

Good Work Project Report Series, Number 15

Getting Kids, Parents, and Coaches
On the Same Page

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2000

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Since 1995, three teams of investigators, under the direction of Howard Gardner, of Harvard University, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of Claremont Graduate University, and William Damon of Stanford University, have been researching the ways in which leading professionals in a variety of domains carry out good work. "Good work" is used in a dual sense: 1) work that is deemed to be of high quality and 2) work that is socially responsible. Through intensive, face-to-face interviews, the researchers have investigated several domains, including journalism, genetics, business, jazz music, theater, philanthropy, and higher education. Pilot studies have been conducted of medicine and the rapidly emerging domain of "cyberlaw", with plans to explore these areas more fully in the future.

In addition to this central line of study, several other related lines of investigation have been launched:

1. The Origins of Good Work project is an examination of teenagers who excel in extracurricular activities.
2. The Dedicated Young Professionals Study focuses on those who have just begun (or will soon begin) promising professional careers.
3. Good Work in Interdisciplinary Contexts. Pilot studies of new arts/science media and of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab have been completed. Plans are underway to study interdisciplinary work at the pre-collegiate, college, and research institution level.
4. The Role of Contemplative Practices investigates the ways in which contemplation/meditation influence how professionals carry out work.
5. Encouraging Good Work in Journalism. This project, carried out in conjunction with the Committee of Concerned Journalists, is currently developing a "traveling curriculum" for use in newsrooms around the country.
6. Good Work as Transmitted through Lineages examines how the principle of doing good work is passed down through continuous generations of teachers to students or from mentors to less experienced professionals.
7. Good Work in Other Societies is a project spearheaded by colleagues at Denmark's Royal Danish School of Education that investigates good work in Denmark and Latvia. In the future, additional international components will be added.

The Project expects to issue a variety of books, reports, and related documentation. The present series, launched in early 2001, includes reports on several of the lines of research mentioned above. For further information on the Good Work Project, contact Professor Howard Gardner's office at 617-496-4929, via email at hgasst@harvard.edu, or through regular mail at 201 Larsen Hall, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA, 02138.

Papers On Good Work
February 2001

1. The Project on Good Work: A Description (April, 2000), Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi, and William Damon.
2. The Ethical Responsibilities of Professionals (July, 1998), Howard Gardner
3. The Empirical Basis of Good Work: Methodological Considerations (June, 1997), Howard Gardner, Anne Gregory, Mihalyi Csikzentmihalyi, William Damon, and Mimi Michaelson.
4. Good Work in Business (August, 2000), Kim Barberich and Howard Gardner.
5. Good Work Among Dedicated Young Professionals (July, 2000), Becca Solomon, Greg Feldman, and Marcy LeLacheur.
6. Contemplation and Implications for Good Work in Teaching (August, 1998), Laurinda Morway, Jeff Solomon, Mimi Michaelson, and Howard Gardner.
7. Good Work in a Complex World: A Cross Cultural Comparison (November, 1998), Hans Henrik Knoop and Howard Gardner.
8. Opportunities and Obstacles for Good Work in Medicine (August, 2000), Jeff Solomon, Jennifer DiBara, Sara Simeone, and Dan Dillon.
9. New Media Art: A New Frontier or Continued Tradition? (January, 2001), Kaley Middlebrooks.
10. The Origins of Good Work (April, 2000), Wendy Fischman and Grace Lam.
11. Good Work among Albert Schweitzer Fellows (April, 1999), Wendy Fischman, Becca Solomon, and Deborah Shutte.
12. High Abilities and Excellence: A Cultural Perspective (2000), Jin Li
13. Interdisciplinary Research and Education: Preliminary Perspectives from the MIT Media Laboratory (January, 2001), Dan Dillon.
14. Good Work in Cyberlaw (August, 2000), Evan Zullow.
15. Getting Kids, Parents, and Coaches on the Same Page (2000), Becca Solomon and Howard Gardner.

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I. Introduction

Some estimates claim that over 40 million American youth play organized sports.¹ Though statistics vary, one thing is certain: sports are an important part of our culture, and they clearly affect the lives of our children and youth. Just what that effect is, however, is not as clear-cut. Certainly, there are benefits. Young people enjoy the exercise, social interaction, and feeling of accomplishment they derive from success in sports. Adults point to young athletes' experiences with collaboration, problem solving, and leadership.

However, there is a more disheartening side to youth sports. Nearly three-quarters of young athletes drop out by age 13, largely because of performance pressure from adults.² In today's success-oriented culture, affluent parents pay \$70 an hour for professional coaches to teach their child to hit a baseball; coaches have been known to rig games in order to win; and young people often compete in as many as five games on a weekend day.

The sports arena can be viewed as a microcosm of our communities: when young people participate in decisions that impact their own lives, they develop self esteem, independence, and a sense of mastery. When the objectives of children, parents, and coaches are in alignment, youth sports provide positive physical experiences as well as opportunities to practice behaviors that are beneficial to our communities. Students learn fairness, teamwork, and even frustration management. In the best of circumstances, the confidence youth gain from sports encourages positive development.

¹ Ferguson, Andrew, *Time Magazine*, "SPORT: Inside the Crazy Culture of Kids Sports," Vol. 154 No. 2, JULY 12, 1999.

² Ibid.

But what happens when youth/adult relationships are "out of sync"? What difficulties arise when expectations from different stakeholders—in this case, kids, parents, and coaches—are "misaligned"?

As part of the "Origins of Good Work", a project started at Harvard Project Zero in 1995, we explore the obstacles and pressures that exist in the youth sports arena. This article presents findings from our research.

II. The Origins of Good Work Project

The goal of the Origins of Good Work project is to examine the ways in which young people make sense of extracurricular activities to which they are deeply committed. We selected several activity areas, and interviewed youth who were passionate about their involvement. Because of the prominence of sports in so many children's lives, we included young athletes in our sample—specifically, ice-skaters and gymnasts.

Through the course of the project, we carried out intensive interviews of five skaters (three girls and two boys) and nine gymnasts (all girls), aged 10-15 (with the exception of one 17-year-old male). Each student devoted a minimum of ten hours a week to the activity for at least one year—though their dedication often far exceeded this minimum criteria for inclusion in our study.

To add an adult perspective on youth sports, researchers also interviewed gymnastics and skating coaches, as well as several parents. Our research team hosted a series of focus groups with parents and a meeting with practitioners (instructors and coaches), to learn about their concerns for and perspectives on these students. The practitioner focus group included coaches working in team sports; their perspectives helped us to expand our understanding of sports beyond individual involvement.

III. Case Studies

Skaters A and B both love their sport. They are close in age and exhibit comparable dedication. Differences emerge, however, in the satisfaction levels of their skating experiences. Skater A is uncomfortable with the demands of her family and coach, while Skater B feels supported in her skating goals. These differences seem, in large part, due to the relative alignment across the expectations of athlete, parents, and coach. Skater B's coach works to align the three groups by establishing mutually understood, realistic goals that are supported by the skater and her parents. Skater A, on the other hand, feels pressured by her family's involvement, and frequently conflicts with her coach—who demands that skating take precedence in her life. This lack of alignment leaves her unable to meet the requirements set forth and, understandably, frustrated.

Misalignment: Skater "A"

Skater A is 15-years-old and has been skating about 15 hours a week for two and a half years. Though she started skating at a relatively late age, she has progressed rapidly and considers herself a "natural." She used to take lessons at an ice-skating rink close to her home, but switched to a more competitive club an hour's drive away to train with her current coach. Her parents drive her to practice almost daily.

The young skater feels pressure to do well "because everyone gives up so much for me to come in and stuff." While she is the only family member who skates, she explains that "it's like a big part of everyone's life in my family." She feels guilty for "taking away" her parents' time to drive her to and from skating. Several times she mentioned the financial cost of her skating, and commented that her mother has returned to work to help pay. She also remarked that her father has passed up several promotions that would require

relocation. Her family's investment in her activity drives her: "I think that's where I get all my ambition from, like to make my parents proud." When asked if their involvement adds to her anxiety to do well, she emphatically answered, "Yes!"

Skater A exhibits fierce loyalty to her family. Nonetheless, the reason she joined this skating club was because of her coach: "We had learned about him through a friend at a different club, and I started taking a class with him . . . I really liked him, so I decided to join here." He was an Olympic competitor, and she values his opinion. Even so, they sometimes disagree.

In a particularly difficult instance, the expectations of Skater A, her coach, and her mother clashed. Her coach wanted her to continue skating during a session that overlapped with ballet classes for which her mother had prepaid. She described the situation:

The two of us got into a fight—a big fight. He was like, "Fine, I'm not teaching you anymore, I'm sick of this" . . . I was crying and upset and I wanted to call my mom and he was like, "don't call your mom." So when he walked out I called my mom and told her anyway, and she was like, "You did the right thing. You had to do what I paid for, you know I'm not going to pay for something on top of that when you can do the other thing. . . . Don't let him push you around." Even though he's my head coach, and does everything. But I was thinking of my mom and schedules, and that I had to do ballet, and that if that's what my mom paid for then I should do it, and stuff, and I was right.

The young athlete was torn between pleasing her coach and her mother—a clash in expectation that created great discomfort for the skater. In this case, her mother was a strong guide to help her determine a course of action.

Alignment: Skater "B"

Now 12 years old, Skater B began skating when she was seven. Like Skater A, she practices and takes lessons for about 15 hours each week. She likes skating for the thrill, and "to work really hard at something . . . it feels good . . . I have fun doing it." When asked about what she is most proud, she responded,

Probably that I like it, that I enjoy skating, that I don't feel forced to do it by anybody. That I go out on my own free will and I say I really like to do this, I want to get better at it, it's fun. And that nobody's saying, you have to; if you don't, then I'm going to be mad at you and you're gonna have to do this or this or something. So that's probably what I'm most proud of, is that I do it by myself.

She commented that, in contrast, many of her peers are forced to skate by parents who "want them to get better and better and better and maybe go to the Olympics someday, but they [the kids] might not like it. . . I don't think you should have to feel pressured that way." Her own parents do not pressure her in skating at all; they just want her "to have fun."

Skater B strives towards focused skating goals, but when she becomes frustrated, she reminds herself, "I wasn't doing it to beat anybody else. I was just doing it for fun, because I liked the sport because I had a fun time doing it." Her coach and parents support this focus on enjoyment.

Skater B's coach remarked that disappointment comes from failure to meet unrealistic objectives; skaters need coaches to help them to set practical goals. His most satisfying moments in coaching have been those in which his students have reached their personal goals.

Skater B loves skating, but both she and her coach recognize her limitations. Nevertheless, her coach encouraged her to enter a competition with a goal of landing every jump. Skater B was very excited about the competition, and she succeeded. The fact that she did not qualify for the next competitive level was insignificant to her coach, her

parents, and to her, because by meeting her personal goals, she had accomplished her objective.

IV. Pressure on Young Athletes

In our interviews, young athletes described various obstacles to their success in or enjoyment of sports. Often, they feel pressured by parents and coaches for being forced to practice when they feel burned out. Nevertheless, these same adults provide support during difficult times. Interestingly, parents and coaches largely denied pressuring young athletes, though they pointed to demands exerted on children by adults other than themselves.

Parental pressure might be implicit (forgoing family vacations for competition) or explicit (demanding that children practice many hours each day). This 10-year-old gymnast describes her mother's response when she asked for a one-day break from practice:

Sometimes, you really don't want to go, and my mom was really upset that I didn't want to go. And she was saying all of these things that made me feel really bad . . . but I really didn't want to go that day . . . I think I just sometimes need a break.

On the other hand, many youth spoke enthusiastically about parental support. Four of the five skaters mentioned parents as integral to their work—most importantly through verbal encouragement. Seven of the nine gymnasts interviewed pointed to the importance of parents' heartening words. The youth were also aware of, and grateful for, the money and time their parents devote.

Parents are acutely aware of the importance of supporting their children. One parent said the ideal is to "support your child and go along for the ride while letting them lead, although it is a very hard thing to do."

In addition to pressure from parents, our study revealed that pressure from coaches is prevalent in the young athletes' lives. Specifically, half of the skaters and gymnasts commented that they disliked being "yelled at" by coaches. One gymnast's mother suggested that the coach is attempting to "live vicariously through the kids," and that he and other coaches engage in "borderline verbal abuse." Indeed, this coach's view of youth sports is evident in his description of the "elite" gymnasts he trains.

I don't see these athletes as children because they're making decisions that could save their life and they work in a 25 -hour job . . . They come in five to six days a week . . . and, each time it's between four and five hours. So, that's not a child. A child doesn't do that.

Simultaneously, all of the skaters and gymnasts in our sample pointed to coaches as crucial in assisting them. Most often, coaches offer technical support, but several athletes also spoke about being comforted by their reassuring words.

Many youth sports do not have strict requirements for becoming a coach or coaching professionally. Skating clubs, for example, receive résumés from aspiring coaches, some of whom have not even competed as skaters themselves. In team sports, coaches working with younger children are often volunteers with little or no preparation. This lack of training may lead to inappropriate practices, such as a lack of knowledge regarding developmental levels. For example, research shows that most children under the age of ten are more interested in fun than competition.

V. Pressure on Parents

Parents of young athletes have their own pressures. The financial costs of youth sports can, in themselves, be staggering. At the top competitive level, skating costs approximately \$40,000 annually for skates, coaching, ice time, outfits, club membership, and travel.

Even in families for which finances are no concern, there are costs. Long practices and competitions whittle away at already limited time parents have with children. One young gymnast states, "My dad thinks that I should cut down and not be on the team, because he thinks it's too much. And he doesn't get to see me as much, so he gets a little upset."

Parents also commented on tension among adults involved in children's sports, especially competition between athletes' parents. Perhaps parents believe that they will be judged on their children's athletic performance.

VI. Pressures on Coaches

Coaches, in turn, pointed to pressures from parents. A skating coach defined "skating mothers" as pushy, demanding parents who expect their children to win the Olympics. As teenagers, skaters with such parents often rebel and leave the sport.

A baseball coach who places great importance on promoting ideas other than "winning is everything" refers to the official goals of the National Little League constitution:

Little League tries to do more than just baseball...it says all directors, officers, and members shall bear in mind that the attainment of exceptional athletic skill or the winning of games is secondary and the teaching, learning of the game, the participants' enjoyment of it, and the molding of future citizens are of prime importance.

In spite of these clear goals, he said that both parents and coaches prioritize winning more than the young athletes do. For example, many parents object to his practice of equal playing time for athletes at all skill levels, because they believe this results in fewer wins. Without parental support for putting the process of playing before the importance of winning, coaches find themselves in awkward situations.

VI. Suggestions

How, then, can we help to ensure that the objectives of participating groups are in alignment? At a systemic level, perhaps we could establish criteria for coaching practices and training. Governing organizations in each sport might determine these criteria, and policymakers might require licensing for youth sport coaching reliant on them. At an individual level, key components include helping young athletes to set *realistic goals* and establishing and supporting ongoing *dialogue* between and among the stakeholders. These practices help to keep the focus on process rather than outcome (i.e., winning) in youth sports.

Parents and coaches can contribute to positive youth development by encouraging young athletes to identify their own sports goals and commitment level. This can be accomplished several ways:

- Individual meetings between coaches and athletes, to set realistic goals at the start of each season
- Parent participation in this conversation
- Open communication between parents and coaches, to ensure that the young athlete's goals are mutually understood by the supporting adults

Once the season is underway, parents and coaches can check in with athletes to gauge their feelings about the activity: Are goals still realistic? Is the athlete enjoying the sport?

We learned from focus groups with coaches and parents that opportunities for dialogue prove useful. Competition among parents makes community building difficult, and parents appreciated the opportunity to meet on neutral ground. Perhaps community youth workers, coaches, or educators could organize and facilitate similar gatherings of parents, coaches, and athletes to further encourage positive community building through youth sports.

In addition to straightforward discussion, participants might gain insight by engaging in role-play with the other stakeholders (parents, coaches, and young athletes). Common

understanding might also be constructed through an exploration of case studies, which illustrate different levels of alignment among the groups. The very act of raising issues may result in better alignment-or, at the very least, a greater level of awareness.

VIII. Summary

Although few young athletes will play professionally, and only a fraction will win athletic scholarships, many still gain a great deal from sports. We observed that when the objectives of young athletes, parents, and coaches are aligned, youth learn to resolve conflict, manage success and failure, and confront adversity and stress. In addition, by watching adult interactions, young athletes realize that their struggles have impact beyond themselves.

While we observed cases of misalignment among young athletes, parents, and coaches, neither those relationships nor competitive sports are inherently flawed. Rather, as sports educators Rainer Martens, et al. state:

[Competition] is merely a means by which we compare our abilities and efforts with others under some agreed upon rules. Whether competition is healthy depends upon how we compete and what significance we place on winning.³

Clearly, young athletes and the adults involved reap positive rewards from meeting challenges, setting goals, and working to improve performance. It is up to guiding adults to encourage young people to adopt—and model—a focus on process rather than outcome. With thoughtful adults scaffolding youth sports involvement, the goals and expectations of parents, coaches, and children can reach alignment, and youth sports can fulfill opportunities from building individual self esteem to building community.

³ Martens, R., Christina, R.W., Harvey, J.S., & Sharkey, B.J., (1981), *Coaching Young Athletes*, Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics Publishers Inc. cited in Beedy, Jeffrey Pratt, (1988), *Understanding The Interpersonal World of Youth Sports*, Doctoral dissertation at Harvard Graduate School of Education.