STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COACHES AND PARENTS – A CASE STUDY: ROMANIA vs. UK

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Abstract. *In the game of football, maybe more than in any other sport, the coach-parent relationship is not always positive. There are quite a few situations when it even becomes toxic, which unfortunately mainly affects the player. The psychological impact on the development of children who play football can be decisively influenced by the coach-athlete-parent triad. If the relationship between adults is not appropriate, then the triangle will be oriented with the tip (specifically, the child) down, which is undesirable in a high-level activity. Not infrequently, taking into account the negative perceptions that the two parties have of each other, they try to avoid any kind of communication or interaction. However, our experience in the field and the literature review prove otherwise. In this paper, we want to highlight the extremely important role that communication can play in solving all existing problems between coaches and parents, and through the comparative analysis between the United Kingdom (UK) and Romania, we will try to see whether there are similarities and differences in addressing this issue. The responses to the questionnaire applied to coaches from the two countries mentioned above can establish new strategic directions for solving problems with the help of communication.*

Keywords: coach, communication, football, parents.

Introduction

Sports activity in general has special characteristics, which more or less distinguish it from other daily activities in modern society. Within the basic sports activities, a very topical issue is the coach-parent relationship that actually focuses on the child and performance.

Increased physical activity, especially among young people, keeps the upward trend of globalisation of the sports phenomenon. Thus, sport participation of the members of society solves a public health problem in general but also in the current epidemiological context. Achieving performance in sport requires, in addition to skills and a lot of work from athletes, an optimal relationship between coaches and parents. In recent decades, the literature has shown a growing interest in understanding the nature of coach and parental involvement in youth sports (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Knight et al., 2011; Danioni et al. 2017; Lisinskiene et al., 2019).

But this equation has limits that are related to coach-parent communication, namely how the interests of both parties converge towards achieving common goals. Obviously, there are objective and subjective views on both sides of the mini-system addressed in this study.

Two important factors (which are characteristic of the football activity but not only) underlie the interpersonal relationship between coaches and parents:

- the athlete (regardless of age);
- the training process of the future professional player.

Both coaches and parents relate to these two factors according to:

- the level of knowledge acquired through specific training or general culture;
- the level of understanding the game of football with everything it includes (training process, competition process, game rules, sporting life, etc.);
- expectations (obtaining direct results in competitions or coaching valuable players, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the personal achievement of children and meeting the expectations of their families through the game of football).

In today's sport, where private clubs are predominant, parents choose who coaches their children. In turn, the clubs, through the coaches they hire, try to solve these demands, but this phenomenon is not yet carefully studied by researchers. (Horne et al., 2020)

Through their cooperative efforts, many parents are productive contributors to young people's sporting experiences (Gould et al., 2006). However, Smoll et al. (2011) note that "the negative effects of a rather small minority of parents are all too obvious" (p. 13).

For an effective educational system, the motivated participation of all components of the coach-athlete-parent triangle is needed. Recent research has shown that the three-dimensional education system is underdeveloped and has limited effectiveness even if the process is positive. But such a three-dimensional system can have a decisive influence on the young athlete's decision to participate in sport, remain in sport and pursue a sports career. Parents play a major role not only in the child's athletic development (Lisinskiene et al., 2019) but also in the choice of a sport type. Empirical research has shown that mothers are the ones who most often choose the sport that their children play, and the main criterion for their choice is the child's safety.

For the educational system to be effective in the world of sport in general (including football), the coach-parent binomial must rely on distinct but converging areas of interest. These are:

A. For the coach:

- To prioritise the process of coaching players (instead of forming the teams);
- To be concerned with the coaching process and the use of the latest training methods and means through which to increase the individual value of players.
- To be focused on the learning, consolidation and improvement of the right skills (creating automation) and the correction of wrong skills.
- To train and educate children and juniors in the spirit of unanimously valid social values;
- To be concerned with the conditions related to quality training (basic materials, intuitive materials, quality devices, etc.);
- To be permanently concerned with professional development and self-improvement;
- To keep constantly informed about the top events in the world of football at all levels (World Cup, European Cup, Champions League, seniors, youth, juniors).

B. For parents:

- Social development of children in a favourable environment;
- Avoiding difficult situations such as early school leaving (Badea et al., 2020)
- Giving children the opportunity to acquire a social status;
- Supporting children to acquire character traits necessary in other professions;

- Highlighting some exceptional qualities of their children.

In the context of youth sport, coaches, parents, siblings, peers and officials form a complex and multifaceted social network that influences the experiences gained by young athletes through sport participation (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Brustad & Partridge, 2002; Weiss & Smith, 2002). Research has revealed that the time and effort that young athletes devote to training and competition depend on the material and emotional support provided especially by coaches and parents (Bloom, 1985; Brustad, 1993; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1988; Weiss & Hayashi, 1995). Although research has consistently shown that the coach-athlete-parent triad forms an important system that determines athletes' sporting experiences, it is not exactly known how parents can influence them (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005).

The structure of the relationships, of the communication between coaches and parents needs to be based on trust and sincerity, the little footballers' success being in the foreground.

Information such as the following must be communicated without restraint between coaches and parents so that the effects are as small as possible, if not completely eliminated:

- there are family problems that influence the child's effective and emotional participation in training;
- the child has health problems;
- the child's school situation is not very good;
- there are problems related to the child's participation in training;
- the child's interest in football decreases;
- the child's level of training acquired in sport is declining, there is no progress.

In such a context, task goal orientation was explained by motivational climates initiated by parents, peers and coaches, although parent and peer climates were most influential. Children with higher task orientations showed greater athletic competence, self-esteem and sport enjoyment. (Atkins et al., 2014)

The expectations and values of coaches and parents can easily influence children's perceptions and sport choices (Brustad et al., 2001). To keep the focus on the athlete's positive development, a sport psychology practitioner should be added to act as a primary stakeholder who informs and facilitates the positive dialogue between adult stakeholder groups. Thus, it is vitally important for this practitioner to carefully consider the roles played by coaches and parents in the athlete's experience, as both may either impede development or encourage positive change in a child-athlete. To ensure that adult stakeholders have a positive influence on the child-athlete, it is necessary for the practitioner to act in the best interests of the child-athlete or team, in addition to balancing the parents' legal rights. (Blom et al., 2013)

During several years of training, the coach-parent relationship can sometimes be very good or other times more difficult and tense at group level. The specific training conditions and the large number of children and parents involved in training and games, who think they know football at least as well as the coach, make communication a difficult process. Therefore, the existence of a set of rules that parents must follow when they want to develop a constructive relationship with the coach of the group of children or juniors is practically mandatory. The coach, who is entrusted by parents to lead and guide the sporting experiences of their sons or daughters, must be able to identify the different types of parents and effectively communicate with each of them. (Van Mullem & Cole, 2015)

Through the responses obtained with the help of the questionnaire applied to Romanian and English coaches, we want to know the opinions (similarities and differences) about the content of a set of rules designed to be as constructive as possible.

Problem statement

The tasks of this scientific approach were as follows:

- identifying problems related to the communication between coaches and parents;
- establishing better communication strategies between coaches and parents;
- highlighting the similarities and differences between Romanian and UK coaches in addressing the issue.

Research questions

- Do the responses received after applying the questionnaire allow us to establish certain strategies to improve the communication between coaches and parents?
- Is parent-coach communication fundamentally different from one country to another?

Purpose of the study

The research aims to find the best ways for coach-parent communication, which will lead to improving the performance of football players.

Methodology

The research was conducted on 48 coaches working at all levels of performance: grassroots, children and juniors, seniors.

The distribution by nationality was as follows: 30 Romanians and 18 English coaches.

To carry out the research, the following methods were used: documentation, questionnaire survey, mathematical and statistical processing and graphical method.

Instruments: to solve the research issues, we used a questionnaire consisting of 15 items (all of them with predefined responses). The questionnaire was completed using the Google Forms application in both Romanian and English.

The questionnaire items are presented below:

1. How often do you communicate with children's parents during the competition year? (a. after each workout; b. once a week; c. once a month; d. only when necessary);
2. What information do you provide during parent meetings? (a. Information related to the competition (or competitions); b. Information related to the training process; c. Information related to children's development; d. Other information);
3. What is the most common application you use to communicate with parents? (a. Yahoo mail; b. WhatsApp; c. Text messages; d. Messenger; e. Other);

4. Which specific factor do you think parents should understand and apply with their children during the training process? (a. Biological factor - nutrition, recovery; b. Psychological factor; c. Physical factor; d. Technical-tactical factor);
5. Do you think that talking to children's parents is a stress factor? (a. Yes; b. No);
6. In the conversations you have with children's parents, do you think that they try to influence your decisions in any way? (a. Yes; b. No);
7. After each conversation with parents, most of the ideas expressed were: (a. All positive; b. Mostly positive; c. Mostly negative; d. All negative);
8. Indicate if you agree with the following statement: "From a sports point of view, parents know their children best" (a. Totally agree; b. Partially agree; c. Partially disagree; d. Totally disagree);
9. How much has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your way of communicating with parents? (a. To a large extent; b. Only a little; c. Not at all);
10. Do you think that scoring children and making parents aware of the results after each training session/game could improve team performance? (a. Yes; b. No; c. Maybe);
11. What do you think is the best way to communicate with all parents in the group? (a. Communicating with a parent representative; b. Communicating with each parent individually; c. Communicating with all parents at the same time);
12. Do you communicate aspects of the training process to parents? (a. Always; b. Sometimes; c. Never);
13. Do you communicate game analysis aspects to parents? (a. Always; b. Sometimes; c. Never);
14. Do you inform parents about their children's results in assessment tests? (a. Always; b. Sometimes; c. Never);
15. Indicate how you approach the following situation: A parent wants to talk to you after a game in which their child played less than usual or not at all (a. You refuse to talk about that child; b. You postpone the discussion for another day; c. You talk to that parent and give them details immediately after the game; d. Other).

Results and Discussion

Table 1. *Summary table of the percentage expression for the 15 questions*

		a	b	c	d	e
Q1	RO	14.30%	28.60%	14.30%	42.90%	
	UK	15.30%	23.10%	30.80%	30.80%	
Q2	RO	25%	14.30%	53.60%	7.10%	
	UK	30.80%	7.70%	53.80%	7.70%	
Q3	RO	4%	85.70%	0.00%	0.00%	10.70%
	UK	0.00%	46.20%	15.40%	7.70%	30.80%
Q4	RO	64.30%	28.60%	7.10%	0.00%	
	UK	23.10%	61.50%	7.70%	7.70%	
Q5	RO	25.00%	75.00%			
	UK	23.10%	76.90%			
Q6	RO	64.30%	35.70%			
	UK	61.50%	38.50%			
Q7	RO	28.60%	50.00%	17.90%	3.60%	
	UK	30.80%	53.80%	15.40%	0%	

Q8	RO	3.60%	10.70%	28.60%	57.10%
	UK	15.40%	30.80%	30.80%	23%
Q9	RO	14.30%	60.70%	25.00%	
	UK	38.50%	23.10%	38.50%	
Q10	RO	35.70%	60.70%	3.60%	
	UK	23.10%	53.80%	23.10%	
Q11	RO	25.00%	39.30%	35.70%	
	UK	15.40%	30.70%	53.90%	
Q12	RO	10.70%	42.90%	46.40%	
	UK	30.80%	69.20%	0.00%	
Q13	RO	7.10%	42.90%	50.00%	
	UK	23.10%	69.20%	7.70%	
Q14	RO	25.00%	53.60%	21.40%	
	UK	30.80%	38.40%	30.80%	
Q15	RO	3.60%	39.30%	46.40%	10.70%
	UK	0.00%	23.10%	69.20%	7.70%

Figure 1. Percentage of responses to Question 1

Most coaches from both countries believe that communication with parents after each workout is not necessary. However, we notice that English coaches talk to children's parents every month, while in Romania, they communicate with a higher frequency (weekly).

Figure 2. Percentage of responses to Question 2

Analysing the responses to Question 2, similarities are observed between the two countries, which are mainly related to information on the child's development process and less to the training and competition process.

Figure 3. Percentage of responses to Question 3

The applications used to communicate with parents differ from one country to another: in Romania, the favourite application is WhatsApp, while in the UK, text messages, Messenger and others are used in a much higher percentage.

Figure 4. Percentage of responses to Question 4

The responses to this question show that the information provided by coaches to parents is fundamentally different from one country to another. Thus, most Romanian coaches believe that information on the biological factor is the most important, while in England, the psychological factor is predominant.

Figure 5. Percentage of responses to Question 5

In both countries, even if 3 out of 4 coaches do not perceive the discussion with parents as a stress factor, there is however a fairly high percentage (about 25%) of coaches who have a different opinion. The aspect to be highlighted in this case is the very close percentage between the two countries.

Figure 6. Percentage of responses to Question 6

The chart above shows that the behaviour of parents is almost identically perceived by coaches from both countries. More than half of parents try to influence coaches' decisions through different methods.

Figure 7. Percentage of responses to Question 7

In this case too, similarities are noticed in the responses of coaches from both countries. Thus, communication with parents largely generates positive ideas.

Figure 8. Percentage of responses to Question 8

The perception of Romanian coaches regarding the topic of Question 8 is clear: parents do not know their children best from a sports point of view. In the case of English coaches, the perception is similar but in a much smaller proportion (just over 50%).

Figure 9 Percentage of responses to Question 9

Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe that the much stricter restrictions in the UK compared to Romania have influenced to some extent the responses of coaches from both countries. It was thus noticed that the impact of the pandemic on sports activity was less felt in Romania (85.7%) compared to the UK (61.6%).

Figure 10. Percentage of responses to Question 10

In both countries, more than half of respondents believe that scoring children after each training session will not lead to improved team performance. However, Romanian coaches are more radical as regards the opportunity to use objective indicators in the process of achieving results with their athletes.

Figure 11. Percentage of responses to Question 11

Analysing the results highlighted in Figure 11, we notice that English coaches prefer to communicate with the entire group of parents, while Romanian coaches believe that individual meetings have the greatest impact.

Figure 12. Percentage of responses to Question 12

The responses given by Romanian and English coaches to Question 12 are totally different: if English coaches constantly provide parents with information about the training process, only a little over half (53.6%) of Romanians agree with this.

Figure 13. Percentage of responses to Question 13

The communication trend observed in the previous question is maintained in the case of game analysis. Thus, half of the Romanian coaches never communicate game-related aspects to parents, and English coaches do this in a low percentage (7.7%).

Figure 14. Percentage of responses to Question 14

Informing parents about their children's results in assessment tests is viewed somehow differently by coaches from the two countries. It is thus observed that Romanian coaches are more open to communicating children's results to their parents, while UK coaches are rather reluctant to do so.

Figure 15. Percentage of responses to Question 15

Coaches from the two countries have a different approach to the situation described in Question 15. If Romanian coaches prefer to postpone the discussion for another day, most English coaches (69.2%) accept the discussion immediately after the game. We emphasise that generally refusing to talk to parents is not an option for coaches.

Conclusion

The conclusions drawn from this study highlight the following important aspects:

- Coach-parent communication has an increasingly important role in the current process of training young football players;
- The information obtained brings to the fore a specific range of problems that, if not resolved through communication, could be a factor of imbalance in the performance of football players of any age;
- The coach is the main factor of communication within the athletic triangle (coach-player-parent), having the ability to objectively manage the different facets of the phenomenon. At the same time, parents, under the rule of subjectivism, can facilitate this relationship, but the most important thing is not to damage it;
- The responses obtained highlight common features of coach-parent communication in football in both the UK and Romania, but the approaches are different;
- The responses obtained may be the basis for the composition of coach-parent communication rules that are unanimously accepted in the specific area of football;
- The coach-parent relationship in both the UK and in Romania is seen by respondents as being more and more specialised.

We can say that the study has led to explicit responses that can contribute to building general communication strategies for coaches and parents, the differences not being fundamental in the common space of the football phenomenon.

After analysing the questionnaire presented in this study, we can design a strategy for the coach-parent communication, which aims at the following directions:

- At the beginning of the season (competition year), establishing performance objectives (both group and individual ones) together with the club's sports director during a meeting;
- Organising monthly meetings with parents to discuss the achievement level of the proposed objectives and how to solve both current and unforeseen problems (if applicable);
- Completing individual player sheets and sending them by e-mail every six (or three) months.

Data provided by the proposed questionnaire highlight the need for communication between coaches and parents but do not reveal more or less important ways of communication in this regard.

Even if we cannot objectively quantify the implications of this bivalent relationship through this research, we think that a good relationship (permanent feedback) between coaches and parents will certainly lead to an increased level of player quality and ultimately to achieving the desired performance.

Authors' Contribution

Both authors have equally contributed to this study.

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