



## The athlete triangle: Coach, athlete and parents as an educational system

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### Abstract

Motivated participation of parents, children and coaches in youth sports activities creates an effective educational system. This system can be described as a continuous process of positive interaction between the three elements of the system. Recent studies however show that such a three-dimensional education system is underdeveloped, is not positive enough and could be more effective if certain social instruments were used: more active engagement of parents in youth sports activities; pressure on children were replaced by motivation in psychologically favourable environment; coaches had continuous learning possibilities. The article analyses how this system functions, what is the educational effect of the collaboration between children, coaches and parents. The goal of the article is to disclose the characteristics of educational interaction of children, coaches and parents in youth sports activities. The following research methods are applied: scientific literature analysis and generalization methods. Scientific literature analysis revealed the importance of the three constituents of the education system. The level, degree and continuation of the child's participation in sports activities depend on financial and psychological support of the parents, physical and emotional wellbeing of the child, the coach's positive education strategy, competence and authority. The analysis of literature sources revealed that the majority of the surveys and studies are cross-sectional. That proves the relevance of multifaceted and longitudinal research into the change of relations between children, coaches and parents in the sporting environment.

Keywords: educational interaction, parents, coaches, children, sports activities.

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## **1. The Athlete Triangle: Coach, Athlete and Parents as an Educational System**

Motivated participation of parents, children and coaches create an effective educational system. This system can be described as a continuous positive interaction between all three participants of the system. However recent research studies reveal that such a three-dimensional education system is not actively developed, is not enough positive, and might be more effective if certain social instruments were used: More active involvement of parents in sports activities of their children; avoiding placing pressure on young athletes and motivating them to play sports in psychologically favourable environment; ensuring continuous development opportunities for coaches. Parents' interest in the child's sports activities creates positive emotions, builds better relations with the child, creates the need to improve knowledge of sport and education, changes parents' understanding about the quality of leisure time, and modifies their lifestyle. The role of coaches is revealed through the possibility to encourage the interaction of parents and children in sport, change the understanding of children and also of parents about the importance of sport as the means of education. Acting as a moderator, intermediary, and a consultant the coach can assist in developing education traditions in the family based on mutual respect, understanding and collaboration of the coach and parents, and commitment to share the responsibility for youth education.

Therefore, the analysed system can be described as a triangle made of three interacting elements: children, parents and coaches. Positive emotional development of the child and willingness to train can only be ensured by open and conscientious collaboration of the three parties.

The aim of the article is to reveal the characteristics of educational interaction between children, coaches and parents.

The aim is reached by means of the following objectives:

1. Analyse the interaction between children, coaches and parents in youth sport environment as an educational system;
2. Disclose the factors that increase the effectiveness of the interaction between children, coaches and parents as an educational system.

*Research methods applied:* scientific literature analysis and generalization methods.

The article is made of two parts. The first part analyses the interaction between children, coaches and parents in youth sport environment as an educational system. The second part analyses the factors that increase the effectiveness of the interaction between children, coaches and parents as an educational system.

## **2. Interaction between children, coaches and parents in children's sports environment as an educational system**

Participation of youth in sports has a wide range of benefits. Physical benefits are related to new sport skills, increased fitness and improved health (Smoll, Cumming & Smith, 2011). Others are psychological, such as developing leadership skills, self-discipline, respect for authority, competitiveness, cooperativeness, sportsmanship, and self-confidence (Smoll et al., 2011; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). Psycho-social development of youth is essential and sports activities have a potential of teaching the most important lessons of life (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Participation in youth sports develops social skills, brings families closer together, and provides a positive experience in the form of entertainment. Sports provide an arena for learning, where success is measured in terms of personal growth and development (Smoll et al., 2011). Children actively participating in sports may learn to set goals and plan the steps towards the desired results (McCarthy, Allen & Jones, 2013). Sports environment encourages pro-social behaviour of youth (Fraser-Thomas, & Côté, 2009; Wells & Arthur-Banning, 2008), helps children to make new friends and acquaintances and become part of an ever-expanding social network (Smoll et al., 2011). Initially providing the joy of small achievements for children, eventually

sport becomes a motivating psychological factor for youth, an interesting and meaningful activity, which later becomes a lifestyle of an adult person (Wells, Arthur-Banning, Paisley, Ellis, Roark & Fisher, 2008).

How can participants of this activity – coaches, parents and young athletes – influence the benefit given by youth sports? Researchers (Smoll et al., 2011) analysing the communication of coaches and parents or parents and children discuss about two-way communication. Talking about the input of the coach-parent-child triad, which in scientific literature is called “athletic triangle”, relations between the three parties should be analysed as three-way communication. Sport psychologists emphasize that triangular relationship approach would be useful for the development of intellectual skills training culture (McCann, 2011).

Researchers, analysing the relationship between sport coaching context and social organization, have distinguished the following major social benefits of sports: Personality development and opportunities for personal growth through skills building; family integration; processes of building close relationships, favourable climate for social interaction and values; social relations and efficiency; identification with the achievements and experiences in sports background; integration into the community (Domingues, Cavichioli & Concalves, 2014). The educational benefit created by the system operating in the context of sports could be measured by the effectiveness of these factors.

The term “system” is often heard in various contexts and is intuitively perceived as a complex whole, a certain set of procedures, uniform behaviour. In more detail, a system is defined as a set of interacting or interdependent components working together towards a common goal. Therefore, in the background of the issue analysed in this article, parents, children and coaches are analysed as mutually affecting and modifying elements of youth sport. The aim of the interaction of these elements is to maximize the benefits of youth sports. Motivated participation of parents, children and coaches can create an effective educational system that would enable the transfer of positive knowledge, skills and habits of the older generation to children participating in organized sport not only through training and teaching but also through positive collaboration, expressed support, demonstrated positive example and respected authority. This system can be described as a continuous process of positive interaction between the three elements of the system.

Evidently, there are different ways of interaction in the parent-child-coach social system and the outcomes of these interactions have an effect on the child’s development. The outcomes of interaction can be more or less effective. Close relationships may not only befriend young athletes, parents and coaches but may also create a confrontation between them (Flett, Gould, Griffes & Lauer, 2013). How then should parent-child-coach relationships be organized in youth sport in order to make the educational system the most effective and bring the greatest benefit? Researchers, who have been analysing two-way relationships of parents and children in youth sports, emphasize that the harmonization of athletic triangle remains the main challenge and the most important topic in further research (Strachan, Côté & Deakin, 2011).

### **3. Factors that increase the effectiveness of the interaction between children, coaches and parents as an educational system**

The role of three participants in youth sports, namely coaches, children and parents, has been recognized as an important factor for creating positive educational sport experience (O’Connor, 2011). However, the latest studies have revealed that the development of parent-child-coach relationship is not positive enough to create favourable environment in sport. The interaction between the three parties would be more effective, if parents were more involved in youth sport activities understanding the importance of their role for the wellness of their children (Horn, 2011); if children were not pushed by parents but were motivated to play sports by creating a psychologically safe environment (Sánchez-Miguel, Leo, Sánchez-Oliva, Amado, & García-Calvo, 2013); if coaches were given the possibility not only to improve their technical skills but also their mental skills (Domingues et al., 2014).

Parents have both the right and the responsibility to inquire about all activities that their children are involved in, including sports (Smoll et al., 2011). The level, degree and continuity of the child's participation in organized sport depend on parental financial and psychological support that ensures the child's physical and emotional wellbeing (Nunomura & Oliveira, 2013). By involving in the child's physical activities parents develop their responsibility and empathy, build better relationship with their children, bring the family together and strengthen family relationships. Parents willing to speak a common language with own children and their coaches in sport context have a need to improve, to gain more knowledge about sport and education (Holt & Black, 2007). Eventually such interaction may change parents' understanding about the quality of leisure time and family lifestyle. Research findings however show that a great number of parents are not interested in sports and, even with best intentions for their child, they do not understand the educational impact they can make in both athletic and social development of their child by actively participating in youth sport (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008).

In such cases, supportive coaches can encourage motivated participation of parents in youth sport (Knight, Neely & Holt, 2011), bring parents and children closer together (Bailey, Cope, & Pearce, 2013), change the understanding of the educational role of sport not only in children but in parents too. Being a moderator, a mediator and a consultant (O'Connor, 2011), the coach can help to create new children education traditions in the family based on mutual respect, understanding and collaboration between the coach and the parents with the aim to share the responsibility for children education. Parents of children who play sports also expect help from coaches in order to offer their children new opportunities of improvement. Parents, like children, want to be listened to by coaches, to have a possibility to give their remarks, discuss problems and receive emotional support.

The effectiveness of both parents and coaches interaction with children in sports depends on the selected educational methods used to build skills of children playing sports (Coakley, 2006). Although parents and coaches wish the child to succeed, studies and surveys reveal frequent cases when parents and coaches seek to improve self-image through the young athlete's achievements (Smoll et al., 2011), to improve their social status, and the pressure placed on the children to excel can be extreme. Similar methods most often have a negative effect on the child's motivation to participate in organized sport (Sánchez-Miguel et al., 2013). When parental love and approval depend on the adequacy of performance, sports are bound to be stressful (Smoll et al., 2011). In spite of the wish of all three parties to excel in sports arena, parents and coaches should understand that the ultimate goal of the child's participation in organized sport is not the best performance but the joy of playing sport (McCarthy, Allen & Jones, 2013), positive development, happy and harmonious personality. Youth play and do sports for entertainment, sensation and excitement, willing to improve skills and find friends, whereas winning is not the most important goal (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008; Smoll et al., 2011). Parents and coaches should not place pressure, intimidate or attempt to bribe children so that they would participate in organized sport. Adults with positive emotions, value system and realistic expectations understand children better, encourage them and support irrespective of their achievements in sport. Children, in turn, feeling encouraging and supportive participation of parents and coaches, develop a positive attitude to sport (Kanters, Bocarro & Casper, 2008). The probable perspective is that sport activities of children will continue and athletic youth will develop a more positive self-expression (Wells & Banning, 2008).

It is important for the parties to understand each other's expectations in educational background of coach-child-parent interaction (O'Connor, 2011), to be able to solve common problems in sport environment without aggression, in non-conflicting manner and demonstrate ethical behaviour (Harwood & Knight, 2012), understand certain communication rules and respect them during training sessions and competitions (Smoll et al., 2011). Positive, flexible, empathic communication between the members of athletic triangle would enable to create more attractive to youth and education-friendly sport environment.

Coaches play an important role in the creation of motivating youth sport environment. The coach's input into the education system depends on professional effectiveness, use of more or

less positive children coaching and education strategy, use of more or less effective tactics of behaving with children and parents. Coaches, trying to change the participants' behaviour in sports and solving ethical and social dilemmas of coaching (Mesquita, Borges, Rosado & Batista, 2012), must be able to assume responsibility for social aspects and moral values. According to researchers (Flett et al., 2013) educated coaches perform more efficiently; they avoid autocratic methods, tend to learn continually, share experiences, are open to innovations. Thus talking about educational benefits, the importance of coach's competencies and opportunities to develop them come to the fore along with the relevance of specialized coach training programmes and their accessibility. Scientific discussions highlight the need and usefulness of long-term education programmes for coaches as well as integrated programmes for coaches and parents.

#### 4. Conclusions and research perspectives

Scientific literature analysis revealed that coach-parent-child interaction in sport environment developed in one direction and having one common goal to increase the benefit of youth sport may be regarded as an educational system in the sport environment. Active participation of all three members of the athletic triangle – coaches, children and parents – is important and necessary for the positive development of this system. Such three-dimension educational system may be more effective if certain social instruments are used: Parents are more actively involved in sport activities of their children; children are not pressed but motivated by psychologically positive environment; coaches are given continuous learning possibilities.

Although quite big attention has been recently paid by researchers to the role of parents and coaches in youth sport, further research remains relevant in order to create education programmes and methodologies for a more effective interaction between children, coaches and parents in youth sport. In addition, the analysis of scientific sources has revealed that harmonization of athletic triangle remains the main challenge and the most important topic of further research on this issue.

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