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THE SUBTLETIES OF DOING SPORT PSYCHOLOGY WITH POST-PANDEMIC YOUTH ATHLETES

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Introduction

Participation in youth sport has proven to have numerous physical, psychological, and social benefits (Bouchard et al., 2012), many of which have a lasting impact on youth athletes' biopsychosocial development (Bailey et al., 2013). Researchers have also repeatedly shown that "children [and youth] are not miniature adults" (Piaget, 2001, p. 30), but rather continually developing individuals with distinct differential biopsychosocial needs compared to adults (Larcher, 2015). Children and youth needs, and those of youth athletes, have only amplified in recent years, particularly because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially the pandemic disrupted youth sport supply and participation (Project Play, 2021), resulting in sport cancelations and consequently reduction in children's and youths' physical activity (Watson, 2022). Because of this, and other pandemic effects, significant maladaptive changes in youth athlete mental health – including heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and social isolation – have been observed (e.g., Kass & Morrison, 2023; McGuine et al., 2021; Watson, 2022; Whitley et al., 2021). Additionally, the unwanted loss of sport participation during the pandemic resulted in disruptions to youth athletes' identity, quality of life, and sleep (Kass & Morrison, 2023).

While return to pre-pandemic sport supply and participation has, for the most part, returned to 'normal', many of the mental health challenges facing children and youth continue to remain cause for concern. According to Whitley et al. (2021) "the imprint of these times [COVID-19] will be long lasting, and deliberate efforts are needed to address the wide-ranging effect on the well-being of young people" (p. 1). This sentiment is shared among various sport stakeholders. For example, the State of Play 2022 (Project Play, 2022) report

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indicated, in the United States, that youth and school sports are amid a historic shift – where different stakeholders are showing greater appreciation for the physical, psychological, and social benefits of sport while also recognizing the increased prevalence of mental health concerns among children and youth.

To address apparent gaps in youth sport systems that were unapologetically exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., inequities in access to sport and opportunities for educational and career success due to various demographic factors), Whitley et al. (2021) forwarded ten visionary recommendations for youth sport, with an overarching goal to meet youth athletes' psychological and social needs. These included: (1) increasing access, (2) training coaches in trauma-informed practices, (3) checking for signs and symptoms of need, (4) getting active, (5) having fun, (6) empowering young people, (7) emphasizing social connections, (8) teaching coping skills, (9) promoting collaborative support for young people, and (10) cultivating healing spaces for all. Several – if not all – of the recommendations are also pertinent to sport psychology practitioners in their work with youth athletes. Depending on a practitioner's education, clinical background, and level of integration within the sport systems they operate, an effective sport psychology practitioner will have to (a) be aware of the aforementioned recommendations, (b) work within an environment where the recommendations may or may not be actively and systematically implemented, and (c) be a catalyst for facilitating the implementation of the recommendations with youth athletes and/or the individuals partaking in the sport systems.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the subtleties of doing sport psychology with youth athletes, considering their developmental and post-pandemic physical, psychological, and social needs within the sport systems they participate in. More specifically, the chapter aims to (a) highlight the relevance of multiple systems surrounding the youth athlete, (b) outline a process of working with youth athletes, and (c) discuss pertinent factors that influence the youth athlete–sport psychology practitioner relationship.

Multiple Systems Surrounding the Youth Athlete: Conceptual Understanding

Much like society at large, youth sport exists within multiple interacting systems. Common theoretical models (e.g., social learning theory, Bandura, 1977; the ecological model, Bronfenbrenner, 1979) aim to explain these interactions. What is universal across these models is a focus on how the environment – and various stakeholders in it – impact individuals' biopsychosocial development, learning, and growth. Recently, various systemic approaches rooted in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model have also been applied to children, youth, and sport contexts. These include (a) post-pandemic children and youth growth and development (Haleemunnissa et al., 2021), (b) the effects of media on

youth development (McHale et al., 2009), (c) youth sports (Dorsch et al., 2020), (d) organized sports (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017), (e) sport injury rehabilitation (Wadey et al., 2018), and (f) the role of sport coaches in athlete eating pathology (Voelker et al., 2022). While differing in context, wording, and visual depiction, there are shared generalities across the proposed systems of influence. What follows is a brief description of the commonly shared systemic levels, applied to doing sport psychology with post-pandemic youth athletes.

Individual Intrapersonal Level

At the core of systemic models is the *individual* with various biological, psychological, and social *intrapersonal characteristics*, such as age, beliefs, racial and/or ethnic identity, gender identity, personality, and values that coalesce with a youth athlete's myriad of lived experiences. These individual characteristics, and their interaction, will shape the ways in which a youth athlete will influence, and be influenced by, surrounding systems. When applying a systems approach to doing sport psychology with youth athletes, the individual intrapersonal level assumes each athlete will enter sport psychology consultancy with a unique set of personal and developmental characteristics and experiences (Kipp, 2018). These characteristics and experiences will shape their attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and readiness for doing sport psychology, all of which has the potential to affect the youth athlete–practitioner relationship, practitioner effectiveness, and consultancy outcomes.

Interpersonal Microsystems Level

Closest to the individual – and thus most influential level of the systems – are the *interpersonal microsystems*. These systems include a youth athlete's most immediate relationships, such as family, friends, parents, sport coaches, teachers, and teammates. The most notable and important relational interactions happen within the coach–parent–athlete triangle (Wylleman, 2000) and with friends and teammates (Dalen & Seippel, 2021). At the interpersonal microsystems level, the youth athlete is an active participant in the bidirectional relational interactions.

The interpersonal microsystems can also include various healthcare professionals – including sport psychology practitioners – particularly when the athlete is living through difficult times such as sport injury or persistent sport performance decrements. In such cases, the practitioner gets added to the coach–parent–athlete triangle (Blom et al., 2013), shifting the youth athlete to the center of the relational interactions (see also Arvinen-Barrow & Clement, 2024). It is a practitioner's ethical and professional responsibility to ensure youth athletes' health, wellness, and rights (e.g., privacy, autonomy) are central, while simultaneously keeping other necessary adult stakeholders informed

of the sport psychology process (Blom et al., 2013). Given the interactive nature of the various interpersonal microsystems, particularly in youth sport, a practitioner should also be mindful of their own direct and indirect ability to change other people's actions and beliefs, including, but not limited to, youth athletes' parents, coach(es), teammates, and teammates' parents (Dorsch, 2018).

Institutional Mesosystems Level

The youth athlete and their individual interpersonal microsystems are connected to each other at the *institutional mesosystems* level. At this level, various institutional systems (e.g., academies, clubs, schools, and sport clubs) provide youth athlete norms and values for navigating the wider world. Existing research has found that shared values, open communication, and stability across various sport stakeholders can provide consistency across different system levels (Dorsch et al., 2020), while conflicts and inconsistencies can have a negative impact on youth athletes' biopsychosocial development, learning, and growth.

Numerous institutional mesosystems can also influence the process of doing sport psychology. For example, if the youth athlete's friends are openly working with a sport psychology practitioner and are performing well in their sport, conversations to this effect between the athletes and their parents are likely to reduce the stigma associated with sport psychology. In contrast, and much like adult athletes (Ong & Harwood, 2017), sport culture where seeking psychological support is viewed as a weakness is likely to influence the youth athlete and their process of doing sport psychology in a negative way (Henriksen et al., 2018).

Cultural Exosystems Level

The *cultural exosystems* level differs from micro- and mesosystem levels by focusing on the established societal and cultural norms and expectations that affect youth athlete development. These can include, though are not limited to: (a) media; (b) collective cultural norms, traditions, and values; and (c) various roles (e.g., gender identity) and structures (e.g., family). Cultural exosystems have been found to influence youth athlete participation in various sport activities (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017). Cultural exosystems can influence whether a youth athlete participates in a particular sport and the quality of the youth sport experience, which are also likely to influence doing sport psychology with youth athletes. For example, if an athlete has strong cultural ideologies, attitudes, and social conditions that conflict with the dominant Eurocentric approach that is common in sport psychology (Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009), factors such as access, delivery, and outcomes of sport psychology interventions are likely to be affected.

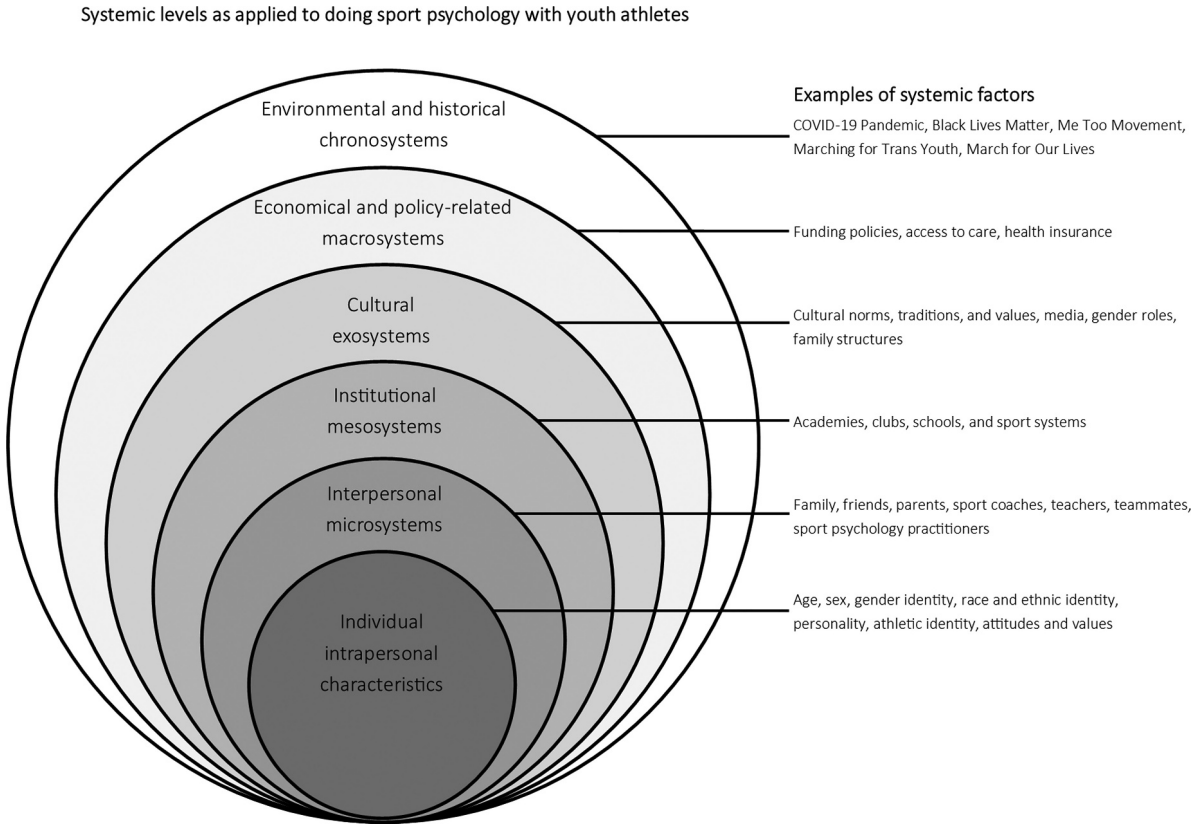

FIGURE 11.1 Systems Approach to Doing Sport Psychology Consultancy with Youth Athletes.

(Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Economical and Policy-Related Macrosystems Level

The *economical and policy-related macrosystems* include local and national government policies related to funding, access to services (including healthcare), and comprehensiveness of insurance coverage for various services. Such systems can have both a direct and indirect influence on doing sport psychology with youth athletes. For example, many healthcare systems and insurance policies do not consider non-clinical sport psychology services focused on athletic performance optimization as a reimbursable healthcare cost, thus it can be a barrier to accessing sport psychology services. This means, for some, sport psychology services are a support that may be limited to youth athletes of parents who have higher socioeconomic means and consequently more disposable income.

Environmental and Historical Chronosystems Level

The environmental and historical chronosystems level captures the role of time in development. It acknowledges the individual youth athlete, and all the systems surrounding that individual, are influenced by numerous environmental and historical events, resulting in a myriad of personal lived experiences. Most notably, youth athletes today have lived through the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a direct influence on their surrounding micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem levels of influence (Johnson et al., 2023). As a result, the impacts of the pandemic, and their effects, will likely influence doing sport psychology with youth athletes in numerous ways. First, for many athletes, COVID-19 resulted in unwanted long-term sport cancelations, and as a consequence resulted in predominantly negative sport experiences resembling having an illness or injury (Baykose et al., 2021). Second, the COVID-19 pandemic removed or limited youth athletes' access to interpersonal microsystems (e.g., coaches, teammates, and other peers), created alternative institutional mesosystems (e.g., virtual sport-based training, distance school education), and forced families to deviate from, or rely more, on their existing cultural exosystems (e.g., religious organizations and communities). When coupled with other historic events and changes, such as Black Lives Matter, Me Too Movement, Marching for Trans Youth, and March for Our Lives, along with prominent athletes like Simone Biles and Simone Manuel stepping forward as advocates for mental health, it is not surprising youth athletes seeking sport psychology support today may be different from pre-pandemic athletes (Figure 11.1).

Doing Sport Psychology with Youth Athletes: The Process of Working

One framework for doing sport psychology with youth athletes is the Youth Sport Consulting Model (YSCM; Visek et al., 2009). Founded on existing models, theories, and practice (i.e., Orton, 1997; Perna et al., 1995; Poczwardowski et al., 1998), the YSCM model frames the planning, implementing, and evaluating steps necessary to effectively, and comprehensively, work with youth athletes

(Visek et al., 2009). The YSCM model includes six interrelated, sequential phases where the final phase connects with Phases II and III in a cyclical manner. Phase I (*Practitioner Considerations*) considers factors related to a practitioner's professional boundaries and consulting philosophy. These include (a) education and training, (b) competency and scope of practice, (c) ethical guidelines, and (d) philosophical approach to doing sport psychology. Phase II (*Initiating Contact*) captures the nuances related to gaining entry, establishing 'who is the client', and setting both legal and practical boundaries to doing sport psychology with youth athletes.

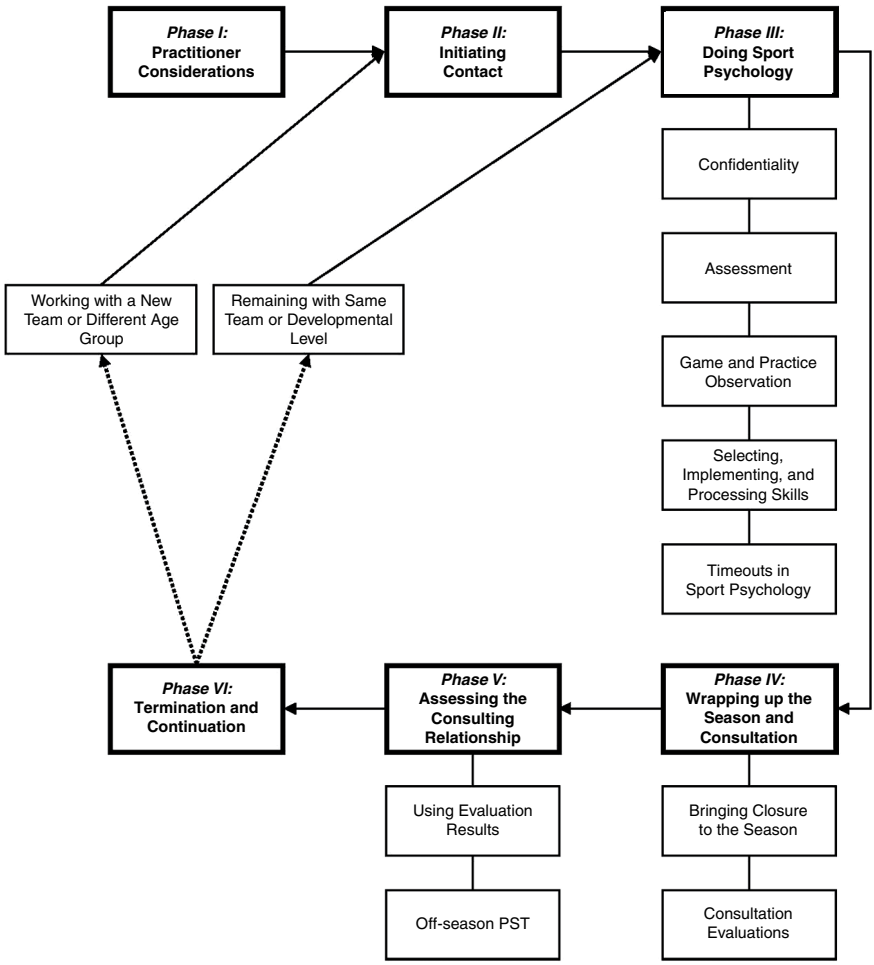

FIGURE 11.2 The Youth Sport Consulting Model.

Source: (Visek et al. 2009). (Used with permission of Human Kinetics, Inc., from The Sport Psychologist, Amanda J. Visek, Brandonn S. Harris, & Lindsey C. Blom, 23, 2009; permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.)

Phase III (*Doing Sport Psychology*) captures five key factors for effective consultancy (Poczwardowski et al., 1998): (a) assessment; (b) conceptualizing athletes' concerns and potential interventions; (c) ranges, types, and organization of services; (d) program implementation; and (e) managing the self as an intervention instrument, including self-reflection. Phase IV (*Wrapping up the Season and Consultation*), Phase V (*Assessing the Consulting Relationship*), and Phase VI (*Termination and Continuation*) are focused on synthesizing and evaluating the program and consultant effectiveness as well as determining the need for continuation or termination of the sport psychology services (Figure 11.2).

Doing Sport Psychology with Youth Athletes: Pertinent Success Factors

Thus far, this chapter has conceptualized doing sport psychology with youth athletes as a dynamic process (Visek et al., 2009) that is situated within multiple systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) while highlighting the centrality of the youth athlete in this process (Blom et al., 2013). With the YSCM conceptualization as a guiding philosophy, what follows is a brief discussion of pertinent success factors that influence the youth athlete–sport psychology practitioner relationship, loosely coalesced with the recommendations for post-pandemic youth sport forwarded by Whitley et al. (2021).

Increase Access to Sport Psychology Services

A successful youth athlete–practitioner relationship starts from creating access to sport psychology services that fosters equity and flexibility. This is particularly important as COVID-19 has broadened long-standing access disparities to sport psychology services (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019), much of which is exacerbated due to various personal and sociocultural factors including gender identity, racial and ethnic identity, religious beliefs, sport culture, and cost (Martin et al., 2004; Neil & Cropley, 2018). Taking into account personal demographic factors, professional competencies, scope of practice, and ethical guidelines (e.g., Association for Applied Sport Psychology, 2011; The British Psychological Society, 2021), it is recommended that the *Practitioner Considerations* phase (Visek et al., 2009) also includes reflective questions focused on access. By doing so, sport psychology practitioners may find new ways of creating a service structure that promotes equity and flexibility, that in turn can facilitate better relationships among the practitioner, the youth athlete, and other key stakeholders such as parents.

Educate Parents (and Coaches)

Successful working relationships with youth athletes is dependent on having clear roles and expectations with the youth athlete's parent(s) and/or coaches. This can be accomplished through well-planned education during the *Initiating*

Contact phase (Visek et al., 2009), where the focus of the education is on: (a) practitioner background, credentials, and scope of practice; (b) establishing who is the client; (c) outlining prominent legal and ethical considerations; (d) delineating fee structure; and (e) establishing next steps. Because recent research has consistently found that children and youth are experiencing a COVID-19 related trauma (Fegert et al., 2020; Noel-London et al., 2021) and other mental health concerns (e.g., Kass & Morrison, 2023; McGuine et al., 2021; Watson, 2022; Whitley et al., 2021), it is also recommended to include education in the *Doing Sport Psychology* phase (Visek et al., 2009). By educating parent(s) and/or coaches on the (a) ubiquity of trauma, (b) how it may look different for youth when compared to adults or children, and (c) how to appropriately respond to youth athlete trauma, practitioners can empower key stakeholders in the early detection of maladaptive psychosocial responses. This can also facilitate the betterment of numerous intersecting relationships between the youth athlete, sport coach, parent(s), and sport psychology practitioners.

Check for Signs and Symptoms of Need

Working successfully with post-pandemic youth also requires recognition that COVID-19 has increased the prevalence of insufficiencies in youth athletes' basic and extended mental, emotional, and social health needs (Whitley et al., 2021). According to Whitley et al., practitioners working with youth athletes should be cognizant that not all youth athletes have access to adequate food, shelter, or clothing. Similarly, not all live in a safe home/school environment. Asking questions related to basic needs can be integrated into the *Doing Sport Psychology* phase – as part of a *formal assessment*, and when *conceptualizing athletes' concerns and potential interventions*. Whitley et al. recommended practitioners who work with youth athletes should use a "simple check list for common signs and symptoms of mental, emotional, and social health needs, with clear steps for making local referrals when warranted" (p. 3).

Be Creative

When *Doing Sport Psychology* (Phase III; Visek et al., 2009) with youth athletes, successful relationships are built through creativity. COVID-19 increased social isolation among youth (Ramsey et al., 2023), resulting in increased reliance on electronic devices and social media. Moving away from technology and going back to basic modalities can be incredibly impactful with youth today, especially when giving them choice in those modalities. For example, making available to them, in session and as take-home material, an array of color choice in paper and a varied selection of colored pens, highlighters, post-it notes, and folders to hold their work allows them new ways to express themselves and gives them agency. Encouraging creativity when constructing goal sheets or completing a performance profile also provides the youth athlete a

chance to 'talk while not looking at you', thus increasing comfort around harder topics and a sense of autonomy in the consultancy session.

In a similar way, metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), storytelling (Rutledge, 2011), and humor (Pack et al., 2020) are a powerful way to connect with youth. Despite any research on the topic in sport psychology, using strategic play with language, slang, and contradictions (Biyani, 2023) can be a meaningful way to interact with youth, as it allows the athlete 'to own' the words when creating an imagery script, infographic, cue words, or other. It is not uncommon for a sport psychology practitioner to present the youth athlete with a prompt (e.g., What would you say to yourself when you perform well?), followed by an idea (e.g., I did well) and encourage them to find a way to capture it in their own words (e.g., "I lowkey slayed" – a slang used by Gen Z to subtly emphasize a statement or feeling about performing well). Note: using creativity when working with youth athletes should not be done in the absence of careful self-management and self-reflection.

Have Fun

Given that "children cite 'fun' as the primary reason for participation in organized sport and its absence as the number one reason for youth sport attrition" (Visek et al., 2015, p. 424), sport – and doing sport psychology – should indeed be 'fun'. A successful youth athlete–practitioner relationship embodies 'fun' in two ways: (1) as a philosophical foundation for consultancy, and (2) as an outcome for consultancy. As a philosophical foundation, making a consultancy session 'fun' can include adopting a person-centered approach (Katz & Hemmings, 2009; Katz & Keyes, 2020) and engaging in positive sport-adult behaviors that foster fun (Visek et al., 2015). In simplest form, these include treating the youth athlete with respect, being encouraging, having clear and consistent communication, and being a good listener. As an outcome of consultancy, 'fun' also means addressing an athlete's presenting psychological issues in a fun learning environment, in which they are heard, challenged, and active participants in the session (see Visek et al., 2015 for further reading on determinants of fun). While embracing fun in sport psychology consultancy is encouraged, its effectiveness lies in the subtlety, and art, of implementation. For example, using statements or metaphors like 'have fun out there', 'performance excellence and having fun are not mutually exclusive', and 'it is hard to compete against someone who is having fun' should be impeccably timed, as inappropriate timing may have a negative impact on the youth athlete–practitioner relationship.

Empower the Youth Athlete

Rarely do youth athletes seek sport psychology when things are going great, but rather initial contact is typically made when feelings of control are already compromised. Because COVID-19 and its consequences have had a significant

impact on youth autonomy (Gabriel et al., 2022; Whitley et al., 2021), a successful youth athlete–practitioner relationship should be structured in a way that empowers young people to take control of their lives. By doing so, practitioners are also able to positively impact youth athletes' sense of identity, intrinsic motivation, commitment to goals, and improved well-being (Mertens et al., 2020). Regardless of a practitioner's chosen approach to consultancy (Katz & Hemmings, 2009), empowering youth athletes should start during the *Initiating Contact* phase (Visek et al., 2009), when educating parents (and the athletes) about the sport psychology consultancy process. Importantly, though, the youth athlete should be empowered across all consultancy phases, so they have an active voice in sport psychology implementation (e.g., skills and application), evaluation, and eventually termination. Consistent with recommendations put forth by Whitley et al. (2021), youth involvement should be of the kind where they have "meaningful, authentic ways to influence (if not determine) the design of their sport [psychology] experiences" (p. 4).

Emphasize Social Connections

Along with other sport professionals, sport psychology practitioners have a responsibility to help youth athletes to rebuild social connections (Whitley et al., 2021). Many youth are finding in-person interacting with others challenging, which is not surprising as COVID-19 has increased social isolation among youth (Sundler et al., 2023), and moved important social connections online (Ramsey et al., 2023). To facilitate the quality of the youth athlete–practitioner relationship, practitioners should (a) be mindful of how COVID-19 has impacted athletes' ability to engage in social interactions, (b) recognize their own role as an important social agent, and (c) be aware of the existing network of other important social agents in youth athletes' lives. Because research has identified sport coaches, peers, and parents as important in influencing athlete autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Chu & Zhang, 2019), all of which are instrumental for intrinsic motivation and general psychological wellness (Deci & Ryan, 1985), emphasizing the importance of social connections, and social skill building, should be embedded in doing sport psychology. In the *Initiating Contact* phase (Visek et al., 2009) during an intake session, a practitioner can ask questions related to friends and teammates, family structures, and other important relationships. Equally, during the *Doing Sport Psychology* phase, evaluating how coaches, peers, and parents might contribute to both the emergence of, and solutions for, youth athlete concerns is of importance.

Teach Coping Skills

A successful youth athlete–practitioner relationship is also rooted in understanding that children are not mini-adults (Piaget, 2001), but instead have not yet acquired the advanced emotional development of adults

(Whitley et al., 2021). Youth often lack coping skills to process difficult situations, most notably an ability to self-regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors during times of stress. According to Kirschenbaum (1984), sport psychology services "[provide] an excellent medium for [athletes'] testing [of] self-regulation principles" (p. 159), and thus using self-regulatory models and principles as a framework for sport psychology consultancy can aid in effective interventions.

Sport psychology practitioners can work closely with youth athletes on acquiring self-regulation skills. These include, though are not limited to, recognizing maladaptive or disruptive thoughts and emotions, using mental and physical relaxation strategies, using thought stopping and/or cognitive reframing, and asking for help. These are consistent with Whitley et al.'s (2021) recommendations for enhancing athletes' coping abilities. Indeed, providing youth athletes with a safe space to practice and reflect on applying these and other self-regulation skills can (a) increase youth athlete autonomy and competence, and (b) strengthen the youth athlete–practitioner relationship.

Promoting Collaborative Support

Along with educating parent(s) and/or coaches, and emphasizing social connections, a successful youth athlete–practitioner relationship should also be rooted in the understanding that no singular entity can meet all athlete needs. A practitioner that is open, honest, and clear about their professional competencies, and promotes inclusion of other healthcare practitioners when necessary, is likely to create better trust and rapport with youth athletes. This recommendation is also consistent with sport and wider healthcare – both of which have consistently called for an interprofessional approach to addressing physical, psychological, social, and cultural factors (Arvinen-Barrow & Clement, 2024; Bosch & Mansell, 2015; McHenry et al., 2022).

During the *Initiating Contact* phase, it is good practice for the practitioner to collect background information related to the youth athlete's previous sport psychology or mental health experience, their injury history (and resultant time away from sport), and any other significant health-related concerns/milestones. Likewise, during the *Doing Sport Psychology* phase, a good practitioner reflects on the possibility of various health-related factors affecting the youth athlete's psychosocial health and makes appropriate referrals to other professionals when appropriate.

Reflective Summary

This chapter has conceptualized doing sport psychology with youth athletes as a dynamic and distinct process (Visek et al., 2009), situated within multiple systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), in which the centrality of the youth athlete within the process was emphasized (Blom et al., 2013). Importantly, the

chapter recognized that children and youth are not mini-adults and thus the practice of doing sport psychology with children and youth is as much an art as it is a science with overt and subtle nuances. Further, working with post-pandemic youth may look different than working with populations pre-pandemic and requires the inclusion, or minimally consideration of, the youth athlete's parent(s) and/or coach. Altogether, working with youth athletes today requires a unique set of professional skills, and careful consideration of multitude factors across all systemic levels.

Questions for Readers

The reflective questions below are meant to initiate practitioner self-reflection and the acquisition of professional skills that facilitate the provision of successful sport psychology consultancy with youth athletes.

1. How has COVID-19 impacted my own physical, psychological, social, and cultural health and wellbeing?
2. How can I structure my service provision in a way that promotes flexibility and equity?
3. In what way does my initial parent education 'elevator pitch' promote trust and rapport?
4. How does use of creativity and/or focus on fun align with my personal and practice philosophies?
5. What are my strengths in working with youth athletes? What about areas in need of improvement?

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