



YOUTHFIRST

Team Cohesion in Youth Sports: A Family Affair

Understanding Team Cohesion

Team (group) cohesion is a process that most of us think we understand. Many of us have heard the locker room slogan: "There is no I in Team". But what exactly is team cohesion? In simple terms, it is the ability of a team to stick together. More specifically, cohesion describes the process of working together to achieve a common goal. This common goal may be learning fundamental sports skills, winning, having fun, socializing, or something else. Cohesion is built around a set of defining characteristics which include: a group identity (team nickname), shared common goal or goals, a structured pattern of interaction and communication, personal and task interdependence, and thinking of themselves as a group. Researchers have identified two types of cohesion: a) task cohesion, which is the aspect of working together to achieve the common goals, and b) social cohesion, which is the interpersonal attraction among members of the group, that is, how well they all get along together. Both types of cohesion will exist on sports teams but to differing degrees. The members of a team do not necessarily have to socialize with each other off the field in order to play well on the field. There are many factors which many determine the nature of cohesion in a particular team. Carron (1982) has identified these as: a) environmental factors, b) personal (athlete) factors, c) leadership (coach related) factors, and d) team factors. Within these factors, we find things such as leadership styles, coaches' behaviors, individual differences among the athletes, goal preferences, team success, and even the nature of the sport itself. As Johnsen pointed out in the Coaches' article in the March/April 1998 issue of *Coaching Youth Sports* interactive sports like soccer and basketball require a different kind of cohesion than coactive sports like archery or golf. We understand that there is some kind of relationship among team cohesion, team success, and team members' satisfaction. Some researchers have argued that this is a circular relationship in that each component effects another component, for example as team cohesion increases, team performance increases, and subsequently member satisfaction increases thus enhancing team cohesion. This pattern can also work in the opposite direction: cohesion decreases, performance goes down, and so on. Other researchers have argued that team success effects member satisfaction and team cohesion but not the reverse. Which viewpoint is correct may not be critical but knowing that cohesion, performance, and satisfaction are somehow related is important.

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7th and 8th Girls

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Team Cohesion— The Key to Success

There are many group dynamics that take place within a sporting team. One of the most important is cohesion. One is always hearing about how important it is for a team to "gel" or "bond" or "have good chemistry." Cohesive teams can achieve dramatic and awesome things. The way players interact has a tremendous impact on the way a team performs. As Hall (1960) put it, "The fittest to survive and succeed are those able to find their strength in cooperation, able to build teams based upon mutual helpfulness, and responsibility for one's fellow teammates."

The more cohesive a team is, the more it encourages peak performance in its members. If cohesion is lacking it can often prevent the team from reaching its' potential. Shouldn't teams spend time and energy developing a cohesive environment? I think the problem is that many teams aren't sure what cohesion is and how to go about developing and maintaining a cohesive environment. Too often the unspoken attitude is, "If it happens, that's great, but if not, well, we don't have a close group this year and there's not much that can be done."

In the past, the concept of cohesion has been defined in many ways. In the sporting world, one definition is most widely used and accepted, and it is the one we will use. Cohesion is the total field of forces which act on members to remain in a particular group (Festinger, Schacter, & Back, 1950). People will usually refer to their team as cohesive if the members get along, are loyal and are united in the pursuit of its goals.

Merely being together at workouts and games doesn't necessarily guarantee a team will be cohesive and successful, it simply means that they are occupying the same space at the same time. A cohesive team can be distinguished from a noncohesive team by many characteristics. A cohesive team has well-defined roles and group norms, common goals, a positive team identity, a good working relationship, shared responsibility, respect, positive energy, trust, a willingness to cooperate, unity, good communication, pride in membership, and synergy. Another indicator of the amount of cohesiveness in a team is the frequency of statements of we and our, in contrast to statements of I, me and mine. The we is just as important as the me. Developing cohesion is something that takes time and effort, but it is well worth the investment.

To establish cohesion, everyone needs to be on the same page when it comes to team goals. If everyone is striving towards the same thing this will help cohesion develop. Productivity must be established by setting challenging and specific goals. Making sure the members know what the individual goals are, for themselves and their teammates, is very important. If you know what your teammates are striving for, many times you can aid them in their endeavor, which will lead to a more cohesive relationship. There can be no hidden agendas by any of the members, their goals must coincide with team goals. What's good for the team has to be good for the individual and visa versa.

Having periodic team meetings is a good way to check in to make sure everything is going all right on the team. This provides an opportunity for the team members to spend some time together off the field where life is not so hectic. This way a coach can ask for input, and players can tell others what they see happening, or what they see isn't happening. There is no chaos and no rushing; it is a meeting with the sole purpose of processing what is going on.

Direct assessment, as given by the players, is the most accurate way to determine the amount of cohesiveness on a team. There is not substitute for the player's own perception of what is going on not only for him, but also for the team that he is playing on. How a player views the interworkings on the team is very valuable information when evaluating the level of team cohesion.

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1. There should be mutual respect among members. You can't have a cohesive group on the field if you don't respect your teammates. You don't have to necessarily love them off the field, but you better love them on the field and respect them both on and off the field. You are all fighting for a common goal and there is a special closeness that goes along with this. The 1979 Pittsburgh Pirates demonstrated this with their We are family attitude both on and off the field. A sort of "esprit de corps" mentality. Also, when there is a strong level of respect it will also reinforce the merit of a teammate's feedback.
2. There should be effective two-way communication that is clear and direct. Good communication skills result in an increase in self-esteem, respect, trust and decision making skills. Trust is an ongoing process; it will be tested time and time again.
3. There also needs to be a feeling of importance among the team. You should do your best to make each member feel like they are a part of the team and contribute something important. The phrase treat others as you would like to be treated applies here. Know the needs of your teammates and how you can help make them feel like they are a viable part of the team. "That's what we call it, a big family, and everyone realizes that and that's why we're so cohesive" (San Francisco 49ers Vice President/ Director of the 49ers Foundation, Lisa DeBartolo).
4. Having continuity in practices, and in every part of the team, can contribute to the cohesiveness of the group. Familiarity breeds not only confidence but also a sense of comfort among the team. Also, by placing team members in situations where interaction is necessary, cohesion will increase.

We have taken a look at what cohesion is and how important it is to develop and nurture it on a team any team. Only good things can come from bonding with other members of your team good things for everyone, individually and collectively, as stated by Long Beach City College Head Softball Coach Shellie McCall, "Team cohesion is the glue that keeps a team focused and determined to reach its goals."

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Coaches Concerns

Most of us understand what team cohesion is and why it is important to the success of many sports teams. But how do we go about creating team cohesion? Fortunately, studies of the process of team building in business environments provide us with some good information. Cartwright and Zander have identified a four step sequence of team development. These steps of team building are: 1. **Forming**, 2. **Storming**, 3. **Norming**, and 4. **Performing**. Most teams go through each of the steps this process but the moving on to the next step does mean that the processes in the previous step have ended. In fact, the development of team cohesion is a constant process and most of the steps are revisited constantly. It is important to understand what occurs in each of these steps and what the coach's role is in utilizing this process to develop team cohesion. **Forming** is the act of putting the team together. In youth sports this may involve tryouts, a draft, or some other process of evaluating the athletes and placing them on teams. A critical part of this step is making the members feel comfortable with each other, getting to know each other, and beginning to establish lines of communication. The next two steps are typically the most difficult. **Storming** is also referred to as infighting. It is not unusual to see displays of temper and occasionally even aggression during this stage. This is when the **SEE CIS PAGE 4**

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Coaches Concerns Continued...

members of the team try to show off their skills for the coaching staff as they jockey for status on the team. It is during this stage that coaches assess the strengths and weaknesses of their athletes and begin to decide who will go in which roles: starters, substitutes, bit players, and so on. While it is important that each athlete gets an adequate opportunity to show what they can do, it also is critical that coaches move through this step as quickly and decisively as possible. **Norming** is the step in which the coaches pull the team back together. Within the team, we move from competition to cooperation. Each athlete must understand his or her unique role on the team and the contribution each will make to the team. We want to try to stabilize the team and each member's roles within the team during this stage. Although nothing is ever set in stone, so to speak, coaches should try to assure that the storming stops during this stage. Note that there are exceptions to this, typically in individual sports like swimming, where we may use time trials each week to determine who swims which events in this week's dual meet. Also, in leagues with younger athletes, we may intentionally rotate the players among the various positions so they can experience the different skills involved in playing the sport. Even in these situations, the athletes must understand how this process will work and why it is being done. **Performing** is the culmination of the team building process. It is when all the members work together to achieve the common team goals.

Just for Athletes

What does it mean to be part of a team? It means you are part of a group who have come together to achieve the same goals. You are a piece of a puzzle. All of the pieces: you, your teammates, your coaches, and maybe even the parents of the team members must fit together to make the whole puzzle which is the team. While some coaches try to emphasize teamwork with the slogan "There is no I in Team" you should understand what they are trying to say. It is important that each member of the team have their own individual goals that they hope to achieve while playing the sport. But there are also goals the team as a group want to achieve. All team members must be willing to adjust their personal goals to fit in with the team goals. Not everyone can be the leading scorer. There are starters and there are substitutes. I once coached a middle school basketball team that had seven players who were essentially equally skilled and could all be starters. Of course, only five could be starters in any one game. After the first game, one of the boys came up to me and said he was quitting the team because he did not get to start. I explained to him that only five of the seven best players could be starters in each game but that as the season went on, all seven would get to start the same number of games. I also pointed out that if he looked at how much playing time each of the seven was getting, he would realize that they all played about the same amount of time during the game. My point was that each member of the team has an important contribution to make and that the team would only be as good as how hard everyone on the team did their particular job. Being part of a team means helping your teammates whenever you can. Cooperation among all members of the team is very important. Jealousy of teammates has no place in sports. No matter how good you are there will always be someone who is better than you. You should admire those who are better than you and work even harder to bring your skills up to their level. You should see this as a challenge rather than something to be angry about. Being angry at a teammate will hurt your performance and will hurt the team's performance.

Finally, being part of a team means giving 100% all of the time. When people are part of a group they sometimes do what is called **social loafing**. This is where you give 100% when you play alone but less than 100% when you are of a group. In essence, you slack off and expect others in the group to pick up part of your responsibilities. What would happen if everyone on the team did this? The team probably would not do too well. You are an equal partner on the team and must contribute your fair share of the effort, take your fair share of the credit for team successes, and your fair share of the blame for team failures. This is what it means to be part of a team.