

DEVELOPING ATHLETICISM IS THE C.O.R.E. OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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DEVELOPING ATHLETICISM

Athleticism is much more than being an athlete. Athleticism refers more to the ability to execute fundamental movements, in either a specific or unpredictable movement pattern at optimum speed with precision, with applicability across sports and physical activities. To develop athleticism, proper strength and conditioning is essential. A properly planned and implemented strength and conditioning program is the core of successful movement, whether for athletics, recreation, or physical activity.

Each special population has unique program needs. The youth population is no exception. To develop athleticism for youth we must understand these C.O.R.E. principles:

- **C**ontext in which to apply movement patterns
- **O**pportunities to develop proper movement
- **R**ecognition of the physical attributes that youth require
- **E**nvironments in which youth explore movement

CONTEXT

The context in which youth, especially children, need to apply movement patterns should be developmentally appropriate. In proper context, therefore, movement patterns need to be fundamental in nature as opposed to sport-specific. This means that emphasis remains on developing and practicing proper movement patterns that lead to physical literacy. Margaret Whitehead is credited with creating the concept of physical literacy and she postulates that without development of the physical capacities (e.g., balance, coordination, flexibility, agility, control, precision, strength, power, endurance, and the ability to move at different speeds and distances) the ability to interact with the world (i.e., positive youth development) would be restricted (7). The aforementioned physical capacities comprise the definition of athleticism for youngsters. As each child develops their general athleticism within their given level of endowment, which is nonlinear and develops at different rates for each child, coaches need to be prepared to engage all children in developmentally appropriate, individualized strength and conditioning programs to fully develop athleticism for all participants. As aspiring athletes reach physical maturity, the context will change to sport-specific physical attributes in order to develop long-term athletic development (5).

OPPORTUNITIES

To develop the physical attributes of athleticism fully, all youth need to be provided multiple opportunities to reach their potential. For children, this necessitates introducing them to a variety of movements on a multitude of surfaces in various settings. These settings should be a healthy mixture of structured and non-structured movement opportunities. All youth should be encouraged to reach the recommended daily amount of 60 min of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, and quite often sports serve as a vehicle for kids to engage in this physical

activity (2). Coaches must be aware of this in order to incorporate appropriate levels of physical conditioning leading to the recommended amount of physical activity. For those times when organized sport is the choice, all youth need to be prepared for participation by developing the physical attributes of athleticism prior to participation in the organized program (i.e., youth need to get in shape to play a sport, not play a sport to get in shape). Participation in a properly designed strength and conditioning program has been shown to improve performance and reduce the risk of injury for youth (3).

RECOGNITION

Coaches need to be mindful of the physical attributes as described by Whitehead and that the trainability of fitness attributes extends across childhood and adolescence (4). While it is certainly advantageous to begin developing physical literacy at an early age, it is important not to give up on a child that has not yet learned fundamental motor skills, movement patterns, or physical literacy. Coaches also need to be sure to include all fitness attributes across childhood and adolescence, specifically health-fitness (muscle strength, muscle endurance, flexibility, cardiorespiratory endurance, and body composition) and skills-fitness (agility, balance, coordination, power, and speed). As outlined in the National Strength and Conditioning Association's (NSCA) Position Statement on Youth Resistance Training, coaches should incorporate a variety of exercises, a variety of training modalities, and variety itself (3). Coaches need to understand how specific training methodologies, such as core training, fit into the development of fitness attributes and fundamental motor skills. Core training is one factor in the prescription for properly developing fitness attributes and needs to be considered in the broader context of general physical preparation in youth program design.

ENVIRONMENTS

The environment that has become the standard of youth physical movement is organized youth sport. Youth sport was not created as a youth-centric model of athleticism for all youth, however. Our current athletic development model is a watered-down adult sports model, with considerations for field size, pitch count, and size of equipment. Data indicates that 70% of youth drop out of youth sports by age 13 (6). The reason for this is that the main reason youth play sports is fun and the primary reason they drop out is that the sport is no longer fun (6). This also attributes to a downward trend in participation in our most popular sports (basketball, football, baseball, and soccer) but the data also shows that 25% of youth never participate in youth sports (1). Based on this data, it seems that it is important to create the proper environment for youth to develop athleticism while continuing to have fun.

Emphasizing context, opportunities, and recognition within a youth-centered environment creates the proper pathway to the development of athleticism that will help youth achieve physical and psychosocial well-being throughout childhood and

adolescence. Positive youth development has been shown to lead to positive adult development, with physical activity tracking into adulthood, psychosocial adjustment, and positive contributions to society, and setting a positive example for the next generation of youth.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP ALL YOUTH DEVELOP ATHLETICISM

This article focused on athleticism as a key physical asset with strong influence on the psychosocial assets, such as self-efficacy, self-determined motivation toward sport and physical activity, and support from significant adults and peers. Since sport is multifactorial and includes access to and opportunity for participation in a wide variety of sports and activities, it is incumbent on coaches to recognize the impact they have in not only the physical domain but also in the psychological and social domains. Designing and implementing evidence-based strength and conditioning programs specific to the youth population ensures that all youth will develop athleticism at their given level of endowment and be able to continue to participate in sports and physical activity throughout their life course. That is the C.O.R.E. of positive youth development and our primary mission as coaches of youth.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rick Howard helped start the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) Youth Special Interest Group (SIG) and served this year as Immediate Past Chair. In addition, Howard serves on the NSCA Membership Committee and is the NSCA State/Provincial Program Regional Coordinator for the Mid-Atlantic Region. Howard is involved in many pursuits that advance knowledge, skills, and coaching education to help all children enjoy lifelong physical activity and sports participation.