

## Parental Support Behaviors for Children Participating in Community Soccer Programs.

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### ABSTRACT

The current study examined the perceptions of parental supportive behaviors and activities when children are involved in community recreational soccer programs. A sample of 145 parents completed the online survey. Children ranged in age from 3-18 years old and had a mean age of 6.02 (SD= 0.86). Demographic information was gathered and twenty supportive behavior statements with likert-type scales were drawn from four general support categories: Instrumental Support, Communicative Support with Coaches, Communicative Support during Games, and Communicative Support with Child Before and After Games. Results indicated that parents were most likely to perform Instrumental Support types of behaviors (M=4.55) which included supportive activities such as attending games and practices, purchasing proper soccer equipment, and bringing game snacks. Attending their child's soccer game (M=4.81, SD = 0.39), showing love and affection to the child who is upset and disappointed after a game (M=4.71, SD = 0.47), and purchasing and providing the correct soccer equipment (M=4.70, SD = .053) were the top-ranked parental supportive behaviors. Freely voicing frustration/opinions during the game when disagreeing with a coach's decision (M=1.49, SD = 0.68) was ranked the lowest among all supportive behaviors. The results suggest that the goals parents have for their soccer playing children center around positive social development. Parental actions and behaviors related to visible and verbal encouragement were rated very highly as supportive activities while voicing frustration at coaches, children's teammates, referees and their own children were rated among the lowest. These results may lead to potential collaboration between parents and coaches regarding the development of their players and children.

### INTRODUCTION

Researchers use many approaches to investigate the influence of sports on individuals as well as the influence of parents on their children. Millions of youth each year take part in sports, which can foster positive development (15). Of paramount importance to a successful youth sport experience is the relational environment (7).

Youth sports provide an opportunity for parents and children to form an emotional bond. Research by Dorsch, Smith and McDonough (6) found that parents experienced many changes in their behavior, cognition, affect, and general parent-child relationship as a

result of their child's participation in youth sports. Similarly, a child's perceived quality of the parent-child relationship has been shown to be a predictor of a child's enjoyment and experience while playing the sport (12-13, 16).

Parents play a large role in the sport experience of their children (10). In fact, parents have been shown to have the largest impact compared to peers, teachers, and coaches (18). Their influences can be communicated through support and their own motivations for their child's participation (5). For this study, we have defined parental support as overt behaviors and activities parents perform to help children be successful in their selected activity and to help them feel positive about their efforts.

Support can be material such as registration (1) or emotional support (9). Results reported by Brustad (2-3) suggest that parental beliefs and positive sentiments about their child's physical activity was a greater influence on a child participation and motivation than role-playing factors. Thus, it is important to understand the types of support that many parents provide and view as important.

Previous research has shown that parents have an important role in their child's development (17) and more recent research suggests this extends into a parent's involvement in their child's activities, such youth sports programs (6, 13). We argue that relational scaffolding theory, as postulated by Vygotsky (17), can be used to conceptualize the parent-child interactions surrounding community youth sport participation. Relational scaffolding theory assumes that children learn through supportive interactions with others which make possible thoughts or actions that otherwise would be outside of the grasp of the child. For example, when teaching a child a skill, a parent may begin training the child using a great deal of hands-on instruction and modeling. As the child becomes increasingly more confident in performing the skill, the parent allows the child to function without as much modeling and guidance, while still offering support as needed. Eventually, after the support and training of the parent over a period of time and with increasing mastery, the child is able to maneuver the skill without any assistance from parent.

Since youth sports have been viewed by previous researchers and scholars as a mode of instruction, socialization, and development (4, 8, 11), understanding the nature of the interactions between parents and children is important. To this end, the current study investigates the nature of parent's involvement and their supportive behaviors during their child's participation in a community soccer program. The following two research questions guided this inquiry: What behaviors and activities do parents perform to show support of their child's involvement in a community soccer program? Which supportive behaviors are done the most and least often by parents?

## **METHODS**

Data was gathered in collaboration with an Eastern North Carolina county's recreation and parks department. E-mail addresses of parents whose children participated in the most recent community soccer league were provided by the recreation department. Three hundred and seventeen parents were then emailed invitations to complete an online

survey of 24 general demographic questions as well as 20 parental support statements using five-point likert scales (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). If they agreed to take part in the study and before starting the survey, the parents were asked to read and electronically sign the research study's consent to participate agreement. Upon consent, parents were presented the twenty statements regarding the behaviors and activities they use to demonstrate their support and encouragement for their children's soccer participation (i.e., "I support my child's soccer participation by...teaching soccer skills and providing soccer instructions to my child at home). Assuming that some of the targeted parents would have multiple children playing in community youth soccer program during the same season, we instructed the responding parents to respond to survey questions as they related only to their youngest child participating in the soccer league. This strategy was incorporated in order to reduce biases of selective support behaviors and to have the parent focus on supportive behaviors for one particular child.

### *Sample*

Our final sample consists of 145 parents with an average age of 37.5 years. Twenty-seven were male (18.6%) and the remaining 118 were female (81.4%). Regarding reported ethnicity, the current parent sample consisted of 113 Caucasians (77.9%), eight African-Americans (5.5%), four Asians (2.8%), and four Latino/as (2.7%). Eighty-two parents responded to the survey regarding their sons (56.6%), while 61 responded regarding their daughters (42.1%). The average age of the youngest participating child was 6.04 years, with their ages ranging from 3-11 years old. Finally, 126 of the parents were married (83.4%), while ten parents were single-never married (6.6%) and 9 were single-divorced (6.0%).

### *Analysis*

To determine the highest and lowest overall parental support behaviors, the statistical means for each supportive statement were calculated and analyzed (see Table 1). Table 1 shows the four distinct parental support categories and their overall collective means scores. In addition, the table shows the overall mean scores and corresponding standard deviation for each of the individualized supportive behaviors statements. The mean scores of each parental support behaviors were also ranked from 1-20, with one being the highest score and the behavior most likely performed by parents within this sample and 20 being the lowest score and the behavior to be least likely performed. Finally, an independent t-test analysis was performed to determine if there were significant differences between the reported means scores of parental support behaviors for male and female children. Statistical significance level for t-test analysis was set at  $p < .05$ .

### **Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Rank of Parental Support for Children's Participation in Community Soccer**

	Collective Means		Individual Means		Overall Rank
	<i>M</i>	S.D.	<i>M</i>	S.D.	
<b>“I support my child’s soccer participation by...”</b>					
<b>Instrumental Support</b>	4.55	0.63			
Attending my child’s soccer games.			4.81	0.39	1
Purchasing and providing necessary soccer equipment (correct sized soccer ball, shin guards, cleats)			4.70	0.53	3
Attending my child’s practices			4.67	0.50	4
Purchasing and providing snacks to the team when asked by the coaches			4.67	0.50	4
Listening - If my child preferred not to play soccer, I would not push him/her to sign up again			4.22	1.00	9
Teaching soccer skills and providing soccer instructions to my child at home			4.12	0.87	12
<b>Communicative Support with Child Before and After Game</b>	4.38	.067			
Showing my child love and affection when he/she is upset or disappointed AFTER a soccer game			4.71	0.47	2
Giving my child advice and feedback AFTER each game			4.23	0.76	8
Giving my child advice and playing instructions BEFORE each game			4.20	0.79	10
<b>Communicative Support with Coaches</b>	4.30	0.73			
Communicating with my child’s soccer coach(es) through e-mail or phone throughout the season			4.63	0.54	6
Communicating with my child’s soccer coach(es) AFTER soccer games			4.17	0.82	11
Communicating with my child’s soccer coach(es) BEFORE soccer games			4.12	0.87	12
<b>Communicative Support During Games</b>	2.79	1.00			
Freely voicing encouragement/approval DURING the game when my child or their teammates are playing well			4.36	0.90	7
Freely voicing encouragement/approval DURING the game when my child’s coach(es) makes good decisions			3.85	1.00	14
Communicating with my child’s soccer coach(es) DURING soccer games			3.28	1.26	15
Giving my child playing instructions while he/she is on the bench or DURING halftime			3.19	1.22	16
Giving my child playing instructions or advice DURING the soccer game while he/she is on the field			2.87	1.24	17
Letting the referee know when I am not pleased with a call or lack of a call DURING the game			1.78	0.98	18
Freely voicing my frustration/opinions DURING the game when my child or their teammates makes a mistake			1.57	0.74	19
Freely voicing my frustration/opinions DURING the game when I don’t agree with the coach(es) decisions			1.49	0.68	20

Note: Scale: 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree

## RESULTS

Among the collective parental support behaviors, parents indicated that they were most likely to perform Instrumental Support types of behaviors (M=4.55). This category included supportive activities such as attending games and practices, purchasing equipment, and bringing game snacks (See Table 1). Communicative Support with Child Before and After Games was the second highest collective parental supportive behaviors category (M=4.38) and included supportive behaviors such as giving advice and playing instruction before and after games, and showing love after a disappointing game. Attending their child’s soccer game (M=4.81, SD = 0.39), showing love and affection to the child who is upset and disappointed after a game (M=4.71, SD = 0.47), and purchasing and providing the correct soccer equipment (M=4.70, SD = .053) were the top-ranked parental supportive behaviors.

Communicating with their child’s coach/coaches through e-mail or phone throughout the season (M=4.63, SD = 0.54) was rated as the highest support behavior in the category of Communicative Support with Coaches. The three lowest ranked parental supportive behaviors all came from the Communicative Support During Game category. Freely voicing frustration/opinions during the game when disagreeing with a coach’s decision (M=1.49, SD = 0.68) was ranked the lowest among all supportive behaviors. Freely voicing frustration/opinions during the game when their child or another player makes a mistake (M=1.57, SD = 0.68) and letting the referee know when they are not pleased with a call or lack of a call (M=1.78, SD = 0.98) were both also in the bottom three lowest ranked parental supportive behaviors. When analyzing potential statistical differences of parental support behaviors for male and female children, independent t-tests showed that there were no differences at the  $p < .05$  level.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Ogilvie (14) suggested that a child in sports will discover that the most rewarding attribute to their own success while participating is if they are intrinsically motivated and supported.

However, Vygotsky (17) argued that parents play a critical role in the development of their child in many activities. Thus, it is important to understand the relational environment created by parent's support behaviors within a recreational sport environment. To this end, results from the current study are the first to examine the supportive behaviors of parents within the context of a child's participation in a community recreational sport program. The results suggest that parents goals for their children center around positive social development. Actions and behaviors related to visible and verbal encouragement, were rated very highly as supportive activities while voicing frustration at coaches, children's teammates, referees, and their own children were rated among the lowest. In other words, it was reported that voicing encouragement and approval towards their children or their teammates for playing well during the game was considered by many to be a very effective way of showing parental support. This seems to show that parents likely recognize that their positive verbal communication during a game can demonstrate their positive supportive, while their negative verbal communication demonstrates low support. As was reported earlier, the mean age for the children was 6.02 years old. Therefore, parents with these younger children seem to want to make sure their children are given opportunities to have positive experiences and environments and they seem to be able to help make that happen. Competitive supporting behaviors (criticizing the referees, coaches, or players) that seem to relate to a team's performance did not seem to rank highly on the parent's list of supportive activities. This might be the difference between having children play in a recreational league versus having them play in a more competitive league or on a travel soccer team. It may also have to do with how young most of the children were when data was gathered (mean of 6 years). Competitive supporting behaviors may become more prevalent as players get older and/or move to more competitive leagues.

Responses to the positive social development items also support the theory of relational scaffolding posited by Vygotsky (17). They indicate that parents view sports as a "relational scaffold" through which children can learn skills that might otherwise be just outside of their grasp. In addition, many parents reported that they provided a high level of material (i.e., attending games, purchasing equipment or snacks) and emotional support (i.e., voicing encouragement or offering advice before, during, or after games) to their children. This indicates that the parents from the current sample work simultaneously to supplement the relational scaffolding that occurs during youth sport participation.

## **CONCLUSION AND SPORT APPLICATIONS**

These results may lead to potential collaborations between parents and coaches regarding the development of their players and children. Parents' moderate-to-strong agreement that they regularly communicated with coaches throughout the season in general and also before, during, and after games indicated there is a channel for such communication. The data indicated that parents seem to want to be communicative with their child's coaches and coaches may need to provide opportunities so that this type of communication can occur successfully. Successful and deliberate parent-coach communication may allow parents to feel they are better supporting their children's soccer

participation. Further, the results indicated that parents moderately agreed that they voiced their encouragement to coaches if they supported coaching decisions. This is in contrast to the relatively low ratings for items regarding expressing frustration with coaches. Although the current study did not ascertain the specifics of these communications, these findings do support the potential for collaboration between coaches and parents in the facilitation of a child's advancement through relational scaffolding by both parties.

Recreational youth soccer league organizers could benefit from developing and implementing collaborative coaches-parental educational seminars that would best teach parents how to show support for their child's participation, while still encouraging positive supportive behaviors in regard to the team, players, and coaches. Coaches might also benefit from similar parent-coaches educational seminars that might teach them how to better facilitate effective parental support activities as well as effective communication techniques. In many youth recreational sports leagues, coaches are volunteer parent-coaches who are regularly looking for ways to build successful team unity, which goes beyond the players and encompasses the parents and their support activities.

The current study has a few limitations worthy of note. First, the sample size is small and is derived from a single community. Though the results are still informative, they are limited in their generalizability. Gathering parental support data from multiple youth community soccer leagues from various areas throughout the country would have likely provided more generalizable results. Another limitation to consider is the ages of the children for whom the parents reported their support behaviors. The mean age of the children for this data was 6 years of age. If our sample would have included more adolescent children, ages (12-18), the parental supportive behaviors might have been slightly different.

The potential existence of a collaborative system of interactions among parents and coaches to facilitate positive development through relational scaffolding is important and should be studied further. Specifically, future research might involve the examination of coaches' supportive behaviors and how they agree or disagree with parental supportive behaviors. In addition, a deeper understanding of the developmental needs and abilities of children at different ages when playing soccer would likely benefit parents and coaches when placing expectations on children's playing abilities and cognitive understanding. Therefore, an investigation of coaches' and parents' understanding of developmentally appropriate physical and cognitive abilities would prove helpful. Such research would provide an understanding of adult interactions surrounding children's participation in youth supports and open a dialogue as to how parents and coaches can provide appropriate mentorship of children attempting to learn new skills and while still having fun in the process.

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