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Emotional Experiences of Youth Sport Parents I: Anger

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Although there is general agreement that some sideline behavior at youth sport events is problematic (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008), the reasons why parent spectators sometimes act inappropriately are not well understood. Given that the most problematic behaviors appear to be motivated by anger (Omli & LaVoi, 2009), the purpose of this study is to identify sources of anger from the perspective of parents. Participants ($n = 773$, 59% female) described specific instances in which they got angry during a youth sport event. A grounded theory analysis yielded three types of perceived offenses—uncaring, unjust, and incompetent—and four categories of perceived offenders—referees, coaches, participants, and other parent spectators.

Organized youth sport programs provide enjoyment and regular physical activity for millions of children each year. These opportunities are made possible through substantial adult involvement, especially on the part of parents (Hoyle & Leff, 1997). Many parents are actively involved in youth sport (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004), signing their children up to participate in an organized program (Brustad, 1996), purchasing equipment, paying league fees, and providing transportation (Green & Chalip, 1998) and emotional support (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008), while routinely attending competitions and practices (McPherson & Davidson 1980, as cited in Smith, 1988); some parents volunteer as coaches, referees, and administrators (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). Due to the importance of parents in the lives of children, researchers have been interested in the involvement of parents in youth sport for decades (Omli, LaVoi, & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2008).

Recently, researchers have focused increased attention on the behavior of parent spectators during youth sport events (e.g., Goldstein, 2005; Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008; Hennessy & Schwartz, 2007; Omli & LaVoi, 2009, Omli et al., 2008; Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, & Power, 2005). Scholarly interest in spectator behavior at youth sport events may have been prompted by news reports (e.g., Abrams, 2010) of egregious acts committed by parents at youth sport events, which have helped to create a public perception that sensational acts (e.g., an angry parent physically assaulting an official) are relatively common occurrences. The perception that youth sport parents are “out of control” has been reinforced by anecdotes reported in popular press sport parenting books (e.g., Murphy, 1999), but as Hyman (2009)

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argues, parental over-involvement in youth sport is not a new issue. Based on the perception that parent behavior is problematic, youth sport administrators have implemented a variety of strategies to curtail inappropriate spectator behavior at youth sport events, including measures that are (a) restrictive (e.g., “Silent Sundays”), (b) punitive (e.g., assessing fines for poor behavior), (c) contractual (e.g., codes of conduct), or (d) educational (e.g., parent training; Omli et al., 2008). Unfortunately, such interventions are seldom based on knowledge from the sport science community (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004) and few interventions have been subjected to empirical scrutiny (Omli & LaVoi, 2009).

Though some studies have been conducted to determine how parents behave at youth sport events, it is clear that the sort of outrageous acts involving physical altercations that have been reported in the media are uncommon (Omli & LaVoi, 2009). However, research reviewed below provides evidence that many spectators regularly behave in ways that are less than ideal. Using observational methods, Randall and McKenzie (1987) found that spectators at youth soccer games were silent during the majority (87%) of each game. During the remaining time (13%), parents provide instruction (74%), positive comments (20%), and negative comments (6%). In a similar observational study, Kidman, McKenzie, and McKenzie (1999) found that 35% of spectator comments were negative. Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, and Wall (2008) provided further insight into the nature of spectator verbalizations by identifying and arranging categories of spectator comments on a continuum from more controlling to more supportive (i.e., derogatory comments, negative comments, striking a balance, instruction, performance contingent feedback, and praise/encouragement). Meân and Kassing (2007) conducted naturalistic observations of parents at youth sport events and analyzed parent verbalizations through a critical discourse analysis. Meân and Kassing suggested that the parent verbalizations that they observed appeared to be intended to (a) encourage aggressive play, (b) achieve solidarity between the spectator and one or more athletes, (c) reinforce the importance of winning, or (d) reprimand children after mistakes.

Observational studies have been supplemented by findings from survey research. Shields and colleagues (Shields et al., 2005; Shields, LaVoi, Bredemeier, & Power, 2007) found that most parents, coaches, and young athletes recall hearing angry spectator verbalizations on a relatively frequent basis. The most commonly reported (Hennessy & Schwartz, 2007; Shields et al., 2005, 2007) sideline behaviors from the perspective of parents are yelling at the referee and coaching from the sidelines. Parents, coaches, and young athletes also reported observing people on the sidelines engaging in angry, humiliating, aggressive, and embarrassing behavior, including swearing, physical and verbal fighting, and encouraging athletes to play rough or outside of the rules (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008; Hennessy & Schwartz, 2007; Shields et al., 2005, 2007). Emerging research is beginning to identify ways in which angry parent behaviors can be predicted by personality traits (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008; Hennessy & Schwartz, 2007).

Using a semi-structured interview procedure, Omli and Wiese-Bjornstal (in press) found that children recall parents acting in supportive ways (e.g., encouragement, cheering) as well as less supportive ways (e.g., talking on a cell phone, disrupting a competition), some of which involve outright hostility (e.g., criticizing the performance of children, yelling at officials), during youth sport events. Omli and Wiese-Bjornstal summarized the behaviors recalled by children using three roles played by parents at youth sport events. Some spectators act like supportive parents by engaging in attentive silence during games, as well as cheering, encouraging, and praising athletes at appropriate times, and when necessary, engaging in protective interventions. Other parents act like demanding coaches by shouting instructions, advice, and critical encouragement during competitions or act like crazed fans by arguing,

blaming, derogating, disrupting, yelling, and cheering fanatically. When asked how they want parents to behave at youth sport events, children indicated preferences for spectators who act like supportive parents rather than demanding coaches or crazed fans (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, in press). The preferences expressed by children were partially corroborated by Holt et al. (2008), who asked children to endorse one rule they would like parents to obey during youth sport events. Children most commonly indicated that parents should be positive, encouraging, and noncritical (53%) and parents should not yell at the referee because doing so disadvantages them while they are playing (Holt et al., 2008). These findings indicate that parent behavior can be a source of support or a source of stress for young athletes (Omli et al., 2008).

Despite the difficulty of obtaining accurate information about the behavior of spectators at youth sport events (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001), findings reviewed above appear to indicate that newsworthy episodes of outrageous behavior are uncommon. However, less egregious acts, such as yelling at referees, are observed frequently at youth sport events (Omli & LaVoi, 2009). Although these studies have increased understanding of how parents behave and how children want parents to behave, little is known about why parents behave the way they do at youth sport events (Omli et al., 2008). Researchers have examined vicarious achievement as a social psychological motive among non-parent spectators at competitive sport events (Kwon, Trail, & Lee, 2008; Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2000), but little research has been conducted to examine vicarious achievement among parent spectators at youth sport events. However, the simplistic and empirically untested explanation that parents misbehave at youth sport events because they live vicariously through their children has been generally accepted by both laypeople and academics (Omli et al., 2008) for decades.

Although the causes of inappropriate spectator behavior remain unknown, it is clear that, for many parents, watching a child participate in a youth sport event is an emotional experience (Omli et al., 2008). A premise of the present study is that many of the decisions made by parents, including parents who engage in inappropriate behaviors, are primarily emotional, rather than rational. As defined by Deci (1980), "An emotion is a reaction to a stimulus event (either actual or imagined). It involves changes in the viscera and musculature of the person, is experienced subjectively in characteristic ways, is expressed through such means as facial changes and action tendencies, and may mediate and energize subsequent behaviors" (p. 85). Given the prominence of emotion in decision-making processes in a diverse array of situations, such as consumer spending (Rick & Loewenstein, 2008) and music and art appreciation (Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 2008), it is reasonable to believe that emotion can play a significant role in the experience and behavior of spectators at youth sport events.

Given the causal relationship between emotion and behavior (Lewis, Haviland-Jones, & Barrett, 2008), identifying events that occasion salient emotional experiences for parents may help us better understand why parents sometimes behave in less than ideal ways. Because basic emotions—fear, sadness, happiness, and anger—have distinctive neural signals (Panksepp, 2008) and universal nonverbal expressions (Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 2008), these discrete emotions provide a reasonable point of entry into the emotional experiences of parent spectators. An emerging body of work (Omli & LaVoi, 2009; Omli, et al., 2008) has provided reason to believe that expressions of anger may have particularly deleterious effects on the emotional well-being of children within the context of youth sport. Despite the general agreement that angry parent behavior can disrupt the emotional well-being (Omli & LaVoi, 2009) of children, the reasons why parents sometimes get angry while watching their children compete in youth sport are not well understood. Therefore, the present study was conducted to identify circumstances that arise during youth sport events that occasion anger in parent spectators.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were youth sport parents ($N = 773$, 59% female) from a large suburban Midwestern city whose children (5 to 19 years of age, $M = 7.8 \pm 3.1$) participated in a local athletic association. Children of participants played in both in-house (74%) and traveling (26%) sports including baseball, basketball, football, volleyball, lacrosse, soccer, softball, track and field, and wrestling. Parent respondents were predominantly White (96%), nearly half possessed a Bachelor's degree (46%), and some possessed a graduate degree (25%).

Procedure

After our University Institutional Review Board had granted approval, parents were invited to fill out an online questionnaire at the conclusion of their child's sport season. A link to the voluntary and confidential survey was emailed to parents by the president of the Athletic Association. Consent was implied and understood if parents filled out the survey.

Instrumentation

Parents were asked to provide demographic information and answer an open-ended question related to their experiences observing their children participate in organized youth sport events. Specifically, parents were asked to "try to remember a time when you became angry during a sport event that your child was participating in" and to describe their experience in as much detail as possible. The open-ended question, which was developed to allow thick description of emotional experiences within the naturalistic setting of youth sport (Gray, 2004), was piloted with five parents not involved in the present study to ensure that the wording of the question would be clear to participants. The 773 participants who participated in the study provided a total of 982 responses, as some parents chose to describe more than one instance in which they became angry.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Analysis

Given that much is assumed but little is known about the emotional experiences of parents in youth sports, an exploratory design was employed. A grounded theory procedure (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which involved the collection of data prior to formulating a theory "grounded in the data" (Creswell, 2003), guided the data analysis. The theory that emerges from a grounded theory process is different than typical theories in the behavioral sciences in that it often does not include causal relationships between variables (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory procedures are ideal for analyzing responses from a large (20–30 or more) number of participants (Charmaz, 2000), especially when the phenomenon of interest is not well-understood (Creswell, 2003). Because our objective was to increase understanding of the sources of anger for youth sport parent spectators, and no studies of this kind had been published previously, grounded theory procedures were deemed to be most appropriate. Specifically, the following procedure for data analysis was followed:

1. Participant responses were retrieved from a secure online database.
2. Members of the research team read through all data multiple times, response by response, to become familiar with the types of circumstances that occasioned anger in parents.

3. Initial line-by-line coding involved looking at responses to interview questions independently of other responses. Members of the research team created a preliminary code for each unit of meaning (i.e., a sentence or paragraph used by a participant to describe a specific event); a total of 33 preliminary codes were stored by members of the research team for use in discussion and triangulation.
4. During the coding process, members of the research team grouped data themes with common properties (e.g., “encouraging athletes to play rough” and “encouraging illegal tactics”) into a single code (“encouraging athlete unsportsmanlike conduct”), until a set of 17 themes that provided a comprehensive account of the data, while minimizing conceptual overlap among themes, emerged. An 18th miscellaneous theme included one-of-a-kind responses that did not fit one of the other 17 themes. The consolidation of data themes involved a constant comparative process, which is a hallmark of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Throughout the constant comparative process, codes that emerged from participant responses were repeatedly compared to the raw data (e.g., responses from other parents) and were revised until the codes fit the data as perfectly as possible (Creswell, 2003).
5. After codes were assigned and tested through the constant comparative process, members of the research team found that the categories of behavior captured by individual codes (e.g., criticize/yell at referee, coach from the sidelines) could be organized into three higher-order themes, based on the type of perceived offense. Names were selected by members of the research team to represent each higher-order theme.
6. After lower- and higher-order themes were finalized, a theory was developed to provide a holistic representation of the data. According to Creswell (2003), a grounded theory can “assume the form of a narrative statement, a visual picture, or a series of hypotheses or propositions” (p. 56). For this study, a narrative statement was deemed to be the most meaningful summary of the data (see discussion section, para. 1).

Trustworthiness of Findings. A grounded theory should include at least 20–30 participants (Creswell, 2003). A total of 773 parents participated in this study, allowing the emergence of a theory grounded in the experiences of a large sample of informants. The process of triangulation was employed to ensure greater veracity of interpretations than would have been possible if a single investigator had developed the theory alone. To establish greater trustworthiness of the findings, an additional individual who was experienced in qualitative methodology and versed in coding procedures was given the raw data and lower-order themes and was asked to match them accordingly. The inter-rater reliability rate of 89% was similar to previous grounded theory research in sport psychology (Buman, Omli, Giacobbi, & Brewer, 2008; Seve, Poizat, Saury, & Durand, 2006).

Descriptive Analysis

In the second step of the data analysis, the lower-order coding schema was used by two researchers to code and triangulate parent responses (Patton, 1990) so that a frequency analysis could be performed. A parent respondent could have multiple angry parent codes within his/her response, as some parents chose to describe more than one event. Given the large sample size, approximately 25% of parent responses ($n = 200$) were used to establish inter-rater reliability ($\alpha = 88\%$, Cronbach, 1951). Collectively, the research team discussed and verified each code. When a discrepancy arose, discussion ensued until consensus was obtained. If consensus could not be obtained, the dimension was coded as “other.” After each parent response ($n = 982$) was coded, the data were entered into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, v.12) software so that descriptive data analyses could ensue. Approximately one-third (257 out of

773) of parents indicated they did not get angry. Because the objective of the study was to identify sources of parental anger, the non-angry parent responses were removed from the sample size, resulting in a final sample of unique descriptions of instances in which parents reported becoming angry ($n = 725$).

RESULTS

Qualitative Results

Parents reported experiencing anger due to the behavior of officials, coaches, athletes, and other parent spectators. The analysis of the raw data yielded 17 distinct themes, which were organized by the perceived offense—unjust, uncaring, or incompetent—and the perceived offender—official, coach, athlete, or parent spectator (see Table 1). The 18th theme, miscellaneous, included responses that were one-of-a-kind and did not fit into one of the 17 distinct themes that emerged from the data.

Unjust

Unjust conduct that triggered anger for sport parents included behaviors that were perceived to lack fairness, impartiality, or honesty. Two unjust themes emerged from the raw data: referee unfairness and coach unfairness. Perceptions of unjust referee behavior included not making fair calls, making an equal number of calls, or favoring one team over another. Coach behaviors that were perceived by parents to be unjust included allocating unequal playing time, favoring talented players, favoring the coach's own child, or making inconsistent decisions. One parent indicated that sometimes "coaches give the prime positions consistently to their kids and their children's good friends, making it unfair for the other kids."

Uncaring

Perceptions of uncaring conduct included behaviors that involved acting without concern or thought for others, caring only about their own interests, or lacking thought or consideration about what is best for everyone. Parents reported uncaring behavior of coaches, athletes, and other parent spectators, but not referees. Overall, 13 uncaring themes emerged from the raw data.

Parents indicated that coaches show a lack of care in five ways: (a) unsportsmanlike conduct, (b) encouraging athlete unsportsmanlike conduct, (c) criticizing/yelling at referee, (d) criticizing/yelling at athletes, and (e) getting involved in an altercation. Unsportsmanlike conduct among coaches included cheering in obnoxious, mean, or excessive ways, taunting the opposing team, using profanity, and coming to games intoxicated. One parent described the behavior of some coaches who act in unsportsmanlike ways, saying "it irks me when opposing coaches manipulate the system. . .rotating fielders to create an advantage, running bases aggressively when ahead by a large margin." Parents also indicated that coaches encourage athletes to engage in rough or illegal play, or break rules. One parent recalled a coach encouraging unsportsmanlike conduct by saying, "I heard that coach give unfair instructions to the team, like to purposefully do something that was illegal!" Another parent reported that "one of the mothers from the other team was very angry that her son's team was 'playing dirty' as she stated to the coach on the field. The coach's comment to her was 'at least it worked.'"

Parents reported getting angry while observing coaches who yelled at, intimidated, or attempted to manipulate referees. One parent described a coach who would "take advantage of inexperienced umpires and intimidate them into calls." Parents also reported getting angry when coaches yelled at athletes. For example, a parent indicated that he or she "disliked

Table 1
Higher and Lower Order Themes, Descriptions, and Exemplar Quotes for Angry Sport Parent Responses

| Higher order theme | Social Agent | Lower order theme | Description of lower order theme | Example of lower order theme |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| UNJUST <i>lacking in justice or fairness; dishonest; not impartial; disingenuous; unequal</i> | | | | |
| 1 | Referee | Referee Unfairness | Referees not making fair decisions, favoring one team. | “A ref wasn’t making any calls so eventually the soccer game became physical, pushing, tripping, etc. . .” |
| 2 | Coach | Coach Unfairness | Unequal playing time, favoring talented players, Parent-Coach favoring own child, inconsistent decisions. | “When the coaches give the prime positions consistently to their kids and their children’s good friends making it unfair for the other kids. The coach’s kids generally start off every batting order.” |
| UNCARING <i>without concern, care or thought for others; thoughtless; only care about self/own child; no thought about what is best for everyone</i> | | | | |
| 3 | Athlete | Unsportsman-like Conduct | Playing too aggressively; acting disrespectfully or boasting; intentionally hurting someone; win at all costs attitude; bad attitude; using profanity | “trash talk among the girls” “When the kids went through the line at the end of the game the other team was very disrespectful and didn’t shake hands and some of the kids swore at my son’s teammates.” |
| 4 | Athlete | Lack of Effort | not paying attention; making mistakes; not hustling | “My son was not paying attention while the coach was giving instruction.” “Some of the children show a serious lack of effort, and then become sullen when the other team is winning.” |
| 5 | Parent | Coaching from the Sidelines | Anyone calling out instruction from the sidelines who is not the coach; yelling at athletes after a mistake. | “One parent consistently yelling instruction from the sidelines.” “One set of parents who constantly berated their son during the games.” |
| 6 | Parent | Unsportsman-like Conduct | Behaving or cheering in an obnoxious, mean or excessive way; taunting; profanity; intoxication; unaware how own behavior affects or is perceived by others | “Parents cheering loudly when other team is already demoralized.” “Opposing team’s parents are often embarrassing/” “When a parent started yelling out racial slurs to the ref.” |

UNCARING

without concern, care or thought for others; thoughtless; only care about self/own child; no thought about what is best for everyone

| | | | | |
|----|--------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 7 | Parent | Criticizing/Yelling at Referee | Yelling at referee(s) from sideline when a bad call was made/not made; parent approaches referee to yell. | “Ref does not make a call or improper call and parent yells at ref.” |
| 8 | Parent | Criticizing/ Yelling at Coach | Yelling at coach(es) from sideline; parent approaches coach to yell. | “A child’s dad pulled the coach aside. . .to complain that his child wasn’t playing more in a very angry tone.” “Parents going up to coaches in the middle of a game in front of the kids to complain.” |
| 9 | Parent | Encouraging Athlete Unsportsman-like Conduct | Encouraging poor sport behavior from sidelines (i.e., rough or illegal play, rule breaking, or bad attitude.) | “A parent from the opposing team yelled out for his son to hit and hurt a player from our team.” “During an in-house football game a parent was yelling for the boys to play rough, ‘make them eat mud.’” “Parents yelling at each other for some crazy reason.” |
| 10 | Parent | Getting Involved in an Altercation | Verbal or physical fight with coach, parent, spectator. | “Coaches on opposing team took advantage of inexperienced umpires and intimidated them into calls.” |
| 11 | Coach | Criticizing/ Yelling at Referee | Yelling at referee(s) when a bad call was made/not made; intimidating or manipulating. Referee | |
| 12 | Coach | Encouraging Athlete Unsportsman-like Conduct | Encouraging poor sport behavior (i.e., rough or illegal play, rule-breaking, bending rules). | “One of the mothers from the other team was very angry that her son’s team was ‘playing dirty’ as she stated to the coach on the field. The coach’s comment to her was—‘at least it worked.’” |
| 13 | Coach | Getting Involved in an Altercation | Verbal or physical fight with coach, parent, spectator. | “I also heard that coach give unfair instructions to the team, like to purposefully do something that was illegal.” “Two coaches of opposing teams . . . yelling at each other and were about an inch away from each other’s face. All the children stood and watched.” “There was a near fight between opposing coaches of my son’s kindergarten soccer team.” |

(Continued on next page)

Table 1
Higher and Lower Order Themes, Descriptions, and Exemplar Quotes for Angry Sport Parent Responses (Continued)

| Higher order theme | Social Agent | Lower order theme | Description of lower order theme | Example of lower order theme |
|--------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 14 | Coach | Unsportsman-like Conduct | Behaving or cheering in an obnoxious, mean or excessive way; taunting; profanity; intoxication; unaware how own behavior affects or is perceived by others. | “A coach was yelling and using profanity at his players.” “The other coach acted in an unsportsmanlike way.” |
| 15 | Coach | Criticizing/Yelling at Athletes | Coach yells at athletes when mad about performance. | “I disliked hearing the coach yell at the boys in field for a missed play.” |
| INCOMPETENT | | | | |
| 16 | Referee | Referee Incompetence | Referees not knowing or fully understanding the rules of the game; failure to make calls; bad calls, applying rules inconsistently; or putting kids in danger by not making calls. | “The refs are too young and not always aware of the rules of the game, they are afraid to make calls.” “Bad call from the ref that cost us the game.” |
| 17 | Coach | Coach Incompetence | Perceived lack of coach knowledge, ability or bad philosophy; inconsistent decisions; inattention; poor/lack of communication; showing up late or not at all. | “Coach made a horrible decision for a squeeze play . . . ended up losing the game” “It irks me when opposing coaches manipulate the system . . . rotating fielders to create an advantage, running bases aggressively when ahead by a large margin.” “Some teams continued to play when the games had been called for weather.” “When people bring their pets to the game.” |
| 18 | Misc. | | | |

hearing the coach yell at the boys in the field for a missed play.” Parents reported getting angry at coaches who got involved in altercations, either physical or verbal, with other adults. One parent reported that “there was a near fight between opposing coaches on my son’s kindergarten soccer team” and another parent described “two coaches of opposing teams who yelled at each other and were about an inch away from each other’s faces [while] the children stood and watched.”

Parents reported two forms of uncaring behavior among athletes: unsportsmanlike conduct and lack of effort. Unsportsmanlike conduct included acting outside the rules, swearing, disrespecting opponents, or having a win-at-all-costs mentality. One parent recalled getting angry “when the kids went through the line at the end of the game and the other team was very disrespectful and didn’t shake hands and some of the kids swore at my son’s teammates.” When athletes showed a win-at-all-costs mentality, this made some parents angry as they perceived this behavior to demonstrate a lack of care for other children. Parents also reported getting angry when they perceived their child to not care about the sport by not giving full effort or paying attention. For example, one parent reported getting angry when his or her son was not paying attention while the coach was giving instructions.

Parents reported getting angry at other parent spectators who engaged in one of six uncaring behaviors: (a) coaching from the sidelines, (b) unsportsmanlike conduct, (c) encouraging athlete unsportsmanlike conduct, (d) criticizing/yelling at referee, (e) criticizing/yelling at coach, and (f) getting involved in an altercation. Coaching from the sidelines involved calling out instructions to athletes during play. For example, one parent recalled getting angry at another parent who was “consistently yelling instructions from the sidelines,” while another participant stated, “a parent on our team constantly rode his own child to do certain things on the field, which visibly upset the child.” Coaching from the sidelines is categorized as uncaring because children consistently express preferences against these behaviors, which children perceive to be distracting, embarrassing, and frightening (Omli & LaVoi, 2009). Furthermore, children frequently perceive overt instructions as covert criticism, and consistently describe instructional verbalizations as yelling (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, in press). Therefore, based on child perception of and preferences against instructional parental behaviors, it can be argued that parental coaching from the sidelines are uncaring behaviors, as these behaviors demonstrate a lack of concern, care, or thought for others, and a disregard for what is best for everyone in the youth sport climate.

Unsportsmanlike conduct among parent spectators included cheering in obnoxious, mean, or excessive ways, taunting the opposing team, using profanity, and coming to games intoxicated. For example, parents indicated that other parent spectators are often embarrassing, and sometimes cheer loudly when the other team is demoralized, or start yelling out racial slurs to the ref. Parents also indicated that other parent spectators sometimes encourage athletes to engage in rough or illegal play, or break rules. One parent recalled “a parent from the opposing team [who] yelled out for his son to hit and hurt a player from our team” and another parent reported that “during an in-house football game, a parent was yelling for the boys to play rough—’make them eat mud!’” Parents reported getting angry at other parent spectators who yelled at or approached a coach or referee during a competition. One parent reported getting angry when “parents go up to coaches in the middle of a game in front of the kids to complain” and another parent recalled an instance when “a child’s dad pulled the coach aside. . .to complain that his child wasn’t playing more in a very angry tone.” Some parents experienced anger while observing other parent spectators criticizing or yelling at athletes, including their own children. One parent recalled getting angry at “one set of parents who constantly berated their son during games.” Parents also reported getting angry at other parent spectators who got

involved in physical or verbal altercations. One parent recalled a physical altercation in which “two dads were pushing each other around and were in each other’s faces.”

Incompetent

Instances of incompetence included acts that were perceived to be evidence that the offender was incapable, deficient, inadequate, or lacked the qualification or ability to fulfill his or her duties. Two forms of incompetence were reported: referee incompetence and coach incompetence. Interestingly, zero parents described becoming angry due to perceived athlete incompetence. Similarly, parents did not report getting angry due to the incompetence of other parents. Perceptions of referee incompetence were based on the belief that the referee did not know or fully understand the game, failed to make calls due to lack of expertise, applied rules inconsistently, or put athletes at risk by not making calls. One parent explained that “the refs are too young and not always aware of the rules of the game—they are afraid to make calls.” Parents sometimes attributed the loss of a contest to referee incompetence. For example, one parent indicated that a “bad call from the ref cost us the game.”

Accusations of coach incompetence were based on a perceived lack of knowledge, ability and skills, inconsistent decision-making, inattention, poor communication, or a bad coaching philosophy. Similar to referee incompetence, parents reported that coach incompetence sometimes resulted in a competitive loss, with one parent indicating that a “coach made a horrible decision for a squeeze play, which ended up losing the game.”

Quantitative Results

Descriptive analyses were conducted to determine which angry sport parent triggers were most common. Within this sample of sport parents ($N = 773$), roughly one-third ($n = 257$, 33.2%) reported they never got angry during their child’s youth sport events. The two-thirds ($n = 516$, 66.8%) of parents who did report getting angry contributed a total of 725 unique responses (some parents chose to describe more than one time in which they became angry during a youth sport event). When participants did report getting angry, the most frequent triggers were referee incompetence (18.5%), followed by athlete unsportsmanlike conduct (12.7%), coach incompetence (11.9%), and parent unsportsmanlike parent conduct (11.0%). Frequency of angry triggers dropped off considerably after the Top 4, with remaining response categories accounted for between 0.3 and 6.1% of parent responses (see Figure 1).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify circumstances that occasion anger in parent spectators during youth sport events. The responses of participants indicate that most (66.8%) parent spectators have experienced anger during a youth sport event and that the anger is usually triggered by a fairly narrow and predictable range of events. The grounded theory that emerged from the data is best summarized by the following narrative statement: Angry reactions experienced by youth sport parents are usually occasioned by the perception that a referee, coach, athlete, or other parent spectator has behaved in a way that is unjust, uncaring, or incompetent.

Given that the present study focused on sources of anger from the perspective of youth sport parents, the actual moral intent or competency of the individuals who occasioned an angry parental response cannot be ascertained. Nonetheless, the majority of parent responses were based on perceptions of wrongdoing by a specific referee, coach, athlete, or parent spectator.

| | | <u>Higher Order Themes</u> | | |
|---------|---------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| | | Unjust | Uncaring | Incompetent |
| Referee | referee unfairness (2.1%) | | | referee incompetence (18.5%) |
| Coach | coach unfairness (5.9%) | | unsportsmanlike conduct (6.1%) encouraging athlete unsportsmanlike conduct (4.3%) criticizing/yelling at athletes (4.0%) criticizing/yelling at referee (2.9%) getting involved in an altercation (1.9%) | coach incompetence (11.9%) |
| Athlete | | | unsportsmanlike conduct (12.7%) lack of effort (3.6%) | |
| Parent | | | unsportsmanlike conduct (11.0%) coaching from the sidelines (5.7%) criticizing/yelling at referee (1.9%) encouraging athlete unsportsmanlike conduct (1.4%) criticizing/yelling at coach (0.6%) getting involved in an altercation (0.3%) | |

Figure 1. Sources of parent spectator anger at youth sport events, organized by higher-order theme. The percentage of responses for each lower-order theme is in parentheses (5.4% of responses were one-of-a-kind and did not fit one of the categories above).

Interestingly, two of the three higher-order themes correspond to two “ethics” that are central to Western philosophical thinking about morality (Arnold, 2008). The ethic of justice, which dominated Western moral philosophy until the last three decades (Aristotle, 350BC/1962), reflects qualities of an interaction such as respect for fairness and the rights of others. The

ethic of care, which has been defended more recently by feminist philosophers (Baier, 1995; Noddings, 1984), reflects concern and compassion for the welfare of others.

Perceptions of injustice were limited to the behavior of referees and coaches. Parents reported getting angry at referees and coaches who made decisions that they considered to be unfair (e.g., foul calls, playing time). Given that justice involves respect for the rights of others, it is not surprising that those who have the power to make decisions that affect others in the context of youth sport—referees and coaches—would be perceived to, at times, make unjust decisions, whereas athletes and parent spectators were not.

Parents reported experiencing anger while observing coaches, athletes, and parent spectators (but not referees) engage in behavior that they perceived to demonstrate a lack of care. Participant responses suggest that parents expect coaches and parent spectators to prioritize the well-being of children above other interests such as winning; behavior that violates this expectation can become a source of anger. Parents also seem to expect children to show care for others (including their parents) by putting forth a reasonable effort while participating in youth sport, and by respecting referees, coaches, and opponents. Parents did not report getting angry when they perceived the child had tried hard but made mistakes, lost, or failed, but did report getting angry due to lack of athlete effort—a factor that is under the control of the child. Given that many parents invest considerable time and resources into their child's sport career (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004), it is not surprising that many parents would expect their children to put forth a proportional effort (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008).

Compared to young athletes, parents appear to have higher expectations and more stringent demands regarding the competence of coaches and referees. Parents indicated that they got angry when they perceived that referee or coach incompetence had adversely affected the success of their child or team, even in cases where the parent acknowledged the coach's or referee's lack of training or experience. Responses to perceived referee incompetence help explain why yelling at the referee is the most commonly reported form of background anger at youth sport events (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008; Omlí & LaVoi, 2009; Shields et al., 2005). From the perspective of some parents, it appears that it is not enough to try your best as a referee. Given that parents appear to be fairly understanding of mistakes made by children and youth who compete in sport, it is interesting that this same level of understanding does not extend to the performance of referees, some of whom are also children or youth.

Future Directions

Results of this study underscore the idea that youth sport is a social system, which includes coaches, referees, athletes, and parent spectators. As a social system, the behavior of any member of the system can influence the experiences of others. Therefore, the responsibility to improve youth sport is one that should be shared among coaches, referees, parents, and administrators. Coaches and referees should make an effort to gain the skills and experience that will help them perform their jobs to the best of their abilities. Additionally, coaches can set a good example for parents and athletes by respecting the authority and integrity of referees, caring for the children and youth that they coach, and building relationships with parents. Likewise, parent spectators can set a good example for their peers by behaving in ways that they would want other parents to behave, making an effort to understand how their behavior influences the emotional well-being and performance of their children (Omlí, 2006), and showing respect for coaches and referees during youth sport events.

Helping parents control and curb behaviors directed at referees, many of whom are also children, may help improve referee retention rates. Across the United States, referee attrition is approximately 35–40% each year, which may be partially attributable to yelling and abuse of sport parents on the sidelines (National Association of Sport Officials, 2001). Rather than

relying on restrictive, punitive, or contractual measures (Omli et al., 2008), administrators should strive to foster a youth sport culture of mutual respect, with the responsibilities associated with each role—coach, referee, athlete, and spectator—clearly defined and appreciated.

CONCLUSION

Counter to Randall and McKenzie's (2006) conclusion that intrusive spectator behavior are not a serious problem in youth sport, our findings provide further reason to believe that a gap exists between actual and ideal parent spectator behavior at youth sport events. Previous research (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, in press) indicates that children prefer spectators act like supportive parents rather than crazed fans or demanding coaches. Findings from this study provide reason to suspect that parents prefer the same behavior as children, and get angry when their preferences are violated.

Understanding the emotional experiences of sport parents is critical because emotion is closely tied to behavior (Lewis et al., 2008). If we understand the reasons why parents experience anger during youth sport events, we will be better equipped to create effective interventions aimed at reducing angry expressions on the sidelines (LaVoi, Omli, & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2008). Although results of this study add to the youth sport literature by identifying many of the circumstances that occasion anger in parent spectators, much remains to be examined. Currently, the mechanisms through which the emotional experience of parents translates to behavior are unknown, leaving an important question unanswered: Why do some parents who experience anger act inappropriately, while others self-regulate and maintain control?

To effectively change parent behavior, developers of interventions must recognize that, for parents, watching a child compete in youth sport can be stressful (Omli et al., 2008). An understanding of the nature and magnitude of this profoundly emotional experience can help administrators create relevant and effective strategies that harness the moral reasoning of parents. For example, perspective-taking and Socratic questioning could be incorporated into pre-season parent education workshops aimed at helping parents understand why they act and react as they do during youth sport events, promoting higher levels of moral reasoning among parent spectators, and the creation of a more just youth sport community (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Given that parent perceptions of referee incompetence frequently occasioned angry parent responses, workshop facilitators could ask parents to consider the following questions: "Is it just to yell at the referee? Is it caring to yell at the referee? What kind of climate do you create for children when you yell at the referee? Would you still yell at the referee if she were your daughter?"

Ultimately, changing the perceptions of parents may increase awareness of how expressions of anger can affect everyone, and may also reduce the frequency with which parent spectators express anger. For example, a parent who perceives that the referee is incompetent may conclude that "The referee is terrible, he always misses the call" rather than a more sympathetic conclusion that "The referee is doing his best, and he may have made a mistake, but perhaps I didn't have the best vantage point." Parents who consider their limitations, and/or acknowledge and accept the fact that referees sometimes make mistakes, may be less likely to get angry and yell at the referee.

Not all sport parents get angry and not all parents who do get angry act upon their anger, but some do. This study identified some of the most common reasons why parents get angry during youth sport events. Greater understanding of the events that trigger anger could help researchers and youth sport stakeholders create proactive strategies aimed at reducing the magnitude of anger experienced by some parents, thereby reducing problematic behavior.

Reducing background anger at youth sport events would lead to more positive experiences for everyone, including referees, coaches, parents, and the young athletes themselves.

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