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The effects of coach training on fear of failure in youth swimmers: A latent growth curve analysis from a randomized, controlled trial

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Abstract

The present study was a randomized trial of the efficacy of psychosocial and injury prevention-based coach training programs for reducing fear of failure (FF) among youth swimmers aged 7 to 18 years. Results revealed that (a) psychosocial training increased coaches' use of reward/reinforcement, (b) the FF measure demonstrated strong factorial invariance over three measurement occasions in a 7-week period, (c) significant variability existed in intercepts, and (d) the type of training coaches received did not predict the slope of youth FF over the season after the variability in intercepts was modeled (i.e., the coach training program did not reduce youth FF significantly). This finding stands in contrast to previous research showing that a similar psychosocial coach training program reduced performance anxiety among 10- to 12-year-old boys. Despite the equivocal nature of the coach training literature, there is no evidence that these programs are harmful and psychosocial coach training may provide some benefits while the necessary conditions for consistent positive youth development effects are being determined.

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1. Introduction

Carefully structured youth sport settings can promote healthy youth development for 20–40 million participating youth each year (Ewing & Seefeldt, 2002; Martens, 1988; Michigan Joint Legislative Study on Youth Sports, 1978). The sport setting affords a unique window of opportunity for influencing large

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numbers of children and youth because youth report greater levels of concentration and intrinsic motivation in organized sport compared to other contexts of their daily experience (e.g., time with peers, during school, while watching television; [Czikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984](#)). The sport context has been hypothesized to influence youth development in several important domains including sense of self (e.g., self-esteem, perceived competence), positive connection to peers and important adults, and development of critical life skills (e.g., social problem solving). To date, the documented consequences of youth sport participation have been mixed ([Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001](#); [Eccles & Barber, 1999](#); [Larson, 1994](#); [Shields & Bredemeier, 1995](#)). This may be due in part to the absence of widely implemented, scientifically based guidelines for youth sport programs such as coach training programs and codes of parent conduct. Nevertheless, the potential of this context for promoting youth development is promising and merits further attention. Many communities and organizations attempt to enhance youth sport experiences by focusing on parent and coach behaviors. Systematic research on those efforts is sparse, however, and the conclusions that can be drawn from existing studies are limited due to the narrowness of the outcomes studied, homogeneous samples, lack of fully randomized designs with data at multiple time points, and use of less powerful analytic strategies.

The purpose of this study was to extend research on the effects of psychosocially based coach training programs. The present study investigated the efficacy of a psychosocially based coach training program compared to an injury prevention-based coach training program for influencing fear of failure (FF) among children and youth in a summer swim league. The study was designed to advance the literature by using a randomized trial design, by collecting data at three time points over the course of the season, by including both female and male participants, and by employing state-of-the-science techniques for modeling developmental change.

1.1. Competence motivation and fear of failure

The salience of competence in the sport domain and the importance of competence as a developmental task for children and youth suggest that competence motivation may be a salient developmental outcome influenced by youth sport experiences. Competence strivings can be distinguished with respect to their valence ([McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953](#)). Approach-valenced competence motivation (i.e., need for achievement) represents a striving for competence whereas avoidance-valenced competence motivation (i.e., FF) represents a striving away from *in*competence.

From unidimensional roots in personality and achievement motivation research ([Atkinson, 1957](#); [Murray, 1938](#)), models of FF have grown into a hierarchical, multidimensional structure ([Birney, Burdick, & Teevan, 1969](#); [Conroy, Poczwardowski, & Henschen, 2001](#)). In the broadest sense, FF represents a dispositional tendency to make threat-related appraisals in evaluative situations because the individual learns to avoid aversive consequences. Different lower-order dimensions of FF can be identified based on specific consequences of failing that are feared (e.g., experiencing shame and embarrassment, devaluing one's self-estimate, having an uncertain future, having important others lose interest, upsetting important others; [Conroy, Willow, & Metzler, 2002](#)). These specific fears of failing are relatively new in the literature and relatively little is known about their distinct consequences; however, a great deal of evidence has accumulated to indicate that FF generally has more costs than benefits related to physical and psychological health, moral development, and behavior (for a review, see [Conroy, 2001a](#)). Thus, programs that can influence the sport context in ways that help reduce young athletes' FF may have positive effects in other domains as well.

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