

Sports & Self Concept Development

Self-Concept Development

During the early elementary school years, the world of the child broadens dramatically to include not only the family and playmates but a widening circle of schoolmates and adults. In this expanded environment children discover and judge their own abilities and begin to form a stable self-concept and feelings of self-worth. Academic and social experiences provide important information, as do the reactions of peers and adults in the child's life. It is during this critical period of development—the years between six and twelve—that most children enter organized sport programs. This is why sport experiences can play such an important role in children's personal and social development.

Self-concept consists of what we believe about ourselves. It includes our perceptions of personal traits and abilities, particularly those that are important in shaping our identities as distinct people. Self-esteem refers to the way we feel about our own characteristics as good or bad, valuable or worthless, and so on. Self-concept and self-esteem strongly influence how we function in the world. They underlie our view of who we are, what we are capable of, and how we can expect others to react to us.

None of us was born with a self-concept. It is a product of our experiences in living. Two types of information are particularly important with regard to self-concept and self-esteem development.

- How other people respond to us.
- How we compare with others in important skills and characteristics.

From the reactions of significant people in their lives, children draw conclusions concerning how other people feel about or evaluate them. Children often have little more than the reactions of others to go on. It is no wonder that such information has such a strong influence on their sense of who they are and how worthwhile they are. Thus, a child who consistently receives attention, approval, and loving concern from parents is likely to conclude that he or she is a valued person and thereby develops a positive self-concept and high self-esteem. Such messages to the child may be very direct, as when a parent says, "You're a great kid and I love you very much," or they may be transmitted in more subtle ways, such as approving smiles and expressions of attention and interest in the child. On the other hand, children who receive a lot of disapproval, rejection, and hostility from those who matter are likely to infer that others see them as unlovable, unworthy, and inferior. It is not surprising that such children tend to develop negative self-concepts and low self-esteem.

A second important type of information enters into the developing conception of self. At a relatively early age, children begin to compare themselves with other children. This is quite natural, for in any new or novel situation we have little basis for judging ourselves or our performance except in comparison with others. Comparison and competition begin around the age of five or six and increase throughout the elementary school years, with the peak occurring around grades four, five, and six. Through self-comparison and competition with other children, youngsters learn where they stand relative to others like them. It is easy to see how such information would feed into the developing self-concept of the child.

Psychologists who study personality place much emphasis on self-concept because we tend to filter new information and to behave in accordance with our self-concept. We tend to accept evidence that supports our notion of ourselves, be it positive or negative, and reject or explain away evidence that is inconsistent with our self-concept. Thus, a failure may have little impact on a child with a positive view of himself or herself, while the same failure may serve to demonstrate once again to the low-self-esteem youngster how inadequate he or she really is.

Children with poor self-concepts and low self-esteem have little confidence in their abilities. They are insecure in their relationships with others, are highly sensitive to criticism, and are easily hurt. Some try to cover up their feelings of inadequacy with an aggressive or attention-demanding front that alienates others, whereas others withdraw into a protective shell. Either response tends to result in low popularity and this only serves to confirm a poor self-image. The low-self-esteem youngster is thus primed for entry into a failure cycle.

Sports and Self-Concept Development

We can now see why sport experiences can have an important effect on a child's self-concept development. Children typically enter the world of sports at a time in their development when they are seeking information about their abilities. The kinds of motor abilities required in sports are particularly valued by them at this stage. When children enter sports, the stage is thus set for an ability test whose outcome is potentially very important.

There are good reasons to try to succeed and to be a good athlete. Success brings feelings of mastery, competence, self-pride, admiration and status from peers, and approval from important adults, such as parents and coaches. Inferior athletes often experience feelings of shame and inferiority, lowered respect and status among their peers, and the reactions of disappointed parents. At the very first practice or tryout, children begin to see how they compare with their peers in this prized activity. In a very short time children can tell how proficient they are relative to their teammates and opponents.

In addition to comparing themselves with others, children also have many opportunities to observe how others are judging them. The reactions of coaches, parents, teammates, opponents, and spectators to their play are visible on many occasions. Some of these evaluations are very direct, as when others offer praise or criticism. Other reactions, although unintentionally shown, are easily picked up by a child. For example, when Bobby comes to the plate with the bases loaded, his teammates, the coach, and spectators cheer and shout, "Hit a home run!" When Chad comes up under the same circumstances, there is silence or maybe even a few groans. Or "encouragement" may take such forms as "C' mon, Chad, try to hit the ball!" or "Don't strike out!"

As youth sport programs become more highly organized, formal procedures, such as grading players during tryouts, "drafting" players, and even buying them with play money, provide direct indications of ability. One child we know was devastated when his coach paid only \$25,000 in play money for him while his neighborhood buddy went for \$40,000." Even more painful is being cut, a most humiliating message that one doesn't measure up. Research done in Canada by sport scientist Terry Orlick showed that nearly three out of every four non-participants who

didn't go out for hockey teams said that they were afraid of being cut-an indication of how much children dread the message that they're not good enough.

Even children who make the team continue to receive many messages about their performance. This feedback comes from people whose opinions carry a great deal of weight because they are so important to the child. Many parents are very concerned about their children's athletic development and often have a good deal to say about performance. It is the job of another significant adult, the coach, to evaluate performance. Youngsters receive much feedback from this "expert" about their strengths, weaknesses, areas needing improvement and progress. The coach also makes very obvious ability judgments in selecting players for particular positions, in choosing who starts and who substitutes, and in deciding the game conditions in which substitutions occur. Being allowed to play only when one's team is way ahead or hopelessly behind communicates a pretty clear message.

Athletics thus provide many opportunities for children to form judgments about their abilities. They get information by comparing themselves with others as well as by observing the reactions of others to them. All this occurs during the age period when children are beginning to form a stable conception of who they are and how they feel about themselves. If you add to this the fact that motor abilities are of central importance and highly valued at this age and that the people evaluating the child-coaches, peers, and parents are of great importance in the child's life, is it any wonder why the experiences children have in sports can have a rather profound effect on them? This is particularly the case with children who have not established feelings of self-worth in other areas of their lives or with those whose parents value athletic abilities above all others. Finally, it is important to realize that children at this age are not yet capable of distinguishing between judgments of their abilities and judgments of their personal worth. Thus, ability judgments are not necessarily seen as evaluations of only a single physical trait but may well be taken as an indication of total worth.

What Parents Can Do

It is important that adults be sensitive to the impact that sport experiences can have on the child's developing conception of self. The processes we have described-self-comparison and feedback from others-are going to occur in any situation in which children interact, but their effects can be softened and viewed more realistically if understanding adults help children place sport experiences in proper perspective. There are several things adults can do.

First and foremost is to emphasize fun, participation, and skill improvement rather than winning and losing. Most children want to play a sport because they enjoy the activity for its own sake. Adults can turn that enjoyable activity into a pressurized, competitive nightmare. Fun is no longer just playing; it's now defined as winning. Introducing material rewards, such as trophies, into the picture can cause children to lose sight of the fun of merely playing.

Second, adults should emphasize striving to improve skills rather than comparing oneself with others. Physical development and skill development occur at different rates in youngsters, and it is important to make this clear to children. It is particularly important that children whose skill development is lagging not view this as a permanent condition. Helping a youngster derive pleasure from his or her improvement over time and praising the self-improvement efforts of the

child can create many rewarding experiences in sports, even for the athlete who never will be a star. Just as it is important that the unskilled child athlete not develop low self-worth because of his or her own sport abilities, it is important that the highly skilled athlete not acquire an inflated self-image. Again, parents should help children to understand that despite the importance of sports to them, it is only one area of their lives. This will foster a more balanced perspective and a wider range of interests.

Finally, it is important that parents examine the conditions of worth that they hold for their children. If your young athlete must excel to get love and approval from you, if you are sending out subtle (or not so subtle) signals of disapproval when your child fails or embarrasses you, then you need to take a hard look at your own priorities. If, on the other hand, you are able to communicate love and acceptance to your child whether he or she is a star or a bench warmer, then a basis for positive self-concept development exists regardless of your child's eventual success in sports.

Competitive experiences are an important part of life. In themselves, sports are neither good nor bad. The value of competition for the child depends on how the competition is conducted, how the situation is interpreted, and how the outcome of competition is understood. Properly managed, youth sports can be an important training ground for competing successfully in other areas of life and for the development of a positive self-concept.