

Experiential interventions focused on optimization of children`s and teenagers` performances in sports

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Abstract. Children and teenagers practice a lot of sports today, in the parks, on the sports grounds or in the halls specially arranged for such kind of activities. Many of them come to practice high performance sports at a very early age, being sustained by parents and coaches. Sometimes, such an experience can be managed quite well by the components of the sportive-coach- parent trio. Some other times, the interactions among the same three can be obstructed and then the intervention of an educational psychologist or counselor comes as a necessity.

Key words: *performance, experiential interventions, prevention, psychological counseling, children.*

Introduction

The attentive observations in the psychologist`s cabinet over the years permitted the completion of an inventory of reasons for which children and teenagers can practice sports. Some of such reasons can be beneficial to a harmonious development, some others not.

So, why do children and teenagers practice sports? It`s pleasant and healthy; it helps with harmonious development; It satisfies the need to know and learn as many sportive abilities as possible; Parents` sportive performance is sometimes actual model to follow in sports provided that the relationship between parents and children should be a nice and nourishing one; Children and teenagers love their coach – particularly when the latter can ”repair” the absence of a parent; There is a potential (talent) in question and it`s worth trying high performance in sports, as there is the risk assumed by parents and coach that the outcome wouldn`t be as expected; Children and teenagers are sometimes full of energy, almost aggressive and they should express and consume such energy or aggressiveness. In fact, they have got some emotional problems the solving of which requires family counseling/psychotherapy; Parents used to practice high performance sports but they gave it up too soon. In such cases children or teenagers come to ”repair”/complete an unfinished project in a symbolic way;

Children/teenagers sometimes bring to life their parents` unsatisfied need of high performance sport; Children /teenagers may do something that their parents haven`t enough time to do – sports! There is a need “to be in trend” like other children/teenagers at kindergarten or school having tight agendas, full of various activities, until late in the evening when their parents come home. Such parents show their interest for multi-development education of their children, through financial investments sometimes seen as sacrifices; Children /teenagers try to lose weight (putting on weight being based on the compulsive behaviour of eating on the grounds of an emotional deficit between them and their parents – sweets are among the favourite); Children/teenagers have very miserable lives with a lot of material shortenings and their practising sports provides them with a better living (thus they commonly satisfy the explicit wish of their parents to be helped by their own children and the latter should cope with life by themselves).

The psychologist`s interventions take into account all the reasons that can facilitate or disturb the healthy physical or psychological development of the children/teenagers. Prevention, regarded as an activity of informing, forming (development) and re-forming, psychological counseling and psychotherapy represent the framework of interventions that can be used by the educational

psychologist, psychological counselor and psychotherapist. The potential clients in this process can be the sportive children/teenagers, parents, trainers as well as doctors who are interested in the psychological component of some symptoms expressed by their patient. The humanistic-experiential orientation can be successfully used by the psychologist working with sportsmen, trainers/coaches and children's/teenagers' parents. Such orientation that refreshes a fully open philosophy, based on the valuation of "human potential", has the main goal of offsetting the alienation and it lays the stress upon experiencing emotions and expressing the present experience ("now and

here").

By its methods and techniques this orientation/approach promotes spontaneity, creativity and authenticity as healing and self-transforming resources as premises for obtaining high performance in sports. Among the representatives of this humanistic trend there are Maslow, Rogers, Perls, Moreno, Berne (1, 2). The experientialists use, as a symbolic provocative support for analysis and insight, universal languages of artistic nature: rhythm, music, dance and motion, collage, visual arts, game, self-exploring narrative imagery, metaphoric situation and scenario, drama-therapeutically creative improvisation.



Figure 1. Interaction with the sportive children/teenagers

Change (transformation/development) comes as a result of the following steps: 1. provocation and experience; 2. clarifying self-analysis; 3. exercise of creative resources and own choices; 4. personal, creative change. Provocation and experiencing take place either in the clients' every day lives (on the sports ground, in competitions, within the family system or during the training) or during the experiential

provocations as undergone within a development group by means of the universal languages of artistic nature. The clarifying analysis made "now and here" in the psychologist's cabinet are meant to bring the client's experiences from the past to the present, the experiences that are responsible for the blockages and difficulties the client faces today.

Such experiences will be lived again and resignified to allow the change of the client's response pattern towards the present provocations. This time, such new pattern is adaptative for him, for his context of life and age.

The exercise of the creative resources and the own choices permit the client to find many solutions to the problems and difficulties he faces, which solutions, once assumed and experienced, will be implemented in his every day life. The personal, creative change occurs over the time and it requires permanent self-exploring, a vivid attention paid to oneself.

Optimization of children's and teenagers' performances in sports, a fruitful collaboration among sportsman, trainer and parents as well as the psychological preparation for contests can be objectives for the prevention activity which the educational psychologist can carry on.

The psychological interventions for personal optimization can be made in an individual manner or in group, at client's request (children, teenagers practicing sports on a high performance basis or occasionally, parents and trainers) or at the psychologist's recommendation (3-5).

The reason for such an offer consists in the fact that both children and teenagers can have access to the following: self knowledge; discovery of own resources and vulnerabilities; change of some vulnerabilities into personal resources that are necessary for increasing the sports performances; growth of self confidence and self esteem; clarification of the reason for practicing sports (high performance or not) and setting of clear objectives according to those of the trainers and parents; optimization of capacity of communication with parents, peers and trainers; awareness regarding some disadaptative/disfunctional patterns of interaction and turning of the same into adaptative patterns at home, at school and in sports.

In my book (6) „*Psychology of long life education- for experts and adults interested in their own development*” I worded up, further to my expertise over the years, a working methodology for the development groups for children, teenagers and parents. Here below, you can see some details about the logistics of such groups as well as examples in order to facilitate a realistic image of such an offer made by the educational psychologist.

What is the logistics for personal development groups?

1. Promotion and organization of groups

2. Assessment of participants

Goal: G1 - collection of life history data about children and psycho diagnosis with a view to finding out the resources and vulnerabilities of each child as related to the group theme.

3. Carrying out of intervention plan

Goals: G2 - setting of group rules, achievement of group cohesion and familiarization with the experiential techniques; G3 - work upon the main vulnerabilities of children in relation to the group theme. G4 - finding out and exercising some new adaptive behavior according to the group theme

4. Implementation of the intervention plan and recording of the process.

5. Assessment of participants and drawing up of the summary reports

Examples of exercises for G1 and G2

Development of emotional-intelligence for primary school children

Character game: Initially each child had the task to draw a person and then they pinned the drawing on their shirts thus identifying with the character, introduced themselves to the other characters and spent twenty minutes of adventures „in a park” spontaneously arranged in the working room.

I am curious to find out who you are - an exercise in which, in diades, the children ask each other as many questions as possible with a view to knowing each other better and take notes by means of drawings, thus completing a personal map of the one he is talking to. Finally, each child presents the person he talked with to the group. Clarifying questions or those asking for further information about the person to be described are encouraged.

Magic forest: with a musical background, trees of old kinds represented by the posture chosen by each participants had the right to relate, speak and express emotions as resulted from certain interactions or provocative events (hot sun, strong storm, snow storm etc) and finally they had a moment when the earth energy unified with the sky energy circulating through each tree offering it tranquility, security, warmth and joy

My family's portrait: each child drew his family, presented it to the group with all joys and troubles, good things and unpleasant things that within his/her family relationships.

Group collage: moulding, cubes and colours were used for creating a universe as wished by all participants. Communication, negotiation, and free expression were commonly used by the children who had the opportunity to know themselves better.

Invitation to dance: over a music suitable for children's motion needs, sat in a circle, this time, the participants are invited, one by one, in the middle of the circle, to propose a motion to be performed by all the participants with a view to knowing better the one who made the proposal, to understanding the message he wants to transmit to the group about himself. The exercise may go on by proposing the dance in diades, in groups of four and then the dance of the entire group.

Offers of personal optimization for parents facilitate the following:

1. Information on: psychological characteristics of age for children and teenagers; psychological processes and mechanisms involved in high performance sports; issues related to parent role assumption: traditional parental models versus partnership models, family as a complex process of construction and reconstruction.

We expect an improvement of the interrelational dynamics in the family system which should generate a better collaboration between parents, between parents and children.

2. Formation and Re-formation in terms of: efficiency and enrichment of the behavioral patterns in parental couple and child-parent relationship; solution to the age specific problems that appear in child-parent relationship; management of parents' stress; shaping of behavior in situation of training, competition and post contest; knowing and making the difference between personal motivation and child's motivation, for practicing sports in general or high performance sports.

For trainers, both the group (with some other colleagues in the field) and individual meetings can help with the following:

1. Information on: psychological characteristics of age for the children/ teenagers; self knowledge and knowledge of personal resources and vulnerabilities; change of some vulnerabilities into personal resources necessary for a successful trainer role; awareness regarding the personal projections made on the trainees and removal of such projections with a view to improving the relationship with the same as well as for increasing the performances thereof.

2. Formation and Re-formation in terms of: efficiency and enrichment of the behavioral patterns in the activity of training children/teenagers for high performance in sports; development of emotional intelligence (capacity

of communication and interaction, empathy, creativity and personal spontaneity); new patterns of interaction as adapted to the needs and characteristics of each sportsman; awareness regarding some dysfunctional patterns of

Interaction with the sportive children/ teenagers and their parents and the removal of such patterns; skills for giving positive feed backs for children/teenagers and their parents and the rewarding system as expected by children and parents too.

On good functioning, the sportsman-trainer-parents trio certainly facilitates high performance in sports according to the targets.

Optimization of communication and interaction within such trio can be achieved in individual sessions whenever one of the trio components faces some difficulty in this respect or in group sessions (sportsman - trainer - parent) on a clarifying purpose. On such sessions, a very simple but extremely useful exercise for an authentically communication among the trio members is that each participant must complete, for all the other participants, the following three sentences: *I like you when...; I don't like you when...; I expect from you to...*

Psychological preparation for contest of sportive children/teenagers, trainers and parents refer to: putting the targets in accordance; mutual knowledge of the reasons for participating in such contest; emotion management and setting of a motivational optimum for participation in the contest.

SWOT analysis can also be a useful instrument for children/teenagers, trainers and parents with a view to preparation for contest.

Here is a significant example for understanding why psychological preparation for a contest is necessary not only for the children but also for their parents. Very often, the unsolved problems of the latter can negatively influence the behavior of a participant in a situation of contest.

A 9 years old child, practicing high performance sports, plays tennis very well and participates in contests with older children. Most of the times he wins except for the contests attended by his father. His father also used to be a champion in an Olympic water polo team and being a well-known notary, married to a famous lawyer, the son of a county attorney of high reputation, he seems to be unable to tolerate his son's failure.

Each contest is lived with anxiety and emotions by the father who becomes a disturbing factor for his son in situation of competition. After a contest in which the son doesn't win, without being aware of the discouraging impact of his behavior, the father is tense, he doesn't talk to his son, he Doesn't express his discontent and simply ignores the child. The relationship gets back to normal in 2 or 3 days. Meanwhile the boy suffered, cried trying not to be seen by anyone, being caressed and supported by his mother who worried about her son's condition.

There have been necessary several individual and family counseling sessions to help the father change his behavior towards his son before, during and after the contest. Subsequently, the boy didn't fail anymore in the presence of his father at contests, being aware of his personal resources and having his parents' emotional support.

As a conclusion, we can summarize why such a prevention is so necessary in high performance sports: children/teenagers are in a process of formation, development, getting mature; the childhood traumas as created willingly or unwillingly by the significant adult (parent, trainer) generate interaction patterns that are adaptative at an early age and disadaptative/inefficient at the adult age- sometimes responsible for some chronically diseases; frequent organic responses with sportive children/teenagers can appear because of the psychological problems that they cannot manage at home, at school or in sports (with the coach, team members or contest situations) and such responses can invalidate them in contest situations; such organic responses can become chronic thus producing organic and physiological disorders with harmful effects upon the sportive activity

The aim of the psychological counseling activity is the optimization of performances in sports with the children/teengers that, because of some dysfunctions in their family systems, becomes the symptom thereof. This activity is particularly designed to families with various problems in the family system which problems can indirectly affect the high performances in sports in spite of the child's and teenager's talent and the efforts made by them and the trainers. Only a deep change in the dysfunctional family system can facilitate high performances in sports with children and teenagers without deep alteration of their personality formation.

The counseling process is a complex one with the following steps:

1. Evaluation and collection of information. It consists in getting the anamnesis data and psycho diagnosis of children/teenagers and their parents.
2. Order of data, hypotheses and objectives.
3. Drawing up and implementation of intervention plan.
4. Final assessment.
5. Summary report. It shows the acquisitions, resources as well as the vulnerabilities of the sportive child/teenager and his family system. However, the presentation of such report to another person is parents' choice.

Here is a case of counseling that revealed the devastating effects of a deficient socio-economic system:

An 8 years old girl has been practicing high performance gymnastics for two years. Her mother takes her to the counselor because the coach told her that her daughter isn't involved enough anymore and she aren't as efficient as she used to be. Moreover, mother is very unsatisfied with the school results of the girl who shows the same lack of attention and interest in school activities as she shows in sports.

Further to collecting anamnesis data (history of life) and psycho diagnosis we could see that the 8 years old girl had strong feelings of abandon as associated with a lack of self confidence and a low self esteem, missing her mother, her father and the games specific to her age.

Born in Italy, with parents of Romanian origin, the girl experienced the divorce of her parents at her age of 3-4. She was uprooted and taken to Romania where her mother chose to return and live. The material needs drive the mother to a very sustained activity thus abandoning her child in a kinder garden and, later on, in a gym in order not to be in position to pay for an afterschool or baby sitter till the end of her working program in the evening. In other words, by her work in the gym, the little girl brought her contribution to an easier management of the family budget, an improper role for her age.

The counseling family was focused on mother's becoming aware of the real reasons for which she asked her little girl to practice sports, on mother's personal analysis and understanding of her daughter's real needs and lack of motivation for sports and learning, on the optimization of mother-daughter relationship, clarifying the motivation for sports and readjusting the expectations as to high performance.

Psychotherapy is designed to the psychological recovery of the sportive children and teenagers or

to provide psychological support along a disturbed physical or psycho condition.

It is a long term intervention performed by specialists - psychotherapists.

Such a process usually takes place as a result of some severe psychotraumatic events or deeply altered psychological state. When the clients are children and teenagers the psychotherapist considers the parents' involvement in the process of psychotherapy thus getting a family psychotherapy.

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