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**Review of Junior Sport Framework
Draft Briefing Paper: Role of Adults
in Junior Sport**

Authors
**Clifford J Mallett
Steven B Rynne**

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UniQuest Pty Limited



UniQuest Pty Limited
Consulting & Research
(A.B.N. 19 010 529 898)

Level 7, GP South Building
Staff House Road
University of Queensland
Queensland 4072

Postal Address:
PO Box 6069
St Lucia
Queensland 4067

Telephone: (61-7) 3365 4037
Facsimile: (61-7) 3365 7115

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Junior Sports Framework Review – Draft Briefing Paper Topic: Role of Adults in Junior Sport

Author's Declaration

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Role of Adults in Junior Sport

Clifford J Mallett & Steven B Rynne

1. BACKGROUND

Participation in youth sports can improve physical skills, fitness, build character, develop social skills, bring families closer together, and provide enjoyable experiences for young people. However, the quality of the sporting experience for participants is contingent upon the quality of adult leadership in sport. Ideally, adults should be responsible for assisting children and youth developing general and specific sport and psychosocial skills and enjoying their sporting experiences.

There is often a high degree of interaction between adults (parents, coaches and officials) in youth sport. For example, coaches and officials have a responsibility to guide parents in appropriate behaviours to foster positive sporting outcomes for junior sport participants. Adding to the complexity is that parents often assume multiple roles as coaches and officials in the sports their children play.

“I have come to a frightening realization. I am the decisive element on the track or on the field. It is my personal approach that creates the climate for learning and personal performance. It is my daily mood that makes the weather bright or dreary. As a coach, I possess tremendous power to make my athletes' lives miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture, or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate. ... or humour, hurt ... or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether the experience of sport is positive or negative and whether my athletes gain or lose self-esteem.” An adaptation from Hiam Ginott

Coaches, parents, and officials are powerful role models for children and youth and their behaviours are often learned implicitly from modeling the behaviours of adults. Therefore, adults should be mindful of how they behave and the implicit “messages” they send to young children and youth in sporting contexts. In terms of creating an overall environment that is conducive to development and growth, it is important to have consistency with respect to the messages conveyed and the adult behaviours exhibited. While all adults have something to

contribute to youth sport, there are different designated roles that exist. In this paper we consider each of these roles separately.

2. THE COACH

2.1 What we know

Coaches are the architects of the sporting environment and have the responsibility to create settings that promote holistic learning and development (Mallett, 2005). Continued sport participation is often contingent upon how coaches interact with athletes and players. In other words, coaches can foster sport participants' future engagement or they can contribute to attrition from sport.

Coaches are responsible for teaching the foundational aspects of sport, including fundamental skills, strategies, and sportpersonship; they also have a significant impact on the psychosocial development of young athletes. Research suggests that young people involved in sport can learn life skills that have the potential to benefit their physical, social, affective, and cognitive development (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). How life skills are developed through sport depends on the coach and how he/she creates environments that foster positive youth development.

Coaches can play multiple roles within the junior sporting context; for example, the coach can be a mentor, chauffeur, adviser, psychologist, motivator, counselor, organizer, and planner. Thus the role of the coach is a great responsibility and coaches should be mindful of the various ways in which they can interact and subsequently influence children and youth.

In junior sport it is likely that most coaches are volunteers. Moreover, they are generally untrained in comparison with other vocations. Despite the influential nature of the role, for the most part, youth sport coaches develop their own approach to coaching. Nevertheless, their approach to coaching is often consistent with how they themselves were coached; for example, some coaches may place a greater value on winning and skill development, while other coaches may focus more on having fun and developing life skills through sport. Typically, coaches use controlling behaviours, such as rewards, punishment, and coercion, to shape athletes' behaviours. Although coaches' intentions are typically honourable, the overuse of controlling behaviours (e.g., threats of punishment) have been found to lead to negative athlete outcomes, such as burnout, less enjoyment, fear of failure, and attrition from sport (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

Research has shown that coaching behaviours that support psychological need satisfaction – autonomy, competence, and belonging – produce positive athlete outcomes, such as, increased effort and persistence, greater flexibility in thinking and creativity, enhanced perceptions of competence and a sense of belonging, superior performance and the use of more coping strategies in stressful situations (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). These autonomy-supportive coaching behaviours promote internal motivation.

When athletes are highly motivated by internal reasons (e.g., thrill of the skill and developing their skills; the excitement associated with playing; thirst for knowledge), the use of extrinsic rewards (e.g., monetary rewards for scoring) does not increase internal motivation unless it provides information that the athlete is competent. In many instances the rewards can become controlling and adversely influence why they play the sport and lead to increased external motivation and reduced internal motivation. What we know is that the quality of the motivation (internal versus external) is more important than the quantity of motivation. Athletes will work harder in training, competition, and outside formal coaching, if they are more internally motivated. Therefore, the research supports the promotion of internal motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

2.2 What works

Providing an environment that encourages teamwork, skill development, and fun has been found to promote internal motivation and future participation. The holistic development of junior sport participants requires the coach to take responsibility for using sport as a vehicle to develop all aspects of development, including (a) physical, technical and tactical skills; and (b) psycho-social skills. Effective coaches who possess extensive interpersonal knowledge (understands others), intrapersonal knowledge (that promotes self-reflection and learning as a coach), sport specific knowledge can positively influence athlete outcomes (e.g., competence, connectedness, confidence, and character). Coaches, who explicitly seek to make players feel they belong, support their learning and individual needs to become more competent and confident in sport, promote participants' internal motivation and positive engagement in sport.

More specifically, coaches can positively influence the learning environment in several ways, including:

- the creation of an adaptive motivational climate that focuses on supporting athlete learning and development; i.e., the coaching environment is athlete-centred. An adaptive motivational climate is characterised by:

- considering the athlete's perspective and acknowledging their thoughts and feelings, which includes asking meaningful questions that foster thinking and input and actively listening
- engaging athletes in the learning process by providing opportunities for athletes to contribute to decision making (within some boundaries) and to minimise the use of pressures and demands
- providing opportunities for initiative and independent problem-solving
- providing of rationales for tasks
- providing informational rather than controlling feedback to individuals and groups/teams; this informational feedback should be specific, constructive, informative, clear and concise, and delivered as soon as possible;
- understanding and catering for individual needs;
- a pedagogical approach that includes a range of interpersonal styles from facilitation and guided discovery to more directive approaches; and
- focusing on self-improvement (mastery approach).

2.3 What doesn't work

Coaches' controlling interpersonal style leads to negative athlete outcomes, including increased a motivation and attrition from sport. This controlling pedagogical approach to coaching is characterised by the following:

- the overuse of rewards, punishment, controlling feedback, and other forms of coercion to shape athletes' behaviour;
- pressures to think feel and behave in particular ways that ignores the athletes' needs and feelings.

2.4 What we don't know

Psychosocial training programs for coaches may be an effective intervention strategy for enhancing youth psychosocial development. However, not much is known about the components of a psychosocial training program for coaches that could improve youth sport.

The evidence supports a shift in how coaches behave from a controlling interpersonal style to be more autonomy-supportive and athlete-centred. Nevertheless, we are unclear of the barriers to this transformation in coaching practice.

3. THE PARENT

3.1 What We Know

Of the adults that shape youth experiences in sport, parents play a particularly crucial role in influencing children's sport experiences and resulting developmental trajectories and are commonly regarded as the key influence during children's early sport participation. It makes sense that parents have an incredible influence on children's development simply because of the great amount of time they share. However, research has also demonstrated that infants are genetically programmed to connect and attach to a few key primary caregivers called 'attachment figures' (usually parents). Each interaction with these caregivers is especially influential in shaping brain connections. It would appear then that the developing brain is primed to be robustly influenced by interactions with parents through the attachment system and these communications strongly affect how children come to automatically see themselves and the world.

With respect to sport involvement, parental expectations, encouragement, support, involvement, performance communications, and perceptions regarding children's sport ability have been associated with children's own perceptions of competence, enjoyment, stress, motivation, and participation levels. Appropriate parental encouragement, support, and praise relate to higher levels of enjoyment and participation. However, unrealistically high parent expectations, pressure, and criticism have been correlated with increased stress, less intrinsic motivation, lower enjoyment, reduced belief in competence, increased dropout, and low self-esteem.

There are also two factors common to sport that encourage children's memory of sport related experiences: high emotionality and exercise. When an experience arouses emotion, such as many in and around sport, the brain recognizes it as important, and becomes more "plastic" (pliable and receptive to learning). Regarding exercise, physical activity seemingly facilitates memory through both short and long term neurobiological processes (Ferris, Williams, & Shen, 2007). For example, aerobic running in humans increases levels of brain derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which has been associated with improvements in various tests of cognitive functioning (Ferris et al., 2007).

Another important factor to consider is that aside from infancy, pre-adolescence is the time when the brain is most open to change via experience. At an average age of 11 in girls and 12 in boys the number of neural connections in the brain is at its greatest of any time during the

lifespan. At this time, the brain also undergoes a new period of incredible plasticity. This is especially so in the pre-frontal cortex which is important for many functions including problem solving and decision making, responding to emotions, long term planning, and empathy.

So in sum, as children begin competitive sport they approach a period when parent-child sport interactions may become even more important combining the power of attachment figure communications in an emotional context after exercise at a time when the child's brain is incredibly open for restructuring. This creates a perfect storm of potential for affecting the internal stories and habitual responses that will come to influence and organize children's choices throughout life.

3.2 What works

Research suggests it is important for parents to be moderately involved in children's sport activities. This communicates interest and best places parents to provide a high quality of support. Parents can do this by attending children's sport activities, providing functional and emotional support, and volunteering as coaches and helpers at club level.

Within youth sport, a recent study examining parenting styles found that parents were better able to understand and take into account their child's internal mental experiences if they successfully attempted to: (i) promote a child's independence by providing choices and supporting decision-making within clear boundaries; (ii) exert minimal pressure on their children to act in a certain way; (iii) strike an appropriate balance between structure and independence; and (iv) help children accept personal responsibility for their decisions and learn from their own mistakes (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009).

Also, parents who communicate belief in their children's ability to successfully meet challenges, and those who tend to focus on positive aspects of task completion, promote competence. In sport, for example, Babkes and Weiss (1999) demonstrated that children whose parents had more positive beliefs about their soccer competency had higher self-perceptions of competence. Additionally, by encouraging children's exposure to sport difficulties and adversity parents communicate their belief in children's competence implicitly, which, in turn, promotes resilience.

Finally, parents can nurture feelings of belonging by successfully communicating their unconditional acceptance of children throughout competitive experiences regardless of sport performance. Within sport, it has been argued that when children are competing for parental

approval sport becomes a test of self-worth that is dependent on high performance. This results in the prospect of shame in the case of defeat in western societies.

3.3 What doesn't work

As parents become highly involved, they are more likely to provide low quality support. When parents become more ego-involved in their child's activities, they become more vulnerable to controlling parenting. Highly controlling parents were less able to read their child's mood and engage in open two-way communication.

Similarly, in situations where parental affection, attention and appreciation are conditional on their child's 'success' in sport, the child subsequently fears failure more intensely. In turn, these conditions tend to result in the development of avoidance focused coping mechanisms typical of maladaptive perfectionism, effort cessation, sport anger, task disengagement, and physical withdrawal.

3.4 What we don't know

There have been a number of interventions aimed at improving parent-child sport communications within Australia. In Australia, most national sport organisations have adopted parent education approaches that combine social marketing and behavioural guidance information. For example, the New South Wales Government introduced a trial program embracing social marketing intended to curb the poor behaviour of adults associated with youth sports *Be a Sport, Just Support*. Unfortunately, it appears that none of these interventions have been evaluated empirically, so it is difficult to determine the efficacy of such approaches.

Also unknown (and somewhat acknowledged) are the limitations of approaches that do not include parent skill development in applying suggested behavioural guidelines. The suggestion is that despite subsequent understanding of preferred sport behaviours, some parents may still be unable to apply these behaviours in performance contexts without additional support.

Finally, aside from strong anecdotal reports, we do not have a clear understanding of the complex relations between coaches and parents in sport and even the issues associated with parents coaching their own children.

4. THE OFFICIAL

4.1 What we know

The pedagogical role of the official is less obvious in junior sport but is no less important. Officiating is a highly complex task that involves much more than the direct application of the written laws and technical regulations of the sport. Accordingly, officials are an important part of junior sport and they can be highly influential regarding the sporting experience created. Unfortunately, the relationship between officials and the rest of the sport participants have often been viewed as adversarial. It is also unfortunate that the societal norm of generally civil interactions between individuals is often missing from coach, player and spectator interactions with officials. Despite this, officials make contributions to sport in relation to game safety (e.g., checking safety equipment), fair play (e.g., ensuring rules are followed) and athlete development (e.g., enhancing players' understanding of the rules).

Ensuring the physical and emotional safety of participants is a key responsibility of officials. Officials fulfill this role by inspecting protective equipment, game equipment and facilities, as well as regulating game conduct, responding to injury, and controlling player-player, coach-player and crowd-player reactions. In this regard, competent officials can provide a protective function with respect to physical injury and emotional upset which, in turn, are critical to player satisfaction, enjoyment and commitment. Ensuring safety is generally considered to be the most important function of officials due to the real possibility of legal action through officials' negligence.

Another key function of officialdom is in relation to fair play. Referees, umpires and other sports officials are responsible for ensuring that the 'rules' of the sport are fairly applied and adhered to by participants. These rules relate to both the published rules of the sport (constituent rules – the written, or public rules specific to each sport) as well as the accepted standards of fair play reflective of the value systems present in the sporting culture (normative rules – the unwritten, or private, rules).

Finally, officials influence athlete development in a number of ways. Through their skilled conduct, officials can educate junior sport participants about acceptable behaviour, social and cultural norms, sportsmanship and fair play. As well as adjudicating on rule infringements, officials may provide cautionary advice prior to infractions, clearly explain their decisions and provide positive comment on actions that are within the rules. How officials interact with athletes, coaches and spectators during competitions provides all stakeholders with important

signals and cues about the acceptable forms of interaction within specific sport cultures. For junior sport participants, the ability to read and assimilate environmental cues, referred to as social thinking skills, is critical for talent development and sport participation. In sum, sport officials' verbal and non-verbal interactions with athletes, coaches, and spectators during competitions impact the development of the young athletes' social language and behaviour.

4.2 What works

It goes without saying that even in the most junior of sporting contexts, it is important that officials have an elementary understanding of the rules and their application. Beyond this it has been shown that to enhance game safety and fair application of relevant rules (constituent and normative) officials must be mentally and physically fit and good communicators. Mental fitness relates to the ability to make effective decisions about rule infractions as well as the capacity to display professionalism, integrity and ethical conduct. Officials must also be physically able with regard to the visual, auditory and movement demands of the relevant sport (noting that this varies considerably within and between sports). Finally, skilled communication is integral to the effective functioning of officials and this plays out in a number of different ways. The following suggestions demonstrate ways in which effective communication may enhance the role of the official:

- Officials can take opportunities during competitions to explain rules, help players understand game situations and improve their skills, and caution players before incurring an infraction.
- Acknowledging players when they demonstrate appropriate or positive behaviours during competition is advocated as the best way to influence player behaviour.
- Officials are encouraged to provide positive feedback to sport participants.
- Take proactive steps in communication such as interacting with coaches prior to competitions about general areas of concern and planning for how to deal with player, coach and/or spectator conflict.
- Interact with other officials in a collegial manner and operating as part of a team of officials
- Other considerations that have been shown to work in officiating environments include:
- Presenting a professional demeanour including appropriate standard of dress, use of language suitable to the context, and providing rulings and explanations with a degree of confidence;
- Undergoing further development including formal (e.g., accreditation) and informal opportunities (e.g., observing other officials);

- The ability of officials to review/reflect on their own performance and having others inform that review (e.g., critical friend, players and coaches) is central to developing their craft.

4.3 What doesn't work

It is established that officials are critical to the conduct of sport and the experience of participants. This influence can soon dwindle or become negative if officials are less considered in their approach. Below are some examples of behaviours that do not work:

- While it is appropriate to maintain some 'professional distance' from players, coaches and spectators, officials who are completely 'detached' are likely to exacerbate misunderstandings and heighten tensions;
- Confidence should not be confused with aggression. Fighting fire-with-fire (i.e., shouting back or becoming aggressive in dealings) does not work for officials who are being heavily scrutinised and attacked;
- While the majority of officials' work involves looking for rule violations, those who solely focus on the negative will be less effective;
- While it is not always appropriate or practical to give full explanations of rulings during play, refusing to explain decisions at all is problematic;
- While it is appropriate to acknowledge errors and regularly review performance of yourself and others, publically undermining the performance of other officials (particularly during competitions) is ethically and morally questionable;
- A legitimate strategy for dealing with abuse during competitions is to ignore it. However, ignoring serious abuse that contravenes the rules does not work and serves to reinforce that it is acceptable practice;
- Thinking that officiating is only something that is done for the duration of play is incorrect. As well as being responsible during competition periods, officials have important roles in ensuring safety and enhancing relationships through their actions prior to (e.g., confirming the safety of the playing area) and after events (e.g., following up injury reports).

4.4 What we don't know

Despite the critical involvement of officials in sport, there is a relative paucity of research regarding the preparation, conduct and needs of officials. It is not only that many questions about officiating remain unanswered; it is that many questions remain unidentified. There are a number of broad categories in which further investigation is warranted:

- Differentiation of officiating. There is a need to differentiate between the requirements of officiating in different contexts.
 - Between levels of sport (e.g., Junior and adult participation, junior and adolescent development, senior elite)?
 - Between sports (e.g., team versus individual, individual performance versus individual aesthetic)?
 - Between sports that operate with one main official and those that have multiple officials operating in the same space (e.g., Tennis versus Australian Rules Football)?
- Developmental experiences and preferences of officials. Relatively little is known about the reasons officials serve in their roles, the challenges they face (practically and personally), and the ways that they learn to perform their craft.
 - What are the officiating entry points for those involved in junior competitions?
 - How do officials currently learn to perform their roles?
 - How do officials prefer to learn their craft?
 - What interventions (e.g., formal training) may improve officiating?
- Performance of officials. While the greatest amount of officiating research currently relates to this area, there is still much that is unknown about officiating, particularly in the junior sport context. The performance of officials may be considered from a range of performance perspectives including:
 - Physiological – e.g., What is the impact of fatigue on decision making?
 - Psychological – e.g., What is the impact of the crowd on decision making; What are the cognitive processes in decision making?
 - Sociological – e.g., What are the complexities associated with officiating the competitions of your own children?
 - Historical – e.g., What have contributions of outstanding officials made in different sports?

5. ADVICE TO THE ASC

5.1 Coaches

- Coaches should focus on holistic development of junior sport participants: (a) general and specific physical, technical and tactical skills; and (b) psycho-social skills.
- Coaches should develop their knowledge and skills in three broad areas: (a) extensive interpersonal knowledge (understanding others); (b) intrapersonal knowledge (that promotes self-reflection and learning as a coach), and (c) sport specific knowledge.
- Coaches should focus on how they coach as much as what they coach and consider how they explicitly contribute to athletes' outcomes such as competence, connectedness, confidence, and character.

5.2 Parents

- Parents should be encouraged to have positive involvement in children's youth sport experiences whether it be as a spectator, an emotional support, a functional support, or a volunteer coaching role.
- All parents should be educated regarding the importance of their sport related communications with their children.
- Parents need to be suitably skilled to cope with the challenges that are naturally evoked in youth sport contexts.
- As parents become more involved in children's sport they need to be provided appropriate support surrounding the challenges of increased involvement that are especially relevant for volunteer coaches.

5.3 Officials

- Officials should be constantly reminded of their important roles as rule enforcers (game safety and fairness) and rule educators (athlete development and sportsmanship).
- Given that it is parents and coaches who often fulfill the role of official in junior sport there is value in providing training and resources that crosses these boundaries (i.e., emphasises the overall creation of an environment that promotes safety, enjoyment and skill development).
- While individual sports should be responsible for ensuring officials have sport-specific rule knowledge, the ASC should emphasise the more general skills of enhancing safety

(physical and emotional), productive communication and continual development (of athletes by officials and of officials themselves).

DRAFT

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