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Creating Trauma-informed Sports Programming for Traumatized Youth: Core Principles for an Adjunctive Therapeutic Approach

Lou Bergholz, Erin Stafford, M.A. , and Wendy D'Andrea, Ph.D. 

ABSTRACT

Youth who have experienced trauma may find opportunities for recovery in community settings, such as team sports. Sports and other community settings may provide an important structure, a venue for persevering toward goals, and a place to connect with mentors and friends. However, the symptoms with which such youth present, such as hyperarousal and aggression, may serve as a barrier to the potentially supportive environment that sports may provide. The typical means of coaching in such environments may be adapted to increase accessibility to youth. In this article, we describe principles of trauma-informed sports programming, including adaptations to play structures, that draw from gold-standard trauma-informed psychotherapy approaches. These techniques may help youth workers adapt their settings to meet a broader range of needs and aspire to provide clinicians with tools for collateral work with trauma-exposed clients.

Youth with exposure to trauma can be difficult to engage in developmentally typical activities, such as sports, music groups, or other organized activity. Yet trauma-exposed youth could benefit significantly from what these activities can provide (D'Andrea, Bergholz, Fortunato, & Spinazzola, 2014): exercise, self-leadership, perseverance, structure, adult mentors, and peer interaction. A significant barrier to participation in group activities can be the challenges that youth face (Cook et al., 2005). Here, we describe a model for engaging youth in positive development activities. For the purposes of this article, we focus on the example of trauma-informed sports, but the examples we provide can be extended to multiple settings which engage youth. Our audiences for this paper are clinicians working with youth in mental health contexts, who are in a position to provide advocacy and consultation to youth workers interacting with their clients, and front-line youth workers, such as coaches and program staff. From the outset we want to be clear in our intention: This article should not be taken as a methodology for providing psychotherapy for young people affected by trauma through positive youth development programming. These young people should be referred for clinical care whenever possible. However, the reality for many programs is that many individuals who work with youth are confronted daily with young people suffering from the effects of traumatic experiences, and clinicians may be interested in helping their trauma-exposed clients thrive in settings that support peer-to-peer interaction.

Most clinicians are familiar with the myriad of outcomes associated with significant trauma exposure (Cloitre et al., 2009), including difficulty regulating affect and impulses, disengagement and low motivation for rewarding activities, difficulties with attention, low self-awareness, damaged sense of self, difficulty with peers, and exaggerated threat reactivity. But youth workers may be unfamiliar with how these symptoms may manifest in play. Examples include:

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- Benign fouls or small incidents escalating to full-blown arguments and even physical violence
- Lack of self-awareness about feelings and how they are acting
- A player quitting a competition or even the team for a seemingly minor situation
- Inability to make friends or form pro-social relationships with teammates or coaches
- Struggle to play by the rules when things don't go the player's way
- Inability to handle the pressure of a high-stakes competition or handling a loss
- Lack of focus or concentration

However, the symptoms of trauma which may manifest in difficult behavior in youth programs are the very skills that high-quality youth programming addresses (Parker et al., 2003). For example, sports provide physical activity which supports affective regulation (Cox, 2008) and concentration (Luft, Takase, & Darby, 2009). Sports allow opportunities for developing competence in a rewarding atmosphere and require perseverance and practice. Sports can also provide important socialization and a sense of positive group identity (Gano-Overway et al., 2009) and focus on the future. A trauma-informed coach can support these skills by providing direct, explicit feedback on how one's behavior impacts play; on strengths and challenges; and on analyzing problems. This work happens within the context of a positive alliance between player and coach. This article focuses largely on the topic of how coaches can develop an atmosphere, including a strong relationship with players, which lets them thrive.

Essential principles in trauma-sensitive design

Numerous therapeutic approaches were mined to guide the principles of trauma-informed youth development, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT; Beck, 2006), Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993), ARC (Attachment, Self-Regulation, Competency; Arvidson et al., 2011), Parent-Child Interactive Therapy (PCIT; McNeil & Hembree-Kigin, 2010), Narrative Therapy (Freedman & Combs, 1996), and other modalities. In this article, we focus on their common elements, what we call trauma-sensitive design principles. These principles should serve as the foundation upon which activities are designed and delivered and staff are trained. Principles manifest in program rules, traditions, staff training, and how participants are treated.

Young individuals who have experienced trauma often perceive the world as an unsafe place (Amir et al., 2009; Maratos, Mogg, & Bradley, 2008), which manifests as a hyper-sensitivity to anything that may threaten safety (Ford et al., 1999). For this reason, it is imperative to design a youth program centered on emotional and physical safety, particularly in terms of what safety means for each child. In addition to safety, long-term engagement is also crucial since short-term programs can re-activate traumatic memories when the intervention ends, and it can take some time before a young individual affected by trauma may settle into the program experience to be able to gain any benefits (Cloitre et al., 2004). The third fundamental focus of a trauma-sensitive sports program is attachment, which is defined as the meaningful relationships one forms with others, where the attachment figure supports the self-regulation and sense of safety (Main & Goldwyn, 1984). Attachment serves as a foundation for all other developmental competencies (Hesse & Main, 2000), such as self-regulation, prosocial behavior, and goal pursuit, making it critical for all adult and peer relationships within the program to be a consistent source of stability and support in managing stressful situations (Arvidson et al., 2011; Duncan & Arnson, 2004; Perry & Hambrick, 2010). In addition to supportive relationships, a supportive structure is also imperative. Structural factors, such as program rules, a predictable schedule of activities, and a reasonable coach to participant ratio, inherent in any youth activity, create and maintain security, safety, and control while also providing expectations for prosocial behavior (Henley, 2005; Lawrence, De Silva, & Henley, 2010). The final and most fundamental principle that all sports programs should have is an integration with local cultural practices. It is essential for the youth worker to understand the particular context within which players are living and to have a comprehensive understanding of

how this context and local culture(s) impact the players' understanding and experience with trauma (Colliard, 2005). This integration is primary for three reasons: managing trauma and grief varies by culture (Andrés-Hyman, Cott, & Gold, 2004; Carlson & Rosser-Hogan, 1994; Christopher, Christopher, & Dunnagan, 2000; D'Antonio, Darwish, & McLean, 1993); adding local cultural elements can increase feelings of familiarity and safety; and incorporating local cultural creates a program that is more integrated and sustainable in the community (Duncan & Arnson, 2004).

There are three main concepts that build upon common existing curriculum features: play, skills, and strengths. Play can lead to the development of competency, executive functioning, and a positive sense of self (Arvidson et al., 2011; Dale, 1996), which are all crucial in the process of recovery from traumatic experiences (Henley, 2005). Play activities allow children who have experienced trauma to lessen anxiety and depression and enhance their capacity for pleasure and desire (Colliard, 2005). A skills-based focus has been adopted in many treatment approaches (CBT, DBT, and ARC) and is key in allowing kids to develop competencies in different areas, which can then serve as a platform for identifying strengths. Identifying and emphasizing strengths can then build efficacy and self-esteem (Catalano et al., 2002; Cheng, Siu, & Leung, 2006), which is crucial for children with trauma exposure who are often overwhelmed with feelings of guilt, blame, fear, and anxiety (Brooks, 2007; Henley, 2005; Cook et al., 2005).

Although it may be difficult for many programs to engage primary caregivers and refer participants to definitive treatment, it is still important to discuss ways in which programs can involve people outside of the group participants. First and foremost, a robust referral system is crucial. This includes knowing who is being referred into the program as well as identifying competent partners to which we can quickly and confidently refer clients. Second, it is important to remember to provide support for staff. Support most commonly manifests in two forms: ongoing training and protection from burnout (Carmel & Friedlander, 2009; Jenkins & Baird, 2002; Meadors et al., 2009). Working with this type of population requires a special understanding of the impact of trauma and an enhanced coaching toolkit. Staff should be provided with both trauma and sports trainings to help them deliver the best experiences possible. Staff working with this type of population may be prone to "burn out" given the high levels of stress, particularly in areas with high community need. Some individuals drawn to working in this population may have also experienced trauma themselves and, in these cases, it is crucial to provide additional support for staff from both within and outside of the program (Henley, 2005). Finally, activating the support of primary caregivers in efforts to leverage the power of attachment is critical (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010). This can happen in two ways: direct support to caregivers through skill building sessions and providing referrals or integration in the program as a trained fan, team manager, or assistant coach.

Skills players can work on in sport to help promote their own healing

We propose ten trauma-sensitive player skills for youth workers:

- (1) *Mindfulness* is a skill that can counteract the trauma reactions of dissociation and emotional numbing by allowing players to recognize stressors and sources of comfort. One example of using this skill would be using specific words to name feelings that come up while playing, like "I felt embarrassed when I missed that shot."
- (2) For some young people, *showing up* to the program may represent a significant commitment. It is important to recognize the choice to attend and the potential obstacles that young person may have had to overcome to attend, despite behavior while participating.
- (3) Choosing to engage in sports can help a child learn *focusing skills*, which can help manage triggers and distractions associated with trauma.
- (4) "*Checking yourself*" is a self-regulation strategy that allows a child "to identify, modulate, and express his or her internal experience" (Arvidson et al., 2011). While playing sports, this can be taught by asking the child to identify his or her emotion and helping the child

see which ways of reacting are helpful and which are destructive. These skills leads to the skill of “recognizing and making choices,” which particularly pertains to the flight, fight, or freeze reactions we see with trauma. This skill can be used each time a player is seen making a choice that is good or one that reduces harm. In these instances, the coach should help the child gain awareness of these decisions and recognize the practice of making choices.

- (5) In addition to having difficulty identifying emotions, children who have experienced trauma also struggle with connecting with those emotions (Frewen et al., 2012; Ogrodniczuk, Joyce, & Abbass, 2014). “*Speaking your truth*” is a skill that can be used to help children connect internally and externally in the moment by learning how to describe their personal experience.
- (6) Teaching children to understand the difference between *good and bad stress* and to take breaks from bad stress and stay with good stress are crucial skills for individuals who have experienced trauma and tend to exhibit a hyper-sensitive stress response to all stress (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006)
- (7) Helping a child “*play to their strengths*” by first identifying and then cultivating those strengths is a crucial piece in challenging the “inherent invalidation” of the traumatic experience (Becker & Zayfert, 2001)
- (8) Along these line, coaches need to teach the players to “*reframe*” their experiences from a more positive angle by helping them to view mistakes while playing in a less self-critical way. Coaches are a major source of support, but one of the most important skills they can teach players is how to support themselves through the skill of “self-coaching.”
- (9) Sports programs also give trauma exposed children an opportunity to “*be a friend*” helping to challenge the isolation prone behaviors that are commonly seen with trauma while also increasing pro-social behavior and relationship building skills.
- (10) “*Making community contributions*” is a skill in which the coach teaches the players the importance of actions that help better the team or community rather than just the individual. This skill allows players to feel connected and useful in social relationships.

Day-to-day program practices that help create a sport program that promotes healing

The interaction between staff and youth is the centerpiece of any extracurricular experience. There is also a structure that exists in these experiences. This structure comprises elements such as the practice and competition schedule, the rules of the sport and team, and the overall culture that is created within the experience. This structure plays a vital role in promoting healing for young people on your team affected by trauma. We call the elements of this trauma-sensitive structure **program practices**:

- Coaching in pairs helps to increase the capabilities for one-on-one attention as well as the level of support for the players and coaches, especially during times when one person may be escalating in behavior and requires one-on-one support.
- Children who have experienced trauma have a hypersensitivity to uncertainty and the dangers it can bring. In this regard, a consistent practice plan is a crucial ingredient. This consistent practice plan should include thoughtful transitions, a body- and brain-based warm-up and cool-down, integrated rhythmic movements (Spinazzola et al., 2011), intervals of both high activity and recovery, teaching mindful breathing, and teaching simple meditation/visualization.
- Establishing a clear and collaborative behavior code for players and coaches is key to establishing consistent conduct. The code should emphasize interpersonal behaviors like how to treat

teammates and opposing team members, how to handle escalating situations, and expectations around participation.

- In order to establish consistent structure and incorporate local culture, coaches must establish and practice positive traditions such as cheers, warm-ups, or wearing team gear in games and practices.
- Coaches must create opportunities for the players to do “good” for the team, which could include setting up or carrying equipment or leading warm-ups. By learning they can make a positive contribution to the team, players are gaining a much-needed sense of efficacy and relevance.
- Along these lines, it is important for coaches to plan for intentional connectivity through designing activities inside and outside of the sport that encourage close teamwork and communication; working hard inside the sport experience to ensure that every player can leave with that powerful protective layer of peer friendship.
- In addition to making time for close interaction, also make time for personal reflection by designing the practices to include a time in which players meet in a circle and check-in, both individually and as a group.
- During practices and games, focus on skill development which includes breaking down, repeating, and practicing the skill. This will create new neural pathways separate from ones associated with traumatic stress reactions. Practice and repetition is the pathway for building new habits.
- If competition is not having the desired effect, then consider changing the game. Adding timeouts in sports that do not traditionally have them or incorporating referees into team discussions are two ways to increase safety and time for reflection. Each sport has a certain “way” it is played, and our models for these ways of playing sport often come from the professional or collegiate levels. It is critical to remind ourselves that we are using the sport experience primarily toward a set of youth development outcomes, making it important to take the assertive and creative approach of tinkering with the game itself to help achieve the desired outcomes.

The trauma-sensitive coach: A special set of coaching techniques that promote healing

The final component of this trauma-sensitive approach is the techniques and tools that a coach can use to promote healing and positive growth. This set of techniques is born from the study of what frontline practitioners do when working with young people affected by trauma. It also draws from the field of positive youth development and sports-based youth development.

Lead with C.L.E.A.R. communication

For young people affected by trauma, how their coach talks with them will play a major role in whether they feel safe in the program. The acronym below can help make communication as trauma-sensitive and positive as possible. Each of these techniques applies in different proportion and sequence depending on the situation, but collectively they form the foundation for a trauma-sensitive dialogue with a young person.

- (a) Calming Voice and Tone.
- (b) Listen Deeply.
- (c) Explain HOW and WHY You are Doing What You’re Doing.
- (d) Ask Engaging Questions.
- (e) Reduce Outside “Noise.”

Zero in on one skill at a time

As discussed in the trauma-sensitive program practices, a focus on skill development is an important part of any trauma-sensitive youth program. However, this does not mean that staff should attempt to develop all of the skills a player needs to work on simultaneously. As youth become more used to, and then more proficient at, one skill, their sense of competency will grow. Whenever possible, try to help players focus on one specific skill and show them how to measure their progress in mastering that skill and celebrating growth. This is called “getting a win.” Many of these players may go through their days feeling dysregulated and disrupted — in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. What they need is the experience of having something go right. Focusing in one skill and promoting competency in that one skill area can help a young person to refuel their confidence and impact their self-efficacy.

Encourage expression

Traumatized youth need practice identifying and talking about their emotions and thoughts. It is the staff’s responsibility to regularly encourage and praise players who express themselves openly and honestly. Expression does not have to be verbal. A nonverbal cue such as a thumbs up or thumbs down can allow participants to share their feelings in an unthreatening way. Once key feelings have been identified, the coach has an entry point for exploring sources of a young person’s feelings.

Offer opt outs and opt ins

As described in the player skills section, one of the most important skills youth need to develop is the ability to know when to remove themselves from bad stress and how to stay in the game with good stress. To do this effectively, “opt out” and “opt in” opportunities must be built into practice/competition so that youth know that they have the power to take control of their own experience and get in or out of situations accordingly. In other words, the coach provides players with opportunities to “stop the clock” of practice or competition and choose how they want to participate. “Choice” or “invitation” language is particularly helpful in setting the stage for participant decisions on whether to opt out or not. As its name implies, this type of language is phrased so that players have a choice in their level of participation. Choice language is focused on effort, not outcome, so it does not continuously push for more. An example of choice language is “If this is uncomfortable, you can take a break and then try again.” Trauma-informed yoga uses language like this frequently (Emerson et al., 2009). For many people affected by trauma, the level of disconnection between body and brain is extensive enough so they are quite literally disconnected and uncomfortable in their own bodies. Encouraging them to choose a level of movement based on how they feel in a specific situation helps reactivate this body/mind connection (i.e., listening and responding to their own needs). By doing this, they move toward the powerful step of being able to say, “No, I will not be in pain. My opinion about what is happening to me matters, and I can take control” (Emerson et al., 2009).

Ask review and “looking back” questions

Coaches should make it part of their regular coaching practice to check in with participants about things that have just happened in order to help players work on their mindfulness and reflection. By asking questions such as, “What were you thinking or feeling in that situation?” you encourage participants to think back to their emotional state, look at how they responded, and think of other possible responses. These kinds of “thinking questions” help young people affected by trauma to engage with higher level functions in the brain and mitigate escalating feelings and behaviors. Review and “looking back” questions help put “participants into situations that they can then link to

theoretical aspects,” which can help them to move beyond a reactive response (International Platform on Sport and Development, 2009).

Focus on progress not performance

In a performance-focused program the emphasis is on winning, while in a progress-focused program the emphasis shifts to growth and celebrating improvement. In a trauma-sensitive program, the focus should be on the developmental and rehabilitative aspects of a player’s experience in the sport. In many cases, it may be a long time before a player gets to the point of actually playing competitive sport. You need to meet them where they are in their recovery, and there may be a point where practice is all that they can handle (Henley, 2005).

Coach the bench, praise the play

As a coach, it is natural to direct most of your attention and active coaching toward the players currently in the competition. This is detrimental to young people affected by trauma for two reasons: First, they are already experiencing a level of pressure in the competition, and to develop their own competency in managing stress and making decisions they need practice making these decisions on their own. Second, in the midst of a loud competitive setting, a coach shouting instructions to a player often sounds just like someone shouting angrily which can have its own detrimental effect.

Try directing praise toward the players in the competition, or even use silence. While the players in the competition rarely benefit from minute-to-minute coaching, those who are sitting on the bench are in the perfect situation to learn from your coaching points. Calmer, less fatigued, and better able to hear you, players on the bench are able to see what is happening on the court, hear your coaching points, and absorb it. Then, when they step into the competition, let them play.

Respond quickly during changes

The moment of substitution is one of the most crucial in sport for young people affected by trauma. In that moment, they could be quick to assume they have made a major mistake or are somehow underperforming to merit a substitution. You may very well be taking them out of the competition because of their performance, but there could also be a host of other reasons for the substitution. This first minute on the bench is a golden opportunity to help reframe player experiences and assumptions about the event, get valuable information about the player’s state of mind, and promote the kind of coach-player attachment this player needs.

Design an individual competition schedule

Some players cannot handle the rigors and pressure of a full practice or competition. In situations where we cannot change the game to meet players at a level of competition and play they can handle, we also have the opportunity to change the individual schedule for players to help set them up for success. Sit with the player and make a plan for how and when they will be playing. Help them understand how the competition will flow. Then, during the competition, keep them informed about their schedule. For this player, knowing there is 30 seconds left in his or her shift before a break can help him or her focus on self-regulating emotions and behavior.

Seize on situations that merit reframing

Reframing is a special conversation with a player in which you share your specific view on a recent situation. Players are telling themselves a story that is overly negative and self-critical. However, you offer an alternative, more positive view on the same situation. You are not changing the reality of the situation. However, you are showing players a way to look at their situations that is more hopeful, reveals a hidden strength or positive outcome, and is truthful.

Be available for informal time

While you should practice intentional connectivity and look to interact with your players throughout practice/competition time, sometimes the most valuable opportunity for building relationship is the time before and after practices/competitions. Make it a habit to stop preparing for practice 15 minutes ahead of time and to hang around after practice.

Sometimes, this is when your players are most real and may want to open up. By creating the routine of being available before and after practices/competitions, you allow the players to come to you in a low-pressure environment when they want to talk, instead of scheduling a formal meeting that may be nerve-wracking and feel too much like treatment or an intervention.

Support good stress, stop bad stress

Good stress is stress that motivates players, helps them focus, and is at a level of intensity they can generally handle. Bad stress is overwhelming, triggers players toward negative responses, and often causes poor performance. One of the most important skills players need to work on is differentiating between good and bad stress and being able to develop their overall ability to handle stress. Talking about good and bad stress should be part of an ongoing and open conversation with players. Coaches support good stress by reminding them how they are positively handling the stress, encouraging them to stay in the game, and to pay attention to how they feel when the stress is good. Coaches can help players mitigate bad stress by making them aware of their negative reactions, helping them articulate their feelings under pressure, encouraging them to take a break (opt outs), or even substituting them out of competition.

Invite their input on how to make the experience better

Youth workers may not be experts on trauma, and there is no way to design the perfect sport experience for a young person affected by trauma. They are partners in creating this trauma-sensitive sport program; therefore, it is vital that leaders invite their feedback and ideas on a regular basis. Ask players how things are going and encourage their input on a regular basis. They may be able to share with you something you have missed to help them have an even more positive experience. Seeking their input may help them take more control of their experience, which is a central component of making sport an experience that contributes to a player's healing.

Limitations of this approach

Though research has demonstrated the impact of a well-designed trauma-sensitive sport program, it is important to acknowledge that the competitive sport experiences could actually create a kind of stress and pressure that might trigger players and potentially exacerbate the existing trauma. Competitive sport is not necessarily a positive experience for all participants, and there are real limitations to when and where competitive sports can have efficacy in trauma work. Recreational games and body-based movement activities, in particular, yoga and dance, may prove more effective. We acknowledge that to generalize a trauma-sensitive sport approach for the many different kinds of

populations and the different types of trauma they can experience can present limitations. However, we have seen for frontline programs, there is value in attempting to create a general framework. When designing your own specific intervention, take the time to learn about the needs of the population you are serving and adapt your approach to your specific context.

Adopting a trauma-sensitive approach does not replace the need that many young people have for more formal clinical care. This special approach is intended to support the existing design of your sport intervention. Specific populations require specific adaptations of this approach. Whenever possible, a qualified trauma specialist should be engaged in the design, monitoring, and evaluation of your program. Healing from trauma is a complicated and nonlinear path. For each person, the journey will be different, and for some young people the path will be very painful. When built on a foundation of research and designed with sensitivity, the potential exists to create a sport experience that could contribute to a positive path for young people affected by trauma.

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