

# SUPPORTING THE BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS *of Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities*

By Rebecca Shangraw

**A** subtheory of self-determination theory, known as basic needs theory (BNT), examines the ways in which social-environmental factors interact with athletes' physical and psychological wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Basic needs theory focuses on three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. The need for autonomy is met by feeling in control of one's actions; the need for competence is met by feeling a sense of mastery through interactions within the environment; and the need for relatedness is met by feeling connected to and understood by other people.



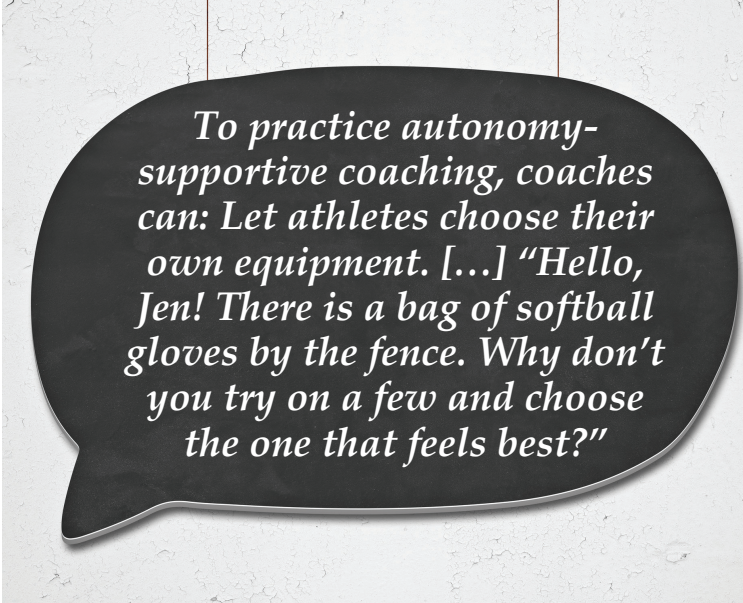
When the three psychological needs identified in BNT are met in a sport setting, athletes' perceptions of well-being and motivation are predicted to rise (Reinboth & Duda, 2006). As the architect of team culture and the learning environment, the coach plays a critical role in nurturing positive social-environmental factors, such as those studied in BNT. Therefore, sport psychologists investigating basic needs satisfaction in sport have emphasized the role that coaches play in creating social and learning environments that foster athletes' autonomy, competence and relatedness (Banack, Sabiston, & Bloom, 2011; Reinboth & Duda, 2006).

While the basic psychological needs outlined in BNT are assumed to be universal among all people, it is hypothesized that the degree to which athletes require social environments that support autonomy, competence and relatedness may vary by culture (Ryan & Deci, 2000), degree of life-span development (Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2008), and disability status (Banack et al., 2011). For instance, the amount of motivation promoted by the coach of a Little League team may vary from the motivation promoted by the coach of a professional baseball team. Similarly, the coach of a Special Olympics soccer team may encounter different needs for autonomy than would a coach of a high school soccer team composed of athletes without disabilities.

Despite extensive research focused on the basic psychological needs of neurotypical athletes, little research has been dedicated to investigating the role of sport participation in the self-concept and perceived competency of people with intellectual disabilities (Weiss, Diamond, Demark, & Lovald, 2003). Defined by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) as "intellectual and adaptive functioning deficits in conceptual, social, and practical domains" (p. 37), intellectual disabilities are often associated with a number of characteristics, including an impaired ability to problem solve, difficulty with interpersonal communication, lack of self-care skills, and difficulty with self-management. With these characteristics in mind, possible differences in how coaches address the basic psychological needs of "typical" (or "neurotypical") athletes and those of athletes with intellectual disabilities begin to emerge. In an effort to begin to fill this knowledge gap, this article presents an overview of the psychological needs identified in BNT, as well as suggestions for ways in which coaches of athletes with intellectual disabilities can support their athletes' feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness.

## Basic Needs Theory: Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness

Contemporary sport psychology and coaching science research have spent considerable time investigating ways in which coaches foster athletes' autonomy, also known as autonomy support (Adie et al., 2008; Banack et al., 2011). Characterized by an authority demonstrating empathy toward subordinates' thoughts, feelings and circumstances, autonomy support has



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been shown to encourage choice and decision making among athletes and to "facilitate the needs for competence and relatedness" (Adie et al., 2008, p. 190). In studies of male and female adolescent athletes — including high school, college and Olympic-level athletes — athletes with coaches who exercise autonomy-supportive coaching have been noted to experience higher levels of motivation (Banack et al., 2011).

An important component associated with athletes' basic needs, the motivational climate established by the coach can directly affect athletes' perceptions of stress, enjoyment and feelings of competence (Reinboth & Duda, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Reinboth and Duda (2006) distinguished the creation of motivational sport environments in terms of ego-involving or task-involving environments. Ego-involving environments focus on performance and outcomes and are characterized by "interpersonal competition, social comparison, and public evaluation" (Reinboth & Duda, 2006, p. 270). Alternatively, task-involving environments allow athletes to focus on skill mastery, learning, effort and skill improvement (Reinboth & Duda, 2006). In task-involving sport environments, competence is realized by self-actualization versus a comparison among peers. When the perception of competence is self-involved, the athlete feels more in control of his or her achievement (Reinboth & Duda, 2006).

Task-oriented sport environments largely support the basic need of relatedness, primarily as a side effect of collective enjoyment, team work and cooperation. In contrast, ego-oriented sport environments encourage interathlete comparison and competition, which has been hypothesized to create feelings of divisiveness, rather than relatedness, among teammates.

## Recommendations for Coaches

Due to frequent stigmatization and their challenges in the academic and social realms, people with intellectual disabilities

*Coaches can promote feelings of relatedness by encouraging athletes to cheer for teammates during practices, scrimmages and formal competitions.*

may experience decreased motivation and confidence (Weiss et al., 2003). Additionally, children and adults with intellectual disabilities may routinely have decisions made for them, chores or errands completed for them, and advocates speaking on their behalf. These experiences, either in isolation or in combination, can lead to a decreased sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness. In sport settings, decreased autonomy, competence and relatedness can become manifest in a variety of ways, including lack of motivation, decreased willingness to try new skills, and withdrawal from group settings.

The following recommendations for ways to foster athletes' basic psychological needs are directed toward coaches of athletes with intellectual disabilities. The recommendations are based on data collected from a dissertation research study examining the teaching practices of Special Olympics Hall of Fame coaches (Sherlock-Shangraw, 2013). It is important to note that the recommendations are written for a broad audience and should be modified relative to the cognitive and physical ability level(s) of specific athletes.

### *Autonomy*

To practice autonomy-supportive coaching, coaches can:

- Let athletes choose their own equipment  
Example: Coach Amy greets one of her players by saying, "Hello, Jen! There is a bag of softball gloves by the fence. Why don't you try on a few and choose the one that feels best?"
- Give athletes choices for accepting help  
Example: Coach Val says, "Adam, that bat looks a little heavy for you. Would you like a lighter one, or would you like to try a few more swings with the one you have?"
- Give athletes choices for participation

Example 1: Coach Shea says, "If you're feeling a little overwhelmed, it's okay to have a seat on the bleachers, Rachael. You can join practice when you feel ready."

Example 2: Coach Teo asks, "Which station would you like to start at, Brendan? You have three choices: dribbling, shooting or passing."

- Give athletes opportunities to demonstrate initiative through leadership roles

Example: Coach Cathy says, "Hey, Chelsea, you know the order of all of our stretches and footwork drills. Why don't you lead the warm-ups today?"

- Give athletes opportunities to demonstrate initiative by establishing practice routines

Example 1: Coach Michelle's athletes are encouraged to independently retrieve equipment and drink water when they need it; their independence is aided by the equipment and water being placed in the same predictable location during every practice.

Example 2: Coach Kim uses the same format for every practice — warm-ups, one drill, a water break, two drills, a water break and a scrimmage. The predictable practice routine makes athletes feel comfortable and encourages them to independently regulate their needs for water and restroom breaks during practice.

- Give athletes opportunities to demonstrate initiative by making their own calls during scrimmages

Example 1: During his team's volleyball scrimmages, Coach George asks an athlete who knows the rulebook front to back to referee a few sets.

Example 2: When Annette's 11-member basketball team scrimmages (5 v 5), one athlete rotates out of the game and referees every five minutes.

- Explain why corrections are being made when giving feedback

Example: Instead of just telling Mary to look up when dribbling her soccer ball down the field, Coach Fritz says, "Mary, pick your head up so you can see what's in front of you and look for open passes."

- Show concern for athletes in and out of the sport environment

Example: When athletes arrive to track practice, Coach Maddie asks them about their day and follows up on any big life events they had previously told her about.

- Promote a task-oriented sport environment

Example: Even though Evan served the ball out of bounds, Coach Gretchen praises him for improving his form.

## Competence

To support feelings of competence, coaches can:

- Listen to and accept athletes' suggestions

Example: When one of Coach Hardin's athletes asks if the team could face another direction because the sun is in their eyes, Hardin responds, "Great suggestion! Yes, let's face a different direction so everyone can see what is going on."

- Assign athletes responsibilities

Example: After every practice, Coach Laura asks one athlete to wash the practice pinnies and bring them to the next practice. When clean pinnies are brought to the next practice, the team claps and says, "Thank you" to the athlete who washed them.

- Ask athletes to evaluate the condition of practice equipment

Example: Coach Lily says to one athlete, "Some of our soccer balls are getting flat. Can you make a pile of balls we should fill with more air?"

- Communicate high and reasonable performance standards

Example: Before their first game of the season, Coach John tells his team, "I know that many of you have never played a softball game before, but you have learned a lot during our practices. My goal for our team in today's game is to score at least eight runs and get at least three runners from the other team out at first base. We've practiced base running and throwing to first base quite a bit, so I think we can meet these goals."

## Relatedness

Coaches can promote feelings of relatedness by:

- Emphasizing the use of first names among coaches, athletes and volunteers

Example: Before the start of every practice, Coach Jose asks athletes, coaches and volunteers to stand in a circle and introduce themselves; throughout practice, Jose insists that athletes and coaches refer to one another by their names versus other, nonspecific identifiers.

- Encouraging athletes to cheer for teammates during practices, scrimmages and formal competitions

Example: During drills, scrimmages and games, athletes who are waiting for their turn or sitting on the bench are encouraged to clap and cheer for their teammates.

- Inquiring about athletes' feelings

Example: Betsy, a gymnastics coach, frequently asks athletes if they are thirsty, tired, scared or excited. While

many of her athletes do not independently express their feelings to her, Coach Betsy has learned that they appreciate being asked how they feel and perform better when they have talked about their anxieties or fears.

## Summary

When adequately met, the three psychological components of BNT — autonomy, competence and relatedness — are hypothesized to increase athletes' perceptions of well-being, confidence and performance. While it can be said that the psychological need to feel autonomous, competent and related is universally shared, it is suggested that the ways in which these needs are met, as well as the effort coaches devote to meeting these needs, varies by culture, team composition and disability status. Using data collected from a dissertation research study investigating Special Olympics Hall of Fame coaches (Sherlock-Shangraw, 2013), the hope is that this article will begin to fill the knowledge gap specific to meeting the basic psychological needs of athletes with intellectual disabilities.

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