents, consultants should provide clear expectations of coaches’ roles in the process. Engage coaches in interactive communication so they feel informed and educated. Dissimilar to parents, coaches do not have the right to make decisions about what constitutes a positive sport experience for each child. Coaches should have clear boundaries endorsed by parents as to what coaching behaviors are helpful and beneficial for their children (e.g., not approving the use of physical conditioning drills as a form of punishment for mental mistakes).

**Conclusion**

In the United States, an estimated 40 million children participate in organized youth sports (Smith & Smoll, 2002). When adult organizers focus on children’s personal development in physical, social, and psychological skills, children can benefit greatly from involvement.
As a sport psychology consultant, who values positive sport experiences for all children, I pledge to:

- maintain a positive approach with the goal of improving the sport experience, not just performance;
- modify my approach and PST to be appropriate for each child's developmental needs;
- construct my interventions to meet the reasons why children participate in sport (e.g., to learn and improve skills, to have fun, to be with friends);
- provide PST for all children – recreational to elite;
- work with parents so that they understand their roles and provide positive support systems for their children;
- work with coaches so that they understand their roles and provide positive sport experiences for all children they coach;
- bring positive change to youth sports that encourages the use of PST by athletes, coaches, and parents;
- judge the success of a child's sport experience and PST on the child's happiness and reasons for playing sport and not on the child's performance success or failure.

A positive sport experience that is focused on enjoyment, age-targeted needs of the participants, and intended practice of psychological skills training can make a difference for children.

Most experienced consultants suggest using a developmental perspective that takes into account the influences of psychological, biological, social and physical factors within the social context of youth sports (e.g., Weiss, 1991).

The sport psychology research is somewhat limited in conveying at what age (or age range) specific mental skills are most effective.

Sport psychologists should focus on skills that athletes need to develop and then choose the best method to deliver those skills (Vealey, 2005).

One purpose of interventions with children is to assist them in fulfilling their reasons for participating in sport.

Each child is unique and so an individual approach is important.

Parents, coaches, and consultants should base the success of children’s sport experiences on children's happiness and not competition outcomes.
References


