

COACHING CHILDREN IN SPORT

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2011 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Coaching children in sport / edited by Ian Stafford.

p. cm.

1. Sports for children--Coaching. I. Stafford, Ian.

GV709.24.C63 2011

796.083--dc22

2010046671

ISBN: 978-0-415-49390-1 hbk

ISBN: 978-0-415-49391-8 pbk

ISBN: 978-0-203-85068-8 ebook

Typeset in Zapf Humanist and Eras by
Keystroke, Station Road, Codsall, Wolverhampton

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DEVELOPMENTAL TRANSITIONS IN SPORT

MARK BRUNER, LEISHA STRACHAN AND JEAN CÔTÉ

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- ▮ Transition research in sport
- ▮ Transitions for children in sport
- ▮ An integrated approach to examining developmental transitions in sport
- ▮ Theory into practice
- ▮ Learning more

INTRODUCTION

Sport has been heralded as a rich context for promoting physical, psychological, emotional, and social development for children (Fraser-Thomas *et al.*, 2005). Despite the identified benefits of sport on children's development, surprisingly minimal research has examined how early developmental transitions in sport affect a child's participation in sport and psychosocial development. The purpose of this chapter is to identify and explore three important developmental transitions in sport: (1) entry into sport (approximately 5–7 years of age); (2) movement into performance-based sport participation (approximately 12–14 years of age); and (3) movement into recreational sport involvement (approximately 12–14 years of age).

TRANSITION RESEARCH IN SPORT

Transition research in sport dates back to the mid-1960s (e.g. Hallden, 1965). Since that time, the number of investigations into athlete career transitions has risen substantially (McPherson, 1980; Lavalley *et al.*, 1998). The increased attention has brought about several key developments, including major shifts in research foci and theoretical frameworks, the consideration

of contextual factors, and the publication of position statements on career transitions in sport (e.g. Alfermann and Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova *et al.*, 2009; Wylleman *et al.*, 1999). This growing body of research supports a 'holistic' perspective on the athlete's career (cf. Wylleman *et al.*, 1999) and the importance of psycho-social variables on athlete development during critical transitions in a sport career. Accordingly, researchers now hold a developmental perspective on athlete transitions.

While much of the early transition research in sport psychology focused on understanding how the transitions out of elite sport influence the athlete (e.g. Baillie and Danish, 1992; Ogilvie and Howe, 1986), recent studies upholding this developmental perspective on an athlete's career have begun to investigate how social (e.g. coaches, parents, peers) and societal (e.g. sport system, culture) influences contribute to athlete development and transitions (Stambulova *et al.*, 2007; Wylleman *et al.*, 2000). However, there is a lack of guidelines on children's transitions in sport and the effect of these transitions on a child's participation and psycho-social development.

TRANSITIONS FOR CHILDREN IN SPORT

Within the sport psychology literature, a number of athlete development models have been identified as highlighting key transitional stages and phases specific to young athletes (Bruner *et al.*, 2009, 2010). The identification of these critical time periods is vital to gaining an understanding of the issues that are pertinent to children and youth as they move through their sport experience.

Wylleman and Lavalée (2004) have put forward a 'holistic' developmental perspective highlighting an athlete's transitions over a sport career. The perspective conceptualises sport as one key facet of an individual's life transitions and includes four levels (athletic, psychological, psycho-social and academic/vocational). The athletic level consists of two types of transitions in an athletic career: normative and non-normative. Normative transitions are foreseeable events that may occur in an athlete's career (e.g. beginning intensive training in a sport; Stambulova, 1994). Contrarily, non-normative transitions are unpredictable and often involuntary occurrences that may happen in the course of an athletic career (e.g. injury, changing teams). Within the athletic level, children fall within the first two stages, initiation and development, which are based on previous work by Bloom (1985). The next layer is the psychological level and describes childhood and adolescence as the first two stages of development. The third layer is the psycho-social level, where Wylleman and Lavalée (2004) highlight the contributions of significant others (i.e. parents, siblings, peers and coaches) to the lives of young people. The final level, academic/vocational, denotes the educational progression that is expected in different phases of life (i.e. primary and secondary education). This model challenges researchers to consider the multidimensional nature of development and to consider all phases when examining children and youth in sport.

When examining athlete development in sport, perhaps one of the most researched models (see Bruner *et al.*, 2010) is the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP; Côté,

1999; Côté and Fraser-T follow as he or she progr chapter, particularly the 5–7); (2) sampling to spe (approximately ages 1: participates in deliberat and Fraser-Thomas, 200 focus in this stage is the sampling and playing outcomes, including pr capital (Strachan *et al.* contends that a child wi decide to either partici development of skills it encourages the continu research has been cond (Strachan *et al.*, 2009), and trajectories of the L and Lavalée, 2004) an us to understand the tr stage-based and transit literature to explore th comprehend the comp

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1999; Côté and Fraser-Thomas, 2007). This model suggests three trajectories that a child may follow as he or she progresses through sport. The first two trajectories will be the focus in this chapter, particularly the following stages: (1) entry into sport and sampling (approximately ages 5–7); (2) sampling to specialising (approximately ages 12–14); and (3) sampling to recreational (approximately ages 12–14). Sampling refers to a stage in development where a child participates in deliberate play activities and several different sport activities (Côté, 1999; Côté and Fraser-Thomas, 2007). As a child samples a variety of sports centred around playing, the focus in this stage is the growth of physical and motor skills as well as enjoyment. Further, sampling and playing has also been linked to the promotion of several developmental outcomes, including pro-social behaviour, a healthy identity and the accrual of social capital (Strachan *et al.*, 2008). Upon entry into sport at approximately age 5, the DMSP contends that a child will participate in sampling, at least until age 12. At this time, a child will decide to either participate in the specialising years, where there is more emphasis on the development of skills in two or three specific sports, or enter the recreational years, which encourages the continuation of sampling through recreational sport participation. Although research has been conducted to examine personal and contextual factors *within* the trajectories (Strachan *et al.*, 2009), there is a lack of research studying the transitions *between* the stages and trajectories of the DMSP. An integration of transition models used within (e.g. Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004) and outside of the sport context (e.g. Schlossberg, 1981, 1984) may help us to understand the transitions between these critical phases. Further, an inclusion of both stage-based and transition-based approaches will address recent calls in the sport psychology literature to explore the integration of stage-based and transition-based models to better comprehend the complexity of sport participation (Bruner *et al.*, 2009).

Schlossberg's transition model

Nancy Schlossberg (1981, 1984) proposed an influential conceptual framework on career transitions that has been adapted and successfully used in a sport setting (e.g. Bruner *et al.*, 2008; Pearson and Petitpas, 1990). Recently, this framework has been expanded by Goodman *et al.* (2006) to include four key factors that influence a transition. Collectively, these four factors are referred to as the 4 Ss: Situation (What is happening?), Self (To whom is it happening?), Support (What help is available?) and Strategies (How does the person cope?). The four factors can be regarded as potential assets and/or liabilities, and make a substantial difference to how an individual copes with a transition (Goodman *et al.*, 2006).

The 4 Ss in developmental transitions in sport

Situation

The situation refers to four contexts of the transition: *trigger*, *timing*, *perceptions of control* and *stress* of the transition. The *trigger* reveals what set off the transition. Specifically, was the

transition anticipated (e.g. moving up in an athletic age category) or unanticipated (e.g. getting dropped from an elite team)? The *timing* refers to how the transition relates to one's social clock (Goodman *et al.*, 2006). Did the individual initiate the transition or did it happen to him or her (e.g. making an elite team after try-outs, or being dropped from a team mid-season)? *Control* entails what aspects of the transition the young athlete can control. The final component pertains to the amount of *stress* the youth faces from the athletic transition and other facets of his or her life.

Self

Along with the situation, an individual's characteristics and psychological resources may influence the transition. Demographic characteristics that may enable or hinder the transition include age, gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status and culture (Goodman *et al.*, 2006). Pertinent personal characteristics may include psychological resources, ego development, outlook (e.g., optimism and self-efficacy), commitment and values, spirituality, and resiliency (ibid.).

Support

Support for the athlete is commonly classified into three different typologies (e.g. House and Kahn, 1985): (1) instrumental support – offering something tangible to assist the young athlete, such as a parent driving the young athlete to practices and games; (2) informational support – providing relevant information to help the young athlete cope with the transition, such as a veteran athlete offering advice to the young athlete based upon previous transition experience; and (3) emotional support – providing reassurance, caring and/or empathy to the young athlete, for example a coach reassuring the young athlete early in the competitive season after a poor performance.

Assessment of support for the young athlete during a transition may involve a series of questions: (1) Does the child feel that he or she is receiving enough support? (2) Does the child have a range of types of support – close family, coaches or friends? (3) Has the child's support system or 'convoy of social support' been interrupted by this transition (e.g. moving away from home to train)? (Goodman *et al.*, 2006).

Strategies

The final S, strategies, refers to an evaluation of the strategies an individual possesses to successfully adapt to a transition. For the remainder of this chapter, the strategies will refer to specific recommendations for coaches to help young athletes overcome issues presented within each of the other three Ss (situation, self, support) to foster development and continued participation in sport.

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M. Bruner *et al.*

REFLECTION

How can you apply these concepts to children in sport?

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In an effort to address these issues, we have developed a transition model (de Vries *et al.*, 2006) that integrates the three components (situation, self, support) into the three stages of transition (approximately ages 5 to 7, 8 to 12, and 13 to 18). The three stages of transition, the three transition components, and the three transition strategies are discussed below.

Entry into sport

Situation

The *timing* of a child's entry into sport is a function of the number of social and cultural factors that activate a child's interest in sport. Parents play a major role in the child's entry into sport. Parents provide support to take part in sport. Cultural factors such as the opportunity to play baseball in a school setting (Côté, 1999).

The perception that a child has of their participation in sport over their participation in sport is a function of their level of stress experience. A child's level of physical competence should be characterized by a high level of enjoyment (1998). Large amount of enjoyment in a enjoyable environment give them control over their participation in sport.

REFLECTION

How can you apply the 4 Ss to the transitions that you have experienced interacting with children in sport?

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO EXAMINING DEVELOPMENTAL TRANSITIONS IN SPORT

In an effort to address the previously identified need to integrate distinct athlete development approaches, we have integrated (where possible) the content of Wylleman and Lavalée's transition model (describing athletic, psychological, social and academic development in sport) into the three identified stages of Côté's (1999) DMSP: (1) entry into sport and sampling (approximately ages 5–7); (2) sampling to specialising (approximately ages 12–14); and (3) sampling to recreational (approximately ages 12–14). To provide a uniform structure to each transition, the three transitions will be further subdivided into Schlossberg's 4 Ss (situation, self, support, strategies).

Entry into sport

Situation

The *timing* of a child's first participation in organised sport usually occurs around the ages of 5 to 7 (Côté and Fraser-Thomas, 2007). A child's initiation into sport can be *triggered* by a number of social and/or environmental factors. Parents are usually the main social agents that activate a child's interest to first participate in sport (Jacobs and Eccles, 2000). The role that parents play in the development of their child's first participation includes providing the support to take part in an organised sport and 'playing sport' with their child. Environmental factors such as the opportunity to play basketball in a driveway, soccer in a backyard, or baseball in a school yard are also important triggers of a child's first experience with sport (Côté, 1999).

The perception that children have of their own competence and the *control* children have over their participation are important motivational variables during childhood that affect the level of *stress* experienced in a specific sport setting. Thus, in order to develop feelings of physical competence and control over their participation, children's first exposure to sport should be characterised by concrete mastery experiences with tangible outcomes (Chase, 1998). Large amounts of deliberate play and the opportunity to sample different sports in an enjoyable environment provide children with a diversity of settings to play sport that ultimately give them *control* over their experience and lower the *stress* associated with competitive

participation in one sport. On the other hand, early specialisation and intense practice of one sport reduces children's control over their activity, increases stress and promotes a state of identity 'foreclosure' which occurs when a child's identity is prescribed to them by parents without sufficient exploration (Harter, 1999).

Self

A child's first exposure to sport is influenced by his or her personal characteristics, such as aptitudes, temperament, attitudes and motivation. Once again, parents play a major role in how children perceive themselves in sport. Research shows that children's self-perceptions are highly influenced by family characteristics (e.g. income and education) and personal characteristics (e.g. sex and age; Jacobs and Eccles, 2000). In other words, parents' perceptions of their children's ability and interest in sport will influence the support that parents provide to their children and ultimately affect their children's self-perception. Although a variety of terms have been used in the literature to describe the self, *confidence* is certainly the most-used term and the most important characteristic that should be valued by coaches and parents of children entering into sport. The way children perceive themselves and their level of confidence when they are introduced to sport have important implications for their persistence and future participation (Vealey and Chase, 2008).

Support

When children are first introduced to sport, adults' (parents and coaches) psycho-social support is probably the most important element in the development of the child's self-esteem. For example, parents' psycho-social support is positively correlated with a child's enjoyment of and enthusiasm for swimming (Power and Woolger, 1994). Through social and verbal encouragement, Bandura's (1978) self-efficacy theory provides theoretical evidence of the importance of parental and coaches' psycho-social support for a child's acquisition of positive values towards sport.

Strategies

Kleiber (1981) suggested that the 'fun' of sports for young children lies in its play qualities. Although sports have become more organised and institutionalised in the past few years, children's first experience in sport is still connected with the importance of experimenting with new or different means of doing things rather than attaining a goal (Côté *et al.*, 2007a). Often, early participation in organised sport becomes distorted by adults who reward behaviours such as excessive competition, physical aggression against others, and cheating. Researchers (Côté and Fraser-Thomas, 2007; Kleiber, 1981) have argued that in order to keep sport enjoyable during childhood, adults should (1) limit competition and performance outcomes, (2) provide play experiences for all children, (3) limit the influence of spectators, and (4) provide choices to children. These guidelines should be at the forefront of a child's first experience of sport.

Sampling to specialising

Situation

During the transition from sampling to specialising, the age of the participant appears to *trigger* this transition. The *timing* of this transition should be athlete initiated. However, in many cases the timing is controlled by an adult, whether it is the coach or a parent. Giving these young athletes greater *control* over their participation in elite sports may allow them to feel more empowered, thereby enabling the development of positive outcomes (Strachan *et al.*, 2009). Further, because this transition occurs during another major transition for youth, adolescence, other stresses beyond sport (i.e. making or having a new group of friends) may add to the complexity of this situation (Allen, 2003).

Self

The development of the *self* is one of the key components of growth as young people progress through adolescence (Harter, 1999). The same is true for youth who participate in sport. Through this transition from sampling to specialising, there may be a shift in cognitive readiness, motivation and identity (Wylleman and Lavalley, 2004). Movement to the formal operations stage of cognitive development (Piaget, 1952) allows for the introduction of more abstract concepts in sport. In terms of motivation, an intrinsic perspective is of utmost importance to promote interest and persistence (Allen, 2003) as these athletes move into a new phase of sport involvement. Finally, a sport identity has been found to be a mediator between psycho-social and socio-environmental factors and sport participation (Lau *et al.*, 2006). Hence, identity plays a key role in promoting persistence in sport for youth. It is important to build a positive identity through sport; however, it is also crucial for youth to maintain a proper perspective so that they do not define themselves only as athletes. A reliance on sport identity as a means to define the self may have negative implications for the development of young people through sport (Coakley, 1992).

Support

As noted within the psycho-social level of Wylleman and Lavalley's (2004) model, *support* is another key factor to consider for youth going through this transition. Coaches need to support athletes by promoting enjoyment while assisting them with skill development (Côté *et al.*, 2007b). Parents play an important role in providing psycho-social support and modelling appropriate behaviours for their children (Côté and Fraser-Thomas, 2007). Lastly, peers provide a growing source of support for youth during this transition. The presence of positive peer groups in sport may enhance motivation, persistence and interest (Allen, 2003).

Strategies

There are a few strategies to offer to coaches who may be interacting with athletes beginning to specialise in sport. Coaches should provide these young athletes with opportunities to

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develop sport-specific skills and increase their competence. Côté and Fraser-Thomas (2007) further suggest that competitive experiences should be made available to athletes, as competition may not only help increase their opportunities to travel and to receive recognition but also enhance their life experiences. While enhancing their skill levels, coaches need to be cognisant of the need to provide athletes with some choice while encouraging positive peer and coach interactions. It is also crucial to always consider their age and stage of development (i.e. adolescence) so that their developmental needs can be addressed. By keeping this in mind, coaches have the opportunity to help youth develop a love for sport and sincerely enjoy their sport experience.

CASE STUDY

Larry is a 12-year-old boy who is currently involved in soccer, hockey, American football and swimming. He is thinking about specialising in soccer and his parents have asked for your advice. From what you have read in this chapter, how would you advise them to deal with this important transition?

Sampling to recreational

Situation

The transition from sampling to a recreational sporting context is often initiated by youth (aged approximately 12–14 years) electing not to pursue an elite developmental trajectory but to remain involved in sport to seek a context that promotes fun, challenge and enjoyment (Côté *et al.*, 2007a). While for most youth the *timing* of this transition is normative, others may be forced into this trajectory when not selected for an elite athletic context. For those young athletes 'cut' or deselected at the beginning of a competitive season, the non-normative transition may be unanticipated and involuntary (Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004). The two distinct types of transitions may give rise to quite different perceptions of *control* and associated *stress* leading into a recreational setting.

Self

As children move into adolescence, they begin to embark on a critical period of growth and development, and engage in a number of activities, including sport, to build their personal identity (Wagner, 1996). It is also during adolescence that they begin to compartmentalise themselves as being 'different' people in different domains (Horn, 2004). This ability to develop higher-order abstractions about self permits adolescents to evaluate themselves as having differing levels of ability in different athletic contexts. In a recreational sport setting, this may involve young athletes feeling competent in one sport (e.g. volleyball) yet not in another

(e.g. basketball), or viewing themselves as being competent in one skill (e.g. serving) but not in another (e.g. spiking). However, this developmental process is not seamless and frequently involves adolescents' reconciling 'cognitive confusion' concerning themselves (Harter, 1999). It is during these trying times that young athletes look to their social support network, specifically the feedback of significant others such as coaches and peers, to resolve conflicting information about the self and form their personal identity (Horn, 2004).

Support

During key developmental transitions in sport, such as the movement to recreational sport, the sources and types of support often shift for the young athlete. Early athletic support for the child during the sampling years may be primarily derived from the family, specifically the parents, while in later elite or recreational years the important supportive roles of coaches and peers often emerge (Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004). In addition to changes in the sources of support, the type of support offered by each source may also evolve. For example, parental support may evolve over the different stages of athletic development (Côté, 1999).

Strategies

On the basis of the description of the previous 3 Ss (situation, self and support), it is recommended that recreational youth coaches devise a number of strategies to assist young athletes to cope with the transition into recreational sport. First, recreational youth coaches should be cognisant of the nature of each young athlete's transition (normative versus non-normative) in order to better understand an athlete's background and any challenges associated with the transition, particularly for those athletes experiencing a non-normative transition. Second, recreational youth coaches should attempt to promote a positive environment that fosters a sense of self for the young athletes. In addition, recreational youth coaches should evaluate the present support network for each athlete to assist and/or complement the athlete's support system.

DIRECTED TASK

Find a newspaper or magazine article that discusses the transition of an athlete. What caused the transition to occur for the athlete? What were the outcomes of this transition? Could this transition have been made smoother for the athlete, and if so, how?

THEORY INTO PRACTICE

In summary, when children initiate sport, coaches should focus on creating a sporting atmosphere that allows them to have fun, develop and maintain a positive attitude towards sport, and acquire fundamental motor skills. Coaches and parents involved in children's early participation in organised sport should be careful not to reward a child's negative behaviours, such as excessive competition, physical aggression against others, and cheating. A greater focus on play and enjoyment during the initiation phase into sport is in line with results of studies that investigate the motives for a child's participation in sport (e.g. Petlichkoff, 1993). After sampling several different sports, an athlete may elect to specialise in one or two sports or maintain involvement in several sports in a recreational setting. If a child decides to specialise, coaches should focus on providing opportunities for the young athlete to develop sport-specific skills and increase their competence. Elite youth coaches should also be cognisant of the developmental changes occurring during adolescence for the young athlete and ensure that the athletic environment is rich in positive interactions among peers and coaches. Similarly, recreational youth coaches should foster a sporting environment that builds a sense of self for the young athlete. In addition, recreational coaches should be sensitive to the nature of each child's athletic background (normative versus non-normative) to better understand the context leading to the child's decision to participate in recreational sport. Finally, recreational coaches should carefully monitor the support network of their athletes to ensure each athlete is receiving adequate instrumental, informational and emotional support to promote positive youth development and continued participation in sport.

LEARNING MORE

Several helpful resources are recommended for those wishing to learn more about the developmental needs of young athletes (Côté *et al.*, 2010), developmental approaches to athlete transitions and performance (Côté *et al.*, 2007a; Stambulova *et al.*, 2009; Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004), effective coaching (Côté and Gilbert, 2009) and positive youth development in sport (Fraser-Thomas *et al.*, 2005).

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