

SPORT PARENT EDUCATION

Michael Q. King, Travis E. Dorsch, and Jim Taylor

The majority of American youth engage in organized sport at some point over the course of their development into adulthood (Jellineck & Durant, 2004; Sports & Fitness Industry Association, 2016), and sport is the most common extracurricular activity for youth across the developed world (Hulteen, Smith, Morgan, Barnett, Hallal et al., 2017). Parents exhibit a range of involvement behaviors in an effort to facilitate this participation, and have become increasingly involved over time (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000). In many cases, this comes in the form of increased family resources being devoted to the youth sport experience, leading to potentially deleterious effects on parent involvement and children's outcomes (see Dunn, Dorsch, King, & Rothlisberger, 2016).

Theory and Research

Youth sport, particularly as it is structured in much of the Western world, would not exist without the involvement of parents. Parent involvement is integral to children's participation, as it is parents who organize,

administer, and evaluate their children's youth sport experiences. Behind the scenes, parents serve as travel agents, launderers, nutritionists, chauffeurs, and psychologists. In assessing parents' role in youth sport, contemporary researchers have focused on: (a) the influence of parental involvement on children, (b) factors influencing parent involvement, and (c) the strategies developed by parents to facilitate their involvement in their children's sport (Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017). In addressing the third of these areas, the purpose of this section is to highlight how parent education in organized youth sport can be a powerful means to maximizing the sports experiences of young athletes. To this end, the section will describe one evidence-based parent-education program's development, implementation, and assessment, and share practical considerations that consultants can use to develop parent education programming in the youth sports in which they work.

Parental involvement in youth sport is important as it has the potential to shape the experience that children have as they develop in sport (Holt, 2008). Despite this knowledge, researchers and practitioners have been slow to develop evidence-based parent education programs in the context of youth sport. This is not to say efforts to enhance parent behavior in youth sport are not happening (see Harwood & Knight, 2015). For example, efforts to improve sideline behavior of parents can be found in the United States and abroad (e.g., behavior contracts, "Silent Saturdays," posted signs at venues encouraging good behavior). While well-intentioned and potentially helpful, these efforts represent little more than a "quick fix" as most of these efforts tend to be scattershot in their design and implementation and have not been based on or evaluated for their effectiveness scientifically.

Designing Evidence-based Parent Education

Parent involvement is especially salient at the earliest stages of youth sport, as parents hold the potential to positively and negatively influence children's early sports experiences and, by extension, how they come to view athletic participation in the future. Accordingly, researchers have sought to identify how parents can be most appropriately involved in their children's sport participation and how they can be supported in doing this. The most important aspect of designing evidence-based parent education in youth sport is translating the field's growing theoretical and research evidence base into practice.

Recognizing the need for evidence-based parent education in the context of youth sport, Dorsch, King, Dunn, Osai, and Tulane (2017) designed an evidence-based *Sport Parent Guide* for parents of youth sport participants. Initially, the research team conducted a comprehensive literature search across multiple disciplines (e.g., human development, family studies, interpersonal communication, sport psychology). Articles and texts pertaining to organized youth sport parenting were annotated to inform the evidence-based education program. This analysis yielded seven distinct categories based on previous research:

1. A review of *youth sport participation* and referenced research that illuminated the reasons for participation/drop out from sport (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Gould, Feltz, & Weiss, 1985).
2. A *developmental model* of participation in sport (see Côté, 1999; Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007) that focused on the processes that youth athletes navigate as they develop in sport.
3. Current *participation rates* in sport and the likelihood of participation at elite levels (Aspen Institute, 2015; National Council of Youth Sport, 2008; National Federation of State High School Associations, 2014).
4. The importance of *communication* in sport and offered parents practical strategies to apply to their interactions with their athlete (Dorsch, Smith, Wilson, & McDonough, 2015; Gershgoren, Tenenbaum, Gershgoren, & Eklund, 2011; Knight & Holt, 2014).
5. The most effective strategies for *working with coaches* (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, Pennisi, 2006; Hellstedt, 1987).
6. *Sport parent behavior* and discussed findings on positive practices for before, during, and after a sporting event (Dorsch et al., 2015; Stein, Raedeke, & Glenn, 1999; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004).
7. The intervention provided parents with tips and strategies for success and overall *positive sport parenting* (see Knight & Holt, 2014, for review).

Upon finalizing the guide, the authorship team used its contents to build a complementary *Sport Parent Seminar*. The *Guide* and *Seminar* were created to offer parents practical strategies to enhance their sport parenting. As such, the program was designed using a "strengths-based" rather than "deficit" approach.

Implementation

Families from nine U8 and U10 soccer teams in suburban Utah were recruited for participation. Both boys and girls were included in this study. Each team was assigned to one of three quasi-experimental conditions (full-implementation, partial-implementation, or non-implementation). Parents in the full-implementation group ($n = 18$) were provided with the *Guide* and took part in a face-to-face *Seminar* prior to the beginning of the season. Parents in the partial-implementation group ($n = 36$) were given a copy of the *Guide* and encouraged to read through it, but the research team did not otherwise interact with these parents. Parents in the non-implementation group ($n = 27$) served as a control and were therefore not provided with either educational resource.

Assessment

To assess the efficacy of the program, children completed surveys of multiple variables at pre- and post-season. Specifically, children were asked to provide their perceptions of parent support and pressure as well as warmth and conflict in the parent-child relationship. Furthermore, children reported on their own enjoyment, competence, and stress in sport. The authorship team then examined variance among the three conditions (full-implementation, partial-implementation, non-implementation) from pre- to post-season. Herein, we highlight a number of notable trends in the data, as reported by Dorsch and colleagues (2017).

Parent Involvement

Parents exposed to the *Guide* and *Seminar* were rated as significantly more supportive and less pressuring from pre- to post-season. There were significant group $\times$ time interactions in children's perceptions of parent support and pressure, with group membership explaining 21% and 32% of the variance, respectively. Interestingly, parents in the partial-implementation and non-implementation conditions were rated by their children as more pressuring from pre- to post-season, suggesting that parents (in the absence of any efforts at behavior mitigation) may actually demand more of the children over the course of a youth sport season.

Parent-Child Relationship

Parents exposed to the *Guide* and *Seminar* were rated as demonstrating significantly more warmth and less conflict in the parent-child relationship from pre- to post-season. There were significant group $\times$ time interactions in children's perceptions of parent support and pressure, with group membership explaining 16% and 11% of the variance, respectively. Interestingly, although parents in the partial-implementation condition were rated as demonstrating relatively little change in conflict, parents in the non-implementation condition were rated as more conflictive from pre- to post-season. This highlights the fact that parents (in the absence of targeted programming) may interact with their children in such a way that their children perceive more conflict in their relationship over the course of a youth sport season.

Children's Outcomes

Children whose parents were exposed to the *Guide* and *Seminar* rated sport as significantly more enjoyable, and themselves as significantly more competent and less stressed from pre- to post-season. There were significant group $\times$ time interactions for all three variables, with parents' group membership explaining 14%, 13%, and 20% of the variance, respectively. Children whose parents were in the non-implementation condition rated themselves as less competent and more stressed from pre- to post-season. These findings highlight an unfortunate status quo in youth sports: namely, that many children are having a neutral, if not negative, sports experience in many respects. This is unfortunate, given the many positive outcomes typically associated with organized youth sport.

Collectively, results from Dorsch and colleagues' pilot intervention highlight the potential for an increase in positive outcomes (i.e., parent support, parent-child warmth, child enjoyment, child competence) and a simultaneous decrease in negative outcomes (i.e., parent pressure, parent-child conflict, child stress) if parents are

provided tools to optimize their involvement. These inferences should prove encouraging for key stakeholders (e.g., researchers, practitioners, administrators, coaches, parents, and athletes) seeking to improve the climate in youth sport.

Practical Implications

Efforts toward educating parents whose children are involved in sports build on previous work examining parenting behavior in organized youth sport (e.g., Hoyle & Leff, 1997; Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Stein et al., 1999) and demonstrate the potential for this type of translation to be pursued by researchers and practitioners across a range of youth sport contexts (i.e., recreational, competitive, elite). In combination with growing knowledge of best practices (see Harwood & Knight, 2015), the further development, implementation, and assessment of evidence-based programs will help to refine targeted approaches to working with parents in organized youth sport settings.

There are a number of considerations that should be made when consultants approach parent education efforts in youth sport. Perhaps most important, future efforts to provide sport parents with education should continue to be based in evidence-based practices (see Thrower, Harwood, & Spray, 2016, 2017). League directors and administrators should seek to avoid the temptation to implement quick-fixes; instead treating educational efforts as a way to enhance the overall culture of the league or team. Future efforts should also aim to become more accessible to populations that otherwise might not be able to take part in the programming due to time, distance, cost, or other constraints. Considerations for future work include the potential to use web-based curricula that could be accessed at parents' convenience. Such efforts that leverage modern technology are both cost-effective and time-efficient. A final consideration is related to the growing population of Americans who may not speak or understand English fluently. This limitation has the potential to alienate or otherwise limit parents whose children are involved in youth sports in their attempts to engage in any form of educational programming. By translating educational curricula, more parents would be served and there would also be a greater opportunity to assess a program's efficacy across a wider range of parent demographics. As an example, the curriculum created by Dorsch and colleagues (2017) has been translated into German and is in the process of being translated into Spanish.

For those seeking to implement their own intervention, a community case study carried out by Dorsch, King, Tulane, Osai, Dunn, and Catlsen (in press) illuminates what parents, coaches, and administrators feel would be the necessary components of a parent education program. Parents offered the feedback that any intervention should be cognizant of parents' demanding schedules. Some parents mentioned that during the children's practice may be an effective time for an intervention. Speaking more broadly, coaches spoke of their preference for such interventions at earlier stages and even expressed the idea that such intervention at the high school level would be "too late" (Dorsch et al., in press, p. 14). Administrators in this study urged for the intervention to be a positive experience for the parents and that it shouldn't be too time consuming. These findings align with work conducted with tennis parents in the United Kingdom (Thrower et al., 2016), and suggests that education should begin early and be ongoing over the course of development, so as not to inundate parents with ineffective and cumbersome one-time sessions.

As for the logistics of the actual delivery of an intervention, coaches specifically felt that the parent education program should be delivered by a third party rather than the coaching staff (Dorsch et al., in press). The stated preference was for a well-respected professional with expertise and experience (i.e., credibility) to implement the program. As was rightly noted by administrators, the program should be customized to the particular sport, developmental level of the children, and specific needs and goals of the parents (Dorsch et al., in press).

Developing a Sport Parent Education Program

Dorsch et al. (2017) offer a helpful framework from which consultants can draw from as they develop their own parent education program. Building on that general structure, the following section will provide more detailed guidance in how consultants can create their own unique parent education program that best provides a meaningful educational experience for the parents in the youth sports organizations with whom they work.

Needs and Goals Assessment

Though there are topics that will apply to most sport parent audiences, each youth sports programs has its own unique set of needs, goals, and challenges that must be considered when developing a sport parent education program. As a result, consultants are encouraged to immerse themselves in the youth sports program they are involved in as a means of gaining a broad and deep understanding of the organization's structure and processes, its parent population, the sport in which the children participate, and the level and goals of that sports involvement (e.g., introduction to sport, fun and skill development, competition, long-term athlete development). This knowledge can be gained by observing parents at practices and competitions, seeing the interactions they have with their athletes and the coaching staff, and interviewing key stakeholders in the organization. This information will inform consultants on what needs the organization has in wanting a structured parent education program, what "pain points" exist among the parents involved, and what goals it sees being accomplished with such a program.

Content

With a detailed picture of the youth sports organization completed, consultants can select what content should be included in the parent education program. These materials can be gathered based the prior experience of consultants in delivering such sport parent programming, reading the many books that have been written about sport parenting, exploration of the extant research on the topic, and other resources found on the internet. Common topics include child development, impact of sports on children, values, investment, goals, motivations, roles and responsibilities, messages to their children, relationships with coaches, and communication.

Curriculum

Once a range of content has been selected by consultants, they can decide how to incorporate it into an effective curriculum. This curriculum details what topic areas will be offered, the specific information that will be provided in those topic areas, the order in which it will be delivered, the length of the curriculum, and the amount of contact that consultants will have with their parent audience. An emphasis in consultants developing a sport parent education curriculum should be on what content will be most impactful to sport parents and how they will translate the information into meaningful changes in their attitudes, emotions, and behavior in their roles as parents of young athletes. Taylor (2016) provides an example of a robust curriculum that is packaged into a four-class course that he offers to youth sports organizations either in person or online.

Modes of Delivery

Good content and a carefully planned curriculum are essential starting points for an impactful sport parent education program. The next issue that must be addressed is the mode by which consultants will deliver the program. Time may be the most influential contributor to deciding how the program is offered. The reality of life for many parents is that they are very busy and simply don't have much discretionary time available to devote to being educated about their role as sport parents, however receptive they are to learning how they can best support their young athletes. An important part of the needs and goals assessment is for consultants to determine how much time the youth sports organization can devote to parent education.

Dorsch et al. (2017) have demonstrated that one seminar and even just having parents read a guide about how to be a better sport parent had a significant short-term effect on their behavior and how their children perceived them. At the same time, it seems reasonable to assume that a series of educational opportunities in which parents can learn more, become more engaged, and maintain awareness of their influence on their children would have a more meaningful and longer lasting impact.

In addition to frequency of contact with the youth sport organization's parent community, another question to be asked by consultants is how the curriculum can best be delivered to the widest audience. Certainly, in-person contact would seem to be the most effective mode of delivery. However, again due to time constraints, attendance may be lacking which, by definition, diminishes the impact of the program on the youth sport organization's parent community.

Thanks to the internet, delivery of information is now possible through several forms of media. Webinar platforms would allow consultants to reach a broader audience by offering remote participation to those who are unable to attend in person. Pre-recorded audio or video classes that allow parents to access the curriculum on-demand and participate at their own pace is another way to reach a wider audience (Taylor, 2016). Admittedly, one weakness of leveraging technology in this way is that the communication is unidirectional which may limit the audience's engagement and takeaway.

As demonstrated by Dorsch et al. (2017) and Taylor (2016), the creation and use of a written workbook can be used as a primary or supplemental means of curriculum delivery. Such a guide that leads readers through the curriculum can allow for another means of delivery that could be appreciated by those who are visual learning and who prefer reading as a mode of learning. A well-thought-out workbook that includes content descriptions and exercises would enable consultants to reach an even larger audience and keep participants in the sport parent education program engaged through another mode of delivery and for an even longer period. As noted by Dorsch et al. (2017), a workbook could be translated into other languages to meet the needs of those who are English as Second Language speakers.

Additionally, the curriculum of a sport parent education program could also be delivered primarily or as secondary sources through periodic online newsletters, blogs, and social media. This approach allows consultants to continually engage with their parent audience with regular postings that either support already discussed ideas or introduce new or timely ideas that would benefit a youth sports organization's parent community. Other benefits of using this type of online technology is that consultants' messages will likely be shared with an even broader audience and it further engages followers by allowing comments, likes, and shares.

Timing

With the content, structure, and means for delivering a robust sport parent education program in place, the last issue that consultants must consider is the timing of the program at several levels. First, when in the course of the season should the programming be delivered? As shown by Dorsch et al. (2017), just before the season begins is the ideal time to deliver the curriculum because, as the saying goes, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." By offering the program before the season starts, parents are able to apply their new-found knowledge and insights from the first practice and competition.

Second, as discussed above, an essential challenge for consultants and youth sports organizations is deciding when to deliver the program that will maximize attendance, for example, during practices when parents might be watching, in the evening, or on weekends. In all likelihood, whenever the program is scheduled, some parents will be unable to attend due to conflicting responsibilities. As such, one option is for consultants to offer the program at different times so as to provide the opportunity for as many interested parents as possible to attend.

Finally, as noted previously, the impact on a youth sports organization's parent community will be greatest if the presence of the sport parent education program and its engagement with the parents is maintained throughout the season. If the program's curriculum involves multiple, connected workshops, then scheduling each "class" monthly will provide an ongoing registering on their radar screens. If the program's curriculum consists of a "one-off" workshop, consultants could increase its "shelf life" by scheduling periodic follow-up workshops or sport parent round table discussions and Q&As periodically throughout the season. If that level of time commitment isn't available, then consultants can maintain contact and influence with the parent community through online media.

Summary

- Youth sport is a nearly ubiquitous context that plays an important role in the development of millions of North American children.
- Parents, displaying a range of behaviors, play an important role in providing for and impacting the sport experience.
- As youth sport has increasingly become driven by adults, parent behavior has appeared to become more problematic in the context of sport.

- While many efforts exist to improve parent involvement and behaviors in youth sport, such efforts up to this point have not been based in research and have not been empirically tested.
- A recent pilot study displayed the ability that evidence-based parent education has to improve parent-child interactions and child's experience in sport.
- Future efforts should seek to find ways to utilize technology, reach out to diverse populations, and continue to be based in empirical findings.
- Consultants can use the following steps to develop a robust sport parent education program: conduct a needs and goals assessment, determine program content, develop a compelling curriculum, specify the modes of delivery, and establish the timing for the implementation of the program.

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