Development of a skills for life training program for youth soccer coaches

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Abstract

Youth soccer coaches in the Netherlands commonly do not dispose of the pedagogical knowledge and skills conducive to both the sportive as well as social-emotional development of their pupils. The purpose of the study is to compose a SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) program for soccer coaches that both in terms of structure and content is in line with the present state of knowledge in this area as well as is supported in these respects by the coaches themselves. **Research methods:** We choose, for the development of the intervention, a combination of a) a panel approach, round table discussions with soccer coaches with the aim of assembling information about the pedagogical demands and needs soccer coaches experience; and b) a review of the literature on effective SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) and SFL (Skills for Life) programs for adults. **Findings:** There appears a strong need among soccer coaches for pedagogical, i.e. social and emotional skills, in dealing with their pupils. Central components or active ingredients of evidence-based Skills4Life programs appeal to the coaches and are perceived as fulfilling important gaps in their coaching toolbox. **Conclusion:** An SEL program for youth soccer coaches is both manageable and meaningful as fulfilling their needs for social and emotional knowledge and skills and therewith extending their pedagogical coping repertoire. A manual has been composed that will be the focus of a feasibility and effectiveness study.
1. Introduction
In many European countries like The Netherlands, France and Denmark approximately 75% of pre-puberty children (roughly 6-11 year old) are reported to practice sports in one way or another. Politicians and sports policy makers all over Europe are intent on increasing participation grades even further, up to 75% or higher (NOC*NSF, 2009). Their main motive and argument is the supposition that participation in organized sports has a broad spectrum of positive effects on children and youngsters, physical, cognitive, social and moral. There is no convincing evidence for these (assumed) positive effects (Bailey et. al., 2009). A number authors hypothesize that it is not so much Sport participation itself but the influence of coaches that determine (positive) social-emotional effects.

2. Problem Statement
Scholars agree that a ‘good coach’ is someone who works towards the realization of positive effects of sport participation by creating a positive pedagogical climate. But at the same time the practice of the coach can be typed as complex, coaches have to fulfil different roles and they have to be a ‘role model’ (Cote, 2006). To complicate matters further the coaches are often not certified as a such. Recently in The Netherlands a growing increase of anti-social behavior in the soccer realm has been observed. Policy makers want to change that anti-social image in pro-social. The Dutch Soccer union asked, academics and coaches collaboratively, to develop a course for youth soccer coaches to stimulate pro-social behavior.

3. Research Questions
What should preferable be the structure and content of a Skills4Life program for enhancing pedagogical knowledge and skills of soccer coaches interacting with their pupils?

4. Purpose of the Study
The purpose of the study is to develop a Skills4Life training program for soccer coaches. This development process is a joint effort of academics and coaches. The aim of the course is to equip the coaches with skills needed to create a positive pedagogical soccer context respecting the complexity of the practice. Contemporary coaching education courses that are used to develop one or more of these skills have been criticized however. They seem to suggest that learning to coach is a process of mastery of mere content knowledge. They ignore the pedagogical complexity and contextual nature of coaching practices (Cushion, Armour & Jones, 2006).
5. Research Methods
We choose, for the development of the intervention, a combination of a) a panel approach, round table discussions with soccer coaches with the aim of assembling information about the pedagogical demands and needs soccer coaches experience; and b) a review of the literature on effective SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) and SFL (Skills for Life) programs for adults. The assumption is when scholars and coaches collaborate on initiating and developing an intervention it will be also an intervention ‘of the coaches’, which can strengthen the motivation for adapting the presented knowledge and skills for use in their coaching practice (Roberts, 2010).

6. Findings
Some quotes of the round table sessions: “In our club you are an educator, coach, father, you have to do it all.” “Our athletes come from various cultures.” “Some of my players are even known by the police!” “You cannot just talk to the group as a whole but you have to adapt to each individual”. “They expect us to have knowledge about social emotional development of the players, but we don’t.” The coaches thought and felt they had to deal with increasing individualization, aggression and complexity and with high expectations set by others (parents, athletes and the Dutch Union) and even themselves. Yet they frequently felt inadequate and often unsure. “I am ashamed of myself. Two boys fight a lot in training practices. When I see it I just look away because I don’t know how to solve that conflict.” A coach has to be able to deal with the players in a good way; they have to know when to intervene, I agree but I don’t feel competent to do so.” The coaches at the round table sessions wanted to change their coaching behavior. They asked to develop a course that can equip them with more belief in their personal abilities by equipping them with effective coping strategies. When reviewing skills4life programs during the round table discussions, academics and coaches together decided to adjust evidence based skills4life program (Gravesteijn & Diekstra, 2007) to the sport context.

7. Conclusions
A SEL program (short version and adjusted to the soccer context) for youth soccer coaches is both manageable and meaningful as to fulfilling their needs for pedagogical knowledge and skills. The projected course appears to be suitable to equip coaches with the ability to create a positive pedagogical context where pro-social behavior is enhanced and antisocial behaviours diminished. A manual has been composed that will be the focus of a feasibility and effective study.
References


