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Article in *Journal of Physical Education Recreation & Dance* · April 2017

DOI: 10.1080/07303084.2017.1367745

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Moral Development and Sportsmanship

in Physical Education and Sport

COLIN G. PENNINGTON



Among the many concurrent goals of physical education (PE) and sport, there is an opportunity for building positive social responsibility in participants. Fostering social responsibility and building character is an important quality of PE and sport, as participation has the potential to advance moral reasoning skills, foster prosocial behavior, and improve sportsmanship among its participants (Naylor & Yeager, 2013). Schools have a unique opportunity to lead the way toward a focus in improving

social behavior in youth. There is a call for school programs to protect children against the damage of social disorganization and family collapse (Stoll & Beller, 1993). Concern about the growth in adolescent problem behaviors (e.g., delinquency, drug use, violence) has led to an increased interest in positive youth develop-

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The arena of sport can provide one of the greatest opportunities for a student to learn honesty, integrity and ethical behavior...or it can provide one of the greatest opportunities in school for a youngster to learn how to be dishonest or how to be hypocritical. (Sabock, 1985, p. 271)

ment and a surge in funding for after-school programs (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2005).

Moral education is fast becoming one of the most important topics in contemporary school systems today. Moral conduct refers to actions performed regarding rules that apply in a given social context (Wright & Taylor, 1971). This includes formal school

or class rules, as well as informal societal norms and expectations regarding behavior.

It has long been believed that positive moral socialization can occur through participation in interscholastic sport, since sport provides learning environments where participants have the opportunity to learn competition, cooperation, role-playing and

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discipline regarding rules, regulations and goals (Bloom & Smith, 1996). In this sense, sport can be seen as a laboratory of human experience. Jack Roberts, executive director of the Michigan High School Athletic Association, is credited with stating, "Sportsmanship is the starting point — if not the essence — of good citizenship. It is what we're supposed to teach in educational athletics more than anything else" (Engh, 1999).

The Nature of Morality in Sports

Two different types of character values exist and are evident in sport: social and moral (Beller, 2002). The exploration and description of moral behavior is derived from a more comprehensive theory of social behavior based on psychological role theory (Goffman, 1959; Wright & Taylor, 1971). The conceptual framework in which moral rules are formulated, and the experience that goes with them, make moral rules distinctively different from, for example, the rules of tennis, grammar or etiquette (Wright & Taylor, 1971). Typical social character values include loyalty, dedication, sacrifice, teamwork and good citizenship, while moral values include honesty, fairness, fair play, justice and responsibility (Lumpkin & Stokowski, 2011; Stoll & Beller, 2000). Instinct-theory supporters argue that social aggression is instinctive, and that vigorous physical activities (such as PE or sporting events) provide cathartic benefits by releasing participants' restrained emotions (Baron & Richardson, 2004).

The original goals of the first community-organized youth sport programs (Pop Warner Football in 1929 and Little League Baseball in 1938) revolved around the development of good citizenship, as well as moral development. The founders of these programs echoed principles made famous by the father of the modern Olympics, Baron de Coubertin, who asserted that participation in sport could help develop engaged, balanced citizens (Raakman, 2006). Although the common portrayal of the high-profile athlete may suggest sport does little to develop positive character, some evidence suggests that moral conduct can be improved by using deliberate interventions in PE and sport settings (Romance, Weiss, & Bockoven, 1986; Hellison, & McBride, 1986). Whether positive or negative, competition has immense power to shape participants' consciousness, values and beliefs, and it passes on selected aspects of the dominant culture (Sage, 1998). The purpose of this review is

to explore the degree to which sportsmanship, morality and character development are being addressed in interscholastic sport and PE. A secondary purpose is to present the impact that formal education programs have had in this area. And, finally, the article lays out recommendations for current coaches and PE practitioners to improve the moral and social development of their athletes and participants.

The Assumption. School athletic programs are often justified by assertions that competitive team sport builds character and sportsmanship in participants and spectators. Furthermore, it is believed that sport reinforces such school and community ideals as the virtues of competition, patriotism, and the desirability of healthy living (Bryan & Horton, 1976). Rasberry and colleagues (2011) suggest competitive physical activity participation may be positively related to academic performance. Similarly, the 2014–2015 National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) reported that many interscholastic athletes in the United States (overall) have higher grade-point averages, lower dropout rates, better daily attendance, and fewer discipline problems than nonathletes (NFHS, 2015). Moreover, early health psychiatry research argued that competitive games provide a medium through which aggressive tendencies are discharged (Menninger, 1948). Since the early work in mental health sciences, sport has been assumed to provide a vehicle for learning to cooperate with teammates, negotiate and create solutions to moral conflicts, develop self-control, display courage, and learn virtues such as teamwork, fairness and a good work ethic (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995; Weiss & Bredemeier, 1990).

However, little modern empirical research exists supporting that mere participation in and of itself leads to moral character development. In fact, the opposite appears true — sport participation may be more likely to negatively affect moral character (Bredemeier & Shields, 1984; Priest, Krause, & Beach, 1999; Stoll & Beller, 2000). Unfortunately, a "win-at-all-costs" philosophy has often led to unethical and aggressive behaviors, having a negative and destructive effect on the development and well-being of young athletes and of society at large (Case, 2011).

Spectators: Part of the Problem. Gelfand and Hartmann (1982) found that participation in competitive games raised both boys' and girls' level of aggression. It was also found that spectators also become more aggressive after observing a competitive event. In agreement, Goldstein and Iso-Ahola (2006) found that over 50% of youth soccer parents became angry while watching their children's games. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, violence and fan aggression were found to be directly associated with the type of athletic event; high body-contact sports (e.g., football) tend to inspire the greatest aggression, while individualized, non-contact sports (e.g., track) inspire the least (Bryan & Horton, 1976).

Media: Part of the Problem. General practices of societal norms and values shape the sporting environment, as does the media through television, movies and print (Stoll & Beller, 2000). Demanding attitudes of parents and fans, plus a celebrity sport culture obsessed with oversize personalities and 24-hour-a-day media coverage amplify the combative demeanor in competition (Gehring, 2005). Some suggest the potential role of media should be to moderate sport aggression (Lefebvre, Leith, & Bredemeier, 1980). Televised sports news programming, such as *Sportscenter*, may affect the behaviors of viewers as they coach and compete in youth, high school, collegiate and professional sports. In Aicinema's (1999) study of *Sportscenter* content, data analysis indicated that sport was rife with poor sportsmanship, violence, and im-

moral behavior. Good sportsmanship and acts considered morally uplifting were rarely mentioned during *Sportcenter* programing. Of the 355 comments made during the observed period, 352 were negative (Aicinena, 1999).

It is important that physical educators and youth coaches do not operate under the common fallacy of regarding their participants as high-profile, professional athletes. Youth sports cannot be compared to professional sports. For example, in the *Sportcenter* study, examples of bad sportsmanship were much more frequent at the professional level than they were at the collegiate level. These results may be explained by the fact that professional players and coaches make their living through sport participation (Aicinena, 1999). Professional sport is a business in which production and success are necessary for continued employment. Perhaps in such an environment, it is unreasonable to expect that participants are fair and generous as they participate. Winning and losing with a spirit of graciousness would seem irrelevant, though it may be a nice facade. Many parents desperately want their children to win because their own ego is overly identified with their child's performance, and because they envision future college scholarships and professional prosperity. Many parents also fail to acknowledge that youth sport is not adult recreation, but children's play (Iso-Ahola & Hatfield, 1986).

In the light of such a negative portrayal of moral conduct in the area of play and sport, one may ask the question: Is it possible to have youth athletic events and competitive PE environments with

positive moral outcomes in the midst of frequent fan aggression and increased publicity of undesirable incidents involving athletes?

The Response from Schools: Formal Education Programs

Some schools have responded to bad behavior of spectators and participants by restricting access to sports events. Other school districts mandate sportsmanship classes for parents prior to their children's participation in athletics to develop or improve the participants' social responsibility during play (Gehring, 2005; Hellison, 1995). A classic preventative program is "A Sports Club" — the physical activity element within Project Effort (Hellison et al., 1996). The content of the club was derived from Hellison's personal and social responsibility model (Hellison, 1995). Social responsibility involves being sensitive to the rights, feelings and needs of others, and personal responsibility relates to self-nurturing and growth (Martinek, Schilling, & Johnson, 2001). The program centers on the notion of empowering at-risk youth to take more control over their lives and to engage in self-development regardless of external forces that significantly limit their vision and options for the future (Hellison et al., 1996).

Although this approach has seen some success, many schools and school districts have implemented other formal education programs (FEPs) as a potential solution for the poor display of character in and at sporting events. Research has shown that when par-



ticipants in FEPs are aware that their behavior is being monitored and that they might be held accountable for that behavior, behavior improved by 65% (Raakman, 2006). Many studies have shown that FEP intervention, paired with a physical education program specially designed to foster moral development, indicate that these programs can affect changes in levels of moral growth (Hellison, & McBride, 1986; Romance, Weiss, & Bockoven, 1986). The *ETHICS* study (Lyons & Turner, 2015) supports this premise, stating that if we teach students to think critically and reason morally to the same extent that we teach and perfect their motor skills, moral development can and will increase, with accompanying moral behavior changes. Since 1990, 250 student athletes have enrolled in one or more Moral Reasoning in Sport courses. During this period, behaviors of student athletes have become more prosocial. Specifically, most student-athletes stated that they saw the importance of and developed social relationships outside the sport realm. Unanimously, the student-athletes stated they now think before they act, especially when in group situations (Lyons & Turner, 2015). The process of formal character education is a direct and purposeful intent to affect character development (Stoll & Beller, 1993).

The typical program involves taking advantage of teachable moments, discussing scenarios (Spencer, 1996), hanging posters, lettering marquees, and making verbal announcements using “word of the day/week/or month” (Fisher, 1998) or viewing motivational

sportsmanship videos. Some programs are specifically modeled to reward good behavior on the playing field by having officials award points for good sportsmanship (Butler, 2000). This model of granting students more social responsibility closely reflects a current practice in PE known as the sport education (SE) model (see Siedentop, 1994). Based on Siedentop’s SE model, the Sport for Peace curriculum used such techniques as team membership and leadership roles to enhance social responsibility. It also aimed to teach conflict resolution skills, to create a sense of community, and to increase participation in the various programs. Results showed an increase in students’ activity involvement, regardless of skill level, and positive social interactions that centered on themes of trust, responsibility and respect (Ennis et al., 1999).

A similar program, Fair Play for Kids (Silverman, 1998), was implemented in the PE setting. It was based on five principles: (1) respect the rules, (2) respect the officials and their decisions, (3) respect your opponent, (4) give everyone an equal chance to participate, and (5) maintain your self-control at all times. Results of the intervention showed that treatment groups scored significantly higher on four measures of moral development than the control group (Silverman, 1998). Studies using formal moral-education strategies have demonstrated success in fostering and improving student athletes’ moral reasoning (Beller & Stoll, 1992; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995).



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Mentorship and Role Modeling

Results from studies in pedagogy suggest positive mentoring experiences help to facilitate the application of responsibility values in the classroom or sport settings (Martinek et al., 2001). It can be argued that unsportsmanlike behaviors of young athletes are learned and reinforced from the leadership of coaches. Coaches often spend more time with young athletes than parents or teachers do. Unfortunately, some coaches of the youngest divisions of athletic participants had some of the worst behavior (Raakman, 2006). Athletes look toward coaches for appropriate responses to difficult situations in their sport. More favorably, researchers found improved moral reasoning and sportsmanship among a group of male basketball players who were positively reinforced for all sportsmanlike behaviors and negatively sanctioned for unsportsmanlike behavior by their coaches (Wandzilak, Carroll, & Anson, 1988). This aims to suggest PE teachers and coaches can have a positive impact on players' or participants' behaviors. Participating in sports with unprofessional coaching leadership could have devastating lifelong impacts on a child's moral development (Treasure, 2002). But, if coaches are leaders of moral character, the outcome of this endeavor is generally positive (Lumpkin & Stokowski, 2011). The Arizona Sports Summit Accord (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 1999) emphasizes that preservice coaches must attain specific skills, including a basic knowledge regarding the character-building aspects of sport, and teaching methods for enforcing the core values of sportsmanship and good character. Coaches must reframe the objective of "good" youth sports programs. Make the goal student improvement, not winning. Athletic participation and achievement should not determine a child's social status (Rasmussen, 2000). These objectives are framed by both coaches and PE teachers. Their responsibility is to provide positive mentoring relationships and role models for the positive values of physical activities. Teaching moral reasoning is not easy, but in the hands of skilled, well-educated moral development specialists, FEPs can be highly effective (Stoll & Beller, 2000).

Recommendations for Physical Educators and Youth Coaches

Evidence indicates that unless character development is directly addressed, the moral maturation process will not likely occur. Therefore, the coach or physical educator has the responsibility and opportunity to create situations that will enhance the character development of children in their care (Solomon, 1997). A long-term commitment to working with youth is needed (Martinek et al., 2001). Six possible solutions for controlling young athletes' aggression and encouraging values of good sportsmanship in sport or PE are suggested (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2006):

- (1) coaches, teachers and parents should serve as positive role models of moral reasoning and sportsmanship and provide playful and healthy environments for young athletes;
- (2) the rules and structure of sports should be modified to satisfy each young athlete's developmental needs and growth;
- (3) media and referees should encourage, facilitate and highlight sportsmanlike behaviors and negatively sanction inappropriate behaviors;
- (4) young athletes and PE participants must be encouraged to join in the classes of academe with the same enthusiasm as in competitive sport;

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(5) coaches must not be evaluated, promoted or fired solely on the basis of their win-loss record; and

(6) physical educators and coaches need to help each participant develop more advanced levels of moral reasoning as well as sport-related strategies and skills in the educational system.

Furthermore, future research focusing on the methodological shortcomings (Hellison & Walsh, 2002) is needed to better understand the shortcomings and the positive effects of formal character-building programs.

Conclusions

Physical education and sport programs have the potential to enhance quality of life (Pooley, 1984). Participation in a competitive-sport setting or the environment of PE can help young people appreciate health, exercise and fitness; learn about themselves and how to handle adversity; and experience teamwork and sportsmanship (Rasmussen, 2000). Creating positive student-athlete character education environments is challenging, yet sport educational environments that are consciously shaped and consistently supportive can succeed (Naylor & Yeager, 2013). A strong belief exists among those who value competition and play, that PE and sport programs have the power to promote the development of sportsmanlike behaviors and ethical decision-making skills (Stoll & Beller, 1993). A curriculum designed for moral character development can provide a social environment for students to acquire personal and social values, as well as behaviors contributing to good character and good citizenship (Arnold, 1984; Sage, 1998; Siedentop, 1994).

Youth coaches and physical educators should implement techniques based on prosocial behavior theory. These include personalization, rewards, punishments and promoting a positive attitude (Wells, Ellis, Paisley, & Arthur-Banning, 2005). These techniques can improve sportsmanship by reducing critical incidents and increasing fun and intent to continue participation in the future. Well-organized sport character education can provide powerful contexts for teaching and learning good moral habits. For character education programs to succeed, athletes need both thinking and reasoning programs, positive role models, a supportive environment, and the strong moral/philosophical commitment of community members, parents, coaches, teachers, students, boosters and the media. Athletes and PE participants who experience competi-

tive situations under quality leadership in healthy environments are more capable of coping with aggression-inducing situations than their peers.

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