KIDS TODAY & WHAT THEY NEED FROM US

VARA EDUCATIONAL SERIES FOR SPORT COACHES & PARENTS

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Understanding Our Young Athletes: Part 1

Kids Today & What They Need from Us

For anyone who has kids of their own or who has worked with young people in the recent years, it's becoming more and more apparent that understanding our young people is at the heart of doing our best by them. In our fast-moving world, this is precisely the thing we are collectively struggling with. We don't have to resign to the seemingly apparent belief that we will never understand *kids these days* – our young people deserve more from us. So, let's be courageous, get curious, and dive in together.

If we want to be comprehensive in our quest to better understand our kids, we need to explore across disciplines, consider different perspectives, and think complexly about something that is indeed, complex. What's to come in Parts 1 and 2 of this topic is by no means exhaustive, but it's a good multifaceted starting point.

A Neurobiological Drive-By: Mechanics Under the Teenage Hood

Today it is quite popular to talk about the brains of our adolescents as mysterious, undeveloped, unsolved puzzles. The reality is, the majority of the brain *is* online and operating at full capacity; what hasn't reached full maturation is the prefrontal cortex (PFC). This unique part of the brain is often called the *decider* when different options are laid out – it's about executive function and making strategic decisions, and it plays a large role in self-regulation and managing impulsivity (among many other things).

This delayed development can be evolutionarily explained as the brain giving itself the opportunity to get it absolutely right. Humans have the kind of nature that requires nurture: our genes are guided and regulated by both the physical and social environment. The risk of being so critically dependent on social and physical input is obvious (can you feel the responsibility?), but the advantage we gain to offset this risk is that each brain becomes optimized for its environment (the one it developed in). Instead of having to encode all of our wiring instructions into our genes, evolution has done the economical and efficient thing; it has offloaded much of this job to the world (and people) around us. We are better served when *experiences* are the ultimate shaper of neural connections rather than pure *genetics*. It is, therefore, no surprise that the part of the human brain that most defines who we are and how we navigate our world is the part that waits the longest to allow a multitude of messy, scratchy, and exploratory situations to shape it.

For the afficionados out there, during this crucial time when the brain is optimizing its neural circuitry, the PFC is reducing the number of synaptic connections through the process of competitive pruning (increasing efficiency). The PFC begins to operate as a more functional unit while an insulating layer forms around neurons (myelination) speeding up the transmission of electrical signals and allowing for more coordinated communication. The brain is being wired by its environment to best serve the young person in the environment they're likely to encounter moving forward. Don't worry, during this time when the PFC is comparatively underdeveloped, other parts of the brain (i.e., the ventral striatum) lend a helping hand. The other fundamental

pillar of support? *Us*. We (trusted adults) step in with our empathic care and loving guidance as we build the hand rails to help keep them upright and tracking forward as they cross the wobbly bridge of adolescence. Time for us to embrace the biological reality that we are critical factors in our adolescents' developing brains – our words, our actions, our attitudes, and our beliefs. Their nature ensures that our nurture leaves its mark.

Hallmark Behavior

The goal here is not to stereotype, but simply to highlight what is common and even expected amongst our beloved adolescents. Let's start with risk taking. To summarize the research, teenagers take more risks and are significantly less proficient in risk assessment than adults. Sound familiar? Risk taking at this age is characterized specifically by novelty seeking. The underlying mechanism here can be found in the exaggerated signaling of dopamine neurons (dopamine is stereotypically knows as the "feel good" hormone or the "molecule of more"). At this age, dopaminergic activity in the brain's "reward center" has huge fluctuations resulting in what typically manifests in experiencing the *highest of the highs* and the *lowest of the lows*. This is the inevitable roller coaster ride our teens are strapped into.

The frantic need to belong is the second unmistakable trademark of the teenage years. Young people experience an increased vulnerability to peer pressure and emotional contagion. When adults are asked what they think of themselves and then what they believe others think of them, neuroimaging shows two distinct but overlapping networks. Adolescents don't show this neural distinction – what they think about themselves is equivalent with what everyone else thinks of them. This positions peer acceptance at the heart of their experience, and social exclusion and rejection become crushing forces to the identity they are working to form.

I would be remiss to leave out the remarkable ability teenagers have to feel huge emotions. These huge emotions lead to all sorts of complexing behaviors that scream teen – I need not mention the infinite possibilities here. If you recall from early on in our neurobiological drive-by, the vast majority of the adolescent brain is online and chugging full steam ahead. The one part that's lagging behind is the legendary decider, the prefrontal cortex (PFC). In the way the brain matures, grey matter gives way to white matter from back to front, from less connected brain networks and regions (i.e., the primary sensorimotor cortex) to the most connected (i.e., the frontal cortex). This white matter that increases from childhood to adulthood is the byproduct of all of those newly myelinated neurons speeding up the brain's communication. Long story short, the teen's brain is experiencing a time of neural imbalance.

But we know evolution ensures a functional benefit here just as we talked about earlier. Big emotions and immaturity of the PFC play a role in allowing teens to connect with others, break away from the familial security zone, and learn a heck of a lot about themselves and their world. The teenage brain appears to favor certain types of learning and flexibility. Frequent powerful emotional experiences lend themselves to fluidity of intrinsic motivation, and goals and priorities are easily shaped and reshaped by ever-changing social contexts. Emotions are a powerful teacher. Using them to learn, however, is not always the teenager's forte. This is where we have the opportunity to (skillfully) step in. Oftentimes, our instincts tell us to fix it. Our teens

learn the most powerful lessons when we have the courage to *not* fix it. If we can sit with our teens through it, allow them the space to feel it, and help them process it when they're ready, we give them the chance to maximize their incredible brains.

With the hardcore science of the individual behind us, next week we will shift our focus to examine the powerful external forces they are navigating. Our society and the culture in which our adolescents are trying to survive and thrive is nothing like the human race has ever seen before.

References (and Resources You Should Also Check Out!)

- Cindy Pierce – www.cindy-pierce.com (Social Sexuality Educator - check out her full body of work)
- Center for Humane Technology – www.humanetech.com (highly recommend their podcast: *Your Undivided Attention*)
- Jean Twenge – *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood (and What This Means for the Rest of Us)*
- Lisa Feldman Barrett – *Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain*
- Robert Sapolsky – *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst*

Understanding Our Young Athletes: Part 2

Exposure, Overprotection, and the Timeline of Growing Up

Our culture of technology, social media, and pop culture have hit the fast-forward button on childhood. If the creators knew when they were building the internet that 1/3 of the users would be children, would they have designed it the same way? Kids are exposed to explicit content including violence, crime, racism, sexism, self-harm, etc., and recent research shows that on average, children are first exposed to online porn between the ages of 8 and 9. The mature content and increased knowledge of the world at a young age, added to the relentless pop culture messaging around what's desirable, all on top of the constant self-presentation social media demands to prove your coolness and desirability, inevitably enrolls our youth in the perpetual race to adulthood. If you think your kids are not specifically involved or engaged in the social media/pop culture driven society and, therefore, immune to its effects, think again. The air we breathe is laden with the beliefs, ideals, and expectations of our modern-day culture – if they are breathing in the air, they are under its influence.

On the flipside of growing up too fast, another body of research is simultaneously telling us that our kids are in no hurry to grow up; that *adulting* seems hard and they want to put off taking on that responsibility for as long as they can. Overprotection has become the norm, and kids are grateful for their parents taking care of them (perhaps both physically and financially). They get to enjoy the perks of being a kid for longer than any generation before them. Recent studies show adolescents are working less, spending less time on homework, drinking less, driving later, and going out less. This begs the question, *what are they doing*? As you may have guessed, the answer lies in the previous paragraph – in that little omnipresent device that's become an extension of their physical body and their personhood. So now we have a generation of youth that want to *be* grown up, but don't want to have to *behave* grown up.

If we refer back to our new knowledge of neurobiology and the development of the brain, we know that the brain requires experience to shape it. If we're not giving our teenagers meaningful responsibilities, allowing them to grapple with real-world situations, pushing them to make their own decisions and be the major agents in solving their own problems, we are denying them the profound experiences that will shape the wiring in their brains. We think we are protecting them from harm, when in reality, we are robbing them of the vital (and possibly unpleasant) experiences that will shape their brains and result is well-adapted, productive, and fulfilled adults. If our teenagers are spending much of this critical time on their phones, computers, tablets, social media platforms, etc., we need to ask ourselves, what *are* the experiences that are shaping their brains?

Expectations and the Social Climate

Our culture demands social relevance. If you're not in, you're *way* out. Talking about peer pressure the way we used to doesn't work anymore, because it no longer exists as a single force acting upon a given decision. It is simply the water our teenagers are splashing around in. Technology allows them to be immersed in the soup 24/7. While some of the pressure our young

people feel is real and some of it is perceived, the pressure they feel to maintain relevance is making them push boundaries while relaxing their own boundaries. To effectively help our teenagers learn to better navigate their world, we need to let go of seeing all of their behavior and mistakes as a personal reflection, and reunderstand their actions in the context of their environment. Our children did not choose to be born into the Kingdom of Snapchat.

I will keep my note short on social media's contribution to the slim-fitting gender straightjackets, but in a conversation around society's expectations of our young people, we have to go there. Our teens are in constant competition to prove and perform their gender and their sexuality, always engaged in the wicked social game of avoiding shame and feeling like they're "enough." For males, we limit the emotional spectrum to anger and stoicism, while for females, we grant emotional freedom but ensure they complete compliance training that enforces ideas like, speak your mind, but be kind while you do it; be assertive, but don't be a bitch; be strong, but not too big or too loud; chase your dreams, but remember your role in this world; etc. Those that don't fit within our rigid binary structures around gender and sexuality are left wondering, *Where do I fit? How do I perform? What's acceptable and allowed for me in this world?* The perpetually performative society social media creates also imposes norms around what bodies are supposed to look like, who's voices are allowed to share which ideas, and even what type of commentary, judgement, criticism, and disparagement we are expected to shower each other with.

Athletes face unique performative pressures centered around their athleticness. Just as young people adopt gender as an identity that they then have to work a lifetime to perform and prove, they adopt "athlete" as an identity in the same way. This leaves them in an unforgiving situation where they perform and maintain this identity through achievement. When the results aren't coming, they lose the white-knuckled grasp on the identity they thought they had, and often we see their feelings of worth as a human being plummet. They are living in a space where there is no separation between their *doing* and their *being*. Imagine the pressure. [More to come on this in a future iteration.]

Since we know that feeling the need to belong is so much of what shapes the teenage experience, the question then becomes, how can we encourage our youth to show up as themselves and stand up for what they know is right (scientifically termed social courage) in a world that demands relevance as a prerequisite to happiness? How can we help them understand that whatever backlash they may face when they show up and stand up is not about them? How can we teach them that it's okay to be strong in their convictions, and they are strong enough to survive the potential consequence of being alone? It's our job to help unveil the pressures they're bathed in, so they can take the criticism, meanness, exclusion, and rigidly drawn boxes of rightness and desirability less personally. It's our job to accept our kids unconditionally, listen with the goal of understanding, give them the space and support to develop and nurture what makes them uniquely them, let them know we're their ally, and make sure we're sending the message they are *enough*.

Wrapping It Up: Parts 1 & 2

Our adolescents have been blessed with a slow to develop PFC which presents challenges in decision making, self-regulation, and managing impulsivity. We may be prone to shake our heads when we witness their proclivity towards risk taking and novelty seeking behaviors, when we see them become contortionists as they try to fit themselves into all the "right" places, and when we have the opportunity to experience first-hand the depth and expansiveness of those gigantic emotions. Now put these biological tendencies evolution has set them up for on an amplified stage created by social media and pop culture. It's no wonder we're struggling to understand the young adults emerging from a world of shocking amounts of screen time, unfettered exposure, and a social expectation that pressures them into performing socially prescribed desirable identities *at all times*.

Our kids need us to step up and step forward with them into their fast-paced world that has so much to offer in terms of connection, learning, advocacy, and opportunity, so they don't get swallowed up by the dark side we know is out there. We have the opportunity to create an experience in sport that offers something different – play, real friendship and community, diversity, acceptance, the effort-laden pursuit of a goal, adversity, and the quest for self-knowledge and self-improvement – real, meaningful learning experiences. It's more than an opportunity, it's our responsibility.

** * Check out the following worksheet for an opportunity to look inwards and take matters into your own hands.*

References (and Resources You Should Also Check Out!)

- Cindy Pierce – www.cindy-pierce.com (Social Sexuality Educator - check out her full body of work)
- Center for Humane Technology – www.humanetech.com (highly recommend their podcast: *Your Undivided Attention*)
- Jean Twenge – *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood (and What This Means for the Rest of Us)*
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Work Along: Understanding Our Young Athletes

Whether you fill the role of a coach, a parent, or some other individual working with and supporting young athletes, answer these questions the best you can from your unique perspective.

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1. Do your best to express what confuses, perturbs, angers, and/or excites you about the world our youth are growing up in.

2. How do some of the behaviors and attitudes you see in your teenagers reflect what you know is going on both with their biology and with the social climate they are immersed in (chose something you now have a new perspective on!)?

Behavior/attitude #1: _____

What's going on here…

Behavior/Attitude #2: _____

What's going on here…

3. What's one insecurity you harbor as a parent or coach of a teen athlete?

_____

How do you find yourself *performing* to maintain the identity that this insecurity threatens?

4. What does sport mean to you?

How do you reflect this view to your athletes?

5. Respond to the following statements on a scale from 1-10 *from the perspective of your athletes (or child).*

- My athletes know that I accept them unconditionally.

1 ---------- 5 ---------- 10

- My athletes feel heard and understood by me.

1 ---------- 5 ---------- 10

- My athletes feel as though I give them the space and support to develop and nurture what makes them uniquely them.

1 ---------- 5 ---------- 10

- My athletes know I am their ally.

1 ---------- 5 ---------- 10

- My athletes know that I believe they are *enough.*

1 ---------- 5 ---------- 10

5. Looking at your answers above, where can you do better?

List one action step you will take *now* to do better on a daily basis.

I will…

6. What's one question you have after reading through this and answering these questions. Either discuss with a group of peers or reach out to me directly to keep the conversation going!

Working Out Our Own Stuff: Part 1

Working to understand what's going on with our teens on an individual and societal level is a noble mission, and the relevant information from different fields and perspectives is enough for a lifetime of learning. On the other end of understanding our young athletes, is understanding ourselves. To live up to the importance of what it means to be a parent or a coach, it's vital we flip the lens and take our turn to sit in the spotlight we so often prefer to place on our kids. Time for some self-exploration…for the sake of our athletes! We ask them to put in the work on a daily basis, so we better make sure we're doing the same.

Crafting Your Coaching/Parenting Philosophy

Whether you're a parent or a coach reading this, you're in the business of developing young people. With the constant barrage of challenges and lack of time that most likely define your life, it's so easy to lose sight of what you're doing and why you're doing it. What about that strong sense of purpose and passion that you started your journey with? If you're like most of us, these things have gotten lost in the daily grind. Whether you're someone who feels very connected to the what, the how, and the why of your role, these things peek out of the shadows every once in a while, or they're buried away in a deep, dark place – it's time to explore, clarify, and recommit.

1. What's most important to me?

A *first principle* was initially defined by Aristotle as "the first basis from which a thing is known" or the central assumptions at the base of a theory. *Your* first principles are what you know to be fundamentally true about who you are and what you stand for. These are the values that you do not alter under any circumstances. What are they?

If you're looking for ideas and inspiration, pull from your past experience when you were in the shoes your current athletes are in. Take a critical look at the coaches you had throughout your youth or how your parents raised you. What are the values they refused to compromise on? What did you admire most about their approach? Which of these influences from your past conflict with your style or beliefs?

Once you distill your list of first principles to no more than 3-5 items, your job is to build your approach, your training sessions, and your entire day around those values. These values are the destination you've plugged into the GPS – they ensure every road you take is leading you in the direction you want to go. Without this certainty, your efforts may be misguided, inefficient, or even aimless. I'm confident we can all empathize with this unpleasant experience. Set your GPS. Uncover your first principles.

2. How do I want to show up?

How we're committed to showing up in our role is intimately connected to those first principles, but may take on a slightly different tone. Instead of asking *what's most important to me*, now we're asking, *what's most important to me about how I am*? These are our "being"

values. This will help illuminate the way we want to navigate the roads programmed into our GPS. It will also force us to put ourselves in our athlete's shoes and ask, "What does it feel like to be coached (or parented) by me? What do I *want* it to feel like to be coached (or parented) by me?"

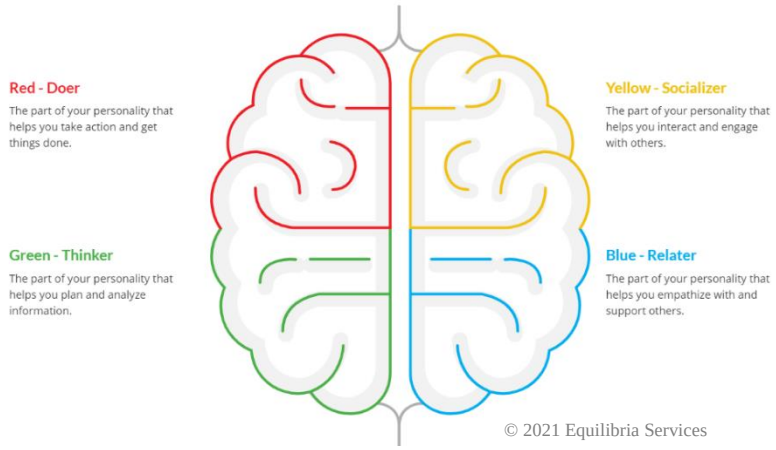
3. Why do I do this?

Our young athletes become a means to an end (winning) when we navigate our roles as parents and coaches with traditional notions of success and achievement as our north star. This outcome orientation positions us to pull more from our athletes than we pour in. Although we may deny the emphasis we put on achievement and objective outcomes, for many, it lurks just below the surface. Our athletes pick up on it. It's our job to reposition our true purpose securely in the forefront and be very clear about what we want to accomplish in our roles. Crafting a statement of purpose that highlights your true *why*, will help pull you back to earth – to the learning and development of the athlete – when you feel the lure of outcomes and shiny things shifting your priorities.

4. What's my coaching/parenting style?

For coaches, the first question to ask yourself is how you conceptualize your role: do you coach a sport, or do you coach a person? If you coach a sport, your coaching most likely takes center stage, and you may find yourself utilizing a one-size-fits-all approach. If you're coaching a person, the athlete takes center stage as a learner. You empower them to think critically and develop autonomy. The athlete-centered approach may seem obvious here, but when you're faced with many young individuals with different needs and on different developmental timelines, taking the time to get to know them and prioritize serving all of their unique needs within the team environment is incredibly challenging. Prioritization of the individual moves your coaching from *transactional* (focused on actions and performance) to *transformational* (focused on development of the whole person). What's the impact you want to have on your athletes?

For coaches and parents, it's also important to develop an understanding of your default style and your ability to move fluidly between styles based on the individual and the situation. To understand your own tendencies and those of the people/athletes around you, taking a brief assessment can be an effective way to begin the process of building self- and relational-awareness. An assessment tool through the organization *Equilibria* breaks personality into four categories that live within each of us. Through a series of questions, we have the potential to identify what dominates within us (the doer, thinker, socializer, and relater) and



what the implications are when looking at our own behavior and responses across various situations (this free, quick assessment will be linked in the PDF work-along).

5. **Articulating your coaching/parenting philosophy**

Time to put it all together, put pen to paper, and articulate our personal coaching or parenting philosophy. The clarity and intention this process brings is what will allow us to show up for our athletes the way we want and the way they need.

Keep it front and center, and revise when necessary. This is the set of ideas that will guide your decisions, direct your actions, and define your relationships. If you get away from your vision, don't beat yourself up – just notice when you stray and deliberately recommit. Share your ideas with your colleagues and develop a dialogue that fosters accountability.

Exploring History and Context

While our coaching or parenting philosophy may feel incredibly individualistic and as through it stems from us alone, it's vital we broaden the scope and consider ourselves as part of a bigger system that is laden with assumptions about what it means to be a coach or a parent. What does our society tell us about the way coaches should act, the way they should communicate, and the lifestyle/sacrifices required to be a good coach? (All of these same questions could be posed to parents as well). We perform these roles as social creatures, so we exist as *co-creators* of our values and purpose. Our learning through history, our immediate organizational context, and the people around us inevitably play a role in determining values and purpose. It's our responsibility to see their influence, ask where these norms and assumptions were born, and consider them all with our eyes wide open. What are the implicit and explicit rules and expectations about how you show up and fulfil your role?

Rethinking Success, Failure, & Competition

As we're thinking about our coaching and parenting philosophies and getting to the root of who we are, how we are, and what we do within our roles, it can be helpful to reconsider powerful language and ideas that carry rigid, entrenched definitions within the world of sports.

- *Success*: the fact of getting or achieving wealth, respect, or fame

<u>The Problem:</u> Achievement as the traditional definition lays out (including results and victory) is inherently dependent on things outside of our control. We can take action to move ourselves towards the outcome-oriented goals we desire, but at the end of the day, we cannot control other's decisions, opinions, or performance. If we measure success in terms of things we do not have full control over, we're setting ourselves up for a journey of frustration, fluctuating motivation, and an unfulfilled sense of constant chasing. This goes for us and for our athletes. Our society places so much emphasis on success and achievement, our athletes can end up feeling suffocated by the pressure – as though their identity and self-worth depends on their performance outcomes. Success of this kind is shallow and does not encompass the kind of higher purpose that brings genuine fulfillment. We are just as susceptible to falling into the same trap where *our* identity and worth hinge on the outcomes of our kids, athletes, and teams.

Reconsidered: Success is defined by how aligned our words, actions, and decisions are with our first principles and our "being" values. Success is understanding what matters to us, how we want to show up in the world, and how we want to treat others. Success is holding ourselves accountable to being the person we've committed to being. Success is rewarding our progress. Success is being courageous enough to put ourselves out there to try, regardless of the outcome. Success is the commitment to learn from failure. Traditional success will follow if we live up to these high standards of personal integrity day in and day out.

- *Failure*: omission of occurrence or performance; a lack of success

The Problem: Failure is traditionally perceived as the opposite of success. If we don't succeed, we fail. There is very little gray area. Because the confines of success are so narrow and our success depends on others in some way, shape or form, we are likely to find failure much more often in our lives. If we (athletes, coaches, and parents) are failing more than we are succeeding, we will feel the consequences. The perception of constant failure has the potential to rob our joy, obscure our original passion, and paint our role as an obligation.

Reconsidered: Failure occurs when our words, actions, and decisions are misaligned with our first principles and our "being" values. Failure is not taking the time to understand what matters to us, how we want to show up in the world, and how we want to treat others. Failure is not holding ourselves accountable. Failure is letting fear determine our actions, preventing us from showing up and trying. Failure is not being brave enough to face failure head on and put ourselves in a situation where we might fail. Failure is not learning from failure. Failure is achievement without joy and fulfillment.

- *Competition*: a rivalry where two or more parties strive for a common goal which cannot be shared (where one's gain is the other's loss)

The Problem: This idea of competition sets us up to believe our success is linked to the failure of others. It positions our competitors as enemies (whether they're on the opposing team or within our own team), and we infuse competition with battle language (crush, kill, slay, murder, slaughter, destroy, decimate, etc.) that further emphasizes the competitor's enemy status. It reinforces the practice of our most deadly habit – social comparison – to determine our standing. When we compete *against* others, we hold onto the idea we will finally be satisfied when we put everyone else down.

Reconsidered: The Latin route of compete is *competere*, which means "to strive together." When we compete *with* others, we compete with compassion and hold onto the idea that we need our competitors to bring out the best in each other.

Words are powerful. Either on your own, with your colleagues, or with your athletes, explore the traditional definitions of these three words (and others) along with how they could be reconsidered. Reimagine and redefine these words in a way that fits your culture, your family, or you organization. Use these words intentionally, allow them to get under your skin, and work them into your coaching and/or parenting philosophy.

** * The worksheet to accompany Parts 1 & 2 of* Working Out Our Own Stuff *will be released with Part 2 at the end of the week. Think about the ideas laid out above in relation to yourself and your role so you're ready to put all the pieces together!*

References (and Resources You Should Also Check Out!)

- Brené Brown – www.brenebrown.com (Professor, Shame Researcher, and Licensed Master Social Worker – check out her fully body of work)
    - *Dare to Lead* – Podcast Hosted by Brené Brown
- Equilibria – www.equilibriainsports.com
- John O'Sullivan – *Every Moment Matters*

Articles:

- McGladrey, Murray, & Hannon (2010): Developing and Practicing an Athlete-Centered Coaching Philosophy
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- Schwartz (2006): Basic Human Values – An Overview

Working Out Our Own Stuff: Part 2

The Magic & Misunderstanding of Self-Awareness

Self-awareness has become a buzz word in all fields and industries where people are striving to be better, and I'm sure you can think of one million reasons why it's important for you to be self-aware in your role as a coach or a parent. I also bet that you, just like the rest of us, overestimate your levels of self-awareness. That's okay, join the party – it means we have a huge opportunity to make ourselves better not only for ourselves, but for our athletes and for all the people in our lives.

For all of the reasons you are thinking that a robust ability to be introspective and understand yourself would be beneficial to your role, you're probably right. The ability to see ourselves clearly, accurately see ourselves the way others do, and see how we fit into the context of the world around us gives us power. Research connects self-awareness to increased fulfillment, stronger relationships, heightened creativity and confidence, better communication, improved performance, and more effective leadership. Awesome. Many of us hesitate to acknowledge there is also a dark side here – the pursuit of self-knowledge can leave us trapped in a vicious spiral that can feel like a self-imposed mental hell. We can metaphorically peel the onion so many layers deep that we end up repeating ourselves and generating more anxiety, misery, and self-judgment than we originally had.

Our misguided efforts to develop and practice self-awareness are often based on a misunderstanding of how self-knowledge and insight develop. Most of us attempt to get to know ourselves by *thinking about ourselves*. The reality is, these two things are not related. This mistake leads us to asking "Why?" in the face of a trying situation or difficult emotional experience. We are essentially asking ourselves to unearth unconscious thoughts, feelings, and motives, which unfortunately, is nearly impossible to do on our own. Instead of this question leading us towards the authentic truth about ourselves, it leads us to answers invented by us that *feel* true. We pull on "facts" that actually cloud our self-perception. Where "Why?" too often leads us down the path of unintentional self-deception and unproductive rumination about the past, asking "What?" moves us productively towards the future (i.e., "What is happening…?" "What can I do…?" "What about this situation…?" "What patterns are at play…?" "What's most important…?" etc.). So often the uncovering of various parts of ourselves is accompanied by self-judgment and criticism along with a further wondering that often sounds like, "Why am I the way I am?" This is a dangerous trap to fall into (we'll explore further in just a moment).

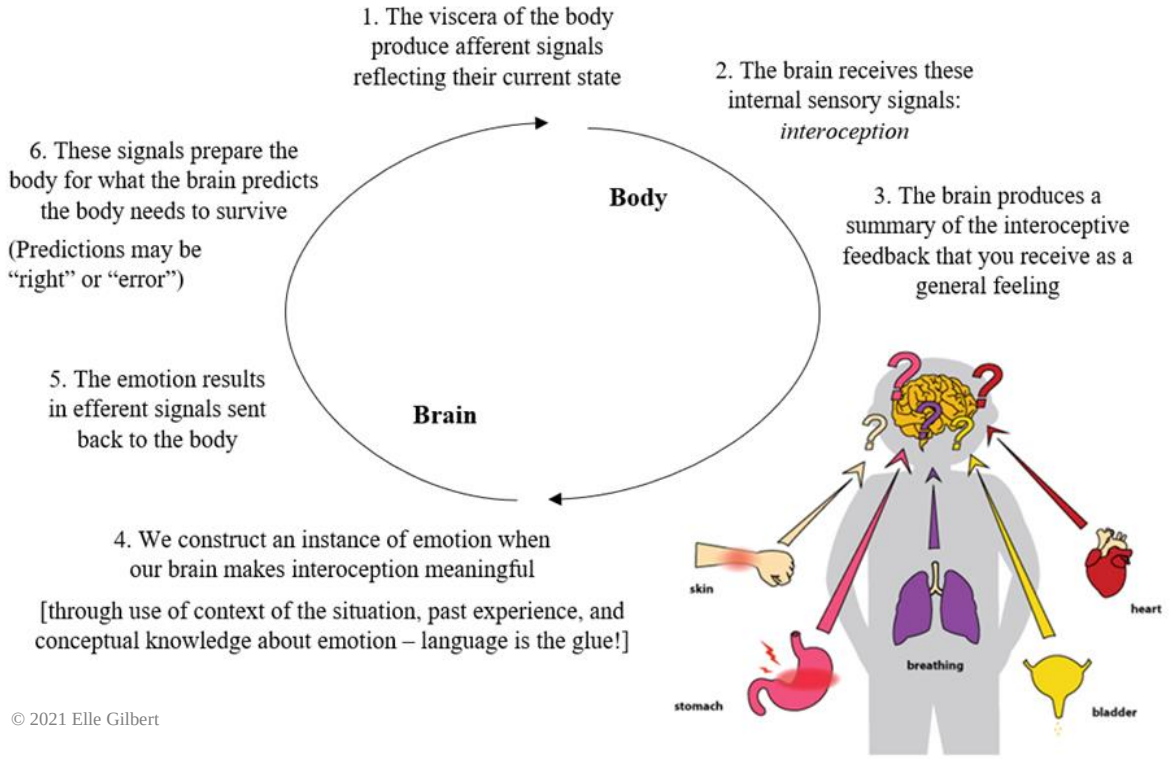
On top of our well-intended, often misguided efforts to develop self-awareness, we now have to contend with the vast misunderstanding nearly all of us hold about our own emotions. We don't have the space here to delve into all of the most recent research, but we'll dip our toes in the water. When we experience emotions we don't like, our go-tos typically consist of some form of numbing or distraction (food, alcohol, video games, social media, incessant scrolling, etc.). When we get to know our vices and develop the ability to step out from under their thumb, we're left with all of our feelings about all the things in our life we probably haven't taken the time to really feel or deal with. Yikes. This can be scary, and some people get stuck here,

thinking that opening themselves up to all of their feelings and developing comfort with them is the pinnacle of self-awareness. But we're stopping a few steps too soon. We can work to experience our emotions as data not directives: Which do we need to simply experience and let pass, and which do we need to act on? We can work to understand the emotions we experience that are simply distracting us from other emotions, and what emotions we are creating in the process of analyzing another emotion. Ultimately, we can learn to understand ourselves as the architects of our emotions. We are responsible for the emotions we feel through how we assign meaning to the processes of our bodies (interoception), how we perceive our external world, and how we categorize experiences in our lives. Emotions don't happen to us; we create them.

If you're rocked by the insights from the last paragraph, you're not alone. We have been bestowed with a mind that fundamentally misunderstands itself. Let's let that information percolate as we explore self-awareness as the foundation for two things at ground zero of what it means to be an effective parent, coach, and overall human.

- **The Path from Self-Awareness to Self-Regulation**

Intimate knowledge of our mental and physical patterns gives us the capacity to consciously manage our internal processes and our resulting external behaviors. Self-awareness is never enough in and of itself, nor is it ever the end goal. Understanding emotion is the vital threshold that can move us from awareness to regulation. Emotion is physical; it's born in our bodies. Our bodies and brains are in a constant loop of communication via our nervous system (see below!)



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To simplify all of that: Our brain creates a general feeling that we feel as a summary of all of the sensory signals it receives from our body's innards. Our brain makes meaning of that feeling, and voil**à**, we experience an emotion whose job is to send signals back to the body to prepare it for some sort of action (or inaction). The step where we hold responsiblity is in making meaning of what's going on in the body, and every single emotion we feel (whether it feels like it or not), originates in the state of the body. Our often unconscious perceptions shuffle through our cognitive circus which then reinforces and influences the state of the body. And so the cycle goes. This sensing of the self (i.e., interoception) is the essense of self-awareness, and it's something we can improve by paying attention to what's going on on the inside (think functions of the heart and lungs) and what corresponding emotions we manufacture.

There is a good reason talking about the breath when it comes to self-regulation is a cliché: because it is the most influential lever we have to pull. Our diaphragm is arguably the most direct, powerful link we have to the functioning of our nervous system. It is the secret portal to taking ownership of our physiology in the heat of the moment as well as to establishing a more efficient, productive state of baseline functioning. The science here is extensive, but to keep it as simple as possible, practice slowing down your pace of breathing to approximately 6 breaths per minute and lenghtening your exhale (i.e., a 4-in, 6-out count). Breathe through your nose and focus on the expansion and contraction of your diaphragm (belly breathing!). In a real-time heavy emotional experience, practice a double-inhale (to fully inflate the lungs) followed by a long, controled exhale. Two to three repetitions of this pattern will facilitate the offloading of carbon dioxide from the body (too much build-up will cause sensations typically classified as anxiety), and science has declared it the quickest way to restore calm. While your body is engaged in a self-regulation practice, slow the spinning wheels between your ears by letting your mind come to rest on the action and feeling of the breath. With enough practice of engaging in a self-regulatory activity such as the simple slowing down and deliberateness with the breath, we can train ourselves to develop an automatic regulatory response to feeling stress in our bodies. Once mastered, this is a true superpower.

Our ability to self-regulate as parents and coaches obviously impacts how we show up in our roles, and we all know that modeling is our most powerful teacher. Our athletes arguably learn more from our behaviors, communication, and way of being than they do from our directed instruction. *Be what you want to see*. End of story. Or is it….

Yes, one of our superpowers is our ability to model the behaviors, responses, and self-regulation we want to see in our athletes. Our other, far less discussed superpower, is our inherent position as a *co-regulator* in the lives of our athletes. As a human, it is our biological imperative to be connected to others – that's how mammals were designed to survive. Our nervous systems are co-dependent, meaning the systems of our bodies are designed to rely on other people. When human nervous systems are left to survive on their own (think solitary confinement), we bear the extra burden. This tax accrues over time, depletes our systems quicker, and takes years off our lives. Long story short, how you show

up inescapably affects the way your athlete's show up. You can be a force for good when your state and way of being supports your athletes' efforts to self-regulate, and you can be working against the goals of your athletes when you are carrying frustration, anxiety, fear, anger, etc. in your body and in your voice. To run this in reverse, your athletes are co-regulators of your nervous system as well. It's our job to be aware of this and make an adjustment if we find ourselves feeding into an unproductive cycle with an individual athlete or with the entire team.

> "The best thing for your nervous system is another human. The worst thing for your nervous system is also another human."
> – Lisa Feldman Barrett

When we understand our own emotions and the nature of emotions more generally, we gain the power to help our athletes reshape and restructure their own emotional experiences. By providing experiences where they can try on new perspectives, be guided through new responses, and even learn new emotional responses to similar external stimuli, we can help our athletes redefine their emotional concepts. This looks like the athlete who used to read fear in their bodies who now reads excitement, and the athlete who used to experience failure as an utter depletion who now experiences the same objective experience as an energizing and motivating. Our athletes are undoubtedly on the teenage pressure packed emotional roller coaster, so we need to start seeing ourselves as teachers of *meaning making*.

- **The Path from Self-Awareness to Empathy**

Empathy is at the heart of understanding, connecting with, and communicating with the person in front of you. Our young athletes need us to have and exercise this ability. Our world needs more people to have and exercise this ability. The path from self-awareness to empathy runs through self-acceptance. It has to. Knowledge and awareness of the self that's laden with judgment, loathing, and criticism defeats the magic of the awareness. Again, self-awareness alone is not the point.

The goal of our awareness is acceptance. Refusing to accept ourselves as we are – flaws, vices, and all – returns us right back to a state of chasing whatever numbing, distracting thing will dampen or obscure our emotions. Being unable to accept ourselves as we are makes it nearly impossible to look at the misguided behavior, bizarre minds, and ugly emotions of others and accept them as *they* are. We instinctively see someone who deserves to be judged and criticized for everything that makes them a messy human, just like us. If you look hard enough at relationships that are transactional, conditional, or generally unhealthy, more often than not, you'll find a striking lack of self-acceptance deeply rooted in one or both parties. Compassion for others begins with compassion for yourself, and compassion for yourself begins with the quest for self-awareness. To look at our athletes and have the capacity to understand their situation, their perceptions and their feelings, demands we take this quest seriously. The equation balances itself: our ability to be empathic towards others = our level of self-acceptance.

Understanding Your Own Stuff

We've finally made it to the uncomfortable part. We'll keep the section on our insecurities short, but the work we do to understand our tendencies, default behaviors, go-to communication tactics, etc. should be thorough. Everyone reading this is a leader. We have a choice in how we lead, and when we're not able to show up as the courageous leader our athletes need us to be, it's because of our *armor*. Our biggest barrier is not our fear. When we respond to our fear with protective mechanisms rather than embracing the vulnerability, discomfort, and suckiness of the situation, our defenses win and we lose. Our athletes lose too. We all have custom made (by us) suits of armor that we've taken years to build and perfect. Can you see your armor in the following behaviors?

- Driving perfectionism and fostering fear of failure
- Needing to be right (vs. wanting to get it right)
- Holding tightly to your expertise (the expert trap!)
- Rewarding exhaustion as a status symbol
- Hustling to prove your worth
- Using cynicism as a shield
- Avoiding and passing the buck
- Tolerating a culture of "fitting in"
- Pursuing your own goals above those of your team/athlete/child
- Comfort with compliance and control

Only when we see it clearly and call it what it is, can we begin to dismantle it. Our call to be the courageous leaders our young people need demands we start shedding our armor. When we do this, we give them permission to do the same.

** Check out the following worksheet for an opportunity to work out your own stuff! Do this on your own, with your partner, or with your fellow coaches.*

References (and Resources You Should Also Check Out!)

- Andrew Huberman – www.hubermanlab.com (Neuroscientist and Tenured Professor in the Department of Neurobiology and Ophthalmology at the Stanford University School of Medicine)
    - The Huberman Lab Podcast
- Lisa Feldman Barrett – *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*
- Mark Manson – www.markmanson.net (New York Times Bestselling Author – check out his full body of work)
- Stephen Porges – www.stephenporges.com (Distinguished Scientist and Professor of Psychiatry – check out his full body of work)
    - Podcast Interview by Sport Psychologist, Michael Gervais on *Finding Mastery*- August 18, 2021
- Susan David – *Emotional Agility*
- Tasha Eurich – *Insight (also check out her out at* www.tashaeurich.com)

Work Along: Working Out Our Own Stuff

As we're looking to welcome our athletes back to school or prepare our clubs and coaches for the winter ahead, it's time for us to do our own work, get clear on what matters, and make sure our programs and coaching staff are on the same page. For parents, replace the word coach with parent, and dive in – there's no time like the present.

Defining my Coaching Philosophy

1. My First Principles:

    1. _____
    2. _____
    3. _____

2. My "Being" Values

    1. _____
    2. _____
    3. _____

3. My Statement of Purpose (Reconnecting to my *Why*)

Why do I want to coach youth sport? | What do I want my athletes to learn? | What goals do I want to achieve as a youth sport coach?

4. My Coaching Style (as defined by the *Equilibria* assessment tool) [www.equilibria.com/PDI-home]

    _____

    What are the implications of my dominant style on how I show up in my role?

Your first principles are what you know to be fundamentally true about who you are and what you stand for. These are the values that you do not alter under any circumstances. These values are the destination you plug into the GPS – they ensure every road you take is leading you in the direction you want to go.

What do I want it to feel like to be coached by me?

My Coaching Philosophy

Reconsidering Language

- My/my program's definitions of:

  Success:

  Failure:

  Competition:

Self-Awareness

- My go-to numbing and distraction vices:

  1. _____
  2. _____
  3. _____

- When I'm stressed, my body…

- When I'm stressed, my mind…

Self-Regulation

- My self-regulation tool(s) for moments of stress in my mind and/or body:

  I will practice this skill by:

- I am a *co-regulator* of my athletes. This is the impact I want to have:

Self-Acceptance & Empathy

- The part(s) of myself I have the most trouble accepting and making peace with:

My Suit of Armor

What does it look like (protective mechanisms)? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Driving perfectionism and fostering fear of failure
- ☐ Needing to be right (vs. wanting to get it right)
- ☐ Holding tightly to your expertise (the expert trap!)
- ☐ Rewarding exhaustion as a status symbol
- ☐ Hustling to prove your worth
- ☐ Using cynicism as a shield
- ☐ Avoiding and passing the buck
- ☐ Tolerating a culture of "fitting in"
- ☐ Pursuing your own goals above those of your team, athlete, or child
- ☐ Comfort with compliance and control

We all have pieces of armor unique to us.
What do you have going on that's not in the list?

When do I armor up?

Let Them Help You Help Them: Ask Your Athletes!

Be brave and get your athletes involved in your self-improvement mission. Hand them the mic, let them take center stage, and take an important step towards more athlete-centered coaching. They have unique and invaluable perspectives and ideas – we simply have to be open and willing to hear them.

- My coach in three words…
    1.
    2.
    3.
- Three words that describe my ideal team culture…
    1.
    2.
    3.
- My definition of success is…
- When I get stressed, I…

Your coaches don't know what they don't know. Now is your chance to communicate!

- One thing I wish you knew about me that would help you coach me better is …
- This is what I need from you when the going gets tough…
- This is what I need from you at the start on race day…

Doing Our Best by Our Kids: Part 1

So far, we have taken a deep dive into understanding both ourselves and our teen athletes with the purpose of using the knowledge to 1) step up and meet them where they're at, and 2) take on the responsibility of influencing their sport experience in a way that effectively helps them navigate the sticky and beautiful thing it is to be a teen in our world. Now we're pushing a little bit further to broaden our perspective of the environments our young athletes are in and the power we have to influence and shape these environments into spaces that facilitate our athletes thriving.

A Critical Look at the Institution of Sport

Admittedly, this is a tough place to start. We have so many organizations taking innovative steps to improve the sport experience of their athletes, so many coaches pursuing education and development opportunities, and we have so many young athletes who are deriving all of the tremendous benefits sport has to offer. When we start exploring this topic with a careful eye, it's not to criticize any one sport or institution, it's simply to look at sport as a whole (specifically in the USA) – to look at it for what it is and consider the impacts of its structure and environment on our youth. To do our best by our kids, we have to have our eyes wide open to the greater systemic influences.

In his speech at the Laureus World Sports Awards in 2000, Nelson Mandela spoke these powerful words:

"Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination."

He is right, of course, but there is a caveat. If sport also has the power to sew division, inspire cheating, excuse the inexcusable, harass and threaten, abuse our youth, and be the breeding ground for severe mental health challenges, it cannot be sport itself that carries this tremendous power of positive impact. It is the people involved in sport who bear this burden. It's us.

Many of us adults have succumbed to the seductive belief that sport is a good thing for our kids. Much of the time, it is – look at all the life lessons our kids are learning, look at the discipline and hard work it requires, look at the friends they're making, etc. We often don't question any of this because, throughout history, sport has positioned itself as an intrinsically healthy thing. It's time to challenge this and break ourselves free from the cultural fallacy of the *inherent goodness* of sport. Sport is only a positive experience for our youth if we *make* it one.

The Context of Sport

Sport organizations (from grassroots to world leading) make a lot of promises with their rich, deep mission statements about what sport is supposed to stand for and the experience it promises to provide that will meaningfully shape the youth that pass through. Excuse me as I

speak generally here, but as a society, we are not living up to these promises. We are working with an innately vulnerable population within our roles in youth sport, and history has simultaneously built a context around sport where we have grown to accept behavior and treatment that in almost any other environment would be considered egregious (even illegal).

Look no further than the scandal with USA Gymnastics to see attentive, caring adults who missed signs that something was seriously wrong because it was all veiled in the glittery context of sport. Zoom out slightly to look at the pervasive *win at all costs* mentality which perpetuates abusive practices (physical, verbal, and emotional) and even frames them as acceptable and necessary for success. Consider the encouragement of illegal performance enhancing drugs necessary in some sports to be competitive, or the perpetuation of disordered eating to meet weight classes, conform to aesthetic norms, or simply to gain a perceived (or even real) competitive advantage. What about the welcoming back of players accused and convicted of domestic violence onto the biggest, most celebrated stages of the NFL, MLB, NBA, and NHL competition? You may even be able to look around you to a local coach or parent to find a demonstration of unacceptable or even shocking behavior that the community let's slide because it is occurring within the context of sport. Sport creates a protective bubble not around the athlete, but around the *sanctity of winning*. The athletes are often the one's that face the very real physical and emotional consequences. We have an obligation to look critically at ourselves, at the sport environments our kids are practicing and performing within, and at the sporting systems at large in order to pop this bubble.

Sport is a Business

Even at the youth level, money makes the world of sport go round. As a business (youth sport is a whopping $17 billion dollar business), teams and organizations see a financial payoff from the success of their athletes. The better their athletes perform, the more recruiting power they have, the more growth and respect they garner. Now they have more kids paying more money to be a part of it. An increasingly steep *pay to play* model has burdened families and inevitably creates socioeconomic and racial barriers, leaving the beautiful sentiment about equality from Nelson Mandela a string of empty words. Our young athletes involved see and feel the financial pressures on their families as well as the pressure to achieve coming from every angle. The message is if they're not achieving, it's not worth it.

This reality of sport as a business is also feeding the early professionalization of our kids. We are asking athletes to specialize at younger and younger ages, and at the same time, we have a whole host of creative systems in place that inadvertently and explicitly tell kids they either have what it takes or they don't. In addition to the deficits in physical literacy and the increased susceptibility to injury early specialization subjects our young athletes to, the amount of time our youth has to enjoy the purity of athletics and play sport for *fun*, is decreasing. We turn them into little professionals who believe tremendous sacrifice is required and who feel the pressure of the world as they strive to achieve. Perhaps they see sport as their ticket to college (and beyond), they feel like they can't disappoint all of the people that support them (parents, coaches, etc.), or they have been defined by sport so entirely that they see no other option.

There is a cost to everything – that's just the way of our world. This becomes a problem when it throws up barriers to participation, when adults see young athletes with dollar signs attached, and when excessive pressure results in unhealthy consequences. The unfortunate reality is physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion cause about 70% of kids playing youth sport drop out by age 13. Staggering.

What's your role in the system and what do you see happening around you? How much pressure do your athletes feel? How much do you emphasize the fun of sport in your communication with your athletes and in the various environments they practice and compete in?

Sport as Identity

I once sat in a group of about 50 middle schoolers as they introduced themselves to each other at the beginning of the winter. They went around the circle saying their names and reading a sentence they'd prepared describing the important components of their identity. Not one athlete deviated from some simple version of, "I'm a skier," or "I'm an athlete." Not *one*. Never had it been so clear to me that our young athletes see themselves as athletes first and foremost if not exclusively. Sport has squashed their identity into something singular: *they are what they do*. When injury, retirement, or other life circumstances get in the way of sport, athletes face the message from society that *when they stop doing, they stop being*. They've spent years learning to attach their worth to their achievements, so their worth becomes conditional and their identity remains unexplored.

Even at the highest level, we see conversation around the mental health of our athletes becoming more and more prevalent. The Tokyo Olympics was a stage many athletes utilized to push back on the messaging from the sporting community that their humanity must come second to their athletics. The best of the best are bravely reclaiming the permission to be humans first. It's our job to teach our young athletes their worth is unconditional, they are so much more than what they do, and their wellbeing as a person always comes before athletics. This will allow our youth to reap the tremendous benefits of sport, and perhaps even allow our next generation of elite to carry their robust identities with them like shields and safety nets onto the largest stages.

The Priorities of Sport

The temporary adventure of athletic competition that has our youth wound up tighter than a drum is a problematic definer not only because it has an inescapable end, but also because they have to work so hard day in and day out to continue proving themselves worthy of their identity. How do they do this? Achievement. *Results*. Through our classic narrow definition of success. At the end of the day, sport is about winning – this is a message from which no athlete is spared. This is driven from the money wrapped up in the industry and the financial stake adults hold in the performance of our kids. When sport is about outcomes, our kids lose.

Our athletes are not in danger of losing their desire to achieve and win (that's pretty baked in to their competitive DNA), so our job is to provide a different perspective rather than add fuel to the fire. Broadening our traditional definition of success and stepping back to look at sport for what it is (long slippery boards to slide you down the mountain, a small ball in a big

net, a big ball in a small basket, you see where I'm going with this…), we can be intentional about the messages we're sending to our athletes about the priorities. But first, we have to believe it. Time to ask yourself what you believe the priorities of sport are. What are the priorities you're projecting to your athletes? In what ways are you still communicating results are what matters? Let's look beyond outcomes and results…

What are your true priorities?

- Developing interpersonal skills and building connections
- Encouraging teamwork, sportsmanship, and leadership
- Providing valuable life lessons and discovering personal values
- Inspiring dreaming, striving, and improvement
- Promoting fun, joy, and a sense of play
- Building competence, autonomy, and self-esteem
- Practicing courage and resilience
- Allowing freedom of self-expression and individuality
- Promoting wellbeing, fitness, healthy lifelong habits and love of sport

I'm not implying results are not important, I'm simply saying our athletes don't need the reinforcement from us to make them a bigger deal than they already are. Make the effort to show excitement about a specific aspect of an athlete's performance rather than the result itself when they do achieve. When they don't objectively achieve, do the same. Provide honest feedback and make sure your priorities are on full display. We are allowed to want to see our athletes perform their best while also making sure they know at the end of every day, *who they are is more important than what they do*. If we can do this, we can help our athletes experience the true goodness of sport.

Sport is not the end goal. Sport is the *vehicle* to building extraordinary humans. When we approach our roles as coaches and parents with sport as the end goal and we measure success in results, we aren't taking full advantage of the opportunity to build extraordinary humans. We are actively diminishing the importance of who they are and who they are becoming. We are missing the opportunity to intentionally develop healthy, agile minds that will propel them forward well beyond sport. We want to shift the focus from mastery of their sport to mastery of themselves *through* their sport. Sport is unquestionably important, just not always for the reasons we have learned to believe.

The Hard Questions

When we fall into the mistaken belief that sport is inherently good, independently working to productively and healthfully develop our children, it gives us the excuse to not look critically at our own behavior and the systems we're operating within. Whether you are a parent, a coach, an athletic or strength trainer, an administrator, or you fill another role adjacent to youth sport, it is your responsibility to face down some hard questions.

- Who is your primary stakeholder? If it's not the athletes, how does your commitment to this peripheral stakeholder (the administration, the board members, the parents, *yourself*)

impact your behavior with and treatment of the athletes? What are the downstream effects of your decisions on the athletes?

- How does the financial cost of participation in your sport through your organization impact the messages your athletes may be receiving about the importance of their success?
- How do you intentionally set up environments to foster fun and healthy competition?
- What mechanisms of unhealthy social comparison do you see your athletes engaging in, and what steps have you taken to address it?
- What efforts do you take to get to know your athletes outside of sport, to show them you care about them as people, and to let them know how they show up on a daily basis always outweighs what they are able to accomplish?
- Ask your athletes: How much does your athletic environment and the adults involved emphasize…
    - …fun and the freedom to play?
    - …friendship, sportsmanship, and leadership?
    - …self-expression and unconditional acceptance?
    - …a healthy balance between sport, academic, and social engagements?
    - …wellness and health come first, even if it's at the expense of the sport?
    - …courage and effort above performance and perfection?
    - …learning, progress, and development above results and winning?

References (and Resources You Should Also Check Out!)

- *The Co$t of Winning* – a short documentary that takes an honest look at the impact of an outcome-driven focus on our youth sport system. – *https://docs.potentialpictures.com/the-cost-of-winning/*
    - Watch the full 24-minute documentary here – *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AYYfI-pOeU*
    - Listen to The Cost of Winning podcast here – *https://www.hbo.com/the-cost-of-winning/podcast*
- Changing the Game Project – founded by John O'Sullivan
    - An organization with the mission to return youth sports to kids – *www.changingthegameproject.com*
- Project Play – an initiative of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program (a global nonprofit committed to realizing a free, just, and equitable society) – *https://www.aspenprojectplay.org/*
    - Check out the *Eight Plays* and the *Children's Bill of Rights in Sport*
- John Amaechi – former NBA player turned organizational psychologist
    - Keynote Speech: *Overpromise and Underdeliver* – *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7z-toAoj_I*
- Michael Gervais – High Performance Psychologist (see his full body of work)
    - Podcast: Finding Mastery – *https://findingmastery.net/*
- Articles
    - Merkel (2012): *Youth Sport: Positive and Negative Impact on Young Athletes*
        - *https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3871410/*
    - Washington Post: *Olympians are crying out about their mental health challenges. We should listen.*
        - *https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/2021/06/19/olympics-mental-health-simone-manuel/*

Doing Our Best by Our Kids: Part 2

Now that we've situated ourselves within the greater context of the sport industry and we've accepted our power of tremendous influence over our young athletes' experience in sport, it's time to look how we are showing up, teaching, and designing environments.

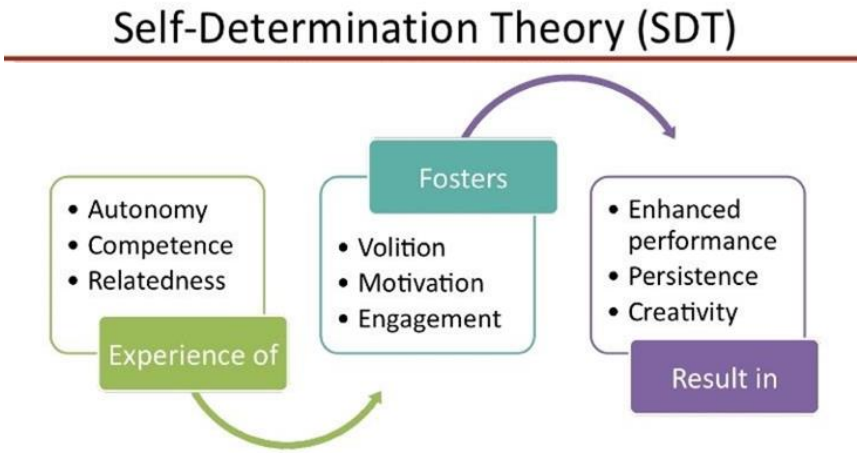
Creating the Environment They Need

A good place to start in tackling the staggering statistic of youth sport dropout (70% of kids are dropping out of sport by age 13), is understanding what underlies motivation and what factors determine people's desire to persevere and stay engaged in a given task. Proposed back in 1985, Self-Determination Theory remains one of, if not the most prominent psychological theory of motivation (Deci & Ryan). It positions three universal psychological needs at the base of our intrinsic motivation to grow and persist in our pursuits: *Competence*, *Autonomy*, and *Relatedness*. For the young athletes who make an early exit from sport (excluding extenuating life circumstances), we can be sure that one or more of these factors is missing.

Competence: The need to gain a sense of mastery over certain tasks and skills. When athletes feel they have the skills they need to compete and achieve, they are more likely to display the effort to move them towards their goals.

Autonomy: The need to feel in control of their own behaviors, decisions, and goals – athletes feeling they have the power and freedom to take action that will make an impact on their future or a specific outcome.

Relatedness: The need to feel a sense of belonging, connection, or attachment to others (their teammates and coaches).



This simple framework of creating effective, healthy environments essentially poses the questions for us:

As coaches, how are we approaching our job on a daily basis that fosters and prioritizes all three of these things?

As parents, how can we prioritize and reinforce the development of these things (rather than outcomes and results) when we talk to our kids about sports?

Mastery vs. Competitive Climates

These two basic motivational climates provide drastically different experiences for our athletes, and it's probably not difficult to guess which one leads to more enjoyment, better sportsmanship, greater perceptions of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, and ultimately, higher intrinsic motivation. This duality does not imply there cannot be competition involved in a mastery-oriented environment – it's important to allow young athletes the opportunity to be competitive with each other in practice so they can explore their own intensity levels, their competitive instincts, and their ability to deal with pressure and manage themselves through it.

These different environments are defined by the ways in which coaches respond to various behaviors and the attitudes they take towards their athletes in various situations.

Mastery Climate

- Hard work and improvement are praised and valued above all else
- Helping others and learning through cooperation is a priority
- Underlying belief that the contribution of each teammate is vital

Competitive Climate

- Athletes perceive poor performance and mistakes will be punished
- The most highly skilled and top performing athletes receive the most attention
- Comparison between team members and hierarchies are utilized and encouraged

Time to Ask Yourself…

- Do you define success through personal progress or external comparison? How do you communicate the idea that success is *self-referenced*? Are you making sure your language and feedback is directed towards process and performance goals rather than outcomes?
- Are you providing opportunities in practice where your athletes can gain feelings of mastery over specific skills, regardless of overall skill level?
- Are you being intentional with the races and competitions you are bringing your athletes to so they have opportunities to experience some objective success in a sport that can provide overwhelming challenge? (i.e., Vermont Cup vs. FIS)
- If you're using a timing system out on the hill (in alpine disciplines), are you being intentional about where you put it, how you talk about and use the information, and if athletes have free reign to scroll through their teammates' times?
- Are you involving your athletes in conversations about what they're doing and why they're doing it, asking for their opinions, and making it clear you value what they think is important and helpful to them?
- Are you being a leader that works hard to create a sense of belonging, support, and teamwork within an individual, often lonely sport (i.e., Are your athletes looping to carry each other's jackets? Are they working together to pack the van? Are they all out on the hill during a b-net project? Are they lifting each other up and cheering each other on?).

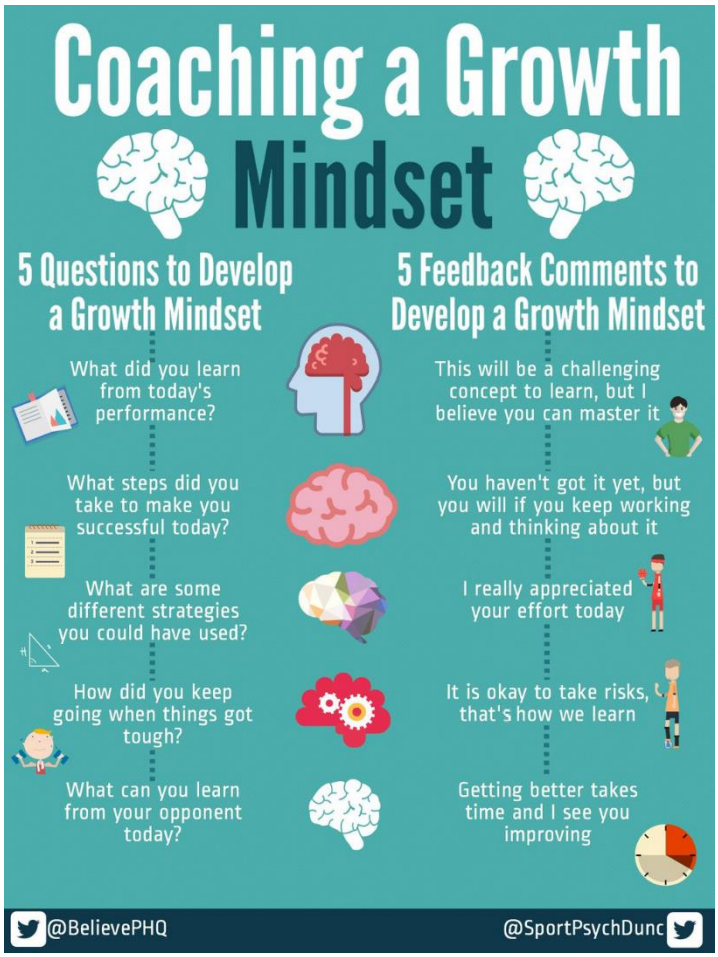
These may sound like simple things, but they carry tremendous power in creating environments of accountability and togetherness.

- Are you making the extra effort to get to know each of your athletes on a personal level to lay the foundation of trust, care, and unwavering support?

Growth Mindset

Inherent in this conversation around creating environments that allow our athletes the opportunity to thrive and be motivated by their love for the sport, is the fundamental idea that our athletes have a great capacity to learn, grow and improve with time and practice. For those of us involved in sport these days, Carol Dweck's famously coined term *growth mindset*, is always on the tip of our tongues. In contrast to a *fixed mindset* where one holds the limiting belief that their talents and capabilities are fixed and cannot be improved, a growth mindset signifies the belief one holds that effort and practice can create meaningful learning and improvement even if the process takes time. Challenges are the path to learning, not something risky to be avoided. So, how do we coach and create environments that foster growth mindsets in our athletes?

The first step is to understand what it is we're talking about and what it is not. We all think we have our minds wrapped around what it means to have a growth mindset, and most of us probably think we can solidly say we ourselves possess a growth mindset. But we get into trouble when our understanding of what this means is incomplete. First, we must realize that every single one of us has a mix of both growth and fixed mindsets, and they are often context and environmentally dependent. We can have one that predominates in a given situation, but there will always be triggers that can invoke the other. Social comparison and excess challenge or discomfort are often very powerful in shifting us to a more fixed mindset. Having our athletes get to know what can lead them into a fixed mindset is not admitting to some sort of inadequacy or "failure" of mindset, it's acknowledging reality and equipping them to identify and work with themselves through these moments. We can also find ourselves up a creek when we oversimplify and equate growth mindset to pure effort. It is absolutely about effort, but effort has to be tied to the learning process and progress of some sort (banging our head against the



same brick wall is not what we're going for). When we throw out praise to make an athlete feel good when they are not making progress, we are inadvertently telling them this is the best they can do – we are not helping them strategize, reconsider, and find new angles of directing their effort. This empty, blanket praise that has become heavily utilized to protect self-esteem and make young athletes feel good, is working against the development of a growth mindset. We serve our athletes much better when our communication is specific and we ensure we are linking their effort to their learning process.

Learning: Failure & Neuroplasticity

The importance of fostering a growth mindset in our athletes leads us directly into a conversation about the mechanics of the learning process. The brain is capable of learning through *neuroplasticity*: the process of growth and reorganization of neural connections and pathways that can occur through learning new skills or information, environmental influences, and internal events. In its simplest sense, neuroplasticity is the ability of our brain to be shaped and molded by our life experiences. The physical, structural "wiring" of the brain is designed through learning, and it is well known that this process is occurring automatically and rapidly through the early stages of a person's life. To keep the timeline straightforward, this effortless, continuous rewiring is strong through puberty and then tapers off after we achieve a more or less fully developed brain by our mid-twenties. At this point, we are all still highly capable of neuroplasticity, but since we have already created a reliable representation of our world, it takes effort to deviate and mark something as important enough to change (just think of that dang bad habit you're trying to break).

This incredible work of the brain means the young athletes we are working with are capable of tremendous, rapid learning. It also means that the most powerful method of learning is through *doing*. Sport is typically an environment where the learner naturally takes an active role in their own learning, but this experiential learning can be uncomfortable because it requires failure – lots of it. We see toddlers and small children jubilantly failing all of the time and getting back up to try again, but when these very small humans become larger small humans and eventually teenagers, this failure does not feel so harmless. When our young people begin to develop a more solid sense of self, they often learn to fear judgment, and they internalize failure as a personal attack and a confirmation of their inadequacy. This is when we begin to see athletes backing away from the challenging experiences that are bound to produce errors, and we see them interpreting and assigning meaning to their errors that actually stunts their learning. In some cases, we see excess pressure and emphasis on outcomes making failure feel intolerable, and athletes quit their sport.

If we can teach or otherwise convey to our athletes that errors, mistakes, and utter failure is not only tolerable but expected and desired, we can help them optimize their learning experience through a growth mindset. We don't like the feeling of making mistakes, but repeated errors are exactly what allows for the altering of our neural circuits, and ultimately, learning. While it's vital to create environments where athletes can experience growing competence and a sense of mastery over skills, it's equally important we develop training environments where they will fail over and over again with the goal of being fully focused on increasing their "successful"

failure throughout a session. With persistence, they will begin to make small improvements, adding a vital chemical (dopamine) to the "learning cocktail." By teaching athletes to couple failure and feelings of frustration with a sense of progress and growth, they will be able to take subjective control of this dopamine release to encourage themselves to keep trying and tracking forward even when they don't objectively see or feel progress. There will be times when it's helpful to have an athlete take a step back – reflect, reconsider, and restrategize – but failure and frustration do not mean it's time to stop. They are, more often than not, the signal that tells us we're getting to the good stuff – time to dig in and keep going.

Flexible Coaching

A vital concluding note that must be included in any conversation around intentionally designing sport environments for our athletes, is the idea of flexible coaching. This might sound like a "duh" statement, but understanding our athletes, how they learn, and their specific needs becomes even more important when you consider the hidden challenges that have, do, or will exist within athletes on our teams. Many athletes have mental or physical impairments that are not apparent or visible, but that undoubtedly impact the way they show up as an athlete. Athletes may be more likely to share and discuss hidden physical challenges such as asthma, diabetes, or autoimmune diseases, but difficulties in cognitive functions may be held closer to the vest due to lingering stigmas or the belief that the information isn't relevant for the coach. Examples include Asperger's syndrome, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning challenges, and various psychiatric conditions. Keeping these challenges hidden can create misunderstanding and confusion, it can lead to labels and frustration, and is ultimately likely to create a situation where the environment and your coaching style is not matched up with a particular athlete's needs.

We are talking about this not to lay out a comprehensive plan for handling each unique situation, but to highlight the reality that these hidden challenges exist on our teams, and it's our job to be aware and adaptable enough to accommodate differences. Making a strong, genuine effort to get to know our athletes can go a long way in uncovering their challenges, but it can also make us more knowledgeable and mindful of our athlete's needs if a neurological difference or diagnosis remains concealed. It's important to remember, some of these challenges may still be unknown even to your young athletes!

It is unlikely that the same coaching approach applied to all athletes will be the best fit for all whether we're talking about hidden challenges or not. It's our responsibility to teach, talk about and represent concepts and ideas in different ways that tap into differing learning styles from tech talks to on-hill coaching to watching video. It's important for us to allow for varying action and expression across different drills and training environments (including free skiing!) so athletes have a diverse range of opportunities to practice and demonstrate their knowledge and capabilities. It's also vital we work to create situations that invite different forms of engagement between the athletes and ourselves as coaches to capture a broader scope of relational desires and maximize feelings of connection. The more flexibility and creativity we are able to exercise in our coaching, the more athletes we will be able to reach and the more inclusive an environment we will create.

References (and Resources You Should Also Check Out!)

- Center for Self-Determination Theory
  - *https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/application-sportsandexercise/*
- Educated Sports Parent
  - An organization tackling a wide range of issues around youth sport, providing information and giving those involved with youth sports the knowledge and tools to make the sport experience enjoyable for every athlete. – *http://educatedsportsparent.com/*
- Books:
  - *Sport Psychology: Concepts and Applications* (Cox, 2002) [if you happen to be looking for a relatively comprehensive textbook]
  - *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* – Carol Dweck
  - *Livewired: Inside the Story of the Ever-Changing Brain* – David Eagleman
- Articles:
  - Shangraw, 2013 – *Creating inclusive youth sport environments with the universal design for learning*
    - *https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272007985_Creating_Inclusive_Youth_Sport_Environments_with_the_Universal_Design_for_Learning*
- Podcasts:
  - Huberman Lab Podcast (episodes on learning and neuroplasticity)
    - *https://hubermanlab.com/tag/neuroplasticity/*

Talking with Teens: Part 1

For the final topic of the series, we are talking about communication: Implicit and explicit; from our mouths and from our bodies; messages sent and messages received. Since we're in the business of relationships, everything we have discussed in the past three topics gives us information that can be directly translated into guidance around communication. This time, however, we're going to drill into specifics and break up the information into what's most relevant to coaches and what's most relevant to parents. Let's start with what's relevant for everyone everywhere.

In the Face of Hard Stuff

We all hold the role of *trusted adult* for so many young athletes, and that gives us the distinct honor of hearing what's going on in their lives. As humans, the price of admission is pain and suffering of all kinds along with the guarantee that things will be hard and occasionally go sideways. Our teens are all somewhere along their journey of learning this lesson, and it is how we handle their sharing of the hard, emotional moments that helps them learn how to navigate through both their internal world and their external environment.

The first thing we need to remind ourselves of, is the amount of courage it takes to show up and share what's going on in a moment of pain, sadness, or hardship. We all know from experience, it's an inherently vulnerable place to be, and more often than not there is some form of shame or blame that's along for the ride. I recognize that "hard stuff" is a very broad category of potential situations our young athletes may present with, so we're going to stick to the real fundamentals here in regards to what's best practice for us in these moments. Honor the nuances of the situation and the unique personality of the young athlete, but keep the ideas below in the front of your mind.

1. **Recognize your own discomfort**. In order to show up for someone else who is struggling, we first need to be aware of how we are impacted. A stress response of our own may cause us to behave and speak in ways that are ultimately not helpful for the athlete in front of us. Commonly we feel the pull to fix whatever the problem is not only to alleviate their pain, but also to alleviate our own discomfort.

2. **Resist the advice trap.** Our pull to give advice often comes from a real honest desire to help. Despite our good intentions, our advice regularly has a demotivating or overwhelming impact on the person in front of us. It also comes with the subliminal message, *You don't have the capacity to fix this on your own, so I'm going to step in and help you*. Our best efforts often have the unintentional effect of robbing them of agency rather than the empowerment and strength we are hoping to inspire. It positions us as the expert and them as the person who needs helping. I'm not saying advice is never warranted, but helping someone dig into their own feelings and experiences and come up with their own solutions is almost always more impactful.

3. **Ask questions.** Honest questions that come from a place of curiosity and care, not loaded questions that come with undercover judgment. Asking questions not only shows interest

and genuine compassion, it allows you to gather more information. It also allows your athlete the opportunity to explore the situation, organize what's going on inside them, and articulate their thoughts and emotions. If our natural tendency isn't to be curious, we might be falling into the trap of relying on our own life experiences to understand theirs – leaning too heavily on our naturally biased assumptions.

4. **Listen with the intent to hear and understand.** This may sound rather obvious, but most of the time, most of us *listen with the intent to respond* – we are planning out what we're going to say while the other person is talking, and we're waiting for them to stop so we can speak our part. When we do this, we cut off our own ability to understand the situation and empathize with the person in front of us. We have shifted the focus from them to us. When our intention is to truly hear and understand, we become present with them, we ensure they remain the focus of the conversation, and we open up the door to a much wider variety of potential responses.

5. **Being matters more than doing.** We've already covered how natural it is to feel pulled to give advice or ask a question, but sometimes, what an athlete really needs is for us to simply be there with them. Sometimes, the most powerful thing we can do is listen, validate their emotions, and allow them to feel their feelings. Jumping into 'fix it' mode and trying to move an athlete away from the hard stuff too quickly, doesn't give them the opportunity to learn they have the strength to handle it, to feel fully, and to come out the other side intact. Allowing them to lean into their experience often means we need to resist the human urge to *do*, and simply *be* with them.

6. **It's not okay right now, but it will be.** Defaulting to the "It's okay" mantra is typically not helpful. It invalidates all of the feelings your athlete is having that are telling them "It's not okay." It might be working to ease our own discomfort more than theirs. It's okay for things not to be okay right now, and it's okay for them to be feeling however it is they are feeling. But we know feelings are temporary – they come and they go. This too shall pass. They have what it takes to weather the storm.

7. **Remind them you're on their team.** Recognize the courage it took for them to express themselves, thank them for being brave enough to talk to you about it, and remind them you are there for support as they continue to navigate through the hard stuff.

What About the Good News?

While the conversation above is probably one we are quite familiar with, this is one that happens much less often. What about those moments of pure joy and excitement? The importance of our responses here is seriously underrated. It may be argued that these moments actually hold more weight in determining the strength of the relationship than the moments when we're tasked with responding to the hard stuff. Time to turn our focus from constructive communication in negative contexts to constructive communication in the context of something wonderful!

PAUSE! BEFORE YOU READ ON…

* Remember the last time you shared good news with someone…
  How did they respond? What impact did their response have on you?

* Remember the last time someone shared good news with you…
  How did you respond? What do you imagine the impact of your response was on them?

There are four big buckets that describe our potential responses in the face of good news that fall along the axes of *how* we respond and *what* we respond with. (If you want a great demo of what these situations look like, check out the video in the resources list put together by the University of Pennsylvania.) The reasons we respond in these seemingly obvious unproductive ways are beyond the scope of this piece, but hopefully laying out the basics will help us all begin to gain some awareness of our default ways of responding and the impact we have. It matters how we show up in the face of our athletes' excitement!

- *Excitement Extinguishers*: We play this role when we are distracted and not fully paying attention or when our lack of energy shows up as a huge contrast to the enthusiasm the other person is bringing to the table. This form of responding is considered *constructive* because we are ultimately responding in a positive way, but we are *passive* – flat and seemingly unengaged. It's like throwing a wet blanket on a fireball of good news.

- *One-Uppers*: We slip into this trap when we briefly acknowledge the good news (or sometimes completely ignore it), before jumping into our own good news or shifting the topic to something unrelated. This is *passive* and *destructive* because we are moving away from the news and leaving the other person feeling completely dismissed.

- *Problem Detectors*: We become *active* and *destructive* when we focus immediately on the potential negatives – bad-mouthing it or letting our anxiety about the news take the wheel. We bypass the other person's excitement and start to pick apart what may go wrong.

- *Excitement Magnifiers*: This response is the only one that has a potential to build and strengthen the relationship. It means we elevate our excitement to match the other person's, we ask thoughtful questions to give them the chance to elaborate, and we authentically validate what they're feeling. This is *Active Constructive Responding*.

Our Unconscious Teachings

Our kids are watching us. They are reading between the lines. They are learning implicitly about all of the things we are teaching unconsciously. We know all of this, but it bears a brief reminder as we are beginning to explore communication with our teens. Our brains are naturally inclined to automate everything they can in the name of efficiency, and while habits are necessary for us to effectively move through our lives, they leave us vulnerable to proceeding with our lives, our parenting, and our coaching without taking the time to critically evaluate the things we say and do. Research is telling us that upwards of 95% of our daily lives are being driven by our subconscious mind – by our automatic, habitual patterns of thought and behavior. It is time to respect this part of our human nature and unearth our unconscious teachings.

While we are not going to take this space to identify and define the infinite number of lessons we are teaching and reinforcing throughout each day we spend with our athletes, we are going to start by examining some fundamental questions. Continue exploring either on our own, with our partner, or with our colleagues.

Your athletes are watching and listening…

- How do you respond to your own mistakes?
  - Do you accept them, own up to them, and apologize? Do you make excuses and pass the blame?
- How do you respond to your own failures?
  - Do you internalize them and become self-critical? Do you embrace the learning opportunity and keep moving forward? Do you try to hide them or are you open about them?
- How do you engage in and resolve conflicts with others?
  - Are you inclined to listen or speak? Do you yell? Condemn? Demean? Walk away? Ignore? Do you hold grudges or hold space? How do you attempt to regulate your own emotions?
- How do you treat other people?
  - In your car? In the grocery store? In line at the mall? At home? When you're frustrated? When you're tired or hungry? When you disagree? Etc.…
- How do you experience your own emotions?
  - Do you allow yourself to fully feel – built on self-compassion and belief in your strength to survive the emotion, or do you distract, numb, and bottle?

Your athletes are internalizing…

- What messages are you sending around the importance of respect? Kindness? Integrity? Bravery? Forgiveness? Generosity? Loyalty? Openness? Justice? Equality? Other values?
- What messages are you conveying about the importance of hard work?
- What have you taught them about their place in the world and their entitlement to certain things?
- What have you taught your athlete(s) about the nature of your positive regard, acceptance, and love (in appropriate cases)? What is it conditional upon?
- What are you teaching about the value of achievement in the way you praise their results, in the way you talk about the achievements of others, and in the way you value things in your own life?
- What have they learned from you about the importance of sport? Where does the importance lie and what power does it have over defining who they are?

References (and Resources You Should Also Check Out!)

- Glennon Doyle (check out her full body of work – she's about as authentic as they come and funny as hell)
  - Book: *Untamed*
  - Podcast: We Can Do Hard Things
- Active Constructive Responding (video enactment) – University of Pennsylvania
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kr7bT-VzbJQ
- Martin Seligman – father of the Positive Psychology movement (check out his full body of work)
  - Books include *Authentic Happiness*, *Learned Optimism*, and *Flourish*
- Bruce Lipton: *The Biology of Belief*
- Articles
  - Passmore & Oades (2014): *Positive psychology techniques: active constructive responding*
    - https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/81945/1/Passmore%20%20Oades%20(2014).%20Positive%20Psychology%20Active%20Constructive%20Responding.pdf
  - Human Performance Resources by CHAMP: *Active Constructive Responding (ACR) Worksheet*
    - https://www.hprc-online.org/mental-fitness/sleep-stress/active-constructive-responding-acr-worksheet

Talking with Teens: Part 2

It's time to break down specifics related to coach and parent communication to wrap up our final topic. For coaches, we are going to skim across the surface of a broad body of literature, and look at the ways we communicate specifically in training and competition environments.

Your Role in the Feedback Process

How would you describe the nature of your communication and feedback to athletes during a training session? We have likely been taught somewhere along the line that our job as coaches is to provide lots of feedback so our athletes learn. While sharing our knowledge and observations and providing information to athletes about how they can improve is vital to the process, the *more feedback = more learning* equation does not add up. Feedback that comes from us coaches, an external source, is called **augmented feedback** or extrinsic feedback, and is typically delivered in the form of verbal instruction. This is the type of feedback most athletes are familiar with and comfortable receiving, but it comes with some potential hang-ups that may actually be counterproductive to the learning process. The type of feedback we too often overlook and undercut is the feedback that arises internally through the athlete's own body. This **intrinsic feedback** is the most meaningful for athletes because it involves them engaging their own brains and processing movement or sport-related information on their own.

We need to shift our perspective from our feedback being the key to athlete learning, to our feedback being a supplement – something that enriches the athlete's naturally occurring intrinsic feedback. To do this, we have to actively provide the space and opportunity to allow our athletes to process what just occurred for them before we jump in with our own feedback. Below are four strategies or *feedback schedules* to experiment with based on the developmental stage of your athletes and the structure of your training environment:

- **Subjective-Feedback Delay**: Ask questions to encourage critical thinking, body awareness, mental engagement, and athlete responsibility over their own learning process. This reduces athlete dependence on coach feedback and allows them to become their own teachers.
- **Faded Feedback**: The frequency of coach feedback is high in the beginning stages of skill acquisition, and is gradually reduced as proficiency is developed.
- **Summary Feedback**: Feedback is offered at the completion of a series of trials.
- **Learner-Determined Feedback**: The delivery of feedback is determined by the athlete.

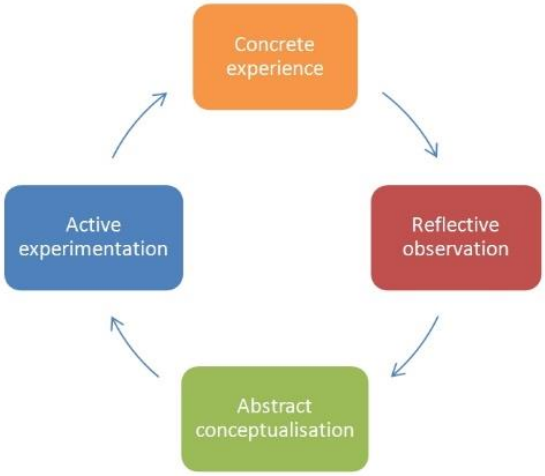
Returning to the potential problems lurking in the shadows of our verbal, augmented feedback, is the matter of *cognitive load* and the amount of information that is helpful for learning. As humans, we experience detriments in learning when information processing becomes overly complex. Often, the quantity/timing/nature of instruction imposes unnecessary demands on an athlete as it is being combined with a high level of intrinsic feedback from performing the activity itself. The athlete has to sift through everything they just experienced in their body as well as find a way to integrate your feedback.

Whatever training activity you are engaging in, think about the intrinsic cognitive load your athlete is receiving. We tend to underestimate the amount of feedback athletes are getting from their own bodies during drills, games, normal training, etc., so it is our tendency to provide feedback that is too frequent, immediate, or unfocused. All we are doing in these moments is detracting from the athlete's attunement to the information that's already available to them through their body. We are also inhibiting their ability to process relevant stimuli in their environment that's necessary for them to produce the desired movement. It is our job to understand their intrinsic cognitive load, find ways to help them process their internal feedback, and be intentional with the nature and aim of our feedback. Creating a dialogue with our athletes through the use of questions and the space for reflection is an effective way to overcome high cognitive loads that hinder learning. If you're looking for general, very broad guidelines around the moments you do give direct feedback, we want:

- **Not too frequent** – we don't want to create dependence on external feedback
- **Not too immediate** – give them a chance to process their body's feedback first
- **Very focused** on the specific skill the athlete is working on – if they are working on pole plants and you start talking about rolling the knees and ankles, you are likely creating unhelpful excess cognitive load

Experiential Learning Process

We can also look at this matter of feedback and communication in a way that provides some structure around understanding the learning process. Learning through experience is often defined as "learning through doing," but a more nuanced, helpful definition includes another step: *learning through **reflection** on doing*. Athletes have the ability to engage in this without us coaches by tuning in to their own internal feedback, but intentional reflection is often not a well-developed skill amongst our young people. If we can shift from seeing ourselves as feedback providers to facilitators of this reflective process, we can allow inward reflection to become a reflexive response for our athletes instead of the habitual looking outwards for answers.



Feedforward

Up until this point, we've been discussing feedback. When to give it, how to give it, when and why not to give it in certain moments, etc. Now we're going to flip the general notion of feedback upside down and inside out to try to understand the impact of how we historically and culturally understand this concept. Merriam-Webster's definition of feedback is as follows: *the transmission of evaluative or corrective information about an action, event, or process to the original or controlling source*.

It is clear that feed**back** is backwards facing – we are looking at what just happened, and providing information to the athlete about how to fix it or make it better. This seems so natural, but it doesn't take into account how most humans actually respond in the face of traditional feedback. The rating, judging, critiquing, and evaluating focused on something in the past that cannot be changed is effective at perpetuating negative attitudes and creating feelings of learned helplessness. Brain imagining studies have shown when we receive feedback focused in the past on things we can't change, vast parts of our frontal cortex go dark. If you remember all the way back to our first topic, this is the part of the brain heavily involved in executive functions including creativity and decision making. In essence, this means we enter a state of mental paralysis, and acting upon the information we've been given becomes difficult if not impossible. When the goal is learning, this is not where we want to be.

Instead of focusing on the problems, feed**forward** focuses on solutions. It offers constructive guidance on how to improve in the future – it's action oriented! It's accepting of whatever just happened and supportive of the idea that the athlete can change. It empowers us to learn and develop, and it reinforces a growth mindset. I'm sure much of your current communication with athletes in training and competition already falls into the bucket of feedforward, but having this framework front and center in our minds will help us make the shift more often. It can even help us help our athletes shift the critical voice that often accompanies their intrinsic feedback. Our athletes have so much to gain from shifting their default mode of perseveration on mistakes in the past to immediate identification of what they can do to improve.

Feedback

- Focuses on the past, on what people can't change [past tense language]
- Rates, judges, critiques, evaluates
- Creates feelings of learned helplessness

Feedforward

- Focuses on the future, on what people have the power to change [future tense language]
- Accepts, supports, develops, encourages
- Commits us to improvement

Parents, It's Your Turn!

We could go down a rabbit hole of the nitty gritty in regards to how we communicate with our kids, but we are going to temporarily set aside our personal relationships and the specific context we are operating within in order to discuss a broader perspective. Eventually we will get to some of the big *Dos*.

Goal Alignment

The root of many conflicts between athletes and parents lies in a lack of goal alignment. Athletes have goals for themselves within their sport and parents have their own set of goals and beliefs about their kid as an athlete. Because the two parties are coming at it from different angles and their involvement is completely different (obviously), more likely than not, these goals and beliefs aren't going to run completely parallel. Regardless of whether your goals line up with your kid's goals, the mistake we make is in not talking about it. If there is no explicit

acknowledgement and open communication about what the goals and purpose are between kid and parent, you are setting yourself up for small things to really rock the boat.

The open communication only works here if you are honest with the goals you are laying out on the table. If you are telling your young athlete your goals for them in sport are to learn a lot, work hard, develop close relationships, and have as much fun as possible, but in your heart, you truly care about their results and you have your eyes on a college scholarship, the latter is the message they will most likely receive through your words and actions. If it is the case that you are more outcome and success oriented, it will be beneficial to take a look inside to see where that's coming from – look at your upbringing, perhaps at your past experience as an athlete, and at the values you hold. There is nothing wrong with the place you are coming from, but it is your responsibility to ask the question, *Is it helpful*. Based on all of the influences in my life, is the way I'm showing up as a sport parent *helpful for my kid*?

Impact Wins Over Intent

In doing the remarkable job of parenting, we all have the purest intentions of setting our kids up for success. We all do it in our own way, and we're all actively experimenting to figure out what works and what doesn't with our unique child. Despite all of our efforts to do best by our kids, sometimes things go sideways. This is normal and to be expected. On top of the natural process of self-differentiation our teens are going through which may leave us with a kid that doesn't want to communicate with us at all, research emphatically tells us that kids perceive parent communication differently and often more negatively than the parents themselves do. For example, parent instruction on the sidelines that is meant to be productive and helpful is often received as negative and degrading. The overarching message here is that our intent often does not match the impact on our kids. The quicker we can come to terms with this frequently frustrating reality, the better we'll be able to navigate the murky waters of how to be the parents our kids need us to be.

Take a moment to think about your parenting philosophy and the values you hold as a human being that you want to pass along to your kids. Gather your ideas and come up with a theme or overarching idea that will guide the way you show up as a sport parent. Take a large step back and ask yourself the question; *When my child is an adult, how do I want them to describe the impact I had on them as a developing human and as an athlete?* Use your simple, personalized framework as your map and as the basis on which to evaluate your words and actions. If you find something you have done or said doesn't feel right or doesn't fit within the sport parenting theme you've laid out, ask yourself; W*hat was my motivation there? And what was the impact that just had on my child?* Whether it was action or inaction; words, silence, or body language… What was the motivation behind it and what was the impact? Don't feel like you have to beat yourself up over it or that you have the responsibility of knowing the impact. Put it out in the open, own it, and *ask your kid*!

Role Confusion

Right on the heels of discussing goal alignment and impact vs. intent, we need to shine a spotlight on the sticky dilemma of understanding our role. Through the *what* and the *how* of our communication, we can create confusion and frustration when we informally dip our toes into

the coaching waters from our parent seat, or when we actually fill the role of both coach and parent.

It won't come as a surprise here, that no matter the nature of the dual role you are filling, they key to success lies in open communication with your kid. If you are a parent who coaches, both you and your young athlete stand to benefit tremendously when the situation is discussed, opinions and desires are considered, and boundaries are set. If you have the luxury of considering the impact of this dual role on your child, you may find your kid's needs compete with your own. If it is a role you have to take on, start by clarifying when you are Coach and when you are Mom or Dad. Clarify what the expectations are at training and competitions, how you plan to treat them just like any other athlete on the team, and how outside of the sport, it's up to them whether they want to talk about sport or not. This is not a one-and-done type of conversation – let your kid know the lines of communication will stay open all season. Anticipate challenges so together, you can navigate in a way that works best for both of you.

Many of you likely have experience in ski racing or whatever sport your child is doing. Even if you don't, you have likely learned a lot watching them progress through their young careers. The temptation to throw on a coaching hat and step into that role from time to time (or all of the time) is strong. We want to help our kid be better, so why not?

The answer here lies in honestly examining the impact of our words. The messaging we intend is most likely that we know they can be better if only they did "X." We believe we are being encouraging and empowering them with our feedback. Studies exploring parental involvement in sport, however, tell us direct instruction is linked to athlete anxiety, perceived pressure, and withdrawal from sport. Hidden in our words is a message about the importance of performance, there is likely the unintended message of whatever they just did not being good enough, and there is a message about your level of trust and belief in the coaching staff to do their job. You also run the high risk of providing conflicting messages with the ones your athlete is getting from their coaches. All of a sudden, our well-intended constructive feedback or instruction has created confusion and an extra cognitive load for our athlete that will make it harder for them to learn and progress. The best thing we can do for our kids is temper our own egos and return to the question of what is helpful for *them*. Again, don't try to guess on what the answer is, *ask them*!

If you have a kid that wants your instructional feedback, it is still worth considering everything laid out in the above paragraph. Our kids look up to us and want to know what we think – perhaps they are even desperately seeking our approval. We can push back on the temptation to give instructional feedback with the broader desire to make our kids feel unconditionally loved and supported. We can give them more general feedback on aspects of their performance such as the effort we saw, the courage it took to try that new skill (sport dependent), or the amount of fun we saw them having. We can engage them in a conversation where they are the ones looking at their own performance and we adopt the role of curious questioners asking all about what went well and what they are working on with their coaches. We can empower them by letting them be the expert on their own experience.

When We Make Mistakes

This process of questioning, self-reflection, and engagement with our kids will not only set the foundation for a more productive relationship, it will also allow us to sit more comfortably within our imperfection. Perfection in the role of parenting, coaching, and being a human does not exist. So, let's wrap up this entire series by embracing the fact that as hard as we try to do all of the "right" things and communicate in the "right" ways, we will make mistakes. Tons of them all the time. The silent shame that seems to swallow us whole and the fear we carry when we place the expectation on ourselves to be perfect (sports) parents is not helpful to anyone. It's holding us back from being the very messy, imperfect, empathic, deeply human role models our kids need us to be. If we can talk about our missteps with our kids, we become the people we want them looking up to, and we free ourselves from the shame that keeps us from being the parents we want to be.

The Big Dos

- *Praise effort*. Praise progress. Praise the fun and joy that the process of sport provides. Praise the resilience, bravery, and commitment it takes to bounce back from failure. Praise the wonderful qualities that make them an awesome human outside of athletics.
- *Orient towards the positive*. It's always there - be on the lookout and call it out! Our athletes aren't always naturally oriented this way, so model the mindset.
- *Listen*. With the intent to hear and understand, not with the intent to respond. Resist the advice trap. Always ask if they would like advice before you give it. Your job is not always to solve the problem. Just hearing them out can be the most powerful way to show love and support.
- *Teach and explore the reality of the world*. Being realistic about the world can be empowering. Things aren't always fair. You won't always win. People will do things you don't understand or agree with. What do we do when the world does what it does?
- *Teach perspective*. Helping them expand their perspective on the world and what truly matters will reduce the feelings of importance attached to any one competition. Winning is great, but does it really change who we are or the values we hold at the end of the day? All it is is another experience to learn from.
- *Teach ownership*. This involves taking a step back. Let them captain the ship, have the difficult conversation with the coach, take care of their own equipment, deal with the consequences of their decisions, etc. They are capable – we just need to give them the space to prove their own capability to themselves.
- *Prepare for the hard stuff*. We can get ahead of a lot of our kids' difficult experiences related to sport by initiating conversations around what we see happening on the elite stage. Look at athletes losing, falling, failing, not making the team, not qualifying for the event, rehabbing from injury, choking under pressure, etc. If our kids have been prompted to think about what to do when adversity hits and they have a model to look to, they won't be left guessing and grasping at straws when adversity strikes them.
- *Make your love and support unconditional*. For most of us, we know that it is. Our job is to be intentional with how we communicate this so there is no opportunity for intent and impact to diverge.
- *Communicate about Communication*. Ask for feedback. Your kids will appreciate the opportunity to be heard, and you will learn about your impact straight from the source.

References (and Resources You Should Also Check Out!)

- Glennon Doyle (check out her full body of work – she's about as authentic as they come and funny as hell)
  - Book: *Untamed*
  - Podcast: We Can Do Hard Things (there are some great episodes geared towards parenting)
- Joe Hirsch: *The Feedback Fix: Dump the Past, Embrace the Future, and Lead the Way to Change*
- Free Range Kids – a movement and project reimagining the way we parent
  - https://www.freerangekids.com/
- Articles
  - Kolb (1984): *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*
  - Grimm et al. (2017): *Parent-child communication in sport: Integrating theory into research*
    - https://familiesinsportlab.usu.edu/files/grimm_dorrance_hall_dunn___dorsch__2017_.pdf
  - Sigl & Ansel: *The Ten Commandments for a Great Sports Parent*
    - https://sportsmentaltoughness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/10_Commandments-By-Ken-Ansell-.pdf#:~:text=Show%20and%20communicate%20unconditional%20love%2C%20regardless%20of%20performance.,her%20life%20in%20ways%20you%20never%20had%20before
  - Sweller (1988): *Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning*
  - Teques et al (2018): *Parental involvement in sport: Psychometric development and empirical test of a theoretical model*
    - https://rke.abertay.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/8592257/Calmeiro_ParentalInvolvementInSport_Accepted_2016.pdf
  - Van Duijvenvoorde (2008)*: Evaluating the negative or valuing the positive? Neural mechanisms supporting feedback-based learning across development*