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Kids Speak: Preferred Parental Behavior at Youth Sport Events

Jens Omli and Diane M. Wiese-Bjornstal

News reports (e.g., Abrams, 2008) and scholarly research (e.g., Wiersma & Fifer, 2005) have indicated increasing concern that parent-spectator behavior at youth sport events may be problematic. Multiple strategies have been used to influence spectator behavior in youth sport contexts (e.g., “Silent Sundays”). However, it is unlikely that interventions aimed at changing parent-spectator behaviors have adequately considered young athletes’ perspectives, because little is known about how children want parents to behave during youth sport events. Therefore, children (ages 7–14 years) were asked to describe how parents actually behaved at youth sport events and how they wanted parents to behave. Through grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2000), three parent “roles” emerged from the data—supportive parent, demanding coach, and crazed fan.

Key words: child preferences, fans, spectators

Many parents in North America are intensely involved in the sport “careers” of their children (Brustad, 1992; Gould, Lauer, Roman, & Pierce, 2005; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004). Parents are usually responsible for children’s initial sport participation (Brustad, 1996; Greendorfer, Lewko, & Rosengren, 1996), as they often begin participating because a parent signs them up for organized sport (Howard & Madrigal, 1990). Parents expose children to organized sport by modeling their own participation (Bandura, 1973) or by exposing children to athletic events in person or on television (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). Once children begin participating in organized sport, parental involvement takes a variety of forms, including providing transportation and emotional support, cheerleading, coaching, and purchasing equipment (Green & Chalip, 1998).

Parental involvement in youth sport has been a topic of scholarly inquiry for decades (e.g., Greendorfer, 1977;

Loy, McPherson, & Kenyon, 1978), but interest in youth sport parents appears to have increased, as evidenced by the number of articles published in recent years (e.g., Holt, Tammimen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008; Omli, LaVoi, & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2008). Some researchers focused on parental influence on participation motivation (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005), motivational outcomes (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006), and achievement goals (White, Kavassanu, Tank, & Wingate, 2004). Others focused on parental involvement in the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005) or the issues faced by parents who coach their own children (Weiss & Fretwell, 2005).

Although parents play various important roles in organized youth sport programs, their influence is not always entirely positive (Gould et al., 2005; Wiersma & Fifer, 2005). In addition to negatively influencing sportsmanship behavior in children (Arthur-Banning, Wells, Baker, & Hegreness, 2009), parents can be a source of stress for young athletes, causing some children to burn out (Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996) or drop out of youth sport altogether (Greendorfer, 1992). Perceived parental pressure to participate and perform well is associated with decreased enjoyment (Brustad, 1988) and increased anxiety (Brustad, Babkes, & Smith, 2001; Hellstedt, 1988). Compared to children low in state anxiety, children high in state anxiety may be at increased risk for dropping out of sport, because they are more likely to express concerns of being evaluated negatively (Passer, 1983).

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Although perceived parental pressure and evaluation anxiety are cause for concern, these may not be the only sources of stress for young athletes. Reports of undesirable parent-spectator behavior in popular press parenting books (e.g., Murphy, 1999) and news reports (e.g., Abrams, 2008) have indicated that parents sometimes act in ways that may be distressing for children. Despite awareness of problematic spectator behavior, few researchers (e.g., Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008; Omli & LaVoi, 2009) have focused on parental behavior as a potential source of stress for young athletes.

Randall and McKenzie (1987) observed spectators at youth soccer games and found they observed silently for most (87%) of each game. During the remaining time (13%), spectators gave instructional comments (74%), positive comments (19.8%), and negative comments (5.8%). Kidman, McKenzie, and McKenzie (1999) found that, although most spectator comments were positive or instructional, over one third of comments were negative. Adding to observational data, Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, and Power (2005) assessed the negative behavior of spectators at soccer games by asking coaches, parents, and athletes to report perceptions of sideline behavior. Compared to other negative behaviors, coaches, parents, and athletes most frequently reported witnessing spectators (a) "coaching from the sidelines" and (b) angrily yelling at coaches and officials during games.

To confront such behavior, youth sport administrators have used a variety of strategies, such as punishing poor behavior (e.g., assessing fines), restricting behavior (e.g., "Silent Sundays"), restricting access to participants during competitions, and requiring parents to sign codes of conduct (Omli et al., 2008). Unfortunately, such interventions are seldom informed by the sport science community (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004) and rarely consider the perspectives of the young athletes themselves (Omli, 2006). The perspectives of young athletes are important because children are most affected by the behavior of parents during youth sport events. Researchers have interviewed children about how they want their parents to behave throughout their sport career (Stein, Raedeke, & Glenn, 1999; Wood & Abernethy, 1991), but research efforts have not focused specifically on parent "sideline" behavior. Therefore, given the inappropriate behavior present during some youth sport events, the purpose of this study was to better understand how children want parent-spectators to behave during youth sport events.

Method

Participants

Twenty-eight boys and 29 girls between the ages of 7 and 14 years ($M_{age} = 9.72$ years, $SD = 1.81$) were recruited

from a week-long beginning tennis camp in a middle class area of the northwestern United States. Racial identity was not assessed, as requested by the departments of parks and recreation that provided access to participants. However, the sample appeared to include substantial racial diversity. Participants were recruited from tennis camps for beginners rather than expert players, as our objective was to explore the parent preferences of youth sport participants in general rather than tennis players alone. All participants reported organized youth sport experience in at least two sports other than tennis (e.g., soccer and basketball) prior to starting the study.

Procedure

This manuscript is the first in a series of articles that present findings from the Kids Speak project, a multiphase study conducted to explore child preferences for adult involvement in youth sport. Our university's Institutional Review Board granted permission to conduct the study. At the beginning of each week of tennis camp, parents were asked to allow their child to be interviewed about his or her perceptions of and preferences for parental involvement in youth sport, including parental behavior during youth sport events. Of the 59 parents asked to participate, 58 provided consent. Prior to each interview, the study procedure was explained, and each child was asked to sign an assent form. Of the 58 children, 57 chose to sign the assent form and participate. Interviews took place during lunch breaks or after camp, far enough away from parents and other camp participants to ensure privacy. All interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and typically lasted between 10 and 15 min.

Investigator. When conducting interpretive research, it is important to identify possible biases of the researchers. Each interview was conducted by the first author, who has 10 years of experience teaching youth tennis in the northwestern United States and has extensive training in qualitative methodologies, interviewing, and child development. During the study, the first author served as an administrator for the participants' tennis program and was introduced as "Coach Jens." He began the study with assumptions that influenced interpretations of participant responses, including the beliefs that (a) some parents act inappropriately during youth sport events and (b) adults should take the preferences expressed by children seriously. Consistent with the recommendation of grounded theory methodologists (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and to avoid imposing biases on participants' responses, the first author also attempted to "bracket out" (i.e., make an effort to actively disregard) prior theoretical knowledge of literature related to parents' role in youth sport.

Interview Questions. At the beginning of each interview, the priming questions, "what sports have you played" and "do parents usually come to your youth sport events"

were asked. The term youth sport “events” include both competitions (e.g., a Little League baseball game) and exhibitions (e.g., a dance performance). All participants confirmed that parents regularly attend their sport events. The interview included two open-ended questions: (a) “how do parents usually act during your youth sport events” and (b) “how would you like parents to act during your youth sport events.” Interview questions were refined during a series of pilot interviews conducted with six youth sport participants, ranging in age from 9 to 13 years, 1 year before initiating the Kids Speak project. Open-ended questions avoided limiting the range of possible responses. After participants answered each question, probes (e.g., “What do you mean by they ‘yell at’ the kids?” or “Is it a good thing or bad thing when parents do that?”) were used, when necessary, to eliminate ambiguity and encourage participants to provide more detailed responses.

Data Analysis. Grounded theory procedures (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were used throughout the analysis. By definition, a grounded theory approach involves collecting data prior to creating a theory. This is different from the way in which the term “theory” is typically used in the behavioral sciences, because the theory that emerges from the grounded theory process often does not include causal relationships between variables (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory procedures are ideal for analyzing interview responses of a relatively large (20–30) number of participants (Charmaz, 2000), especially when the study objective is to better understand a situation (Creswell, 1998). We deemed grounded theory procedures suitable for the present study, because our objective was to better understand how children want parents to behave during youth sport events and no studies of this kind had been conducted. Specifically, the following procedure for data analysis was used:

1. Two research assistants and the first author transcribed the interviews verbatim, resulting in approximately 63 single-spaced pages of data.
2. After bracketing out prior knowledge of research and theory on parental involvement in youth sport, the authors read through all data multiple times to become familiar with the types of behaviors participants described.
3. Initial line-by-line coding involved looking at responses independently of other responses. Each of us selected a preliminary code for each unit of meaning (i.e., a sentence or phrase used by a participant to describe or evaluate a specific parental behavior or a category of behaviors); and each stored preliminary codes for discussion and triangulation with the other’s codes.
4. During the coding process, we grouped data themes with common properties (e.g., “yelling” and “shouting”) into a single code (“yelling”), until we agreed

on a set of themes that provided a comprehensive account of the data, while minimizing conceptual overlap among themes. This grouping involved a constant comparative process, which is a hallmark of grounded theory. Throughout the process, codes that emerge from the data are repeatedly compared to the raw data (e.g., responses from other participants) and revised until the codes “fit the data” as perfectly as possible (Creswell, 1998).

5. Once we identified and “tested” codes through constant comparison, we found we could group the behavior categories captured by individual codes (i.e., “praise,” “critical encouragement”) into three “roles” parents played during youth sport events, based on children’s preferences for or against each behavior.
6. Once we completed coding, we developed a theory to explain the data. According to Creswell (1998), a grounded theory can “assume the form of a narrative statement, a visual picture, or a series of hypotheses or propositions” (p. 56). For the present study, the theory was presented as a narrative statement (see the Discussion section).

Trustworthiness of the Findings. The trustworthiness of the findings in the present study was supported by the bracketing out process and triangulation throughout coding. Triangulation helped to ensure greater veracity of interpretations than would be possible if a single investigator developed a grounded theory alone. To further ensure trustworthiness, another individual with previous involvement in youth sport, experience conducting grounded theory research, and no involvement in the present study served as an independent auditor for quality control. Agreement between the codes we derived and those applied by the external auditor was greater than 82%, indicating interrater reliability similar to previous grounded theory research in sport psychology (e.g., Buman, Omlil, Giacobbi, & Brewer, 2008; Sève, Poizat, Saury, & Durand, 2006). Finally, interpretations of the data were further verified through follow-up interviews with a subsample of 8 or the original participants 1 year later.

Results

Analysis of the raw data yielded 15 themes, categorized into three “roles” played by parents during youth sport events, and based on children’s preferences for or against each behavior (see Table 1). The first role, the “supportive parent,” included six behaviors children indicated a consistent preference for: attentive silence, cheering, encouragement, praise, empathy, and protective intervention. The second role, the “demanding coach,” included behaviors children did not prefer but tolerated in limited circumstances: instruction, advice, and critical

encouragement. The third role was the “crazed fan,” which included six behaviors children consistently indicated a preference against: arguing, blaming, derogation, disruption, yelling, and fanatical cheering. Following are descriptions of the behaviors.

Supportive Parent

Attentive Silence. Children indicated a strong preference for attentive silence, which involved sitting down quietly out-of-view, controlling one’s emotions, and maintaining a positive attitude while “paying attention” to the contest. When asked how parents usually act during her soccer games, a 9-year-old girl said, “They do really good, they just watch.” When asked what it means for a parent to “watch really good,” the 9-year-old girl responded, “They’re quiet.” One 9-year-old boy said that his dad “...watches [him] but doesn’t say anything.” Children indicated that parents should “sit down quietly and that’s about it” (10-year-old girl) or “sit quiet and not yell out comments” (10-year-old boy). Attentive silence may allow parents to be supportive without the risk of becoming a source of distraction or embarrassment for the children.

Cheering. Overall, children indicated a preference for cheering, provided parents cheered in ways the children consider appropriate, that is, an important means of support that can result in “more fun” (8-year-old boy) and allow children to “play better” (8-year-old boy). Children indicated clapping as one way parents cheered for them. A 10-year-old girl indicated that while playing goalie she

“tends to smile” when her parents clap for her and she “want[s] to do the same thing” again.

Some children indicated parents should cheer only for them, while others said parents should cheer for their entire team or both teams. Children felt that cheering for only one child can be embarrassing or distracting for that child. A 10-year-old boy explained, “When they’re cheering you on, it kind of embarrasses you and makes you stumble ‘cause then you know they’re watching you and looking for mistakes.” A 9-year-old boy suggested parents should not cheer for only one child because “it kind of puts more pressure on you when they are all cheering.” Many children indicated that parents should cheer for the entire team, and several indicated they preferred parents to cheer for all participants. For example, an 8-year-old girl indicated she preferred that parents cheer for “everyone on both teams so everybody feels like they are having fun. It’s just for fun, it’s not anything about winning, it’s just so everyone feels they are a part of the whole big team.” When asked if parents should cheer for both teams, an 8-year-old boy said, “I think they should [cheer for both teams] because it may be unfair because most teams, their moms might not be able to come. Or dads.” A 9-year-old girl suggested that “if there is barely any parents from the other team you should cheer [the other team] on.”

Participants also indicated that parents should only cheer at appropriate times and in ways that did not draw unnecessary attention to specific individuals. They felt parents should be aware of the child’s need to concentrate in order to perform well, because “it’s hard to concentrate

Table 1. Roles played by parents at youth sport events

Role	Behavior	Example
Supportive parent	Attentive silence	“Sit quiet, don’t yell out comments” (10-year-old boy).
	Cheering	“Cheer for everyone on both teams so everybody feels like they are having fun...” (8-year-old girl).
	Encouragement	“Encourage us and not discourage us, just give us, like, positive stuff” (11-year-old girl).
	Praise	“Tell you that you did really well” (9-year-old girl).
	Empathy	“Parents should not cheer so much that [other] children feel very bad...” (11-year-old girl).
Demanding coach	Protective intervention	“...I mean, if someone will really get hurt, then [parents] can argue...” (13-year-old boy).
	Instruction	“They tell you what to do” (7-year-old boy).
	Advice	“Take your time” or “focus” (10-year-old boy).
	Critical encouragement	“Come on, get up there, get up there, you can do it” (10-year-old girl).
Crazed fan	Arguing	“No arguments, just cheering us on” (13-year-old boy).
	Blaming	“Oh don’t worry, that ump was just being unfair” (12-year-old boy).
	Derogation	“They said mean stuff to us” (11-year-old girl).
	Disruption	“When I’m swimming it sort of bothers me when I see my mom waving...” (10-year-old girl).
	Yelling	“Don’t yell at us in a mean way” (11-year-old girl).
	Fanatical cheering	Parents “get over excited and start jumping up and down and make a racket” (13-year-old girl).

on a game and then concentrate on what your parents are saying” (11-year-old girl). A 10-year-old boy offered the following suggestion: “Cheer for them when you’re, like, going up to the plate but when the pitcher is getting ready you have to concentrate.” Some children pointed out that parents are sometimes unaware of what is happening during competitions and will “cheer for their children when they are not even playing...they’re like ‘go, go, go,’ and they’re not even in” (13-year-old girl).

Although cheering was a desirable trait, participants noted that cheering could be embarrassing under certain circumstances. A 13-year-old boy suggested that parents should “try to blend in with the other parents’ voices, and try not to stand out.” Organized cheers could be embarrassing, as a 10-year-old boy recalled that his dad would “start chants...and would get the parents to start cheers, and it was kind of embarrassing.”

Encouragement. Participants preferred encouragement as a response to mistakes, “even if you lost” (8-year-old boy). An 11-year-old girl summarized this sentiment, saying that parents should “encourage us and don’t discourage us and don’t like yell at us in a mean way, just give us like positive stuff.” Others offered examples of ways parents encouraged them, such as saying, “You can do it” (7-year-old girl) after a mistake, or, “You’re almost there, you’re almost caught up with the other team” (8-year-old boy) if their team was behind. One 9-year-old girl said parents should encourage the opponent and recalled, “Even if the other team made a goal, we could encourage them so they would feel good. Some other parents, they don’t really do the same, but maybe that is something they should do.”

Praise. Children indicated a preference for praise in response to good performance or effort, such as a “nice goal or hit” (7-year-old boy). One 9-year-old girl said parents should “tell you you did really well” and another 9-year-old girl preferred that parents say she “did a really good job.” A 10-year-old boy explained that praise should be given at appropriate times, “When we go off to the sidelines it feels rewarding when they say, ‘you did your best,’ like ‘really good job,’ but like only on the sidelines because if you’re out in the action...it can be, you know, distracting.” Preference for praise was not limited to participants. Some indicated parents should praise officials if they make a good call.

Empathy. The children noted that sometimes positive comments directed toward participants had the potential to make other children feel bad. Therefore, they suggested parents consider the feelings of other participants, especially less skilled ones and those on the opposing team. For example, an 11-year-old girl said that, when cheering for participants, parents should “make it a really big deal, but, not so it’s not like *so* big of a deal that those people who aren’t really good feel very bad that they never could live up to that or something.”

Protective Intervention. Protective intervention emerged as the only form of “yelling” the children considered justifiable. They described instances in which parents would yell at officials to protect children from injury when games got too rough. A 13-year-old boy indicated, albeit reluctantly, that yelling at the referee was justifiable (but not desirable) when a game got rough, “. . . just cheer us on, no arguments, I mean if it’s for a good cause and like if someone will really get hurt then you can argue but no arguments, just cheering us on.” A 10-year-old girl gave a specific instance in which she considered protective intervention appropriate: while playing soccer, “Two girls ran up to me and then they bumped me with their shoulders and then another girl tripped me and I did a spin in the air and I landed on my hip and the ref didn’t call it.” In this case, the girl indicated it would be acceptable for a parent to intervene.

Demanding Coach

Generally, participants thought parents should not “coach from the sidelines” because children “should do what the coach says” (13-year-old girl) rather than what parents say.

Instruction. Children noted that parents often gave instructions or commands *during the action* at youth sport events. A 7-year-old boy said that parents “yell and they tell you what to do and they get mad if you don’t do it.” Children described parents who gave (a) instructions that contradicted the coach’s instructions, (b) repetitive instructions, and (c) specific instructions in which they told kids what to do, such as “get down there” (8-year-old boy) or “shoot it” (13-year-old boy). The most commonly mentioned instruction was to “pass it to” a teammate. An 8-year-old boy elaborated on his preference against instructions during games, saying,

One thing my mom did, she’d be yelling, “No Ryan pass it to Aaron, Aaron pass it to Daniel, Daniel pass it to Blair’...it was distracting and it makes you feel bad, it makes you angry at your parents. Let us play the game! We don’t want you treating us like remote control cars and telling us exactly what to do!

Advice. Compared to instructions given publicly during sport action, the children were somewhat more accepting of advice offered privately during breaks. An 11-year-old girl suggested that “sometimes, in some cases, [parents should] give advice, but not all the time.” Parents sometimes gave advice to children during timeouts or half-time. A 9-year-old girl indicated that “if there is anything to fix [parents should] tell you nicely, not like when you are on the field.” The advice parents gave included general suggestions, such as “take your time” or “focus” (10-year-

old boy), and score reminders. Children mentioned that sometimes parents advised engaging in illegal tactics. For example, a 13-year-old boy said that if he followed the advice of some parents during soccer games “it would be a foul.” Overall, children felt advice was sometimes acceptable but rarely needed.

Critical Encouragement. Critical encouragement involved communicating an objective message that a child could succeed but in a tone suggesting the parent was frustrated with the child’s lack of previous success. The most common were, “Come on, you can do it!” (10-year-old girl), and, “You can do better!” (9-year-old girl). Participants found critical encouragement to be annoying and hurtful. A 10-year-old girl described her frustration, saying:

They can just say a comment and stuff and they don’t have to get all “come on, come on, you can do it, come on, get up there, get up there, you can do it, run faster,” and just keep knocking us and stuff.

Crazed Fan

The children indicated that parents need to “control their emotions” (11-year-old boy) during youth sport events to avoid acting like a crazed fan.

Arguing. Participants reported observing parent spectators arguing with coaches and officials during youth sport events. All such arguments involved a parent “coaching from the sidelines.” For example, a 10-year-old boy recalled a parent who would repeatedly yell things like, “You’re two points behind, and the coach was just like, ‘can you go back and sit down?’” Likewise, arguments between a parent and an official involved disputed calls. Children who reported arguments involving parents considered them to be negative events, in part because arguments were considered distracting.

Blaming. One 12-year-old boy indicated that parents sometimes blamed unfavorable game outcomes on officials. He described an experience with a mom who would “try to comfort us every time after the game like, ‘oh don’t worry that ump was just being unfair and he just’...ahhh!” The child clearly disapproved of the parent’s attempt to comfort his teammates by blaming the official for the team’s loss.

Derogation. Children reported derogatory behavior, such as “booing” and saying mean things to children on the opposing team. A 9-year-old girl indicated that “one parent kept on saying ‘boo’ when [her] team got a goal.” An 11-year-old boy recalled that “parents on the other team were booing and they were basically distracting us.” An 11-year-old girl described an incident in which “some parents got really intense and then they started getting mad at us...and started saying mean stuff to us” and to members of their own team. She explained that she

...wouldn’t like it if [she] was one of the kids because they put a lot of pressure on you and it would make you sad if you didn’t do really good in a game but you did your best, and you’d just feel really bad if you didn’t because your parents would discourage you and it just wouldn’t make it very fun because you want to please your parents.

Disruption. Children reported that some forms of disruptive behavior were intended to get a specific child’s attention. A 9-year-old girl indicated she would “...get embarrassed when [her] mom and dad shouted [her] name” during games. A 7-year-old girl described a mom who would “start whistling at her son and daughter, and it was really distracting and it was really loud.” Other children said that parents sometimes waved at children during games. A 10-year-old girl described a preference against waving: “When I’m swimming it sort of bothers me when I see my mom waving and I start drowning and I have to hold onto the wall.” An 11-year-old boy explained how supportive parents can unintentionally distract their children:

Usually, well, sometimes they just stay out there, wave or smile. Sometimes that takes me off guard, and some people on my other team get embarrassed really quickly and mess up even if they’re really good at something while their parents cheer for them.

Other forms of distracting behavior included invading the play space, making physical contact with participants, and attempting to make physical contact with officials. A 9-year-old boy recalled an event in which a parent who disagreed with a call “ran down from the stands and tried to attack the umpire.”

Yelling. A 7-year-old boy stated that parents “shouldn’t yell at the coaches or umpires;” however, children indicated that yelling was relatively common at youth sport events. A 10-year-old boy indicated that in soccer “if there is a foul [parents] will yell at the refs,” and a 12-year-old boy recalled that “every time the umpire would call one of us out she’d be like ‘oh come on ump, what is that? What is that? That was a ball! He was walked!” A 13-year-old boy had mixed feelings about his father’s presence at the events, saying:

Sometimes I actually feel that I would rather not have them there because, like, my father yells a lot at bad calls and he’ll like always argue at the ref or something like that and, um, it kind of gets embarrassing and you kind of hope he doesn’t do it and it can take you off your game.

Taking the referee’s perspective, a 10-year-old boy indicated he didn’t want parents “yelling at the ref because

it also breaks their concentration and then they have to stop the game.” Children also had a consistent preference against yelling at participants. As an 8-year-old girl recalled:

Once at a soccer game one of the parents of this very mean girl was behaving so badly, she kept on...yelling at her daughter to “win, win, win,” just her and, um, that freaked people out...and it was really harsh. They were not good parents.

An 11-year-old girl provided the following suggestion for parents: “Don’t yell at us in a mean way; just give us positive stuff.”

Fanatical Cheering. Fanatical cheering involved parents who got “really into it” (10-year-old boy), “go crazy” (13-year-old boy), or “go berzerk” (13-year-old girl) during the games. Children found these forms of behavior to be “annoying” (10-year-old girl), “distracting” (13-year-old girl), “disruptive” (13-year-old girl), and put pressure on children (11-year-old girl). A 10-year-old boy said that sometimes parents were “just being hyperactive and jumping.” A 13-year-old girl summarized fanatical behavior: “Some parents get over excited and they’ll start jumping up-and-down and making a racket, and that is really disruptive to the players who play the game.”

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to determine how children want parent-spectators to behave at youth sport events. By responding to open-ended questions, participants could freely identify behaviors that parents actually engaged in at the events and could evaluate the desirability of each behavior. Boys’ and girls’ perspectives were remarkably similar across the age span. They indicated that parents *can be* an important source of support during competitions. Conversely, it was equally clear that parental behavior could be a significant source of stress for children during competitions. Although parents could negatively influence sportsmanship behavior in children (Arthur-Banning et al., 2009), participants in our study seemed motivated to encourage good sportsmanship among parents. Given the profound socializing effects children can have on their parents (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009), it stands to reason that if children and parents can discuss sideline behavior openly, sportsmanship might improve for some parents. The clarity and consistency with which children expressed preferences is reason to believe that most youth sport participants could provide clear and specific recommendations for their parents, if asked to do so.

Young athletes summarized preferences for parental behavior as good (supportive parent), bad (demanding

coach), and ugly (crazed fan). The grounded theory that emerged from the data is stated most succinctly in the following statement: Children of all ages want parents to act like supportive parents at youth sport events and avoid acting like demanding coaches or crazed fans.

The supportive parent role indicated how children wanted parents to behave at youth sport events. A 9-year-old boy summarized this role by saying that parents should “...just be quiet, and if you do a good thing then clap.” According to children, being a good parent spectator was relatively simple: parents should attend games and be silent and attentive during the action, but cheer at appropriate times (e.g., after a goal is scored or a basket is made). Being a good parent-spectator is not always easy. Watching a child compete in sport can be a stressful experience for parents, and some parents seem to be unable to behave appropriately at times (Omli et al., 2008). Given the variety of negative parental behaviors reported, the children’s overwhelming consensus that parents *should* attend all youth sport events was somewhat surprising. However, this apparent discrepancy makes sense when considering the robust nature of parent-child relationships (Ainsworth, 1967), which motivate children to maintain proximity to caregivers. It appears that, for children, the potential benefit of having a supportive parent attend their sport events outweighs the risk of having a demanding coach or crazed fan in attendance.

Descriptions of parents who acted like demanding coaches during games corroborated survey (e.g., Shields et al., 2005) and observational (e.g., Kidman et al., 1999; Randall & McKenzie, 1987) studies, which indicated that some parents regularly “coach from the sidelines.” Unfortunately, when one or more parents shout instructions during the game, the child’s attention is divided between the demands of the game, the parent’s instructions, and possibly the coach’s instructions. Parental instructions may be particularly distracting when parents use the children’s names to instruct them (e.g., “Kailee, pass it to Sylvia”), and children may be more likely to attend to instructions that include their name (Omli et al., 2008). In addition to these behaviors being distracting and embarrassing, children indicated they were not appropriate for parents, because children “should do what the coach says” (13-year-old girl). Parental advice and instructions can put children in an uncomfortable dilemma: they must choose either to please their coaches or please their parents, both being important objectives to children. Critical encouragement was considered undesirable, because a comment such as, “Come on, you can do better,” sends the message that the child’s performance is not adequate. Parental comments have a particularly strong effect on the self-perceptions of younger children, who rely heavily on adult feedback to evaluate their athletic ability (Horn & Hasbrook, 1986; Horn & Weiss, 1991). The influence of parental comments during competitions may be compounded by

the reality that youth sport is a uniquely public context in which children perform (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004).

Child preferences against behaviors that fit the “demanding coach” role are not surprising when considered in light of self-determination theory. In Deci and Ryan’s (1985) terms, shouting instructions, providing unsolicited advice, and offering critical encouragement could diminish feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in young athletes. When parent-spectator behavior prevents the fulfillment of these intrinsic needs, it is reasonable to predict that children will be less likely to enjoy (or continue participating in) organized youth sport.

Although participants expressed preferences against “demanding coaches,” they responded most negatively to parents who acted like “crazed fans.” This is not surprising, given that most of the behaviors involved expressions of anger; exposure to angry adult behavior, sometimes called “background anger” (Omli & LaVoi, 2009) or “sideline rage” (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008), is distressing for children. Child development research (e.g., Cummings, 1987) has provided reason to believe that sustained exposure to such behavior may result in short-term emotional responses and long-term developmental consequences for children. Children who are exposed to conflicts between adults exhibit increased blood pressure (El-Sheikh, Cummings, & Goetsch, 1989) and experience negative emotions, such as sadness (Cummings, 1987) and distress (El-Sheikh & Cheskes, 1995).

Stress associated with interadult conflicts can help explain why children were adamant that parents should not yell at officials, unless participant safety is at stake. When the topic arose, participants indicated they would rather lose a game than witness their parents yelling at an official. Although winning is important to them, participants suggested that winning is less important than having fun in a conflict-free environment.

Clearly, the behavior of some parents at youth sport events can make participation less enjoyable for children. Given that children play sports “to have fun” and quit sports “because it was no longer fun” (Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk, 1993), it is reasonable to believe that negative parental behavior *could* encourage youth sport attrition. That is, it may partially explain why (a) about one third of children who begin a season drop out before the end of the season (Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988), and (b) youth sport participation rates begin to decline at around age 12 or 13 years (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1989).

Results from the present study indicated a gap between parents’ actual behavior and the behavior preferred by children. By identifying the behaviors children prefer, and thereby establishing a standard to strive toward, results from the present study may be useful for youth sport administrators interested in influencing parental behavior at those events. Currently, there is insufficient information available to evaluate the effectiveness of restrictive

(e.g., “Silent Sundays”), punitive (e.g., assessing fines), contractual (e.g., codes of conduct), or educational (e.g., parent training) interventions in reducing inappropriate parental behavior. However, despite negative behaviors, restricting parents’ attendance or verbalizations altogether is not an optimal solution, because children want parents to attend their events and to cheer and encourage them at appropriate times. Further research is needed to better understand (a) the causes of inappropriate parental behaviors, (b) the consequences of such behavior on children’s emotional and performance outcomes, and (c) the most effective strategies for improving behavior. Through future research, the sport science community can help administrators implement effective solutions so that youth sport sidelines will be lined with supportive parents rather than demanding coaches and crazed fans.

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