

# Creating a Healthy & Effective Motivational Climate

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In a perfect world, each child that signs up for a youth sports program would enter the season motivated to learn and compete, emotionally equipped to process failure and setbacks, focused on working hard and putting forth his best effort, possessing strong self-esteem and an optimistic outlook. Indeed, in the report, "The Implications of the Motivational Climate In Gymnastics: A Review Of Recent Research", Dr. Joan Duda identifies six characteristics of a motivated athlete. \*They are:

1. "...strives for optimally challenging goals, rather than goals which are too easy (so she is guaranteed success) or much too difficult (so she, like others, won't reach these goals)."
2. "...performs up to her potential on a consistent basis."
3. "...rebounds from mistakes, defeats and set-backs. In other words, such occurrences enhance her motivation rather than make her feel like giving up."
4. "...gives her best effort and enjoys working hard."
5. "...looks forward to continued participation in sport and does not want to drop out."
6. "...feels competent to accomplish what the sport demands of her and feels in control of her gymnastics experience."

Most coaches would agree people possessing these six characteristics are usually the most successful and well adjusted athletes. But, we don't live in a perfect world where these attributes are acquired at birth. As Dr. Duda points out, motivated athletes are not born that way. "Motivation is a product of an athlete's socialization in and out of sport." With coaches of competitive athletes having a major influence over that socialization, the question becomes, "What is the most effective and healthy way to motivate gymnasts?"

Experts in sport psychology have identified two types of motivational environments that are present, to varying degrees, in the sport setting. Dr. Duda explains, the predominantly task-involving climate is one in which athletes feel like the coach:

- "Rewards high effort"
- emphasizes collaboration between teammates"
- makes everyone feel like they play an important role on the team or in the gym"
- views mistakes as part of the learning process and teaches athletes to do the same."

In the ego-involving climate, athletes perceive the coach:

- "gives most of her or his attention to the best athletes"
- "fosters rivalry between teammates"
- "punishes the gymnast when she makes a mistake in training or competition."

Likewise, an athletes' individual goal orientation (how she defines success) can vary. Athletes who are predominantly task oriented determine their success by how hard they try and how much their skills and performance improves. They feel successful when they do their best, are able to improve their technique and feel they contribute to the team. They generally like who they are and are confident to do what is required in the sport. An athlete who is predominantly ego-oriented focuses on normative goals.

Athletes feel successful if they have shown superior ability (or equal ability with less effort). There is more emphasis on outcome than process.

It is important to note that "gymnasts vary in their degree of task and ego orientation. These orientations are not bi-polar opposites; an athlete can be high in both orientations, high in one and low in the other, or low in both orientations." In any case, the athletes goal orientation is influenced by the type of motivational environment in the gym and the research clearly confirms, it is the task-involving climate which should predominate.

The predominately ego-involving oriented environment has been related to athletes having greater performance anxiety and self doubt and other behaviors which are counter productive to both physical health and gymnastics success. With the task-oriented motivational climate coaches are more likely to produce athletes who are confident, coachable, willing to work hard for commonly agreed upon goals, and who enjoy gymnastics.

USA Gymnastics has devoted a great deal of time and resources to the study of motivational climates in gymnastics. Dr. Duda and colleagues have studied a wide spectrum of athletes. Each study had a unique focus but all shed light on this issue. The results confirm the motivational atmosphere in the gym can greatly affect performance effort and success and long term participation in the sport. More specifically, the findings indicate how the gymnast perceives herself, how she responds to anxiety, to what extent she practices healthy behaviors, and her personal goal orientation is significantly influenced by the motivational orientation in the gym and the behaviors of both the coach and parents.

In the report, Dr. Duda summarizes, "the studies highlighted provide a rationale for why we should reduce the ego-involving features and enhance the task-involving characteristics of the motivational climates which envelope female and male gymnasts."

To that end, the balance of this article will identify practical suggestions for structuring the atmosphere in the gym to set the stage for the task-involving motivation to thrive. Factors to consider are:

- General standards for interaction in the gym
- Types of Feedback
- Quality of relationships
- Use of authority: empowering athletes to take responsibility for their sport experience
- Value and enjoyment in the "task"

## **General Standards for Interaction in the Gym**

The general climate of a task-involving setting is one that is well organized, communicates respect for the athletes and parents, and operates under standards of fairness and impartiality. Following are more specific examples of these characteristics:

### **Well Organized**

- Program goals and performance goals are clearly communicated for each level of athlete. (ie., team and parents meetings, club brochure's, team handbook)
- Athlete knows what is the expected behavior for workouts and competition (ie., tasks are easily defined and understood, training schedule is well thought out and followed, consequences for inappropriate behavior are given).

## Communicating Respect for Athletes and Parents

- Display unconditional acceptance of the athlete (regardless of performance).
- Show a concern for other aspects of the athlete's life (besides gymnastics).
- Provide opportunities for parents to be involved in gym activities.
- Arrange goal setting conferences with athlete and parent.
- Communicate respect for individual differences of athletes and their families.

## Operate with standards of fairness and impartiality

"We knew our coach had high expectations but some-how he remained kind, gentle and fair. His coaching style built national champions and strong self esteem at the same time."

- Joyce Tanac & Cleo Carver, *1968 Olympians about their coach, George Lewis*

- Communicate unconditional acceptance of athlete regardless of performance.
- As far as it is possible, give each athlete equal time and attention.
- Ensure that the consequences for inappropriate behavior are the same for all.

## Types of Feedback

"As an enthusiastic beginner, I was told everything I needed to do.

As an elite Olympian, my coach would often say very little.

Sometimes, good coaching means saying nothing."

- Peter Vidmar, *1984 Olympic Pommel Horse Champion*

Another critical area that defines the predominant motivational climate is the type of feedback given to athletes. The task-involving climate will have responses which emphasize effort, improvement and skill mastery. The ego-involving climate will focus on the win-loss record and the athlete's ability. Suggestions for developing a predominantly task-involving environment include:

## Feedback

- Focus on already established strengths and learned skills.
- Improve weaknesses in small steps.
- Recognize even small improvement in technique as part of a learning process.
- Emphasize what is wanted, discourage what is not wanted.
- Give constructive, skill-specific feedback instead of attacking some aspect of their performance or personality.
- Practice eliminating negative thoughts and expressions of self doubt (see *The Athlete Wellness Book*, Chapter 3, Mental Skills Development).
- Eliminate "luck" from thoughts about performance. Be so confident that luck is not a factor.
- Use humor to diffuse tense situations.
- Change activities if plagued by recurring problems.
- Keep the atmosphere light and goal oriented.
- Avoid showing disappointment and discouragement.
- Never focus on a characteristic the athlete can't change (ie., physical characteristic, family circumstances).
- Discourage gymnasts from comparing themselves with others.
- Never allow the gymnast to dwell on a failure. Encourage him to learn from mistakes and move forward.

- Discourage worrying or distressing over some aspect of competition or performance.
- Place more emphasis on meeting pre-determined performance goals rather than beating a rival athlete or team.
- Recognize good effort by rewarding hard work.

## Rewards

- Provide privileges in the gym.
- Schedule well earned breaks.
- Plan social time with fellow team members. (Outside of workout time.)
- Serve healthy snacks.
- Create personal "mastery" charts that are recorded and monitored by the gymnast.
- Give awards for effort (t-shirts, trinkets, posters, photographs, best effort for the day award).
- Recognize an athlete who has helped teammates or competitors (congeniality, spirit, most inspirational award).
- Provide time for mental skills instruction (see *The Athlete Wellness Book*, Chapter 4, Mental Skills Development).

The following adaptation highlights different verbal responses in a task-oriented vs. ego-oriented environment.

## Responses Which Emphasize...

<b>Task Orientation (Effort/Improvement/Skill Mastery)</b>	vs.	<b>Ego Orientation (Ability/Winning &amp; Losing)</b>
"How did you perform?" or "Did you have fun?"	vs.	"Did you win?"
"You're really nailing those beam dismounts."	vs.	"It's too bad you didn't stand up your double back today."
"You were a real encouragement Sam/Sue."	vs.	"You're better than Sam/Sue. "
"You really stayed positive even though the scores were so low."	vs.	"You probably would have won today if the scores weren't low."
"I was proud of the way you stayed determined and focused throughout the whole meet."	vs.	"That team from across town was lucky!"

(Adapted from Skill Builder exercise in *Motivating Kids: Balancing Learning, Fun and Ego*. By Mary C. Walling, Ph.D. and Joan L. Duda, Ph.D. PerformanceEdge 1995. Volume 4, No. 6)

## Relationships With and Among Athletes

Task-involving and ego-involving climates can also be identified by the type of emphasis placed on relationships within the gym. The task-involving climate emphasizes collaboration between teammates and makes everyone feel like they play an important role on the team or in the gym. The ego-involving climate is one where the coach gives more attention to the best athletes and fosters rivalry between teammates. As Dr. Duda cites, "Studies of athletes from a variety of sports at different competitive levels have found that when athletes perceive their team climate as a more task-involving, they report greater enjoyment of their sport, rate their coach more favorably and believe that one needs to work hard to get ahead in that activity." Healthy relationships are key to this type of satisfaction. Following are

some practical ways coaches and parents can contribute to this type of climate.

- Hold team meetings to strategize and set goals.
- Provide opportunities for and reward teammates for helping one another.
- Encourage gymnasts to aid each other in skill development by giving feed-back on technique.
- Discourage making comparisons between and among teammates and competitors.
- Allow gymnasts to use creativity in their interaction and occasionally allow them to organize practice.
- Allow gymnasts to hold their own team meetings and encourage athlete leadership.
- Model the behavior you desire.
- Hold athletes accountable for the way they treat others in the gym.
- Provide social opportunities for friendships to build outside workout. (ie., gym sleep-overs, end of the year parties, volunteer as a team for a local cause.)

### **Use of Authority: Empowering Athletes to Take Responsibility for Their Sport Experience**

An effective coach needs to use her expertise to compile training schedules, set goals and expectations, know when to push and when to back off. Coaching, like parenting, requires a keen sensitivity to know when to exercise authority and when to give the athlete control over his own decisions. There is no magic formula that calculates how much independence each athlete should have. But, research in sport psychology and many related fields overwhelmingly supports the environment that encourages athletes to take some control over athletic goals and participation. (See Chapter Two: Child Development As It Relates To Gymnastics and Chapter Five: The Female Athlete Triad). Encouraging the athlete to focus on what she can control leads to a more confident and self-directed person. In contrast, an athlete who feels she has no control over her circumstances can resort to unhealthy behavior such as eating disorders (an attempt to control something), mood swings, temper tantrums, and depression, to name a few...hardly the profile of a motivated athlete.

When examining the characteristics of the two types of motivational climates it is the task-involving climate that encourages athlete-initiated behavior. High effort is rewarded, cooperation is encouraged, contributions are applauded, and mistakes and failures are examined and learned from. The ego-involving climate minimizes the control an athlete has over his/her experience. She has little control over who the coach chooses to train, how teammates treat her, and there is a small margin for error without experiencing punitive consequences.

### **Suggestions on how to encourage athletes to take responsibility for and exercise control over circumstances and emotions include:**

- Give the gymnast a chance to make some decisions regarding training (ie: choose the intensity or duration of practice on a given day).
- Give the gymnast some choices regarding workout plans (what event takes priority).
- Allow choices in the order of events practiced.
- Allow input in scheduling, practices, competition, travel and other activities.
- Provide choices in training aids and other equipment when possible.
- Provide choices in the use and kind of music.
- Incorporate mental skill training into the workout.
- Partner with health care providers (nutritionist, sport psychology consultant, athletic trainer) so the coach is not perceived as the authority on health issues.

## Empowering Gymnasts To Control Anxiety

Gymnasts of all levels can find themselves anxious and emotionally out of control. When this happens, anxiety causes muscular tension that deters the body from doing that it is trained to do. Effective coaches enable gymnasts to address the challenges and exercise control over their emotions. Strong self-confidence and a clear sense of direction will result. It is the essence of the task-oriented approach to sports and life. It is the opposite of the ego-oriented approach where athletes see themselves at the mercy of forces beyond their control or at the whim of others they perceive to be in control.

## Practical Tips for Coaches to Help Athletes Control Anxiety

1. Encourage the athlete to practice short periods of deep breathing to calm himself, to get centered and to bring about a more relaxed state.
2. Suggest the gymnast take a "time out" to think about the task at hand and to remove unrelated thoughts. Example: Focus on the technique of the beam mount and block out thoughts of, "What will happen if I don't get this."
3. Make positive imagery a common component of practice. Visualize performing the skill and "feeling" it successfully performed in the mind. Example: Get a good mental picture of a stuck dismount.
4. Encourage the gymnast to engage in positive self talk to develop an internal mechanism that will guide her through a difficult combination or competitive situation. Example: "Square my hips over the beam."
5. Teach the gymnast to devise her own plan to rid her mind of negative influences. Create a mantra that breaks the pattern of self defeating thoughts. Example: "Think strong," "Focus."
6. Teach the athlete to be aware of his thought process during a successful performance. Implement what works.
7. Practice blocking out internal and external distractions. Example: create as near to a real competition experience as possible and create typical distractions while the athlete is performing her routine.
8. Encourage athletes to compartmentalize their focus. Example: When at practice teach them to ignore unrelated events that may be happening in their life. This is an especially helpful skill for adolescents.
9. Develop a pre-competition routine that provides stability and familiarity even in the midst of the most stressful and / or unfamiliar environment. Example: Perform the same warm-up routine, eat the same pre-competition meal, listen to the same motivational tape.
10. Teach, practice and exude optimism. Coaches who model optimism create a positive atmosphere that breeds perseverance and success.

Giving gymnasts some control in their training enables their own personalities to grow. This growth will be evident in both confident performance and strong self-esteem which benefits both gymnastics and personal development.

## Teaching Value and Enjoyment in the "Task"

"I liked that we were always reminded that gymnastics could be fun.  
My coach always wanted us to retain the love for gymnastics and that motivated me."  
- Elizabeth Crandell, National Team Member 1987-1993

The challenge of the "task" in sports is especially apparent in gymnastics where each new skill presents a new task to be mastered. A task oriented environment is one where the athlete is taught to find as

much satisfaction in the journey (learning process) as she derives from reaching her destination (fulfilled goals). If an athlete enjoys the journey, her level of commitment will be greater, her response to mistakes and failure will be tempered with perseverance, and her motivation will be fueled by endurance. The coach has a significant influence on whether or not the journey is a rewarding one. How do you make someone enjoy what at times can be a tremendously grueling and difficult road?

- Look for opportunities to celebrate. (ie., mastering a trick, overcoming fear for the first time, creating an original skill.)
- Encourage relationships. Since gymnastics is predominantly an individual sport it can be a lonely pursuit. Friendships, even if only one or two, can enhance any sports endeavor and make the journey more enjoyable.
- Find ways for athletes to integrate other interests into their gymnastics experience. (ie., schedule an exhibition at their school, hire the older gymnasts to teach the younger classes, schedule site-seeing time during out of town meets, help with gymnastics-related school projects.)

As Dr. Duda states, there is still much to be studied about the most optimum conditions for motivating athletes. But enough is known about the satisfaction and achievement of athletes who perceive to be training in a task oriented environment to confirm its value over a predominantly ego-oriented motivational climate. Hopefully the research findings from within our sport and the suggestions in this overview will encourage the gymnastics professional to invest in the task oriented environment.

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The above chapter is an excerpt from *The Athlete Wellness Book*, the newly published text for USA Gymnastics Athlete Wellness Course. The book can be ordered through USA Gymnastics Merchandising Department by calling 1-800-345-4719."

\*(Unless otherwise noted all the above quotes are from *The Athlete Wellness Book*, Appendix V, "The Implications of the Motivational Climate In Gymnastics: A Review of Recent Research" by Joan Duda, Ph.D.)

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