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Why is Confidence important for Young Athletes?

Young athletes will experience times when they struggle with their confidence and it is low, they will also experience the opposite where confidence is high, and everything seems to be straightforward. With some effort and the right knowledge and support young athletes can take control of their confidence. This doesn't mean that they will be full of confidence 100% of the time, but its presence can be increased.

What is confidence?

Confidence can be linked to a variety of terms that are all interlinked and are often used interchangeably.

- Self-confidence - The belief that one has the internal resources, particularly abilities, to achieve success.
- Sport Confidence - Used to describe a sport-specific confidence, which is an athlete's belief that he or she has the ability to perform successfully in sport (Vealey, 1986)
- Perceived competence - Focuses on the skills individuals perceive they possess. Self-confidence focuses on people's beliefs about what they can do with the skills that they have (e.g. perform successfully).

The importance of Confidence for Young Athletes

Self-efficacy theory states that self-confidence influences how people behave, think and emotionally respond in various situations (Bandura, 1997). Behaviourally, levels of confidence or self-efficacy influence young athlete's motivation in terms of the choices they make, the effort they expend, the persistence they show in the face of difficulty, and the resilience they demonstrate in rebounding from failure. Chase (2001) found that 13-14-year-old athletes high in self-efficacy had stronger motivation to participate in sport in the future compared to low self-efficacy children. Perceived physical competence has been linked to positive emotions in youth sport such as feeling pride, satisfaction and enjoyment (Ebbeck and Weiss, 1998).



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What happens when confidence is low?

A lack of confidence is often accompanied by feelings of worry, uncertainty, fear, doubt and/or anxiety. If young athletes are experiencing one or all of these, then they are unlikely to perform consistently well. These feelings are likely to have an impact on an athlete mentally and physically which can be detrimental to aspects of their performance like decision making and co-ordination. These performance issues may then prevent the young athlete from being the best they can be in their given environment (which may subsequently reduce their confidence further).

How can we build confidence in Young Athletes?

Vealey, Chase and Cooley (2018) outlined case studies related to confidence in various domains. These cases provide suggestions that can help us understand young athlete's confidence within various age groups

Importance of fundamental motor skills and physical literacy for confidence

If we go right back to the early stages of a young athlete's development, then fundamental motor skills and physical literacy are the main areas of focus. An important goal for all children in these early stages is the attainment of physical literacy, which is the physical competence and confidence to maintain physical activity at an individually appropriate level throughout life.

Developmental changes in perceived competence

The age and developmental stage of a young athlete will affect the way that they view their competence. Children become more accurate in assessing their personal competence as they age. Additionally they will use different sources of information upon which to base their confidence as they age.



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Maturation influences on confidence and importance of mastery orientation

The rate that an individual matures will impact upon their confidence and the role of mastery orientation. For example, because of their early success, early maturing boys receive a lot of recognition and attention from coaches, which fuels their confidence and motivation in sport but as others catch them up this confidence could be knocked.

Learned helplessness

Learned helplessness happens when people become conditioned to believe that a situation is unchangeable or inescapable. Attributions affect confidence and motivation because they are the reasons young people identify as to why they succeed or fail. Learned helplessness can hamper confidence and motivation to get better because an individual does not believe they can improve.

Coach expectancy and feedback

It is important to remember the huge influence that coaches can have on the confidence of young athletes as they progress through their respective sporting environments. Coaches can influence youth athlete's confidence through various aspects of the coach-athlete relationship including modelling and leadership, trust, encouragement and performance feedback.

Importance of developing and reinforcing a growth mindset in young athletes The Growth mindset will be key for young athletes. Although confidence is based on beliefs about abilities, an athlete can believe his ability is either (a) fixed and unchanging (fixed mindset) or (b) something that can continually be improved and developed (growth mindset) (Dweck, 2006)

Performance slump and loss of confidence - The most important source of confidence for young athletes is their performance. So it is not surprising that when athlete's performance decreases, their confidence subsequently suffers, this can be a vicious circle for many if not addressed early enough.



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Final Points...

From the 7 areas identified above it is clear to see that there is a wide range of concepts that relate to young athletes' confidence in the sport domain. Identifying that an athlete is low on confidence will be the first step, while then understating why this has happened and what needs to be done to help them build it back up again. From this point forward remember that *that confidence can be improved!!*



With Rebecca Chidley

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