

“Creating a Pathway to Healing: Research, tools, and strategies to help children move from negative mental health outcomes to resiliency”

Gillian Corke
Coach from the Heart Ltd

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The last 15 years have seen a series of scandals and revelations within international youth sport highlighting systemic failings and misinterpretations of what it means to be an athlete and to be resilient. Some of the most high profile include the USA Gymnastics / Larry Nassar investigation (USA Department of Justice), The Whyte Review of British Gymnastics (Whyte QC), Penn State / Sandusky (Freeh, Sporkin & Sullivan LLP), and the treatment of Kamila Valieva at the 2022 Winter Olympics (Abad).

For coaches, volunteers or parents (referred to as ‘adults’ from here on) looking to make a difference in children’s lives, part of the journey from negative mental health outcomes to genuine positive resilience is making space to acknowledge that these failings *have* happened and that we want to do something different.

The mission of Coach from the Heart Ltd to join with National Governing Bodies, sports clubs, coaches, parents and volunteers to empower healthy cultural change from within. To deliver 21st Century pastoral skills CPD that co-create pathways to healing from harmful psychological and physical treatment, to connection, health and resilience.

You see,

“Human connections are important across the lifespan. They begin early, constantly evolving, and extend through old age. They are impacted internally through human development, externally through changing social landscapes, and are dynamically impacted by interactions with and responses from others.” (Allen)

As adults interacting with people in a sports domain, we are part of those ‘interactions with and responses from others.’ My question is, how can we educate

ourselves and make choices around our behaviour to break the repeating, “Well this is what they did to me...” cycle? How can we move forward as a result of these choices, rather than in spite of circumstances? Dr. Mustafa Sarkar of Nottingham Trent University has identified coach education as a crucial step to this realisation. He states, “...due to the ever-changing nature of psychological resilience, sport psychologists and national sport organisations should explore the need for coaches to receive education and support regarding stressors, protective factors, and enhancing resilience in athletes.” (Sarkar and Hilton p25)

The relationships that children have with adults in their life profoundly impact the way they see themselves, others and the world. Given that only a tiny fraction of the children taking part in sport in the USA will become professional athletes (NCAA), only around 180 of 1.5 million football players in the UK will make it to Premier League standard (Gregory), and over 75% of British Gymnastic’s members are children under the age of 12 (Whyte QC p.1, point 2), we can surely see as adults in a sporting environment, the relationships we build with children are in the first instance, not ones geared towards trophies and medals, but rather self-esteem, social skills and community cohesion. Reuben Jonkind at FC Volendam identifies the ‘Coach Paradigm’ and the ‘Player Paradigm’ (Jonkind) to describe these two approaches.

Let’s be honest, some mornings, you wonder why the heck you are there, right? It’s raining and cold. The cones are missing again and someone didn’t put the keys back. Plus the kids are going nuts. All the session plans are going off course as you break up yet another squabble. Then you feel the angry red mist rising, and it’s game over. Time out. On the bench. This is one of the flash points where the difference can be made (Circle of Security).

It is now known that our inherited genes AND early life experiences contribute to the way we experience the world (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child). Our perceptions from there, including interpretations of our feelings inform the choices we make and consequently the course of action through our lives (Griffith, J., & Powers, R. L.). Where we can make the difference as adults is bringing our awareness to ourselves, our bodies, our thoughts, feelings and snap decisions - then making a conscious choice to add a pause before we act.

Consider, what was it in that ‘game over’ moment that caused you to flip your lid? (Siegel) Ask with curiosity and without judgement, “what am I feeling, thinking and deciding to do?” What did you notice in your body? Where did you notice it? Then explore what would help you right now to feel safe and respond rather than react? There are many self-regulation tools available to us (Nash) and often the ones that work for us are the ones we do naturally. Learning to see and value them, then use them when needed, can be a real game changer for what happens in a training

session. Sadly, the Coach Paradigm can lead to instances where adults “rationalise sarcasm, put-down humour and off-putting remarks as “good for the group” (Vajda) as a result of experiencing stress or their own triggers. Mistakes are not seen as opportunities to learn but targeted to bring down self esteem. This has the fundamental impact of breaking trust. These kinds of behaviour are described in the Whyte report (Whyte QC). In contrast, a Player Paradigm connection as simple as saying, “I am happy to see you today,” at the start of a session, and, “I’m looking forward to seeing what you’ve done next week” - and really meaning it- at the end of a session can make the world of difference not only to that one child, but to the whole organisation. (NSPCC) These positive ‘serve and return’ interactions between adult and child help to build trust and an expectation of constancy. From this safe base, other learning and engagement can follow.

In a UK study with PE teachers, resilience was found to consist of three components: adversity (stressor), protective factors and positive adaptation (Sarkar et al.). For the individual, this means something happens (e.g. I am playing netball and a ball comes with a spin I wasn’t expecting. I drop the ball.), I have support and strategies in place (I experience shock and pain which I understand are natural responses. I know that my teammates support me. I know I can ask my coach how to handle a spin next time), I can make changes to move forward (I pick the ball up and throw to my teammate).

The study identified that “team resilience differs from individual resilience in that it involves relationships and requires a different set of qualities including group structure, importance of collective confidence, deep emotional bonds, and social identity.” (Sarkar et al.)

I want to pause here. Wow, what a privilege to be making and holding these spaces for our young people. Ones where they have collective confidence, deep emotional bonds, and social identity. You might be reading this thinking, “I know that”, “I’ve heard that before,” or, “we already have that.” If you are, amazing. You are aware of the power that you steward. My question to you is, “Are you *doing* that?”

Once our safe base of connected, attuned adults has begun, and we are moving towards resilience, perhaps the next aspect to consider is how do we encourage belonging and significance within our organisation? Belonging is more than having a club badge. Significance is more than having a title. They are fundamental human needs to be seen, be accepted and be able to make meaningful contributions to society (Brower). Again, as adults working with children in sport, we have a wonderful opportunity to offer a space where young people can do just that in ways that are unavailable to them at home or school. Take a moment to consider all the areas in your club or team where the young people might have a chance to contribute. Where can they make choices? Where can they lead? Where can they

support? Where can they plan? Where can they celebrate? Where can they be role models? This can be as small as making a choice from two warm up options, to as big as planning and hosting an inter-team competition for a fundraiser. When done sensitively with an awareness of developmental appropriateness (Mincemoyer) of tasks (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), you have boundless opportunities for young people to connect, contribute and make a difference. Through this they will learn grit and perseverance that will benefit them and their communities for the rest of their lives (Duckworth).

I have noticed that in our bid to 'make a difference' in the lives of young people, us adults can be our most rigid barriers to success. This is where we know what we should be doing, but we aren't actually doing what we hoped. The signals get mixed and sincerity is lost in translation. Perhaps we have the opportunity to empower a young person to develop perseverance, then we step in at the last moment to "just finish it up". Perhaps a child is doing a task that will build their feeling of significance, like handing out the bibs, and something isn't going quite how we imagined it, so we step over their efforts to "make it a bit better." Maybe we ask back-handed questions like, "What would you like to do first? Running?", thinking we are offering a choice. To the brains and beings of the young people we are with, all this does is say, "You don't matter. You can't do this. You have no choice. I know better." (Siegel and Bryson) The children's behaviour spans out from there towards mistaken goals of attention, revenge, inadequacy or power (Dreikurs), and the adults descend into reward and punishment (euphemistically called 'consequences') behaviour management. I know it's tough, but to make that difference with the kids, we have to make the difference with ourselves first. Cultivating our own growth mindsets (Dweck) combined with practising self-regulation techniques and self-compassion are a wonderful place to start. When we do that, those urges to fix, rescue or do for start to recede because we have faith in the young people to learn what they need to learn. We stop asking fake questions and start delivering real choices because we're not scared of the outcome. "What would you like to do first? Running or skipping?"

Let's take a look at reward and punishment in view of moving from negative mental health outcomes to resiliency. If your coaching aim is anything like mine, you want to encourage committed learners who are able to manage themselves, engage in a team and progress through intrinsic motivation. Did you know that your body has its own reward system? You are made to be curious, try stuff out to see what happens, then feel good about what you did and learned! This is the basis of intrinsic motivation. (Domenico and Ryan) When your skill level and the difficulty of the task at hand meet their sweet spot, that is when you experience 'flow'. (Passarelli) Think back to your own childhood. What were you doing when you got into that flow state? Who was there? Why were you doing it? Pioneering skateboarder Rodney Mullen describes how he spent hours alone as a child in flow states working on tricks. (MIT

Media Lab) Now, it has been known for some time that reward and punishment are ineffective at long term actual change (Kohn). They hijack the intrinsic system and subcontract our motivation to an external reward system. In the short term, this can be useful. In the long term it is destructive and unsustainable leading to addiction, learned helplessness, loss of motivation, control issues and lack of responsibility. Dang. That's going to make the sticker chart look a bit different next time you take a look at it.

So what can we do instead? Firstly, stop kidding ourselves that we need the rewards and punishments! Remove unnecessary incentives and use curiosity questions instead e.g. instead of, "You'll get a sticker if you put your shoes in the box", try, "What do we need to do to keep the changing room safe and tidy? (then wait for suggestions)". (PDA) Share rules and set up group/team agreements in advance so the routine can be the boss - Specific coach education around the skills to do this successfully would be a good pre-season investment. Next, look to encouragement. Build an environment where autonomy, relatedness and competence are central to your structures, coaching and relationships. (Sutton) Praise the effort and the process, not the person or the outcome (Oxford Learning). Model sharing gratitude and compliments. Build regular opportunities to show gratitude and share compliments into your hourly sessions, termly programs, and annual calendars. (CASEL) Notice small efforts that people make and share it with them 1:1, e.g. "I noticed you held the door open for Coach when they were carrying the mats earlier." Then when you're ready, get comfortable validating feelings.

If we really want to make a space where children can move from negative mental health outcomes such as body image issues (Mancine et al.), suicide (Blakelock and Conn), self-harm, anxiety (MIND) and lack of interest (Begley) to resiliency, confidence and social connectedness that are the basis for a happy, healthy life (Happiness) then we have to be comfortable with feelings and mistakes. We have to get comfortable feeling our own feelings and acknowledging others, without exception. Validating feelings and experience, regardless of whether we share them or not, says to the other person, "I see you. You are accepted." (Cameron) Dan Siegel has some practical and accessible tools in his book, "Brainstorm - The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain" (Siegel) This something that experienced and novice coaches can learn and is relevant to all ages of athletes.

Remember that morning I described earlier? Let's rewrite the story.

It's raining and cold. The cones are missing again and someone didn't put the keys back. You notice on the club MessageApp that there was a problem closing up last night. You check in to see who has the keys. You take a deep breath and make sure you can feel your feet inside your shoes. You greet each child as they arrive

and thank the parent who has brought the cones round for you. You have a moment to check your lesson plans and ask an athlete to demonstrate the warmup. Your co-coach comes over and says, "I saw the message last night and was thinking of you setting up this morning. That must have been rough to come in to with the weather." You feel seen and validated and carry on outside until the keys come.

How would that be?

Experiential education and learning around age-appropriate language and really *feeling* what it is to be felt rather than reading about it could be some of the best investment you make for your club. This is how I believe we can move forward to healthy relationships and resilience - whether we are providing Elite or entry level sports. This is what Coach from the Heart delivers. Let's work together.

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