

PerformanceEdge

The Letter of Performance Psychology

Motivating Kids:

Balancing Learning, Fun & Ego

Volume 4 No. 6

In this issue:

Goals of sports play

Ego-oriented vs. Task-oriented athletes

Tips for coaches

Tips for parents

Skillbuilder: Developing positive dialogue

Motivating Kids:

Balancing Learning, Fun & Ego

Mary D. Walling, Ph.D.

Joan L. Duda, Ph. D.

“Perhaps I was even more pleased by the way I had played than by my results in terms of wins and losses, or even in terms of prize money. I had done nothing, through scandal or bad behavior, to bring the game into disrepute. And I was also proud that fans and other players had found my game adventurous.”

Arthur Ashe

- Days of Grace

The challenge of optimizing motivation in young people has received a great deal of attention from coaches and parents for two reasons:

- First, there is concern with trying to foster long-term involvement in sport and physical activity amongst children. Much of the adult population leads sedentary lifestyles, and research has shown that when children have positive experiences with sport when they are young, they will be more likely to continue their participation as they grow older.
- Second, there is the desire by coaches and parents to set the stage for athletic excellence. Many talented children seem to suffer the effects of burnout before they have the opportunity to develop their potential ability.

How can we maximize motivation among kids? How can we encourage youngsters to try different sports. To work hard when they play, to enjoy their sport activities, and to have predominantly positive experiences with their sport involvement? Some boys and girls, no doubt, have fun in sport. Surveys would suggest, however, that many kids lose interest or become too stressed at a young age in the athletic domain.

Recent research efforts by sport psychologists have shed light on how children’s enjoyment and future participation in sport and exercise might be enhanced and how their skill development can be maximized. The results of these studies have been enlightening and encouraging.

How can we encourage youngsters to try different sports, to work hard when they play, to enjoy their sport activities, and have positive experiences?

What are our goals?

Sport psychologists have come to understand that individuals approach their sport participation with different goals. Some individuals typically gauge their success in terms of how hard they try and how much they improve their skills and performance. These individuals are high in **task orientation**. They feel most successful when they exert effort and observe personal improvement in their skills. Athletes high in task orientation can lose a game / match, yet still feel good about their tenacity and performance.

A second goal perspective is ego orientation. Individuals who are highly ego-oriented judge their success using normative standards. That is, they feel successful only when they are able to show their superior ability, by playing better than their peers, or at least performing equally with less effort. For highly ego-oriented individuals, outcome defines their experience, regardless of how they played. A win guarantees a feeling of success whereas a loss ensures feelings of failure.

Myths about motivation

Myth: Athletes are either task – or ego-oriented

Fact: People are not confined to a single goal perspective; they are at some level, both task and ego-oriented. Some athletes may be high in both orientations, others may be low, and there are people who are high in one goal orientation and low in the other. A questionnaire has been developed which measures individuals' proneness to be task and ego-oriented. The task and ego-orientation in sport Questionnaire consists of 13 items which tap the athlete's approach to sport orientation. Individuals respond to the question which all begin with the stem "I feel most successful in sport when...". Sample items include "others mess up and I don't" (ego item) and "a skill I learn really feels right" (task item).

Myth: Ego-oriented athletes/teams perform better than task oriented athletes/teams....

Fact: There is no evidence to suggest that an ego orientation is better in achieving higher levels of performance especially in the long term. In fact an ego orientation appears to be particularly hazardous when athletes with lower skill levels question their competence. Further, more talented ego-oriented athletes can also suffer through periods of injury and poor performances. A prevailing task-orientation will advance performance more than an ego orientation over time.

Myth: only ego-oriented athletes desire competition and want to win

Fact: Perhaps the biggest misconception about differences in goal perspectives is that task oriented athletes do not care about winning. To the contrary, task-oriented individuals have made a considerable investment of time and effort in their sport, and they use feedback about their performance in competitive situations to judge how well they are improving. No matter what orientation, individuals want to win, the difference lies in why they want to win. For predominantly ego-oriented individuals, a win allows them to proclaim "I am the best." Victory for strongly task-oriented individuals, a win provides them with information reinforcing their hard work and improvement, allowing them to acknowledge "I am doing my best." Thus, when athletes have lost a competition, success is likely to be felt only by those high in task-orientation. High ego-oriented athletes would rarely feel successful when the competitive outcome is not in their favor.

Task and Ego orientation assessment

When do you feel most successful in sport? In other words, when do you feel a sport activity has gone really well for you?

Please read each of the statements listed and indicate how much you personally agree with each statement by choosing the appropriate response value. Add the values for your score.

Response:		Value:
Strongly disagree		1
Disagree	2	
Neutral		3
Agree		4
Strongly agree		5

I feel most successful in sport when

1. I learn a new skill and it makes me want to practice more.
2. I'm the only one who can do the play or the skill.
3. I learn something that is fun to do.
4. I can do better than my friends.
5. I learn a new skill by trying hard.
6. The others can't do as well as me.
7. I work really hard.
8. Others mess up and I don't.
9. Something I learn makes me want to go and practice more.
10. I score the most points/goals/hits, etc.
11. A skill I learn really feels right.
12. I'm the best.
13. I do my very best.

Items (1+3+5+7+9+11+13)/7= task orientation score
Items (2+4+6+8+10+12)/6= ego orientation score

Making a case for enhancing task orientation

Numerous studies have shown that individuals who are high in task and / or ego orientations tend to be characterized by other characteristics.

Fun / Enjoyment.

Research has shown that people who are high in task orientation are more likely to have fun when they play sports. That is, they tend to report greater levels of enjoyments in terms of their athletic participation, and this is evident even when athletes have lost a competition and / or think that they are not very skilled in the sport. Sport psychologists have realized that having fun is no trivial matter in terms of fostering a lifelong commitment to physical fitness and activity among athletes, regardless of their age.

Attitudes toward fair play and injurious acts.

Because the focus for task-oriented individuals is on personal improvement, they seem inclined to place greater value on principles of fair play. The only way they can accurately judge their improvement is through feedback via honest and fair competition.. Highly task-oriented athletes have little to gain by cheating and employing deceptive tactics. In contrast, individuals who are high in ego-orientation place primary importance besting an opponent and demonstrating superior ability. It is not surprising then, those ego-oriented individuals have been found to have a greater tendency to endorse unsportsmanlike play such as cheating. They have also been found to more likely to perceive intentionally aggressive acts in sports as more legitimate.

Motives for participation.

Goal perspectives have been linked to the motive children and adolescents have for participating in sport. For example, individuals high in task-orientation tend to report that they become involved in sport to develop their skills, compete, and interact with others. In contrast, an ego-orientation has been linked to different reasons for participation such as gaining social recognition.

Desire for Challenging Tasks.

A focus on skill mastery leads task-oriented athletes to chose more challenging tasks. Personal improvement is rarely achieved by individuals who avoid optimal challenges. In essence, high task-oriented athletes are not afraid of "looking bad" or failing if that is what it takes to improve.

Persistence and Desire to Continue Participation.

Task-oriented individuals thrive on hard work. Research has revealed that a task orientation is associated with greater persistence at activities, as well as greater anticipation of future sport participation. Particularly note worthy was the finding of in one study where high task-oriented young athletes with low perceived ability and who had just lost an important game, responded quite favorably to the statement "I can't wait to play again". A similar finding did not surface for the high ego-oriented athletes.

Beliefs about success in sport.

John Nicolls, a renowned educational psychologist, has suggested that individuals' goal perspectives reflect their views about the nature of the world, and no less the nature of the sport. Research has indicated young people who are high in task orientation tend to believe that success in sport is the result of hard work, intrinsic interest, and cooperation with peers. High ego-oriented youngsters are more likely to report that success is achieved when athletes posses high ability, parade the "coolest clothes", have the best equipment, and master the use of deception through cheating or pretending to like the coach. Further, an ego-orientation is associated with the belief that success is also achieved via the use of performance enhancing drugs as steroids.

Purpose of Sport.

Past work has linked individuals' perceptions of the very purposes of sport involvement to their goal orientations. Task-oriented athletes and physical educational students are more likely to hold the view that important functions of sport and physical activity include fostering skill mastery, enhancing self-esteem, teaching individuals to try their best, and helping people learn to interact positively with peers. Athletes high in ego orientation are more inclined to perceive that their sport involvement should serve to make them feel important, have higher self-esteem, and raise their social status.

Anxiety.

Since ego-oriented individuals are pre-occupied with factors over which they may have little control (i.e., winning / losing, their opponent's performance), it is not surprising that they tend to report higher levels of anxiety when they are engaged in sport. The sport psychology literature clearly indicated that high anxiety levels do not set the stage for athletic excellence. Rather, they lead to concentration difficulties, injury, and less coordinated movement.

Motivational climate

The goals kids adopt are influenced by the environment, or motivational climate, in which they find themselves. The motivational climate can be either task- or ego involving. A task-involving climate is characterized by recognition that mistakes are part of learning, the sense that every individual plays an important role on the team, and the perception that the coach reinforces effort and improvement. When the climate is ego involving, kids perceive that mistakes result in punishment, only a few star players will receive the majority of attention and recognition, and team rivalry is crucial to success.

Creating the right climate

Tips for Coaches

Evaluate how you define success for you athletes.

What behaviors do you reinforce and reward? What do you think it takes to be successful? Consider what it is you want your players to learn and to experience while they are part of your team. How do you convey to your players the value you place on hard work, their cooperation with teammates, and their personal improvement? Do you foster rivalry among teammates? How do you approach players after they have made errors, and how do you interact with less talented team members? All of these coaching behaviors are assumed to impact the goal perspectives adopted by athletes.

Become aware of how your athletes approach their sport.

It is often helpful to know what athletes are bringing into their athletic activities. Remember, the motivational climate at home may be different than the one you are trying to establish on the field. You may experience an athlete who is easily upset, appears to be stressed, has a hard time dealing with loss, is impatient with his teammates, etc. One possible explanation could be this athlete is highly ego-oriented because of strong home influences. It is not uncommon to see a parent in the stands and a child on the field reacts the same to various competitive situations. Of course, you have no power to change the environment at home but you do have the ability when they are with you to teach that there is more than one way to view sports and gain satisfaction from athletic participation.

Make it know what climate you are creating.

At the beginning of each season, communicate clearly with the parents and athletes the goals you have for the season, the way you define success for the team, and the expectations you have for the athletes and the parents.

Understand that competition is not good or bad.

Rather it means different things to different athletes, depending on the mix of task and ego orientation.

Tips for Parents

Check out sport programs before enrolling your child.

Ask about participation policies. Do some children spend the season on the bench? What seems to be the motivational climate in the league and on your child's team specifically? Are kids having fun? Are they receiving instructional information from their coaches? How do the coaches respond when a child makes a mistake? Concerned parents can greatly improve the quality of the children's sports programs. Remember a child's sport experiences have a great impact on their future involvement in exercise and sports, and on their attitudes regarding physical activity.

Support your child's coach.

Remember that in most programs, coaches are well-intentioned individuals who are willing to volunteer. They may have little or no training in principles of teaching, psychology, and physical education/coaching concepts. Reinforce the coach behaviors when he/she stresses hard work and mastery of skills rather than the competitive outcome. If you do have a concern with a coach behavior or attitude, talk to the coach privately without putting your child in the middle of your concern.

Try to help your children focus on how hard they try and their personal improvement, rather than the outcome.

Many parents cannot resist the temptation to direct the conversation with their child around winning or losing, team and individual standings/rankings, and potential trophies/prizes. These are factors over which most children have very little control. Instead, look for ways to fortify your children's efforts. Examples are presented in the following table which serve to highlight how verbal responses may stress hard work and skill mastery versus a concern with one's ability level and outcome. It is important to note that the responses on the right are not necessarily bad if used in moderation. For example, there is nothing wrong with occasionally asking a child if he/she won a competition. It is simply a matter of being more aware of how we talk to kids, and being careful not to always emphasize being the best or winning. Rather, adults can be creative in looking for ways to discuss sports with children in a way that highlights the value of effort, improvement, and skill development.

Skill-builder

Responses which emphasize	
Effort / Improvement / Skill mastery	Ability / Winning & Losing
<p>“How did you play?” or “Did you have fun?”</p> <p>“You’re really following through well on your swing.”</p> <p>“You and your teammates are working well together on the court.”</p> <p>“You really stayed positive when your doubles partner was getting frustrated and down on herself. It sure helps to have your partner support when things aren’t going well.”</p> <p>“I was proud of the way you hustled all the way through the game.”</p>	<p>“Did you win?”</p> <p>“It’s to bad you didn’t get to base today.”</p> <p>“You’re better than Sam/Sue. I don’t know why the coach isn’t starting you at that position.”</p> <p>“You probably would have won today if you partner had played better.”</p> <p>“Your opponents cheated / were lucky.”</p>

Reference for further reading

Duda, J.L. (1989). The relationship between task and ego orientation and the perceived purpose of sport amongst male and female high school athletes. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 11*, 318-335.

Duda, J.L. (1993). Goals: A social cognitive approach to the study of motivation in sport. In R. Singer, M. Murphy, & L.K. Tennant (Eds), *Handbook of research on sport psychology*, 421-436, New York: Macmillan.

Duda, J.L. (1994). Fostering active living for children and youth: The motivational significance of goal orientation in sport. In H.A. Quinney, L. Oauvin, & A.E. Wall (Eds), *Toward Active Living, 20*, 421-436, *Champion, IL: Human Kinetics*.

Duda, J.L., Olson, L.K., & Templin, T. (1991). The relationship of task and ego orientation to sportmanship attitudes and the perceived legitimacy of injurious acts. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, 62*, 79-87.

Duda, J.L., & White, S.A. (1992). Goal orientations and beliefs about the causes of success among elite skiers. *The Sport Psychologist, 6*, 334-343.

Seifriz, J., Duda, J.L., & Chi, L. (1992). The relationship between perceived motivational climate to achievement-related affect and cognitions in basketball. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 14*, 375-391.

Walling, M.D., Duda, J.L., & Crawford, T. (1994). Goal orientations, outcome, and responses to youth sport competition among high/low perceived ability athletes. *Manuscript submitted for publication*.