

Belonging

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What value does belonging have in youth development? PDP Contributor & Founder of Raising Excellence, Reed Maltbie shares a personal story that outlines the critical importance of the environments we create and the tribes we belong to.

I sat in the parking lot, a quiet observer, hoping not to be noticed by my son. People change when they are being watched. When they know someone is observing, they change behaviors, words, interactions. When they are “in their element” and not aware of watchful eyes, they ease into who they really are. They are not actors for other’s eyes, but wholly absorbed in being who they were meant to be.

My son doesn’t see me. He wanders out of his classroom into the open courtyard of the school and immediately spots his “people”. He glides over to them. Exchanges of deep eye contact, touches of the hands through fist bumps, shoulder pats, and some ritual handshakes. Then he breaks out into dance. The dance is an obvious after effect of all his Fortnite playing.

He is with his tribe. His people. Right where he belongs. He is smiling, at ease, and completely himself. A massive smile sprawls across his face. He is “at home” here at this school, with these kids.

This has not always been the case. The last two years were an epic struggle for all of us. My son coming home from school depressed and dejected. Feeling like he was a fish out of water, a foreigner in a distant land, far from his home. He was bullied and berated by students and teachers. He was made to feel like he didn’t belong to that school, that class, those tribes.

From students sucker-punching him on a dare, to teachers telling him his “ideas” in class were stupid, to school administrators promising to make him feel welcome and then “accidentally” missing vital parent/student/teacher meetings, he felt like he had no place to belong.

Each week he came home with a new story of being excluded or a new infraction due to his “acting out”. His one teacher actually told his sister she didn’t like him! We spent hours trying to collaborate with teachers to find a way to make him feel like he had a place, in Principal’s offices crying about how our poor son is being crushed by the weight of the world, and days on end trying to build his self-esteem.

He fully disengaged. He stopped doing his homework. He stopped participating in class. He started lashing out at the world every chance he got. We were regularly called into the office for his behavior, to find out he was doing “funny” things or saying “silly stuff” only to fit in with others. He wanted to feel accepted. He wanted to be liked. He wanted so desperately to belong he

did whatever others told him to do just to feel it. He would tell us that if he “made them laugh, maybe they’ll accept me”. It only pushed him farther away, and closer to total disengagement.

Finally, one particularly poignant day, his only champion at the school (a teacher who so cherished the person he was and tried at every chance to make him feel loved) called us to tell us that he said something alarming. He was berated, again, by one of the other teachers and when she tried to console him he barked “What’s the use? This is who I am. This is how it is going to be the rest of my life.”

Unaccepted. Unbound to a tribe. He was misunderstood and ostracized for who he was. Shortly after this, we moved him to a school where we hoped he would belong. To a place that would celebrate his uniqueness, harness his boundless energy and joy, and let him open his wings to fly free. We hit the jackpot!

He had friends. His teachers loved him. They quipped about his “effervescent” personality and channeling it during certain times, but they completely loved him for who he was and what he brought to the class.

In his classmates he found a tribe. He had just celebrated his 13th birthday. Seven 13-year-old boys ran amuck in our household all night on the previous Saturday night. They danced weird dances. They sang crazy made up “meme” songs. They played video game tournaments and deepened their bonds of friendship.

And on this Monday, I watched him “lean into” this amazing sense of place he must be feeling. Fully accepted, wholly himself, completely understood for the fullness of who he was. He mattered. He contributed. He belonged.

My wife touched my arm and tears welled up in my eyes. I turned to her and said, “what would it be like if every coach I worked with understood this moment, this feeling, this unmistakable power of the sense of belonging? How much better would youth sports be if we first made them feel like they belonged somewhere, as part of something bigger than themselves before we ever tried to teach them a game? This is the first obligation of a coach. That little boy, that total acceptance, that full engagement, that joy on his face.”

This is **your** first obligation as a coach. To make your players belong. To invite them into your world, provide them a sense of place, a safe spot to “be me”, and a belief in something much bigger than themselves. If you do this, you unlock a greater excellence in each of your children. You create a better place to play, and learn, and develop. Our job is not to “make” the next world champion, as a youth sport coach. Our job is to help each and every child unlock their own individual excellence. One may be a world champion, some may be elite athletes, but **ALL** will be undeniably successful at whatever it is they do if we help them unlock that excellence. If only you made them first belong.

Belonging matters immensely to our species. It is hard-wired in our brains – deep down in our lizard brain from the primitive days of existence. We seek inclusion and desire companionship. We need to connect with others. It is a survival mechanism. It harkens back to our cave people days when we huddled for warmth at night, gathered food in groups, and fought off predators in packs. We seek out others for mere survival. Belonging is a base need of all humans and one of the components of all my work around the Excellence Equation. I could spend days “influencing those who influence our children” on belonging alone. It is that important.

Belonging is important in youth sports and athletic/person development. The fact we are losing 70% of youth athletes by age 14 means we miss the chance to provide them with a vehicle for developing valuable life skills, instilling positive character traits, and finding role models who provide a clear path for success beyond the game. They leave for a myriad reason, all tied to the sentiment that sports is no longer fun. If we are truly honest with ourselves, we know that having a strong sense of belonging, a tribe to call their own, and a safe place to truly be themselves, we could keep them in sports longer. There a few vital factors that a sense of belonging promotes in young athletes:

Engagement

My son is more fully engaged in his new school experience because he has a place where he belongs. He says he is on “his planet, with his people”. When he was at his former school, he had dozens of missing assignments and wanted to “call in sick” regularly. Even when he was at school, he was not actually engaged. His teachers complained of him being somewhere else, not being involved, or disengaging. Of course, he was “checking out”, he felt like he didn’t belong.

At his new school, he still has a few missing assignments, but he has yet to miss a day of school, his teachers talk about that same energy and talkativeness AND they mention what a joy he is in class and how much he actively participates. I guess I should mention he only goes to school twice a week, with three self-guided independent study days. It has taken some getting used to. However, his level of engagement with his independent study days is far greater than any of the days when he was actually in a school 5 days a week.

Focus

If you have a sense of belonging, and you feel like your presence matters to those around you, the level of focus is exponentially greater. Belonging leads to a sense of accountability as well. You are no longer working for yourself, but for a group of people. You focus because you have others counting on you, cheering for you, sharing with you. You focus because you don’t want to let down those with whom you share this kinship.

My son spent 4 hours the other day working on a group project because his partner was one of his new friends. In fact, he is actually willing to learn a new skill – woodworking – so he could complete the project successfully with his partner.

Commitment

When someone feels like she belongs, she is typically more committed to the experience, even when it is difficult. Knowing others are going through the same thing as you, and they will support you on your journey will keep you on the path. Commitment is strong when you have a tribe. A few weeks ago, he complained that being dropped off at 8:15 for an 8:20 start cuts it too close because he “has things to do before school”. When we dropped him off, we watched him joyfully bounce up to his friends. My wife said, “I think those ‘things’ he needs to do before school is spend time with his friends.” He was just as joyous in his arrival during exam week!

Trust

Do we really need to address this? Isn't it painfully apparent that trust is built during times of belonging? Knowing you have a tribe allows you to let go of fears and insecurities and be yourself. Groups with high belonging come to trust each other, trust their coach, trust the “mission” more fully. We can point to the New Zealand All Blacks for evidence of this fact. They have built a culture so powerful anyone who dons the black jersey with the silver fern becomes part of a much larger brotherhood of people. They are part of the legacy. To that end, they embrace vulnerability as a group. You don't dare show vulnerability unless there is a modicum of trust. Wearing that jersey, and subsequently feeling that sense of belonging, leads to enough trust to be vulnerable.

I wish all of us could be vulnerable at any moment without needing the trust factor, but the truth is vulnerability is a suppressed character trait by most societies. Until we embrace its true power, we can at least build belonging in the hopes more become empowered to show it.

Resilience

I recently heard resilience described as “a mentally skilled athlete expects and therefore prepares for obstacles and hardship. That is resilience”. It is much easier to be prepared for and overcome, or bounce back from, hardship or obstacles if you know others have your back and if those others will support you and not ridicule you. Risk is easier when you feel belonging. Resilience when that risk leads to hardship is more prevalent when you feel you belong.

Confidence

Belonging means you matter to others. They care about you. You're welcomed. They believe in you, support you, and cheer for you. I have said before, but it bears repeating, “when an athlete knows someone believes in her, it lights a fire of confidence that will burn long after the game has ended”. Belong means they believe. Belief breeds confidence.

This is a small list of how important belonging is in youth sports, but it is not nearly enough. It gives us a great jumping off point for starting to understand the vital nature of this basic human need and guides us in ensuring it exists within our teams. The reasons belonging matters are quite

easy to see and understand. Developing belonging is just as easy if you follow a simple formula of seeking connection and being consistent with that connection. Model for your athletes ways that connect you to them and them to each other, and then continue to practice these ways.

Here are some great methods for developing belonging that are easy to do and easy to repeat regularly.

1. **High Fives Change Lives** – They really do change lives. You never know what that athlete is carrying in the heavy bag upon his or her shoulders that day. A simple fist bump or hand shake may be all he or she needed to remain anchored to this world and feel like someone cares. Greet every athlete, every time you see them, with a fist bump or handshake. Humans need physical contact. Especially children, need that fist bump to feel the belonging in human touch.
2. **Eye Contact** – When you make eye contact with people you are essentially talking to their true self. Many scientists believe the self is housed in a space of the brain behind the eyes. Of course, we've known this for centuries because prior civilizations always touted the eyes were the window to the soul. We also know that eye contact builds trust. By looking your athletes in the eye, you are building trust and you are speaking directly to their true self. It is important to get down to their eye level, to take off your sunglasses, to put distractions behind them so they can focus only on your eyes. This makes them feel like they matter to you and they belong.
3. **"I'm glad you are here"** – How hard is it to tell every child you coach this phrase. That tells them you care about them as an individual, you are invested in them, you love having them at your practice or games. You cannot better define belonging than "I'm glad you are here". Usually their thought is "there is no place I'd rather be".
4. **Ritualistic Behaviours** – Do you have a team mantra, handshake, slogan, saying, or team shirts that announce to the world who you are and what you all stand for together (a shared vision or purpose)? Having these shared rituals is a constant and consistent reminder of belonging to something greater than yourself. James Kerr, who wrote *Legacy*, calls this the concept of "ritualise to actualise". Creating ritual brings a culture to life. Its mission, vision, values, and beliefs become living and breathing actions through ritual and become a lightning rod from drawing them closer to each other.

These are a few ways you can develop belonging in your athletes. I challenge you to find new ones and share them with other coaches. We also belong to a group greater than ourselves and it is our obligation to support and encourage that group by sharing our best practices. Wouldn't it be amazing if all coaches were committed, engaged, focused, and trusting? Wouldn't it be great if

they were confident enough to change the coaching dynamic into something more empowering, encouraging, and inclusive by embracing the techniques of their colleagues?

We are in this together, too. As coaches we have an obligation to those children, and to each other, to chase that excellence in the way we coach and to strive to make every athlete feel like he or she belongs. We must keep them in sport for as long as possible so the true magic can be revealed and little lives can be transformed way beyond the game. And if we do that, if we keep athletes engaged long enough to change their lives, they'll come back to do the same for the next generation. Then we will all belong to something truly amazing: a legacy of excellence beyond the game.