

“The Schedule Has Been Tough But We Think It’s Worth It”: The Joys, Challenges, and Recommendations of Youth Sport Parents

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Abstract

Substantial research has been conducted on children’s experiences in youth sports, and on parental influences on children’s affective responses to participation, yet little is known about how parents themselves are impacted by organized programs for their children. The purpose of this study was to understand the positive and negative aspects of parental involvement in youth sports from a sample of 10 focus groups with 55 parents. Parents identified four global themes including: (a) parent joys, (b) parent challenges, (c) factors explaining parental behavior, and (d) adult responsibility. The implications of this study are to provide youth sport leaders, practitioners, and researchers with an understanding of the concerns youth sport parents have in regards to parental conduct at youth sport events.

KEYWORDS: *Youth Sports, Parents, Families*

As the demands of youth sport participation become more complex and competitive, so, too, has the role of the youth sport parent. Parents provide instrumental support in the form of transportation to and from practices and games, league fees, equipment, and spectatorship for the millions of children and adolescents involved in competitive sport (Baxter-Jones & Maffuli, 2003; Green & Chalip, 1998a; Hoefer, McKenzie, Sallis, Marshall, & Conway, 2001), and thus are integral to the existence of youth sport programs (Hoyle & Leff, 1997). Parental provision of unconditional emotional support serves as a precursor for children’s enjoyment of sport (Brustad, 1988, 1996; Power & Woolger, 1994). Moreover, their influence on youth sport and physical activity involvement is significant, in that a young child’s motivation, achievement, esteem, and perceptions of competence are largely influenced by their parents (Bois, Sarrazin, Brustad, Chanal, & Trouilloud, 2005; Power & Woolger, 1994; White, Kavussanu, & Guest, 1998).

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Parental influence is manifest in a variety of ways. Researchers Stephen Leff and Rick Hoyle (1995; Hoyle & Leff, 1997), for instance, found parental support to significantly relate to enjoyment and self-esteem in young competitors. White and colleagues (White, 1996; White et al., 1998) have found children's goal orientation, learning, and worry to be directly associated with their perceptions of the motivational climate established by parents (and coaches). Moreover, children often rate parents as the most significant source of influence for participation in organized sports (relative to the influence of coaches, peers, or even the child's own decision to become involved (Baxter-Jones & Maffulli, 2003).

While the socialization of children into sports has been well studied (Coakley, 1986; Coakley & White, 1999; McPherson & Brown, 1988), and the factors relating to youth enjoyment, satisfaction, and motivation are abundant (e.g., Boyd & Yin, 1996; Gould, Medbery, & Tuffey, 2001; Weiss, Kimmel, & Smith, 2001; Wiersma, 2001), those same factors related to the experience of the parent are relatively unknown. Children and adults encounter distinctly different "frames of reference" in the sport setting (Green & Chalip, 1998a), and the experience of the parents while in this venue may influence the extent of encouragement, support, and/or provision of opportunities for their children, and the manner in which this support is provided (positive or negative). Yet an understanding of parental socialization has long been ignored in the youth sport literature, and continues to be so (Brustad, 1992; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Green & Chalip, 1998a; Greendorfer, 1992). As parents remain primary providers of children's sports experience, a focus on the socializing role of the parents, and the nature of their experience, should be a priority.

A relevant theoretical framework by which to study parental roles in youth sport is the Expectancy-Value Model proposed by Eccles and colleagues (Eccles & Harold, 1991; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). This framework attempts to explain the factors relating to parental and family influence on a child's decision-making in a variety of domains. According to this model, parents exert two types of influences on children: as "interpreters of experience" and as "providers of experience" (Eccles & Harold, 1991, p. 13). The former role focuses on parental influences on a child's perceptions of competence and esteem, while the latter is characterized by efforts to encourage and provide youth opportunities to be active in sports and physical activity. The ability and desire of youth's long-term participation, therefore, is dependent on parental involvement, especially during the preadolescent years. From this perspective, it is plausible that understanding the factors related to parental socialization will, in turn, provide insight into how or why they provide a positive experience for their children.

Research has also been lacking in substantiating or refuting popular media reports of parental overinvolvement or misconduct at youth sport events (Docheff & Conn, 2004; Spaid, 1997). Green and Chalip (1998a) offered that stereotypes exist about parental conduct that, "if taken seriously, one would conclude that parental involvement... should be minimized or eliminated" (p. 73). Gould, Lauer, Roman, and Pierce (2005) reported that coaches perceived 60% of parents to be a positive influence on their children, yet perceived that about 35% prohibit player development in some manner. Observation of parental behaviors during youth soccer games by Randall and McKenzie (1988) led to the conclusion that parents are largely quiet or attend to

nongame-related events during the course of a competition, and that comments that *were* made were either instructional or positive in nature (consisting of 95% of all comments recorded). Kidman, McKenzie, and McKenzie (1999) has more recently supported the notion that the majority of parents' comments at competitions are positive, although a high percentage of comments were considered instructional, and negative in nature. Reports of instances of more serious overinvolvement, those leading to clinical instances of "achievement-by-proxy" (Ogilvie, Tofler, Conroy, & Drell, 1998), largely remain anecdotal.

An additional benefit to studying parental experiences is the impact it could have on volunteerism in youth sports. The vast majority of youth sport leagues rely on volunteer coaches, many of whom are parents who step forward to coach because they have a child on the team (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). Volunteers are most likely those who have directly benefited from (or had children benefit from) the sports experience (Green & Chalip, 1998b); learning the perceived benefits, and possible difficulties, of parental involvement could therefore assist in attracting and retaining volunteer coaches.

The purpose of the current study is to understand parental involvement in youth sport from the parent's perspective, with a particular emphasis on both the difficulties and benefits of providing sports opportunities for their children, as well as an understanding of their perception of parental behavior at youth sport events. The use of focus groups was considered a more beneficial methodology than paper and pencil measures or individual interviews because of the potential for dialogue and exchange of ideas that focus groups provide. This study is a follow-up to research conducted with volunteer coaches on many of the same areas of interest (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005) as part of a multi-stage needs assessment of local programs that would serve as the impetus of collaboration between the community and a university-based youth sports center.

Methods

Participants

Ten focus groups were conducted with 55 parents total (16 fathers and 39 mothers) aged 26-59 years ($M = 40.98$; $SD = 7.45$). Each focus group contained between five and eight parents from organized youth sports leagues in Southern California. Of the parents, 17 had previous volunteer coaching experience, primarily in baseball, softball, soccer, and basketball. Collectively the parents represented 115 children (77 boys and 38 girls) in youth sports, with an average age of 10.32 years ($SD = 3.56$; range = 4-18). Their children represented a variety of sports, some of whom had participated in multiple sports. All focus groups were conducted at baseball, softball, and soccer practices.

Procedures and Focus Group Guide

The choice of a focus group method as opposed to individual interviews, observations, or traditional quantitative methods, was based on the opportunity for interaction, discussion, and differing perspective that is allowed in such a format. Krueger (1998) offered that focus groups are desirable because attitudes and perceptions are

developed and conceptualized, in part, through interacting with others, thus enhancing the quality of expression that may be lost in individual interviews. Because the purpose of this study was to provide a “voice” to parents, focus groups allow for input and interaction, permitting the researcher to interact only for the purpose of introducing the topic(s) of interest (Edmunds, 1999).

The methods for this study closely followed the recommendations provided Krueger and Kasey (2000) and Locke (1989), and followed the procedures used in previous research with volunteer youth sport coaches (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). The focus groups were conducted by the authors with the assistance of Kinesiology Sport Psychology graduate students enrolled in a graduate-level “Issues in Youth Sports” course. The students were trained by two university faculty members with previous focus group research experience, including the first author. The training included group meetings discussing the nature of focus group research, and of the role of the focus group leader. A “mock” focus group was conducted on a hypothetical topic, with the faculty member playing the role of focus group facilitator and the students playing the role of participants. Students were trained to be cognizant of the fact that the participants of the sessions are given freedom to discuss the questions with each other while the researcher acts as a passive facilitator.

Two of the focus group sessions were held in participants’ homes, where previously arranged groups met for the study. The other eight focus groups were carried out in a relatively novel manner. To respect the time demands of parents, we wanted to avoid requiring participants to take time out of their busy schedules, arrange for child care, or meet at an alternate location away from their children’s practices. Our intent was to conduct the focus groups during a child’s scheduled practice session, on or near the playing fields, and without requiring advanced completion and return of questionnaires or informed consent forms. Parents were approached at the beginning of existing practice sessions, explained the purpose of the interviews, and invited to spend approximately the length of the practice session discussing their experiences and offering recommendations for improving youth sports. Those interested met in a circle where the focus group began; on almost all occasions these were conducted in a secluded area outside of the fields or courts where practices were being conducted. Many parents had brought folding chairs or blankets to use during the practice session, and most of those who had already planned on staying through the duration of the practice were positive about the opportunity to share their ideas. This unorthodox method of recruiting subjects without the added burden of additional travel or time requirements likely increased participant involvement, and also brought the focus groups to the natural setting in which parental behaviors occur, addressing a common criticism of focus group research (Patton, 2002). A potential limitation of the study, though, is that it included only those adults involved enough to be present at a child’s practice or game, and potentially neglected less involved parents, and thus their experiences.

Each focus group consisted of a brief introduction of the researcher and a more specific description of the purpose for the study. Each parent read and signed an informed consent form that was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board, filled out a brief demographics questionnaire, and responded to the interview questions. The sessions ranged from 45-100 minutes and followed a consistent set of instructions, procedures, and “ground rules” of discussion. Concerns of trustworthiness

or social desirability were addressed by indicating that the intent was not to reach consensus, but to allow for differing viewpoints and to encourage participant dialogue in the case of differing opinions (Patton, 2002). Follow-up questions were asked when appropriate, and the participants were instructed to avoid the urge to speak in "order" (e.g., after the person next to them responds), but to keep the discussion conversational (Krueger & Kasey, 2000).

Focus groups were conducted using a structured interview guide consisting of five questions (Table 1) and possible follow-up probes. The parents met in groups in relation to a specific season (such as during Little League season), but were encouraged to reflect on their experiences in all youth sports leagues in which they had been involved.

TABLE 1
Focus Group Interview Guide.

1. Please tell us a little bit about your role as a youth sport parent. What specific joys have you experienced as a result of your or your child's participation?
2. What are some difficulties or challenges of being a youth sport parent?
3. What about parental behaviors at practices and games. Is that an issue?

(Possible follow-up: How does your league deal with potential problems?)
4. Please talk to us about the preparation or training of coaches in the leagues in which you've been associated.

(Possible follow-up: Is this enough?)
5. In what areas, if any, do you believe volunteer youth sport coaches could be or ought to be better trained?

Data Analysis

Data analysis closely followed the procedures described by Krueger (1998), Patton (2002), and Maykut and Morehouse (1994). Each focus group was video taped and transcribed verbatim by the researchers who conducted the specific sessions. The transcriptions were reviewed thoroughly against the video tapes by the lead researcher to ensure accuracy and completeness. Inductive content analyses were conducted separately by the two researchers, then compared and discussed until agreement was reached, in the manner described below.

Each researcher reread all the transcripts and, one question at a time, coded the participants' responses line by line. The codes, each one to four words in length, were meant to summarize and represent the meaning of the full quotation. A single sentence often contained multiple meaning units, while some entire paragraphs were labeled with a single meaning unit. Once researchers agreed upon the names for each meaning unit, a complete list of meaning units was transcribed on a white board to provide a visual display of the data and allow for discussion of the hierarchical organization. A digital photo of the list of meaning units was taken as record, then both researchers

took the list of meaning units and separately arranged them into groupings based on like content. The authors then collaborated on how they each grouped the meaning units. When full agreement was met, the grouping served as a lower-order theme; if incongruency was a matter of language, not meaning, the researchers agreed upon the clearest descriptor of the theme. If discrepancy in meaning occurred, the researchers discussed the themes until agreement was met.

The original quotes represented by the meaning units were then grouped by copying and pasting the original transcriptions into a single Word document, grouped by lower-order themes. The complete list of lower-order themes was then written on a white board, then another digital photograph was taken of the completed themes. The researchers then each separately grouped the lower-order themes by similar content, where appropriate. After comparison of these groupings between authors was made (with discussion until agreement was reached), the groupings served as high-order themes. This process continued until the high-order themes grouped into global themes. A hierarchy of meaning units, lower-order themes, higher-order themes, and global themes was conducted in this manner for each focus group question.

Results

The 10 focus groups conducted with 55 parents revolved around five major questions. Participants' responses were analyzed by question, but many of the responses overlapped in meaning across the interview guide. Our decision, therefore, was to allow responses from the questions to be analyzed together when appropriate, so the analysis led to themes that were subsumed across questions. For example, transportation difficulties were discussed in response to part of the role of a youth sport parent as well as a challenge of having kids in sport. We also attempted to be cognizant of the extent to which we were gathering information from our participants that were or were not consistent with past research, but we also found that much of the results did not necessarily add any understanding of the topic beyond what has been reported elsewhere (e.g., Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; McCallister, Blinde, & Kolenbrandner, 2000; Wiersma & Sherman, 2005) and, therefore, did not appear to have added anything new to the literature. The latter was the case with the responses to questions addressing (a) the manner in which inappropriate parental behavior was dealt with by leagues, and (b) and discussions about coach training or preparation. Our decision was to focus on the questions regarding parental joys and challenges, parental difficulties, and those that led to factors explaining negative parental involvement. This analysis led to 73 meaning units, 21 lower-order themes, 6 higher-order themes, and 5 global themes. Figure 1 includes a list of the individual meaning units and themes that emerged from the content analysis.

Parent Joys

Participants were asked to share the positive aspects of having a child involved in youth sports; the context of their responses emerged into two higher-order themes, including benefits they received as parents and an appreciation of the benefits their children gained through sports.

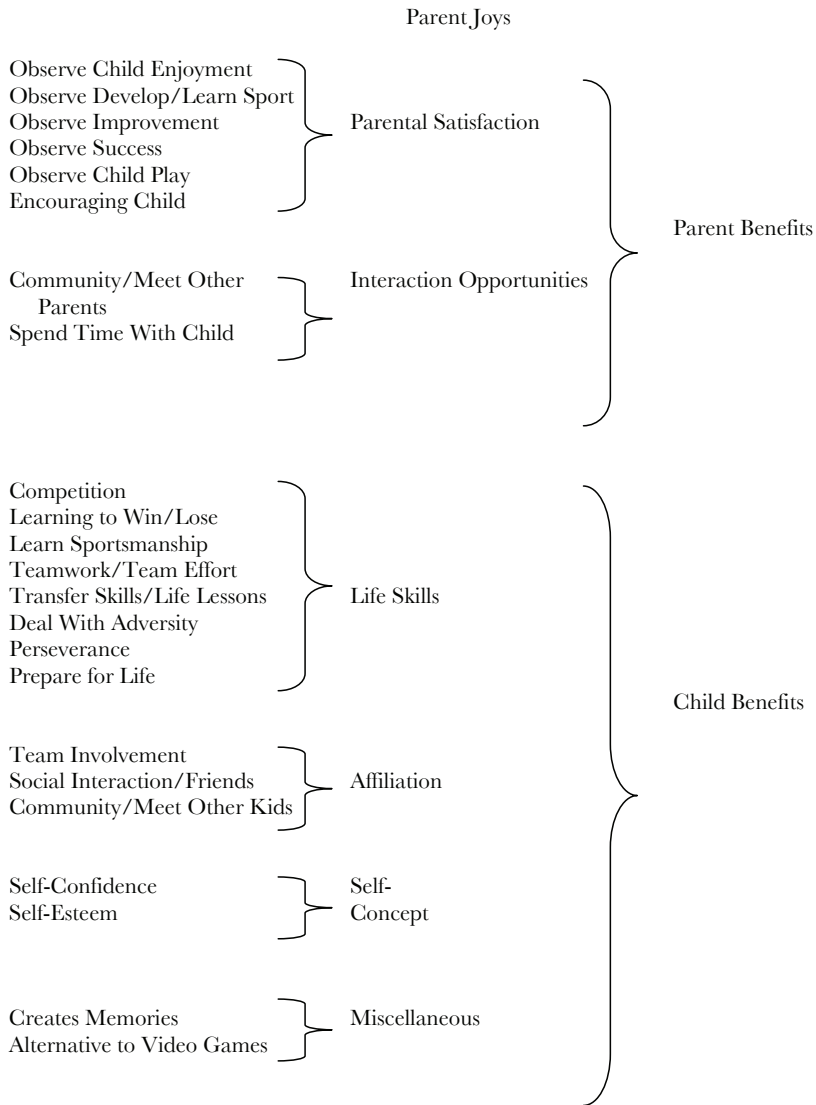


Figure 1. Lower-order, higher-order, and global themes from 10 focus groups.

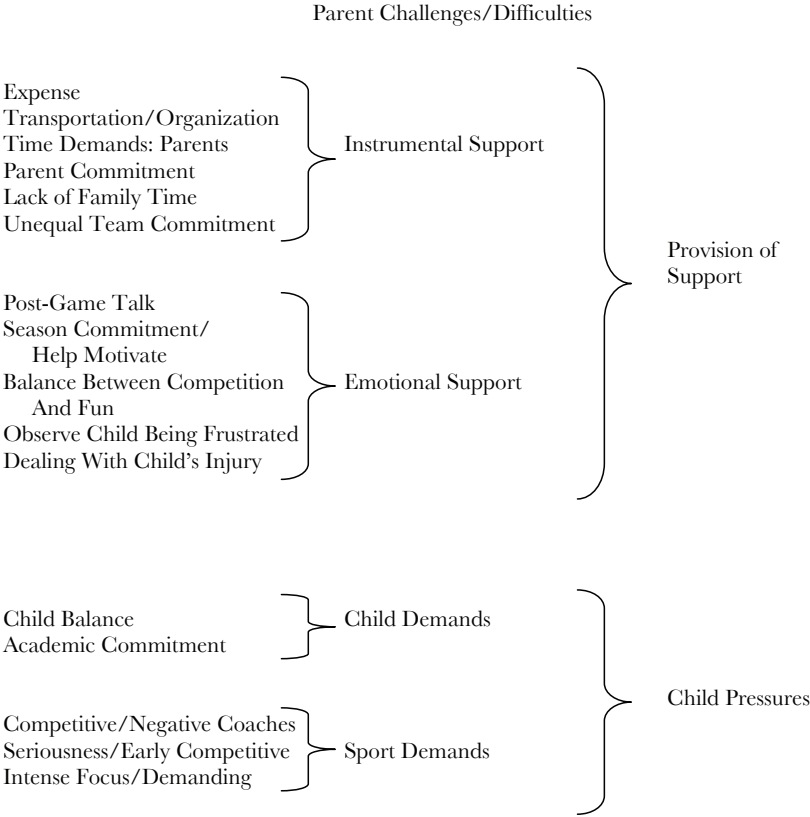


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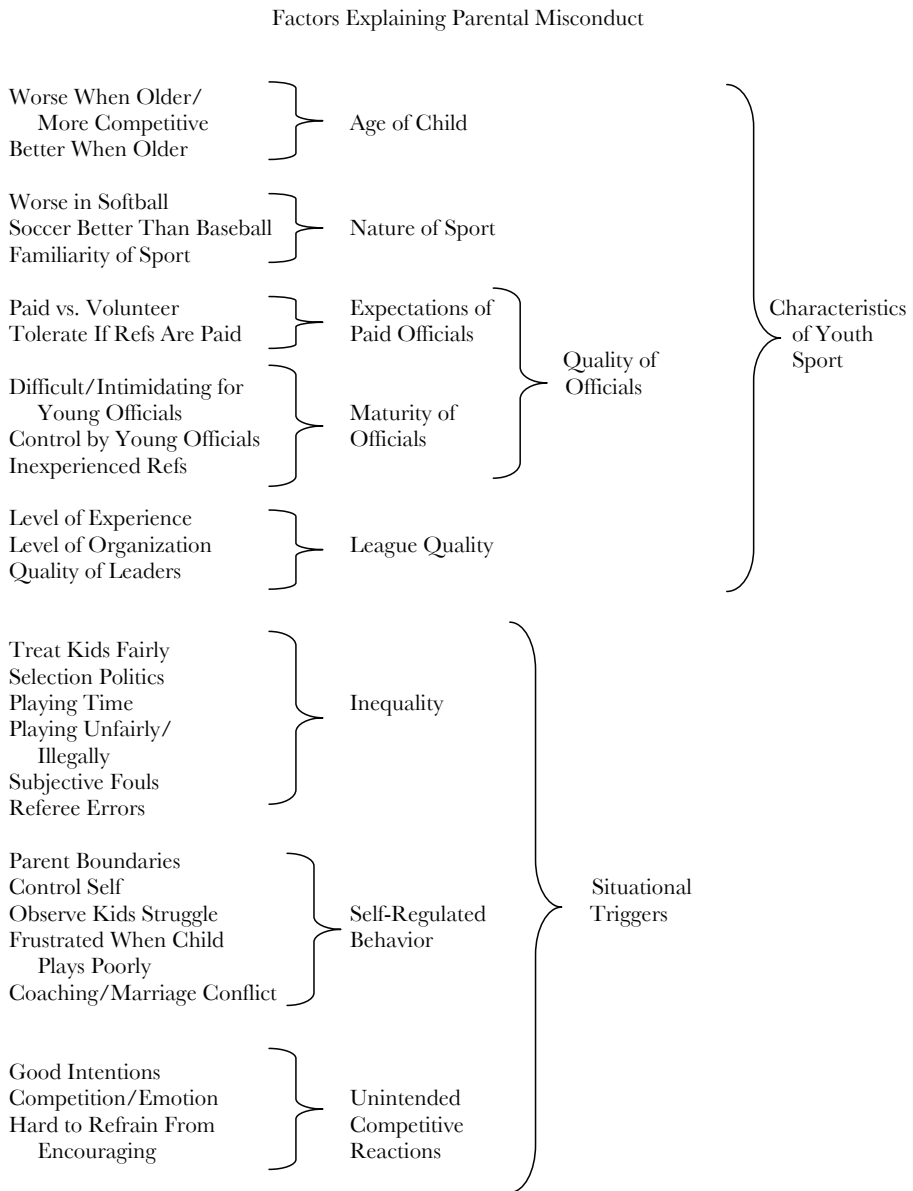


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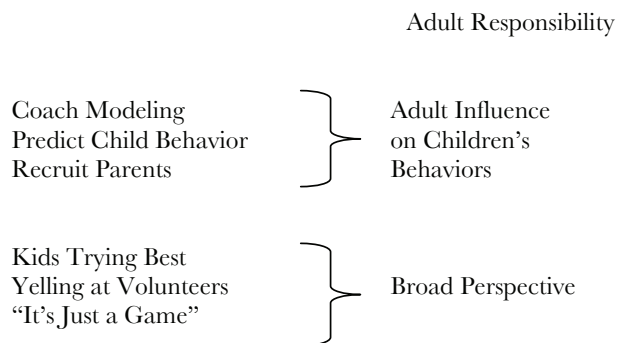


Figure 1. Continued

Parent Benefits

Parental satisfaction with child's experiences. One of the major benefits that parents received from being involved in youth sports was the joy in observing a child's enjoyment, improvement, development, and success. This satisfaction could be described as "vicarious involvement" because the parents' enjoyment and satisfaction was positively gained through watching their children's enjoyment and success, as described by the comment, "I love to see the smiles on their faces." Satisfaction came from watching children learn and improve at a sport, as indicated by the participant who said, "When you watch them for a number of years, all of a sudden, they get it. They're not playing amoeba soccer anymore. They're passing the ball and everything. It's so great to see that happen." Enjoying a child's improvement was not necessarily related to success:

The thing about proper mechanics is, when you teach them, it all comes in later. It might not happen now, but it makes you happy when you see them use the proper mechanics. Even if it doesn't go through or they don't do the right thing, but they're using the proper mechanics to get there.

Interaction opportunities. The opportunity to meet other parents and establish a community was important to many parents. With the busy lives of the participants and the large communities in which they live, they indicated that with an activity such as youth sport, they established friendships with people with whom they would have not otherwise met. The opportunity to spend time with their own children was also valued: "my husband has been coaching, or helping to coach this year, and I just think it's great for him to get to go out there and spend time with our son, and just teach him how to play the game." Attending practices or games with younger siblings who did not play gave the parents an opportunity to socialize while their other child[ren] were playing.

Child Benefits

Besides enjoyment derived through watching their children learn skills of a sport, the parents also discussed, at length, the joy of watching their children learn and experience other skills or traits that they believed would last beyond the scope of athletic

participation. These benefits and skills were grouped into four areas: the development of life skills, the opportunity to socialize and work with other children, the development of a positive self-concept, and other miscellaneous benefits.

Life skills. Various life skills were discussed that the parents believed to be positively developed through sport participation. For example, a father discussed his belief in the importance of youth sports to help children learn to be competitive. Others reflected on their own competitive development through youth sports, and offered that they were willing to make the same sacrifices and commitment to providing such opportunities for their children as their own parents did for them. This was difficult, though, for parents who were competitive themselves but who had less competitive children. Related to developing competitive traits was learning how to win or lose and the development of sportsmanship skills. Parents felt that it was important for kids to learn, at a young age, to take responsibility for one's own play and for putting in perspective when things occurred beyond their control. For example, one mother explained,

You don't want to teach them to blame an outside source for what happened on the field. They lost the game, 'cause they lost the game. You do want them to learn how to lose. And it's not just because of a bad call or because the field was bad or the sun was in your eyes, you know, the other team just played a better game that day.

Parents also noted the importance of youth sports in providing an opportunity to develop teamwork skills. In their eyes, sports allowed their children to learn the importance of working as a team, of putting together a concerted effort towards a goal, and understand that winning and losing does not occur in a vacuum, but is a result of an interaction of a group's effort and execution.

Other transferable skills mentioned included learning to listen to adults and following directions, developing communication skills, learning to balance and maintain perspective, and staying focused. Parents valued the experience to help their children deal with adversity ("things will not be peachy their whole life, so they get to learn how to deal with that and they also learn to deal with people who might be jerks"). Parents believed that these skills would carry over into the child's adult life and future career, and ready them for the fact that "you're going to win and lose your whole life. Youth sport prepares them for that." This dimension of youth sports made the commitment easier to make for parents, as indicated by the following:

I think it builds character. Like others, we drive a long ways to get here, about an hour. But it's the coaching and the aspect of building character of the kids. And they're going to be going into high school next year. It's tough in high school sports. But this toughens them up. It makes better citizens of them, I hope.

Affiliation. Discussions also included the positive aspect of affiliating and establishing relationships with peers. The parents were concerned with the children building social skills during childhood and adolescence, and valued their children's opportunity to make friends and maintain friendships over years of playing sports together. One mother described the pleasure in seeing her son

...walk into a group of kids he may not know any of and by the end of the season they're friends. He sees them around town, and then now that we've been in it so long, Brian¹ actually knows probably half the kids in Placentia just because we've been on

¹ All names associated with parent comments have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

some team with them somewhere. And you keep running into kids three years later on the same team.

Self-concept. Development of friendships, coupled with the development of the other skills listed above, appeared to positively contributed to the development of self-confidence and self-esteem in their children. Parents reflected on being able to see a child's confidence "just go way up" through the challenges that youth sports provides. One mother explained,

I wanted to be sure that my kids had something that was theirs and something they could excel in and something they could identify with and something that, hopefully, would build self-confidence and that sense of personal self that is needed during the tough times that might come along in their life. Something that would provide them that strong enough sense of self-worth, that they could get through these things. And I think youth sports are a great way to do that.

Miscellaneous. The final benefits the participants discussed related to miscellaneous consequences of youth sports for their children. For instance, many parents discussed the importance that youth sports had in creating long-lasting memories throughout their childhood and adolescence. A parent of a 17-year old mentioned that many of his peers had played together since he was 7 and that it was great to see them now, after so many years, transitioning into college together. Another mother mentioned,

It's hard when you work two snack shack shifts, and when you do the team mom stuff or you do the coaching stuff. But when you at least try to get yourself involved more with the team, there are more memories built that way. I know Shaun and Megan will, and I'm sure your children will, have a lot of special memories with their dad as the coach.

Finally, one parent mentioned the positive nature of youth sports as an alternative to playing video games.

Parent Challenges and Difficulties

The benefits of youth sports did not come without challenges, and parents discussed in length the areas with which they struggled. The participants were simply asked to discuss the challenges of youth sports parenting, and their responses were categorized into two broad areas: challenges in providing various forms of support related to their children's involvement, and dealing with pressures placed on young athletes.

Provision of Support

Supporting and providing healthy opportunities for their children to participate was particularly demanding for parents. Two general types of support emerged from their discussions: Instrumental and moral support.

Instrumental support. Children's experiences in sports have evolved from backyard and sandlot play to extensive involvement in structured leagues. This evolution has, according to the parents, been demanding in many ways. Instrumental support reflects various types of investments that parents make to provide their child with a positive youth sports experience. First, the monetary expense of having children in sports was discussed as a burden for many families. From private camps to equipment to league fees to weekend travel, the parents discussed many ways in which the expenses esca-

lated as children moved from one level of participation to the next. Like other family expenditures, some parents indicated that they felt pressure to pay for experiences that other kids in their neighborhoods or leagues received. For example, one parent shared, “club soccer is huge. You’re kind of fed that if you want your kid to compete and get any kind of scholarship or play in high school, you gotta get to the next level. And that’s about money.”

The expense of youth sports did not appear as difficult for the parents as other forms of instrumental support, such as providing transportation to practices and games and meeting the time demands associated with participation. Parents, especially mothers, compared this role to that of a taxi driver, especially when more than one child was involved in more than one sport. One mother described, “It gets tiring with the kids going back and forth and the times overlap and you are the only driver. It’s hard.” Transportation was only one area in which the time demands of parenting was problematic. Parents had to balance practices and games with keeping other scheduled appointments, assisting with homework, providing dinner, getting their kids to bed on time, and other regular duties. In one focus group, a mother mentioned dinner, and another mother said, “Dinner?” The woman next to her said, “Yeah, what’s that?” Some parents expressed guilt that during competitive seasons, dinner often would come from the “snack shack”. One parent expressed that time management served as the “absolute biggest challenge of being a youth sport parent.”

Some parents mentioned that because of these time demands, they limited their child’s involvement to a single sport, and often restricted other activities outside of the season. One mother explained,

It’s fun, but it’s crazy. And that is why I limit their activity. If you want to play baseball, then okay, but we’re not playing basketball and we’re not signing up for camps and doing Boy Scouts and playing soccer. I mean you’re going to play baseball in the summer and in the fall you can play soccer or whatever. Because then it’s not fun; we’re stressed and we’re busy trying to run from here and there and it’s just not enjoyable.

With many families having both parents working, it was difficult for parents to not only get to practices that start at 4:00 pm, but to give up free time on the weekends when games were scheduled. Vacations were difficult to plan, especially if one parent was the coach, to the extent that attending away games sometimes served as the only form of vacation that a family had. One father looked back at his childhood and realized the sacrifices that his own parents made for him, and recounted,

If I hadn’t had the upraising I did, I would probably think of this as more of a chore. But I am able to fall back on the fact that my folks did very much the same thing for me and I didn’t think much of it at the time, of course. I couldn’t figure out why they were always griping about only one week between seasons and never getting a vacation. But I’ve come to realize that that is a true concern for parents and families as a whole.

As much of a demand it put on the parents, they indicated that because of all of the benefits, youth sports was worth it. One mother reasoned, “Our schedule is demanding. Both my husband and I work full-time, and trying to keep up with the schedule has been tough, but we think it’s worth it, and we want to continue. We think it’s important that our children be involved in sports.”

One final aspect of supporting children in sports related to an unequal distribution of commitment among parents of a given team, in that some parents had to

provide more than their share of obligation for a league to run smoothly. Parents expressed a concern for volunteer-based organizations with this respect; under involved parents made the reliance on just a few volunteers for all duties essential to running a league. Many parents are not able or willing to perform duties such as running a session at the snack bar, selling raffle tickets or candy orders, ordering uniforms and team pictures, umpiring, working sign-ups, coaching, etc. A designated “team Mom” stated that youth sports do not differ from other volunteer based organizations:

I have a real problem as far as the parents being involved in a volunteer organization when they don't see what their role is. They don't understand that they have to participate or the league will not run. I see that in Girl Scouts, I see that in Pop Warner football, and I see that in the school carnival that I am trying to run tomorrow. You ask someone to volunteer, and they say to ask somebody else because they are too busy. Who is that somebody else? Then it falls on the coaches, who are giving enough of their time.

Frustration was apparent when parents would rather buy out of working an essential duty. One parent offered,

In Orange County, in our affluent society, they would much rather just give you some money and have somebody else do it. But then it's somebody else doing it. And here, that is not an option. We need bodies in there. Participants indicated that youth sport was not unlike other areas, where ‘90% of the work is done by 10% of the people.

One father compared it to a class project. “Anytime you have a group, there's always somebody who doesn't do anything, right? Without a doubt, I know which parents, if I ask them, are going to help out and which will say to get somebody else.”

Emotional support. The provision of emotional support was also challenging for the parents and was impacted by a range of challenging situations. This aspect of support largely reflected difficulties in helping their children interpret their experience in a positive manner or dealing with challenges. The post-game discussion on the ride home, for example, was something with which the parents felt they had to tread lightly. If the coach complained about bad officiating, for example, the children would complain about it on the way home and the parents indicated that they would have trouble with the children seeing the bigger picture. One parent offered the advice of her son's coach, that “the ride home is the most important part of the game.” Knowing what to say, however, was not always easy for these parents. Participants expressed that over time, their maturity as parents developed into a better perspective. One father's perspective changed, for example, after having multiple children in sports:

There's a tone of maturity that as a parent you bring in with even your young children that probably isn't particularly good. Like other parents, with my oldest son, I came in and you expect that they're going to be successful and very good at what they do partly because you were when you played. By the time I've gotten to the third one, there's much more perspective on that. I don't believe that there are many children on this field, if any, who will be a professional anything.

Thus, this parent learned appropriate ways of assisting his children only after having experience with the first two.

Another area of emotional support that the parents had trouble providing was helping a child commit to a team when he/she did not want to go to practice or keep playing when they were clearly not as good as other children. The parents did not want

their children to develop the belief that they could quit any time a task became difficult, and they wanted their children to understand that it is not fair to the other kids on the team if they were to walk out half way through the season. However, the parents also felt it necessary, yet not easy, to balance commitment and fun; when it stopped being fun for the child, for a variety of reasons, they were afraid of pushing the child to continue playing. One parent was particularly concerned:

The minute the score and the competition outweighs the enjoyment of the game, which happens with some regularity, I begin to question what we're trying to do with competitive sports. On the one hand, you want them to be competitive and you want them to grow and be the best they can be. On the other hand, I think as parents, we stress about that. Young athletes have the challenge of putting that perspective of what mom and dad want, what the trainer or the coach wants, and still have plenty of fun and enjoy it.

Another parent shared her own concern:

Yeah, we had that problem one time with Jack. When he started pitching, he didn't get a call the whole game. He was close, you know, just outside, but he didn't get a call. He just broke down and started crying. And after the game, like you were saying on the ride home, I said, 'You know what, we're not going to play if you're not going to have fun. If you're going to cry about it, we're done. You know, sometimes you're going to get strikes, and sometimes you're not. So, just go and have fun.'

When the young athlete put pressure on him/herself to succeed, or did not reach an expectation, or did not get to play a position he/she was hoping to play, the parent struggled to help the child see that not everybody can be successful in all situations.

Finally, some difficulty existed in understanding and dealing with a child's sport-related injury. The biggest concern seemed to be with the long-term consequences associated with an injury to a youth athlete, and on the decision about how much participation is too much for a developing child. One parent shared,

It's so funny cause being older, I run into young people who have already had knee surgery and I think, 'Wow! You guys are so young and you've already had surgeries.' I worry about that cause my daughter's been complaining a lot and I think, where do you draw the line? To me it's not worth it—just so she can play soccer so that later on in life she's always gonna have knee problems.

Child Pressures

Focus groups discussions often revolved around the competitive nature of youth sport and the appropriateness of pressures placed on young children. Two major areas of demand were shared related to child demands and the characteristics of youth sports. The context of these concerns was placed in the larger notion of the nature of childhood in today's society and the seriousness that accompanies participation in youth activities.

Child demands. Just as parents felt that sports were time consuming to them, they were also concerned about the time commitments that children experienced, especially related to balancing a number of activities and commitments. They were worried about burnout in their children and about providing a variety of experiences outside of sports without it becoming overbearing. Additionally, the parents wanted to instill an importance in academics, and found it difficult to help their children balance the demands of extra-curricular activities with school and homework.

Demands of the sport. Participants expressed concern over some of the potentially negative or adverse consequences of the youth sport setting. While most of the parents spoke favorably about the characteristics of their children's coaches, many were concerned with coaches who were too competitive or negative for the level of play expected in a youth sport program. One parent hypothesized that coaches who take youth sports too seriously were those who were living vicariously through the success of their players, and try to turn a program for children into a "professional" setting.

Participants who played youth sports themselves noted that today's environment is much more serious than when they had played. One young mother described, "It has definitely changed from when we played here. We played on this same field. The level now is just so high, the girls are pitching so fast, playing at such a higher level than we did." The woman sitting next to her responded, "These girls are taking private pitching lessons. They are pitching 40 mph at age nine. They're taking batting lessons. It's a huge business."

Parents also discussed an urgency to start their children playing an organized sport at a very young age, and the pressure they felt that if they held the child back, he/she would fall behind his/her peers. A married couple was discussing their young daughter getting involved in youth softball. "When we started our daughter, she didn't play mini-ball, and they basically said, if she didn't play mini-ball, then forget about signing her up. And she was seven. It was like her career was over because she didn't start at age five." A mother of a young baseball player who was in the same focus group agreed, and said that "you've gotta start early. By the time you get to AAA and the majors, if you haven't played and established a name for yourself, forget it." This general seriousness about youth sports made the young athletes develop an intense focus to handle the demanding expectations of participation. While this was not necessarily discussed as a bad thing, the parents stated that they knew that participating in very competitive leagues would only be allowed if the child him/herself had the desire to focus as much as was demanded. One parent noted, "I would never put your average kid in this."

Factors Explaining Parental Misconduct

Participants spent a lot of time discussing negative parental behaviors at youth sports events. These ranged from verbal behaviors (yelling at officials, heckling young players) to negative emotional support (criticizing or embarrassing children) to living vicariously through children and putting excessive stress on kids to succeed. Throughout the focus groups, parents shed light on many reasons why these behaviors occurred with regularity in youth sports. While never specifically saying, "this is why this happens," they provided much insight as to the antecedents of inappropriate parental behavior. Two major dimensions emerged that described potential precursors to negative behavior; the first identified characteristics of youth sports that might contribute to parental misconduct, and the second consisted of high-order themes categorizing situational "triggers" to potential misconduct.

Age of child. Some discrepancy existed when parents described the relationship of age to negative parental conduct. On the one hand, participants indicated that negative behaviors were more likely to be found in older and more competitive programs. When a child is younger, the focus of parents tends to be on encouraging all

players to have fun. As competition becomes more apparent during higher levels of participation, parents believed that the presence of competition had the potential for more abuse. On the other hand, some parents expressed that as the level of play and knowledge of the game elevated beyond a parent's level in more competitive leagues, one may be less likely to find interference from parents.

Nature of sport. Some interesting observations were made regarding the characteristics of particular sports that could lead to parent misconduct. Participants believed that youth softball programs are more competitive, for example, than youth soccer programs, especially in leagues with all-stars. Comparisons were also made between baseball and soccer; more problems seemed to exist in baseball because the coaches and, to some extent, officials, are generally not well-trained, and because of problems that occur with the existence of the draft. An interesting aspect of this area was with regard to the extent that parents were more familiar with baseball than soccer, and therefore may be more likely to argue officiating with a sport of which they were more knowledgeable. One woman mentioned that when her generation was young,

Soccer wasn't something we played, so we know more about baseball so we feel like 'rah rah rah,' you know. Where with soccer, well I don't know that much, maybe the officials are doing good, I don't know. We're learning it with the kids.

Quality of officials. This higher-order theme encompassed two lower-order areas related to the quality of officiating: whether the officials were paid, and whether the officials were mature enough to handle a competitive situation. With respect to volunteer vs. paid officials, parents thought that parental misconduct, especially towards the referee, was more likely to occur if the official is getting paid to do a job. One father suggested that parents generally get more irate because "we are paying this person to do a job, and if they are not competent, what are we paying them for? That's when you become a little upset." The maturity of the officials was an important factor when it came to parental behavior. One parent observed that in soccer, "for a 15-year old official to red card a 45-year old [coach or spectator] can be an extremely intimidating situation." A baseball parent realized that a young, inexperienced umpire must control parents, coaches, and players at the same time, and if not carried out effectively, parents could get out of hand.

League quality. The nature of parents' behaviors in youth sports was described as being consistent with the quality of a particular league and the level of experience, organization, and quality of its leaders. Leagues that are run by experienced leaders and are well-planned were considered to see fewer instances of misconduct by parents.

Inequality

One often-mentioned area that came out of the focus groups and was particularly tied to parental conduct was the issue of equality and fairness. When parents perceived that their child was being treated poorly compared to other children, or when their child was not given the same opportunities as members of their own or the opposing team, they were more likely to act inappropriately. One adult indicated that "if you treat kids fairly, parents are great." This aspect of fairness was closely related to team formation and playing time. With respect to the draft in baseball, some parents were concerned that coaches pick their friends' kids first, so by the time other kids are chosen, "it feels like you're in a clique and you don't really feel like part of the team."

Equal playing time was another concern by parents. A mother of a young child said,

My kid's not Kobe Bryant, but I like to see every kid play. Winning is not the ultimate goal to me, and I don't know if all parents feel like that, but I sometimes sit there and bite my tongue when my kid's not ever getting to play, because they always have the superstar kid out there. And I know everybody likes to win and they do what's better for the team sometimes, but I like to see every kid play and even if it's not my kid, I notice.

In leagues with equal playing time regulations, parents felt it was obvious and were frustrated when a child played their minimal time, then are quickly sent to the bench for the remainder of the game.

Another major area related to inequality was with officiating. When parents perceived that children from an opposing team were playing unfairly or were instructed by a coach to play intentionally rough, they described a protective mechanism that kicked in that led them to react, often times emotionally. For example, one mother explained,

When I see another team or another player, or another coach telling their kids to do something that isn't acceptable behavior, and I see my kids out there, not only my own, but if I'm coaching or being a parent on that team that's being taken advantage of, I get very aggressive. I don't like that, so I'll get verbal and aggressive, just to put a stop to it.

Subjective fouls by an official often lead to verbal complaints by parents ("Was he tripped or not? Yes he was or no he wasn't"), as did perceived errors or bad calls by referees.

Self-Regulated Behavior

Participants discussed situations in which it was difficult to control their own behavior while watching their children play. One matter where this was apparent was in parents' difficulty in not coaching from the sideline. Parents knew that they should not overstep their boundaries, and knew the implications this would have on their kids, but expressed that it was hard to "just let the coaches coach" or try to control themselves and refrain from yelling instructions from behind the bench. In addition, parents found it challenging to not outwardly react when their children struggled, played poorly, or displayed poor mechanics. One father mentioned that "it's not so much if he hits. I just want him to be doing it correctly. You know, when he goes up to bat and doesn't stand right, or he doesn't hold the bat right, I get real frustrated. I don't care if you hit, just do it right." This particular father was getting visually frustrated as he was speaking, making hand gestures to indicate what the correct batting stance should look like. The final aspect of this area dealt with the potentially problematic dynamic of having a spouse as the coach of a youth sport team. When a child comes home after a practice or game and complains to the mother, in this case, that his father, who is the coach, made him do this or that, the mother felt torn in how or if to intervene.

Unintended Competitive Reactions

The final area that helped explain parental behavior was labeled 'Unintentional

Competitive Reactions,’ and was defined as behaviors in a competitive environment that otherwise good-natured adults display that is out of their general character. Parents described times they witnessed when, in the heat of the moment, a well-intentioned adult behaved aggressively or out of line, only to be embarrassed afterward. For example, a father reasoned that

I think a lot of time the parents have good intentions. You see the parent get all crazy or excited over something, then the moment afterwards they feel so stupid. You feel bad for them... I don’t think they mean to be terrible people.

When competition is present, and the focus is on the game outcome, parents described that emotions are stirred up inside of them. Even though they have good intentions, they act in ways that they later regret. Interestingly, this may be reflected in not only negative behaviors, but in positive ones. One mother, for example, described how hard it was to sit on the sidelines during designated “Silent Saturdays,” when parents are discouraged from providing any verbal feedback:

I had a hard time because I like to really yell like, ‘Come on, you can do it! Let’s go! I have a hard time not saying it [laughs]. I’m a teacher, I like to encourage, and they need to hear that. And I have a hard time keeping my mouth shut.

Adult Responsibility

The final global theme representing the broad category of ‘Adult Responsibility’ described the parents’ beliefs about the importance of modeling appropriate behaviors and of keeping youth sport involvement in a proper perspective. This theme reflected the notion that children pick up on behaviors that adults model to them, including emotional reactions to different plays on the field, thus parents discussed a responsibility to be role models of proper behavior. Participants also described importance of seeing the larger picture of youth sports and keeping in perspective certain aspects of parental involvement.

Adult Influence on Children’s Behavior

Parents seemed to have a well-developed understanding that adult behavior has a significant impact on children. The parents believed that all adults involved with youth teams, including parents and coaches, have the ability to influence the players through their actions. For example, one parent described the amount of control the coach has through their example:

I think the coach has a huge amount of control just by their modeling. And the team we’re on right now, Andy’s baseball team, we have some really good players and we have some very, you know, first year players, [who] don’t know the sport. And the coaches just stay really consistent with their modeling, and how they treat everybody fairly.

Furthermore, participants discussed how they could predict a child’s behavior based on how his/her parents behaved on the sidelines. One parent said, “when it gets out of control, not only do the parents get out of control, but then the kids feel like it’s okay and you see the same actions with the player.” A mother who had previously coached commented:

I can tell you when I’ve coached, I know the kids who are going to be a problem from the mother on the sidelines or behind the bench. I mean, they certainly feel that it’s

acceptable to behave in that manner and you can see right where it comes from. And then what you find yourself doing as a coach is you have to deal with both personalities, you have to deal with the parent and try to get them to back off, and then you have to say [to the athlete], “look, that’s outside the lines of the field and we have to block that out” and that’s tough.

Parents who have also coached suggested that they took into account which players to recruit based on the reputation of their parents.

Broad Perspective

Adults provided many insightful perspectives about the bigger picture when it comes to youth sports. For example, parents felt that when they are inclined to react to a child’s mistake during a game, it is important to stop and remember that children are trying their best. One mother simply stated, “They [children] don’t go out and think, ‘Hey I’m going to try to look like an idiot out here.’” A mother recalled a situation when she was an official for a U-6 soccer league and had to remove a coach from the field for calling one of his players “stupid” and “lazy.” The mother said, “And he’s still around. And whenever I see him I think, ‘Wow, your life must be really empty if that makes you feel good.’” One group of parents described situations where parents in the stands during a softball game would yell “SWING” to distract opposing hitters. One particular parent remembered thinking, “What’s going on? This girl is seven!” They encouraged parents to stop and reconsider the larger picture of youth sport.

Many participants expressed the concern that adult volunteers, especially coaches and officials, are the recipients of much abuse. A participant expressed the concern that “you’re begging people to coach half the time, so now, here’s a guy who just wanted his kid on the team, never coached. He’s nice enough to step up, and then the parents are screaming at him.” With volunteer officials, in the lower levels of Little League baseball, for example, the costs of the league stay low. One father explained,

Parents need to understand, it’s just a parent volunteering, and that is the only way this is going to run, because if we paid the refs we would have to charge you three hundred dollars to register. So when they make a bad call the parents get mad and yell, and it’s just like, ‘Hold on, it’s just somebody else’s dad!’ I think that is one of the hardest things because it is so hard for me to get the dads to umpire. They all say, ‘I don’t want someone else’s parent yelling at me because I called their kid out.’

Parents made many comments reflecting the notion that when it comes to youth sports, “it’s just a game.” Bickering over referee’s calls, yelling at players, worrying about playing time, all seem inconsequential when considering the larger picture that it is all just a sport. With respect to officiating, one parent stated,

You know, you can you unravel it, the guy was safe, he was out, the ball went in the goal, it didn’t go in the goal. It all goes back to, it’s not a professional sport, it’s a youth activity. And the perspective that people oftentimes come in with is we are watching Major League Soccer and we should see the same level of competency that we’re seeing at the MLS level. But c’mom, it just isn’t that way.

A different person put it another way. “I was walking in the parking lot after one of my kid’s games, and there was a guy talking to an official about a call. You know, I thought, what a ridiculous thing to do over a youth sport game.”

Discussion

The intent of this study was to provide youth sport parents a venue for discussing their experiences in and insights about youth sports. Parents were asked to share their positive experiences, the challenges, and their beliefs about the nature of parental misconduct in youth sport. Parent joys included benefits received by their children (i.e., life skills gained through playing sports) and by themselves (i.e., interacting with other parents); parent challenges included the broad categories of providing adequate support for their children's participation as well the pressures and demands on children they witnessed in youth sports. The parents discussed how several specific characteristics of youth sport (i.e., quality of officials), or characteristics of a particular league (i.e., leadership, organization) influenced parent and spectator behavior of youth sports, and, finally, provided observations about how adult behavior had an impact of children's experiences in youth sports.

Several interesting findings emerged from the focus groups. For example, much of the attention in the youth sports literature focuses on negative perceptions and influences of parental behaviors, criticizes parents for focusing on competition rather than individual development, and encourages parental education that clarifies the role of the parent in the youth sport setting. The need for parental education arose from this study, too, but in a different sense. The parents in our focus groups appeared to have a clear understanding of their role in youth sports, articulated a child-centered philosophy of involvement, and clarified quite cogently how they should behave at youth sport events. These parents did not appear to need education that outlined these things for them (although for some, learning these things was realized over time and after they made mistakes early in their children's involvement). In fact, they contributed quite well to an even clearer "big picture" of youth sport involvement.

The participants, though, discussed the difficulty of acting appropriately at times and in a manner consistent with the philosophy they discussed. Their behavior appeared to be regulated by an "instinct" to protect their child from harm, unfair treatment, or from being embarrassed in front of others. During highly competitive situations, or when their child appeared to be at risk for harm during a game, or when they perceived unfair treatment for their child on the part of a coach—each of these situations led to reactive or inappropriate responses on their part for which they later regretted. Gould et al. (2005) also reported that well-intentioned adults sometimes act inappropriately in the "heat of the battle" and have a difficult time controlling their emotions. Parental education efforts should therefore prepare them for these situations and teach them how to keep things in perspective, recognize their reactive tendencies, and engage in some sort of coping behavior (deep breathing, refocusing, etc.) that leads to an alternate response.

Parents discussed many of the difficulties of providing a quality experience for children in sports. Excessive time demands, monetary expense, transportation, limiting family time outside of school and sports—these were all challenging roles for parents. While factors related to the high attrition rate in youth sport are numerous, parental difficulties in providing regular participation (e.g., Kirk et al., 1997) are likely partly responsible. These challenges also impact volunteerism, in that a few parents assume the majority of the responsibility for all aspects of league functioning, including administration, coaching, and fund raising. This contributes to the transient nature of youth sport leadership found elsewhere (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). At more elite

levels, parents may want a return on their investment that may, over time, turn into parental over-involvement (Gould et al., 2005).

One important trend among parents in the current study, though, sheds a positive light on the perception of the importance of youth sport programs. Despite the barriers of providing various forms of support for children, the parents spoke at length about the perceived benefits of youth sport programs, many of which were discussed as unique to youth sport compared to benefits gained in school, church, or other after-school activities. These potential benefits appear to outweigh the challenges of cost, transportation, and time demands and made the efforts worth it in the eyes of otherwise busy and overcommitted parents. The benefits of youth sports, however, do not come automatically but can be the product of the involvement of caring, engaged adults (Hellison, 2003).

Another important point emerged from our study. We were surprised that as the parents discussed many perceived benefits of youth sports, only one parent out of 55, in one instance, mentioned youth sports involvement as providing physical health benefits or as an alternative to playing video games or other sedentary behaviors that are very popular among children. In light of the current media coverage of the childhood obesity epidemic, it seems reasonable that parents would discuss the role of youth sports as providing opportunities for their children to get off the couch or away from their computers. Instead, parents focused on the psychosocial benefits of youth sports. Perhaps there are characteristics of families that get involved with youth sports compared to those who do not in this respect. Jambor (1999), for example, found greater differences in participation rates among children whose parents perceived certain benefits to be gained through youth sports, with perceived social benefits distinguishing between participation rates more so than perceived health benefits. It is possible that parents who themselves played a sport create an environment where sport is a natural part of everyday life (Gould et al., 2005). Perhaps, too, because their kids adopted an active lifestyle they may not think about health benefits.

In volunteer-based sport programs, such as Little League baseball or National Junior Basketball, it is nearly impossible to separate or compartmentalize issues or roles of coaches from parents. Persons serving in the role of the coach primarily come from the parents of athletes participating in a given league. Unlike club, high school, or college sports, where coaches are not necessarily part of the parent constituency, youth sport coaches are often parents from the community. This means that some youth sport coaches do not belong in a "separate" group from parents, as their roles overlap. However, the coach must attempt to separate his/her roles as a parent from his/her duties as a coach (avoid bias, teach children from sometimes diverse backgrounds, etc.), while parents must attempt to limit behaviors that are more appropriate for coaches (instructing children, making decisions about playing time, etc.) and focus on providing support and encouragement to foster continued participation. This serves as an interesting coach/parent paradox, or what Weiss and Fretwell (2005) called a conundrum, in that coaches come from the ranks of parents to assume roles that can and often are assumed by other parents. Coupled with the sense that "anybody can coach" (McCallister, Blinde, & Kolenbrander, 2000), it may be difficult to expect that the roles of coaches and parents be easily distinguishable. Perhaps a solution is to attempt to combine coaching and parental education efforts in such a manner that does

not assume independent roles.

The Expectancy-Value Model (Eccles & Harold, 1991; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004) served as the theoretical foundation for this study, and we focused specifically on the link between family support/encouragement and child participation. In the model, the links between parental behavior (i.e., expectations, behaviors) and child's decision-making and performance are considered unidirectional. In this study, it was clear that the child's behaviors and expectations—the entire sport environment in which the children played—also fed back to the parents' decision making and involvement. The performance of the children, the demands of the activity, and the perceived benefits gained from the children all influenced the way in which parents provided support and encouragement. In other words, the groups react to each other and rely on each other to gain satisfaction from the environment, and make decisions about continued involvement based on this relationship. Future research to study this symbiotic relationship seems warranted.

One major limitation of this study could be reflected in the nature of the participants: did those who agree to participate in the focus groups already likely have a positive perspective of youth sport, as they were both attending their children's game *and* willing to discuss their involvement? While this question is inherent in most forms of research, a potentially crucial parent group—the underinvolved parent—was likely missed in this particular study. Results of this study should be interpreted with caution based on this limitation. A logical next step along this line is to hold similar focus groups with parents whose children were no longer involved in youth sport, or who do not regularly attend children's games. Such research could create a more complete perspective of the range of parental and child experiences in sports.

Another limitation is the extent to which participants attempted to present themselves favorably to other parents and not be honest about their own potentially negative behaviors. Self-report research methods (such as paper-and-pencil measures or, in this case, focus groups) lend themselves to the possibility of social desirability, especially with potentially controversial subjects, and thus observational research may be needed to provide a more accurate "picture" of the true nature of parental behavior. Our intent in this study, though, was to provide a voice to parents, as so often the literature provides largely theoretical links between parental and child behavior without a larger understanding of why or how parents behave in some manner.

Future research in this area is essential in efforts to promote long-lasting involvement in youth sport and physical activity, and efforts to understand the two-way influence of parental and child involvement in sport would be beneficial. Being that the parents in this study were clearly emotionally tied to their children's involvement, parent and child satisfaction, enjoyment, and socialization should be studied as symbiotic in nature. Moreover, research efforts to educate well-intentioned adults in keeping things in perspective could provide a better understanding of how to provide the most rewarding experiences for young athletes *and* their parents in sport.

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