

A Psychological Perspective to Understanding Athlete Development: What Swim Coaches Need to Know

Another area of development that needs to be factored in relates to psychological, or cognitive, development. As with the other areas, this is an extensive area of study that we are not doing justice to when trying to condense the developmental process to a few concise points. That being said, let's try to identify and understand several elements of psychological development that may be especially important for coaches. These include the development of perceived competence, perspective-taking abilities, and motivation.

Perceived Competence: This concept of perceived competence is extremely important as it profoundly affects participation in sport, motivation, anxiety, and sport enjoyment. Athletes' perceptions of their athletic competence and sources they use to judge self-competence go through predictable developmental changes as is highlighted in the following:

- At an early age (seven-nine years), there is a focus on outcome and effort in judging one's competence. "I won, therefore I am a good swimmer" "I tried hard, I must be a good swimmer" Winning and losing serve as an important source of competence information for young athletes.
- From about ages eight-twelve, there is a gradual decline in the importance of feedback from parents as a source of competence information, an increase in coach technical knowledge as a source of competence information, and a gradual increase in the importance of peer comparison in making competence judgments. "I beat Joe which means I'm a good swimmer".
- The older athlete (twelve-thirteen) begins to recognize that both ability and effort impact performance. Prior to this, the athlete can not distinguish between the two concepts.
- There is a progression from focusing on peer comparison to focusing on self comparison (16-18 years) as sources of competence information.
- A "task or process" goal orientation increases with age with "outcome/win" goal orientation decreases with age.

Recommendation: We need to understand what sources children rely on to provide competence information. Because outcome is so important at a young age, our late maturing athletes are at risk of low competence as they are not experiencing much success. Additionally, note that coach feedback becomes an increasingly important source of competence information for athletes -- recognize your role in enhancing (or tearing down) the athlete's sense of self-competence. For example, as opposed to just providing critical feedback ("you missed your last turn"), also reinforce what she did correctly ("you held your streamline and kick out").

Perspective-taking: the ability to take another's perspective progresses in a predictable sequence and impacts how an individual relates to others and overall behavior in the sport environment.

- At a young age (under eight), individuals are not able to take the perspective of others and, thus, have an egocentric perspective. The young athlete's thoughts, feelings, ideas, and needs are correct (as far as they are concerned)...and everyone else thinks and feels this same way too, right?
- Gradually, children develop the ability to take others' perspective but still view their perspective as the correct view.
- The latter stage of development occurs when the individual can take and appreciate another's perspective.

Recommendation: The young athletes you are coaching will often display behavior that is selfish and doesn't take others into account. Remember that they may not yet have developed the ability to understand others feelings or points of view. As they develop, you can enhance their perspective-taking abilities by pointing out how their action affects others. This can help them progress along the developmental spectrum.

Motivation: simply defined as the direction and intensity of effort. Ideally, we want to see young athletes motivated to approach success in swimming with great intensity. But, what is it that motivates young athletes?

- Younger swimmers (seven-ten) seem more externally motivated while older swimmers are often more internally motivated.
- Around age seven-eight and older, young children begin seeing rewards as bribes ("discounting") which, under some conditions, can negatively affect motivation.
- While "discounting" increases with age, viewing extrinsic rewards (ribbons, medals, gold stars) as adding to intrinsic motivation decreases with age.

Recommendation: Although developmentally it may seem that extrinsic rewards undermine intrinsic motivation, this is not necessarily the case. Two aspects of the rewards are particularly important as they can affect intrinsic motivation -- the controlling and informational aspects.

- If rewards are being perceived as controlling ('swim fast to get a ribbon'), it decreases intrinsic motivation because they are doing it for reasons outside of themselves.
- The informational aspect of rewards affects intrinsic motivation by influencing one's self competence. Rewards that are given contingent on specific aspects of performance (and provide information about these specific aspects of performance) should enhance intrinsic motivation as they are providing positive feedback regarding the athlete's competence.
- The key is not the reward itself but the message behind the reward. The reward must be as providing positive competence information not as controlling behavior to enhance intrinsic motivation.