

Bullying on Sports Playground: Coaches' Perception versus Athletes' Experience

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents who participate in sports tend to demonstrate healthier functioning on various physical and mental indicators. But there's nothing more heartbreaking when young athletes become the target of bullies. They may play tentatively and worry constantly about bullying. Ultimately, adolescents can lose all enjoyment for sports and dropout altogether. To know more about sports bullying, a survey research was carried out. This survey comprised 20 coaches of adolescent athletes (with a minimum 5 years of adolescents' coaching experience) and 50 adolescent athletes (within the age range of 12-18 years) of these very coaches. The main question asked from both athletes and their respective coaches during this survey, was "what kind of bullying takes place amongst athletes?" The results of this survey revealed that there exists a huge difference between the 'perception of bullying amongst coaches' and 'the actual experience of bullying by young athletes'. Bullying on playgrounds is less recognized by coaches. But the survey amongst adolescent athletes observed this to be a grave phenomenon acquiring various forms. The need of hour is to make coaches perceive bullying, as is experienced by the athletes. So that an imperative role can be played by coaches in curbing sports bullying, to make the young athletes take all the benefits of participation in sports.

KEYWORDS

Sports, Bullying, Athletes, Coaches

Sports are defined as all forms of competitive physical activity, which through casual or organised participation, aim to use, maintain or improve physical ability and skills, while providing entertainment to participants (Council of Europe, 2014). The Australian Sports Foundation (2014) has defined sports as 'a human activity capable of achieving a result requiring physical exertion and/or physical skill, which, by its nature and organization, is competitive and is generally accepted as

being a sport.' According to the physical activity guidelines provided by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (U.S. DHHS, 2008), sports have various physical and mental benefits for adolescents such as less body fat, higher levels of cardio-respiratory fitness, stronger bones and muscles, higher levels of self-esteem and social connectedness, lower levels of depression, lower levels of problem behaviours (aggression problems, social problems, and delinquency

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problems) and lower levels of suicidal ideation, thoughts and attempts.

Bullying in Sports

Bullying is an aggressive, intentional act or behaviour which is usually carried out by an individual or a group of individuals, repeatedly over time, against a victim who is not able to easily defend him/herself (Whitney & Smith, 1993). Bullying is a long standing physical or psychological violence, which is perpetrated by an individual or a group, against a person who cannot defend himself or herself. The whole act of bullying is thus characterized by an imbalance of power (Rigby, 2002).

Types of bullying

Bullying falls into the following categories (James, 2010):

physical bullying: in this type of bullying a person is hurt in a tangible way.

Emotional bullying: indirect actions like stealing or damaging one's belongings can hurt person emotionally.

Verbal bullying: includes name-calling or being insulted or humiliated, writing unpleasant notes/letters/graffiti, writing comments on internet sites.

Relational or social bullying refers to the behaviours that disrupt the victims' relationships with their peers, such as social exclusion or spreading gossip.

Sexual bullying may involve sexual acts or demands.

Cyber bullying involves the use of electronic means such as the internet, e-mail and mobile phones etc to hurt the target.

Bullying before, during or after sports may appear as unwarranted yelling and screaming directed at the target; continually

criticizing the target's abilities; blaming the target for mistakes; making unreasonable demands related to performance; repeated insults or put downs of the target; repeated threats to remove or restrict opportunities or privileges; denying or discounting the target's accomplishments; threats of, and actual, physical violence; and e-mails or instant messages containing insults or threats (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005).

Signs and Indicators of sports bullying

Adolescents experiencing sports bullying generally withdraw from some or all sport activities; become anxious; begin self harming or attempt suicide, appear distressed; have bruises, cuts or scratches and give improbable excuses; have possessions which are regularly damaged, lost or money that "goes missing"; be frightened in certain situations i.e. just before changing or when they are about to get on a sport's club bus; be frightened of walking to or from training; appear frightened of a particular individual or group; change their usual routine; start stammering or stops eating; cry themselves to sleep at night or has nightmares; feel ill at the thought of going to the sports ground; begin to do poorly in school work; ask for money or start stealing money (to pay bully); become aggressive, disruptive or unreasonable; be bullying others; be frightened to say what's wrong; and be nervous and jumpy when a cyber message is received (Child Protection in Sport Unit, 2008).

Objective of Study

To study the differences in the perception of bullying amongst coaches and young athletes.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

For this study, 20 coaches of adolescent athletes (with a minimum 5 years of adolescents' coaching experience) and 50 adolescent athletes (within the age range of 12-18 years) of these very coaches were selected. This sample was selected from five cities of Punjab namely Patiala, Rupnagar, Malerkotla, Ludhiana and Jalandhar. None of the athletes had played at national level up to this point of their lives. The sports in which these athletes were engaged are: Hockey, Kabbadi, Wrestling, Running and Football.

Procedure

The study was primarily a survey research; it started with interacting individually with all 20 coaches of adolescent athletes. Before getting enrolled for this study all these coaches had already confessed that bullying does take place amongst athletes. Further, during this interaction they were asked a common question, which was- 'what kind of bullying takes place amongst athletes?' Their responses regarding their perception on bullying on sports playground were recorded verbatim.

During later part of study, 50 adolescent athletes of these very coaches were individually approached. They were also asked the same question i.e. 'what kind of bullying takes place amongst athletes?' Their responses were also recorded verbatim.

The entire aim of asking this question was to know if the differences in the perception of coaches and actual experiences by athletes regarding bullying in sports exist.

Observations from Study

After analyzing the responses of both

coaches and their young athletes, it was observed that there exists a huge difference between the perception of coaches and athletes actual experiences regarding bullying on sports playground. The coaches emerged out as unwilling ignorant of sports bullying amongst adolescent athletes.

Coaches' perception of bullying amongst athletes

- Bullying on playgrounds is less recognized by coaches.
- For most of them it is limited only up to verbal taunts, name-calling and put-downs.
- For most of them it is nothing but the pranks which one player plays on other, and does not bear any harmful consequences for the victim.

Athletes' view/experiences of bullying amongst athletes:

As found during this survey, bullying amongst young athletes can acquire many forms such as:

- Social exclusion from peer groups, ganging up, or group teasing;
- Physical hitting/kicking victims; threats and intimidation;
- Targeting team members who do not perform as well as others;
- Intimidating the most promising players in order to eliminate the competition for the best positions and the limelight;
- Targeting new team members and forcing them to prove they belong to the team;
- Ganging up on team members because a "leader" on the team doesn't like them;
- Targeting someone because they get more attention and praise from the coach or because they appear to be the coach's favorite;
- Harassing team members when they

- make a mistake during the game;
- Making junior athletes do all the chores of senior athletes such as cleaning rooms, washing clothes/utensils, body massages etc.
- Making others do pity jobs such as tying shoe laces;
- Gender based bullying in sports is exceptionally common, e.g. many athlete girls due to their physique are considered as tom-boys and are often bullied by both boys and other girls due to this;
- Consumption of dietary products and supplements of other players;
- Threatening team members about doing well in games and practices because they might steal the limelight; and
- Bribing the player in lieu of doing illegal tasks (e.g. involving someone in drug usage) and threatening them if they do the otherwise.

DISCUSSION

The observations from this study revealed that huge mammoth size differences exist between the bullying on sports playground amongst adolescent athletes as 'perceived by coaches' and as is 'experienced by athletes'. Sports bullying is a grave phenomenon, which is causing sports dropout for many adolescents. Engaging in sports is specifically beneficial at this age of development (U.S. DHHS, 2008), but bullying on playground can make these adolescents do the otherwise. Lack of sports or physical activity in adolescence is a concern because individuals are likely to maintain similar level of physical activity into adulthood.

Further, coaches tend to play a highly significant role for their athletes. Coaches' feedback and reinforcement comprise

informational (i.e., instruction) or *evaluative* (e.g., praise, criticism) responses to participation and performance. Several intervention studies by Smith & Smoll (1996) have demonstrated that the coaches who engage in more frequent praise for desirable behaviours (effort, technique), encouragement following skill errors, and instruction following performance attempts, generally have players with higher perceived ability, enjoyment, and intention to continue playing, and lower anxiety and attrition rates. But a coach unintentionally criticizing his/her athlete for poor performance, without knowing that the actual cause behind athlete's bad sport's performance is bullying by his/her co-athletes, can further make the victim to perform poorer in future as well.

In many instances it is very likely that a coach unintentionally, in complete ignorance, compares the performance of bully and the bullied. The actual reason for 'bullied' not performing well had been his/her bullying by 'bully' (who performed well in that sport). This comparison can aggravate further the likelihood of victim not performing well in future sports as well, thus maintaining this vicious circle. The requirement, along with catching sports bullying, is that of structuring an environment that encourages a self-referenced definition of success (e.g., improvement, enjoyment), rather than any normative standards of peer comparison.

Further, sport is as an arena in which adolescents develop close friendships that allow opportunities for emotional and moral support. *Friendship* refers to specific aspects of a dyadic peer relationship, such as similarity, companionship, loyalty, and emotional support. Youth who reported

higher friendship quality reported greater sport enjoyment and a stronger desire to stay involved in their participation (Smith, 1999). But various forms of sports bullying can exclude the victim from such relationships. This exclusion can make the victim to perform poorly in sports owing to his/her thwarted needs.

Nevertheless, the athletes also need to expand their social circle. They generally get restricted to their athlete community. Once losing popularity within this group, either due to failure or bullying or both, they become less motivated to continue participation in sports. But having friends beyond this community can make them receive acceptance from other sources as well, hence they can still remain motivated to perform well in sports. Peers' support is possibly important source of social support for adolescent's participation in sports (Heitzler, Martin, Luke & Huhman, 2006).

Hence, adolescent athletes need to have an alternate source of peer-support, so that they can cope well even if they lose this support from their sport community.

Further, there are bystanders too in the sports community. These bystanders look on whilst someone is being bullied. The requirement is that these watchers should offer help to the bullied athlete, yet these rarely have the courage to intervene while the bullying is happening. The need is to create sport's environment where the bystanders can either intervene or report the matter to coaches. Then there exist the 'Don't Care' team members. These may actually be the majority of adolescents in a sport's team. These are members who are fully aware that bullying is happening on the sports ground yet they believe that as it does not affect

them directly they do not need to be concerned or think about it. Although they may know that some team members are having a hard time because of bullying, they will try to ignore it as much as possible. An environment where such member can assume moral responsibility for helping the victim needs to be created by the coaches.

Coaches, along with the athletic training, also need to supervise adolescent athletes against bullying on sports playground. They need to make the athletes believe that something can definitely be done against bullying and the bully. Bullies need to learn to stay calm – as giving reactions to bullies ignite them further. They should learn that they need to project confidence as bullies pick on people who they think are afraid. The bullied need to understand what bullying is and the negative impact it can have on them and those around them you. Becoming a victim of bullying also make them a part of the problem instead of the solution. They need to learn that they are exactly the audience that the bullies want. All such feelings and behaviours can be inculcated by coaches in their athletes. The coaches need to be vigilant enough for knowing when and with whom bullying is happening. For this they need to create sports environment where bullying is minimal, and when it happens the victim can have the audacity to approach the coach and the bystanders can also report the matter to him/her. Coaches need to accept their obligation to ensure a safe and respectful sport environment by not engaging in, allowing, condoning, or ignoring behaviour that constitutes, or could be perceived as, bullying.

The prime requirement is to make coaches perceive bullying on sports

playground as is experienced by the athletes, so that they can play an effective role in curbing it. In order to prevent athletes' dropout, researchers need to discover and

implement strategies specifically for sports, so that the young athletes can get all the benefits of participating in sports. Sport provides an opportunity for thousands of

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