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Tackling A Family-Related Issue as a Youth Development Leader

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Youth Case Study

Becky,¹ an 18-year-old white young woman, is an athlete I formally coached on the varsity dance team at St. James High School. Becky is now successfully attending college, but her future didn't seem so bright during high school. She engaged in alcohol and drug-use, and was frequently reprimanded at school and benched from varsity athletics. At one point it was very uncertain if Becky would graduate from high school with the rest of her peers. Becky was very defiant, frequently having physical and verbal altercations with her mother. Becky would drift among friends' homes because she didn't agree with her mother's rules and subsequently didn't like staying at home. The dance team was always a "safe haven" for Becky. It got her away from the stressors present at home, she worked harder at practices than any other aspect of school, and her pure enjoyment of dance was clearly evident to everybody on the coaching staff. However, Becky's defiant behavior outside of practice and performances resulted in her being benched from multiple games. Eventually, her expulsion from the team was discussed.

As Becky's coach I knew what being on the team meant to her, and I did whatever I could to help her to remain on the team. Becky trusted my guidance and respected me for giving her another chance to prove her dedication, and she began to improve. I helped her to get in contact with the appropriate staff members at school, including counselors, and frequently met with her teachers to discuss what needed to be done to insure Becky's success at school. I also kept in daily contact with Becky and her mother to make sure that all areas of communication were open and everyone was on the same page. Becky worked with a tutor to improve her grades, began family counseling with her mother to help improve communication and

¹ Name changed to protect identify of youth in the study

boundaries, stayed late after dance team practices and no longer associated with the peers who influenced her to use alcohol and drugs.

Becky's success had a lot to do with the environment around her outside of her family. The positive influences of her counselors, tutors, dance peers and coaches all helped Becky to take positive strides and move on from what was holding her back. These environmental influences are supported by Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecology model. The first structure of the model is the microsystem. "A microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting" (Bronfenbrenner, 2004, p. 5). The settings involved can include school, peers, family, and the workplace. Many different aspects of a microsystem positively influenced Kimberly's successes: her relationships with her dance team peers and coaches, speaking with a counselor, and her school tutors.

Becky's success can also be attributed to attending family counseling, which improved the relationship between her and her mother. Adriana de Melo discusses how sessions between parents and children provide benefits for parents. Examples include strengthening and reducing stress in the relationship; increasing confidence in how to respond to children's and teens' challenging behavior; and relief from being heard in your experience as a parent (2012). Counseling helped Becky and her mother learn to communicate in a positive manner, and to open up about the stressors present in their lives. With counseling Becky and her mother were able to successfully live under the same roof again.

A Family Related Issue

Coaches work to maintain a positive environment for the athletes they lead. Factors like parents can influence the environment. Through placing too much pressure on athletes, parents

can negatively affect the outcomes of children's participation in sports, which in turn has an affect on the environment coaches are working to create and maintain. Personally, I have dealt with parental pressure on athletes I coached on a high school varsity dance team coach. The anxiety and stress that this pressure created caused a lot of my dancers to lose their enjoyment, and their exhibited efforts started to decrease. Other athletes' schoolwork was affected because they were focusing all their energy on succeeding on the dance team. Daniel J. O'Rourke and colleagues state, "Parent behavior construed as negative, coercive, or as communicating excessive evaluative concerns, contributes to a more threatening sport performance environment" (O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2011, p. 399). As Youth Development Leaders and Coaches it is important to make sure that the parents of our athletes are not negatively impacting the sport environment the athletes are in and not negatively affecting the athletes themselves.

Application of Systems Theory to Parental Pressure on Athletes

Biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy proposed the idea of the general systems theory in 1940. Bertalanffy stated, "Systems are complexes of elements standing in interaction" (Bertalanffy, 1968, p. 33). A general systems theory takes the focus away from separate components and focuses on connectedness and wholeness of all parts. From this theory psychiatrist Murray Bowen derived the family systems theory. Within this theory "the family is seen as an interconnecting unit" (McCarthy & Edwards, 2011). McCarthy and Edwards explain how family members consistently influence each other, and that their behaviors and functioning are interdependent. General systems theory and family systems theory are applied theories that can help to identify the positive and negative aspects of a particular family unit. Every aspect of a family plays a role in the functioning of each individual family member. Parents who

emphasize athletic development over the child's overall development can effect the overall functioning of that child. Also, the parent-child relationship can be negatively affected. Frequent conversations about the child's performance and training may cause the child to ignore the parent and discredit their advice. This attitude and feeling toward communicating with the parent may pour over into day-to-day communication and affect the parent-child relationship outside of sport (Lauer, Ph.D., 2015, p. 2).

The over-involved parent and the pressures created by parents within children's sport performances can be related to the attachment theory. Family system theorists describe the attachment theory as an overinvolved or enmeshed relationship. This enmeshed relationship is described as "one of the most common maladapted family structures" (Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujii, & Uchida, 2002, p. 331). It is believed that children who are involved in family structures such as these often do not see their parents as "a secure base to explore the environment." These ideas and theories support the thesis that parents who are too involved in their children's athletics and place too much pressure upon them will not only have a negative impact on their sport performance, but on their overall well-being.

For Youth Serving Professionals

Research in the field can provide youth-serving professionals with knowledge of the effects of parental pressures on athletes. For example, "coercive behaviors by authority figures are typically accorded a negative role because they frustrate the need for autonomy and undermine intrinsic motivation" (O'Rourke, et al., 2011, p. 399). Parents who are forceful and place pressure on their athletes can cause their children to be fearful of failing and to lose their autonomy. This pressure to win for their parents can cause the sport to become less enjoyable and more anxiety-provoking.

Coaches and youth-serving professionals can help prevent pressure placed on athletes by encouraging positive support from parents. Being aware of issues that may arise for their athletes due to pressure from parents can help coaches to be proactive and discuss expectations of parental behavior and provide suggestions for positive support.

Parents need to remember that youth athletes are people first and athletes second, and they should be treated that way. Additionally, they should not be ridiculed or berated for any mistakes that they may have made. They should try to keep feedback about performance constructive and positive. The positive coaching alliance discusses how children who are positively encouraged are more optimistic, can handle criticism better, are more coachable and are more likely to listen and respond without objection (2014, p. 1).

Before sport seasons begin and before sporting events are to take place coaches and youth serving professionals can hold meetings to express suggestions for positive parental support. Brochures and newsletters can be distributed that discuss expectations and offer suggestions for communication between parents and athletes at home and at sporting events.

Conclusion

Youth development leaders and coaches have a role in making sure that the parents of their athletes are not negatively impacting the sport environment the athletes are in and not negatively affecting the athletes themselves. Pressure on these athletes can cause negative affects in relation to sport performance and in relation to the family relationships. Youth-serving professionals and coaches should be aware of the effects and be proactive in reducing and preventing them. Positive support of athletes will keep a positive sport environment and support a positive parent-child relationship.

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