

Drill Sergeants' two contrasting approaches to “Soldierization” and instilling healthy eating habits in soldiers

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Introduction

- Obesity epidemic identified as a threat to the National Security (Christeson et. al., 2012)
- Issue among incoming AND outgoing soldiers
- Military attempting to address problem
 - Starting in basic training
- Average Army enlistment age is ~21

Introduction

- Adult leaders such as athletic coaches and teachers play a key role in instilling healthy diet and physical activity habits in adolescents and young adults
 - Information
 - Role modeling
 - Mentoring

Introduction

- Positive approaches have been examined and promoted among coaches and teachers
- Drill Sergeants (DS) emphasize the importance of physical fitness in training
- ...but little is known about how DS influence development of long-term eating habits in soldiers.

Purpose

- To understand DS perspectives on instilling healthy eating habits in Soldiers as part of their overall approach to basic training.



Methods

- 30 DS at two US Army training bases
- In-depth qualitative interviews
- Transcribed verbatim
- Analyzed using a grounded theory approach



Sample Interview Guide Questions

- How would you describe the ideal Soldier?
- Can you describe what the Soldiers are like when they first enter basic training?
- How would you describe the ideal DS?
- What do you think is the most important part of your job from the Army's perspective?
- What are your thoughts about what an ideal Soldier should eat and drink?
- What do you consider to be good nutrition for Soldier performance? What about for DS?
- How does a DS influence the food choices of Soldiers?

Results: The “Ideal” Soldier

- Physical attributes like strength and endurance important, but secondary to character
- Soldier who are motivated, intelligent, willing to learn, disciplined, and positive attitude

“So I think the motivation and having the right attitude and their mind being in the right place, and a strong mental Soldier, I think, is probably as beneficiary as one who comes in just like a pure PT stud, but he has a wrong attitude. That doesn’t help me any. “

The “Ideal” Soldier and Nutrition

- Many emphasized physical training over nutrition

“I think a Soldier should eat and drink whatever they feel. If it causes them to become unfit, then that’s like a personal thing, right there. I eat and drink what I want, and my metabolism is skyrocketed. It doesn’t bother me right now. Maybe later on down the line it would, but right now, it doesn’t, and I eat and I drink whatever I feel.”
- Fewer cited nutrition habits as important
 - Described **balanced diet, less junk food, and proper hydration** essential for Ideal Soldier performance

“Soldierization”

“The soldierization process, [is] turning a civilian into a Soldier I think that is it, that’s the mission”

- Soldiers learn basics about Army ideals and values.
 - teaching, discipline, role modeling, and mentorship
- DS have a high level of influence *“soldiers are like sponges”*
- Some (not all) DS recognize their influence on Soldier’s attitudes and behaviors

General approaches to “Soldierization”

- **Authoritative:** Emphasized mentoring, role modeling, and tailoring strategies to the individual.
- **Authoritarian:** Emphasized obedience, discipline, and intimidation.
- General approaches framed strategies for instilling healthy eating habits in Soldiers.

Authoritative “Soldierization”

- Individual approach to training and disciplining Soldiers

“My approach is different than other DS. Patience, you got to have lots of patience, and you have to learn how to teach something more than one way.”

“As crazy as it sounds, we’re trying to take the civilian out of them and make them Soldiers. So we want to make them not machines, but Soldiers. You know, disciplined. Everybody kind of similar, but they’re still individuals, whether we want to admit that or not. They are, and each person responds differently to different things. I can have certain Soldiers that I smoke them, they’re fine. Other ones, if I don’t smoke them and I pull them in, and I’m like, “Hey, you know,” I give them the disappointed mom talk.”

Authoritative “Soldierization” (cont.)

- Embrace their role as mentor to the Soldiers

“Soldiers look up to a DS as, I mean, we’re up on pedestals you know, and we’ve got to make sure that we live up to it.”

“[DS are] also a coach and a mentor because a lot of these kids’ [lack] father figures or family problems are looking for that coach, whether it be a male or a female DS. You’ve got to sit these kids down sometimes and just mentor them about everything, whether it’s military or just life.”

Authoritative “Soldierization” (cont.)

- Be a parent-like figure for Soldiers

“To me, it’s like my kids. I talk to them. I tell my son, “Sit down. Don’t do that.” I tell the same thing to the Soldiers, “Hey, stop acting like that. You want to come here. You’re here.” You give them the same techniques you use at home because they’re kids. The majority of them are kids. Like this summer surge, they’re 17. ... the majority of them are kids. They’re somebody’s kids, and that’s how you know, we tend to treat them.”

Authoritative “Soldierization” and nutrition

- Address Soldier needs individually to encourage or suggest
- Worked proactively with DFAC personnel
- Purposely model good eating habits

“If we didn't watch what they were eating and just let them eat whatever, I think it would affect them in the long run. So sometimes we'll get in there and say, hey, you know like I said, eat this, eat that, this is will help you out. We'll even talk to them up in the bays about their eating habits.”

Authoritarian “Soldierization”

- Focus on what Soldiers lack and their need for discipline

“We’re accepting the mediocre everybody gets a trophy concept that this nation has so wholeheartedly accepted, which is retarded. And they’re mistaking caring for Soldiers with babying Soldiers.”

Authoritarian “Soldierization” (cont.)

- Emphasize teaching Soldiers to be less emotional

“I think one of the big things is that Soldiers’ emotions get in the way. “Oh, my wife’s pregnant. I don’t know if she gave birth to the baby or not. Can I call her?” “No.” and when you say no – okay, I said it today. Just look at their reaction. Oh, it just breaks their heart. It’s like all the motivation gets sucked outta them. And usually, I just do things to see what kind of reaction I get. I want the Soldiers who don’t have an emotional reaction. I want the soldiers that just, “Okay, he said no. All right, well, let’s see what else I could do.”

Authoritarian “Soldierization”

- Harsh and more rigid disciplinary methods

“...I've got one standard and that's the right way, ...”

“Some people, you've got to put them down. You've got to put them down. You're going to be like, “Look, you're a piece of [expletive]. You don't mean nothing.” And that will get them going. Then there's some that just want to buck the system completely. They don't respond to authority. They don't respond to physical exercise. They don't respond to anything. You've just got to kind of keep kicking them in the [expletive] until they get the point of it.”

Authoritarian “Soldierization” and Nutrition

- Discipline and intimidate to change Soldier eating habits

“They need to eat, but [I] make sure they stay away from extra calories. Instead of getting three pieces of bread, just get one that day. They’re so used to eating three. “I always eat three DS.” “That’s why you’ve always been fat. Dude, who are you talkin’ to?”

“But most of the time I’ll stand right at the beginning of the line where they try to go and dump their tray and stuff. If they’ve got a pretty good amount left, I’ll tell them to go sit down and finish eating.”

“I would say some DS [influence Soldiers eating] by saying, “Hey, private, if you wanna get ice cream, that’s fine, but just know that we’re gonna work that ice cream off later.” So privates, they’ll be afraid to get any”

Conclusions

- DS descriptions of approaches to “Soldierization” reflect common parenting styles known to be associated with better and worse diet related outcomes
- Many already use strategies that are compatible with best practices used by successful athletic coaches and teachers
- Insights from positive parenting and coaching best practices could be used in DS training to potentiate positive impacts have on Soldiers’ health eating habits.

Thank you!

QUESTIONS?



Jason Bacon. (2010) Army adds nutrition to basic training. USA Today.