

Eliminating 'scary coach' behaviour to keep kids in sport

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Changing coaches' behaviour to give children a more positive experience of playing sport has been found to change children's intentions to drop out of sporting activity, according to sports scientists at the University of Birmingham, who announced their findings this week (20 September 2013) from a 4 year project called 'Promoting Adolescent Physical Activity' (PAPA).

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During the £2.9 million Euro study, almost 1400 grassroots football coaches attended interactive workshops in England, France, Norway, Greece and Spain where they were taught how to create a motivational atmosphere that would be more effective in creating more empowering sport experiences, and ultimately effective in encouraging children to continue to play sport.

With the help of the Birmingham researchers and coach education trainers from the Football Associations in each country, the coaches had the opportunity to attend the Empowering Coaching™ programme, a theory and evidence based education package created by the University of Birmingham's Professor Joan Duda and further developed for youth football within the PAPA Project. Coaches were encouraged to develop new strategies to use on the playing field that would motivate children by creating a sense of belongingness, giving them autonomy and fostering a sense of competence in and ownership of their sporting activity.

Previous research suggests that children are most likely to drop out of sport between the ages of 10 and 14. Often the reason they give up is due to feelings of inadequacy at sport, feeling less competent than others, or having a bad experience with a coach or sports teacher that has put them off.

David Villa, 2010 World Cup MVP, striker for Atlético de Madrid, and Empowering Coaching™ Ambassador, when commenting on the importance of the climate created by youth sport coaches said: 'Any kid wanting to be a footballer needs to feel valued in terms of his or her effort. Coaches can stop your desire to learn and make you fail.... I have always been lucky because my coaches have always tried to help me out with things that I wasn't good at. As you move forward toward the future, this makes you improve.'

Professor Joan Duda, from the University of Birmingham's School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences, who directed the PAPA project, said: 'Via the implementation of Empowering Coaching™ we support the coaches in understanding how, and why to try different ways of coaching, for example, to instill a sense of competence in the children in terms of improving and developing at sport rather than winning, making sure they realized they felt competent, not by only being the best in the team, but especially by being the best that they can be. More if not all children can realize the latter!'

The new strategies that the coaches developed included adopting a more questioning style rather than imposing activities on the children, for example, consulting them about changing tactics during a match rather than dictating to them.

Dr Eleanor Quested, PAPA Project Manager, from the University of Birmingham said: 'The new empowering approach meant that coaches stopped using language like 'you must...' or 'you should...' and changed to 'have you thought about...' or 'why don't you try...'. This starts a discussion with the children so they can have input into their sports session and feel more in control of the activity.'

Terry Venables, a coach from Birmingham, who took part in the study, said: 'I've been a coach for over 20 years, but this workshop was a real turning point for me. The workshop has changed the way I coach, for example we now focus far more on how to promote the players' intrinsic motivation and enjoyment.... And we are seeing the results – everybody enjoys themselves more, we are retaining more players, and what is fantastic is we are also noticing performances are improving too. We noticed quite quickly that children were starting to enjoy their sessions and that they were participating better and they were beginning to take on problem solving in the matches as well.'

Professor Duda concluded: 'In all the countries that took part, the findings of our study (involving nearly 10,000 European youth) tell us that an empowering coaching climate corresponds to more intrinsic motivation and players' enjoying their sport participation more, feeling greater vitality, having higher self-esteem and developing stronger intentions to continue playing sport. We are delighted that the coaches who have taken part in the Empowering Coaching™ workshops in the PAPA Project have found the process useful in their coaching, as drop-out from sport participation during adolescence is extremely common and this leaves young people at risk of the negative health consequences of a sedentary lifestyle.'

Currently coach education only briefly touches on motivation of participants in sport, so the researchers are hoping that National Governing Bodies and other coach and teacher education systems will adopt their new coaching methods, which are grounded in theory and are evidence-based.

Notes to Editors

A [podcast \(/Audio/news/duda-podcast.mp3\)](#) interview with Professor Joan Duda is also available

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