

Self-determination Theory: A Guide for Coaches



sports coach UK recently commissioned the University of Gloucestershire¹ to examine how self-determination theory can be used by coaches to develop coaching sessions. This document provides an easy-to-use summary of key points and practical actions.

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Self-determination theory

The quality of a sporting experience and the likelihood of a participant being motivated and staying in sport is often determined by the motivational climate created by the coach. This relies on satisfying three key psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness.

- **Autonomy** is feeling that you have control over your own actions.
- **Competence** is having a perception that you possess adequate ability.
- **Relatedness** is having a sense that you belong (to the group, coach or sport).

This summary shows key points from the research, broken down into the different types of people you may coach.

Seven things every
coach should know

Coaching young people
(11-13 year olds)

Coaching adolescents
(15-18 year olds)

Coaching teams



Seven things every coach should know

The satisfaction of all three psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) is required to engender a positive motivational climate that encourages effort, persistence, enjoyment, satisfaction, prolonged engagement with sport and, critically, enhanced self-confidence within and outside of the sporting domain.

- 1) Enjoyment, mastery and socialising should remain the focus of coaches working with all young athletes. Although winning becomes a more important motive with age (especially with adolescent males), it should not become a priority for the coach.
- 2) Coaches should concentrate on the satisfaction of relatedness, as it is the key determinant of motivation for young athletes, and is associated with increased self-confidence. Such confidence can result in positive behaviours across domains (eg at school). Relatedness can be achieved through building friendships, group identity and cohesion.
- 3) As young athletes require perceptions of competence to maintain motivation, coaches should create a motivational climate in which the athletes experience mastery and are rewarded for effort and self-development, rather than for winning.
- 4) Coaches should remain mindful of the differential need for autonomy across age groups. The desire for ownership, input and choice increases with developmental maturity.
- 5) It is advantageous for coaches to demonstrate competence, benevolence and integrity in order to develop athlete-coach trust.
- 6) The use of educational material for parents should be considered, to ensure they are aware of the influence they have on their child's motivation for sport participation.
- 7) As technology is valued by young athletes, it should be integrated into coaching where possible. This is particularly the case when offering feedback on performances (using an iPad/video replays), and for developing and sustaining relatedness (using social media).



Coaching young people (11-13 year olds)

Key results

Autonomy

- Asking young people to take ownership of a session is just unwanted pressure. They're happy to trust the coach.
- Sometimes they like to be given the chance to say if they are enjoying the session or not.
- Telling them why they are doing things in a session is enough to give them a sense of autonomy.

Competence

- A climate that emphasises self-improvement, personal challenge and constructive feedback (even after failure) is vital to develop competence.
- A focus on task and mastery increases fun and enjoyment.
- If young people can see that their coaches' instructions lead to improvement, they will be more committed and feel more competent.

Relatedness

- Being able to socialise with peers is critical to continued engagement in sport.
- It is the coach who creates the inclusive environment for relatedness.
- Social support from peers, and positive feedback, ensures young people develop a sense of identity.

Making it happen

Provide plenty of feedback for your young athletes; not just what you say, but also what you do, as young people are incredibly sensitive to body language.

How can you demonstrate that your instructions will lead to improvement? Can you use people you have coached in the past as examples?



Barriers

- Educational demands
- Costs associated with sampling lots of different sports
- A lack of progression in competence
- Lack of variety.

Coaching adolescents (15-18 year olds)

Key results

Autonomy

- As young people get older they place more value on being able to take ownership of their training. However, they still believe it is the coach who provides the overall framework for the session.
- As young people develop at different speeds, the timing of when they will be given more ownership will vary.
- Adolescents have to balance education demands with sport, so the volume, intensity and content of training needs to be negotiated with the coach.

Competence

- Gaining physical accomplishments is linked to adolescents developing social competence.
- The value of the coach focusing on, and reinforcing, individual improvement cannot be underestimated.
- Instructional feedback based on evidence is more important for feelings of competence than general reinforcement and praise.

Relatedness

- Social support and friendships within sport contribute to greater levels of enjoyment and motivation.
- Adolescents look for contact with sporting peers and coaches between training sessions, either face-to-face at social events or through social media.
- Friendships formed in sport show higher levels of trust and less conflict than non-sporting friendships.

Making it happen

Embrace technology! Adolescents want to use technology – like videos and iPads – to see their progression, which will also serve to enhance feelings of competence.

Keep an eye on what is happening to your young athletes at school. If they have tests or pressures, can you make the training easier?

Barriers

- Competing demands of training, education and lifestyle
- Negative feedback from coaches or parents
- Lack of clarity in where their sporting life is going
- Lack of social connection to peers.



Coaching teams

Key results

Autonomy

- Allowing the squad to take ownership of individual and team performance improves motivation.
- Motivated team players want input into tactics, or to be able to constructively challenge tactics.
- It is accepted that the coach holds overall responsibility for the team.

Competence

- Feedback is essential to increase competence.
- Different team players seek feedback from different sources (either teammates or the coach).
- The source of feedback needs to match individual preference to bolster competence.

Relatedness

- Relatedness is a particularly important psychological need for team players.

- Socialising with teammates and building personal connections are the most important aspects to improve relatedness.
- Shared goals help develop team identity and increase feelings of relatedness.

Making it happen

Shared goal setting can be key for team harmony. Involve everyone in establishing and monitoring group roles and behaviours.

Develop a plan to incorporate new players into the team. For more on this, see our ['Bringing New Players into Your Team'](#) summary.

Barriers

- Cost and access to facilities
- Balancing education with commitments to teammates
- Reliance on teammates to regularly attend training to ensure progression.

