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Theory into *Practice*

Coaching Athletes with Hidden Disabilities: Recommendations and strategies for coaching education

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Hidden disabilities (HD) are those disabilities not readily apparent to the naked eye including specific learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, emotional behavioral disorders, mild intellectual disabilities, and speech or language disabilities. Young athletes with HD may have difficulty listening to and following instructions, exhibit impulsivity (Alexander, 1990), have difficulty taking turns, and talk excessively (Heil, Hartman, Robinson & Teegarden, 2008). These behaviors often lead to frustration within the sport setting as coaches may mistakenly label these athletes as unmotivated, lazy, oppositional, or defiant and as a result develop negative attitudes toward them. However, if given the chance for positive experiences within youth sports, athletes with HD may reap rewards such as improved self-

esteem, self-efficacy, peer acceptance, and social acceptance (Armstrong & Drabman, 2004). Such a positive experience can be created through the use of research-validated strategies and instructional methods. While these methods are often included in teacher preparation, they rarely if ever, are included in coaching preparation.

Recent Research

Recent research on HD has found that overall, volunteer youth sport coaches hold positive attitudes toward the inclusion of youth sport participants with HD (Beyer, Flores, & Vargas-Tonsing, 2008), as do coaching educators who feel that curriculum within coaching education should address coaching athletes

with HD (Flores, Beyer, & Vargas, in press). These results, coupled with the knowledge that coaches feel less efficacious in their abilities to recognize athletes with HD (Vargas-Tonsing, Beyer, & Flores, 2008), underscore a need for improved coaching education. For example, coaches with the most positive attitudes toward HD were those coaches who have had previous experiences with athletes with HD. This highlights a need for new learning methods which incorporate video scenarios and other experiences to improve coach perceptions and attitudes, as well as increase coaching efficacy. Similarly, it was discovered that coaches most likely learned that an athlete had HD through parental communication, thus underscoring a need for coaches to learn new and improved techniques to gather all relevant information

from parents, such as a checklist indicating the athlete's preferences or behavioral strategies to which the athlete best responds.

Recommendations for Coaching Education

Coaching education, and as a result coaching efficacy, can be improved through the incorporation of research-validated strategies and instructional methods. While it is noted the importance of the techniques listed below for working with athletes with HD, it is important to note that these techniques are actually reflective of best teaching practices and would benefit all youth athletes.

Proximity control

Proximity control involves physically positioning one's self close to another person. As a preventative strategy, coaches should position themselves close to their teams while giving instruction. Having athletes in a U-shape formation around the coach will allow for proximity to the greatest number of individuals. The use of a circle or other such formation should be avoided because this arrangement positions athletes behind the coach. Proximity control can also be used to interrupt inappropriate behavior by providing group instruction from a position close to the athlete who is behaving in an undesirable way.

Encourage attention and engagement

When providing instructions or directions, coaches should ask athletes to repeat information or ask simple questions related to the information presented. These opportunities should be provided to individuals randomly so they do not know when to expect a turn and will encourage athletes to maintain attention. Coaches should also praise athletes' accurate responses and provide correct answers to athletes who respond incorrectly while avoiding negative comments for these answers.

Explicit instructions

Explicit instruction involves demonstration, guidance, and independent practice. When providing instruction, coaches should physically show athletes how to complete tasks either through coach demonstration or demonstration by another competent athlete. This demonstration provides specific cues to accompany the task and improve the athlete's performance knowledge. If the instructions are related to mental tasks, coaches should think out loud, modeling the mental steps that are involved in the task. For example, when learning a new play, athletes should rehearse the steps aloud, "break right, pick-and-roll left, go back to the middle." After modeling the skill, coaches should guide athletes as they engage

in the task. Guidance involves a cooperative activity in which the coach and the athletes complete the task at the same time without the pressure of competition. This allows athletes to watch a model as they complete the task, and also allows coaches to assess accuracy. Once athletes have demonstrated mastery with coach guidance and mental steps, athletes should complete the task without assistance or guidance.

Differentiate learning activities

Differentiating learning activities involves the provision of activities related to the same skill but with different levels of difficulty. This allows the whole team to actively participate and practice without singling out specific athletes' skill levels. For example, when providing practice in dribbling, three different courses could be arranged, each with cones positioned with different spacing. Each athlete could choose their course. For athletes who struggle with changing hands or changing directions, the course would include fewer cones with longer spaces in between. Other courses would involve more cones, spaced more closely.

Organize the learning environment

Organizing the learning environment involves spacing equipment and materials in a way that maximizes efficiency of time and instruction. For example, during demonstration, when athletes' attention is required, equipment should be stored or out of the way. Coaches should place materials or equipment readily needed in an easily accessible place that allows for a smooth transition from one activity to another.

Establish, teach, and reinforce rules

Establishing routines provides athletes with structure and predictability. For activities that will occur often or regularly, coaches should establish a routine, or set of tasks that will be completed in a particular manner and order each time. The routine should be taught explicitly by modeling, guiding, and providing independent practice. Once athletes learn the routine, their execution of the routine should be reinforced by providing attention and praise. An example of a routine for a basketball team would be 10 minutes of shooting free throws at the beginning of each practice. When athletes enter the court, they find basketballs and begin shooting. The coach would walk around, recognize, and praise athletes who make their shots and/or demonstrate proper shooting form or responsible behaviors. At the end of 10 minutes, the coach sounds a whistle and the athletes put the basketballs on the rack then go the center of the court where the coach

will begin practice and reinforce expectations. This practice routine would allow athletes to arrive and warm up at different rates so it is more likely all athletes will be ready for group instruction. Routines are also used throughout the practice session to establish a secure and predictable learning environment such as during stretching, drill organization, water breaks, and closing activities.

Conclusion

The youth sport coach, and the sporting environment, can have a positive impact on all youth sport participants, including those with HD. Athletes with HD are similar in many ways to athletes without HD. Most of the strategies described in this article represent effective coaching practices and will benefit all athletes. In addition, these practices can be implemented in a way that all athletes have access to learning without singling out specific athletes who have different learning needs. Therefore, it is imperative that researchers and coaching education continue to update curriculum and give coaches the tools they need to provide a positive, fun, and successful environment for all participants.

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