

Parents' role in fostering positive youth development in sport: Theoretical and conceptual considerations

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Introduction

Nearly nine in ten North American youth participate in organized sport during childhood and/or adolescence (Clark, 2010; USDHHS, 2010). This participation has been associated with positive physical, psychological, and emotional benefits during childhood and across the lifespan (Bailey, 2006; Weiss, 2016). To foster these positive outcomes, parents seek out opportunities for growth, development, and socialization for their children. In doing so, they become active participants in their children's youth sport experiences, exhibiting a broad range of involvement behaviors over the course of a child's development. In turn, parents' involvement behaviors reciprocally influence the child's sport participation, performance, and enjoyment (Fraser-Thomas, Strachan, & Jeffery-Tosoni, 2013).

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics' Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness (Brenner, 2016), youth sport is becoming increasingly driven by adults and less centered on the young athletes who participate. As parents continue to invest a growing percentage of resources (e.g., time and money) into the athletic achievement of their children, what should be defined as an "appropriate" amount of parental involvement in youth sport has become an important topic of debate. This debate is meaningful because parent involvement in extracurricular activities has been linked to child outcomes including physical and mental health (e.g., Bailey, 2006; Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013), motivation (e.g., Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Brière, 2001; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992), and the broader parent-child relationship (e.g., Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009; Knight & Holt, 2014). Indeed, there is considerable evidence to suggest that positive parental involvement can help facilitate the development of key developmental outcomes for young athletes.

This desire to promote personal development among young athletes is at the core of positive youth development

(PYD). This strength-based perspective of adolescence views youth as resources to be developed, rather than problems to be fixed (Damon, 2004). A growing body of literature has examined the role of sport as a catalyst for PYD (see Holt, 2016 for a review). While sport participation does not automatically lead to positive developmental outcomes, youth's involvement in intentionally structured, enriching sport environments can help facilitate lifelong benefits (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Sport research in this area has conceptualized PYD in various ways, including the acquisition of life skills (e.g., goal setting and leadership) which are developed through sport and applied in other life domains (Hodge & Danish, 1999). Other popular approaches include the expansion of external (e.g., family support) and internal developmental assets (e.g., responsibility; Benson, 1997), and the demonstration of the 4 Cs (i.e., competence, confidence, connection, and character; Côté, Bruner, Erickson, Strachan, & Fraser-Thomas, 2010). Despite the lack of a singular conceptual definition, the commonality among these frameworks is the view that youth sport can be used intentionally to create better athletes and better people who develop skills and competencies that enable them to become thriving, contributing members of society.

Sport researchers have addressed the developmental and involvement outcomes of youth's participation in organized sport (e.g., Holt & Neely, 2011), and have begun to understand the processes through which PYD outcomes are attained (Holt et al., 2017). Nevertheless, there remains a gap in knowledge of the specific ways parents may foster these outcomes. We propose that intentionally designed youth sport can be utilized as a positive developmental context for youth, and that parents can play a major role in that development over time. The present paper is therefore designed to highlight parents' role in fostering PYD in organized youth sport contexts.

Theoretical and Conceptual Considerations

Multiple factors affect the role parents play in fostering positive developmental outcomes among their youth in organized sport settings. In borrowing from Bronfenbrenner's process-person-context-time (PPCT) model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2005), we argue that multiple factors existing within these four categories impact the ways parents are able to foster positive developmental outcomes in their youth.

Process. Processes are the recurring social interactions that individuals encounter in their proximal social settings



(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). They are the building blocks of human development, which by definition is a process facilitated by ongoing interactions with meaningful others in various social contexts. According to Bronfenbrenner (2005), interactions between individuals that occur in the settings in which they constantly live and grow result in progressive socialization (i.e., development) throughout the lifespan.

A salient process-related factor that impacts parents' role in fostering PYD is parent-child communication. Of the many processes in which parents and children engage, communication is the most common – as well as perhaps the most impactful. Parent-child communication can take many forms, from parent verbal sideline behavior to more informal sport-related communication that takes place during the commute to and from practices and competitions or at home around the family dinner table. Parents' verbal sideline behaviors have been studied in many contexts (e.g., Dorsch, Smith, Wilson, & McDonough, 2015; Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008). For example, Dorsch and colleagues classified parent verbal sideline behavior using a multiple goals perspective (Caughlin, 2010; O'Keefe & Shepherd, 1987), suggesting that parent communication is guided by instrumental, relational, and identity related goals. Holt and colleagues classified parent verbal sideline behavior along a continuum from more supportive to more controlling. Overall, it is evident that parent-child communication is a multi-faceted process that is associated with child outcomes such as physical and mental health (e.g., Eime et al., 2013), motivation (e.g., Pelletier et al, 2001), and the broader parent-child relationship (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009), and as such plays a key role in youth's positive development in sport.

Person. Person traits are the biopsychosocial characteristics of an individual that influence her or his development (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Tudge, Makrova, Hatfield, & Karnik (2009) describe three sub-domains of person traits. *Demand* traits are the observable characteristics of an individual that prompt responses from others in a social setting (e.g., ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sex, height, and weight). *Resource* traits are the characteristics of an individual that are not directly evident to outsiders, but that allow for a range of responses to social stimuli (e.g., cognitive maturity and emotional control). Finally, *force* traits are characteristics relating to an individual's motivation (e.g., persistence) in various social domains. According to ecological theory, different individuals will interact with their environments in characteristic ways based on these ascribed and achieved biopsychosocial faculties. This leads individuals to develop along varied trajectories even when presented with similar contextual stimuli.

A person-related demand trait that may impact parents' role in fostering PYD is ethnicity. The way that PYD is conceptualized varies across cultural contexts, thereby shaping the ways parents can help facilitate developmental outcomes. For example, Aboriginal populations ascribe unique benefits to youth's sport participation, including a focus on empowerment and traditional cultural values (Bruner et al., 2016). Additionally, parents from ethnic minority or low-income families often face barriers in financially supporting their children's sport involvement (Holt, Kingsley, Tink, & Scherer, 2011). A key resource trait is youth's cognitive

maturity, as it impacts how and whether life skills are learned through sport and transferred to other contexts (Pierce, Gould, & Camiré, 2017). As an example, parents may wish to take advantage of "teachable moments" on the car ride home following competition. However, life skills transfer may not occur if the child lacks the necessary knowledge regarding the transfer process. Finally, a force trait which may influence youth's development through sport is persistence. Parent-child relationship quality has been shown to be a key predictor of continued sport participation (e.g., Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006). Further, research suggests a dose-response relationship whereby a greater breadth and intensity of sport involvement is associated with heightened developmental outcomes (Busseri, Rose-Krasnor, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006). Thus, parents should remain supportive of their children's sport participation and encourage them to sample a variety of activities.

Context. Context includes four increasingly broader systems of an individual's environment that influence the trajectory and magnitude of development. The microsystem is the most proximal of these systems and consists of the relationships and interactions in the individual's immediate social setting. The mesosystem consists of interactions between or among microsystems, of which the individual is a member of both. The exosystem consists of interactions between or among microsystems, of which the individual is not a member of at least one, but that influence the individual's development. Finally, the macrosystem comprises the most distal layer of social environment and has been described as the implicit and explicit societal imperatives that guide development (Bronfenbrenner, 1999).

A key microsystem that may impact parents' role in fostering positive youth development is the parent-child relationship. Organized sport and the high levels of time investment that are sometimes required present valuable opportunities to cultivate parent-child relationships (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Highly involved parents who adopt an autonomy-supportive parenting style are able to foster stronger parent-child relationships and positive youth sport experiences (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009). At the mesosystem level, a complex interplay exists between the parent-coach and parent-child relationships. While well-intentioned, parental feedback during competitions can sometimes confuse the child-athlete, as it may conflict with instruction from coaches (Knight, Neely, & Holt, 2011). Additionally, in youth sport, parents often serve as volunteer coaches. In such cases, the line between parent and coach becomes blurred, presenting both unique challenges and opportunities (Weiss & Fretwell, 2005). One exosystem that exists for parents in sport is the interaction between a child's peer relationships and the parent-child relationship, which have been shown to exert both individual and interactive effects on youth's sport motivation (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006). As an example, the behavior of over-involved parents during competition can embarrass youth in front of their teammates (Keegan, Spray, Harwood, & Lavalley, 2010). Finally, at the macrosystem level it is evident that the sport environment changes within and across geographic regions and cultures. For example, by choosing to live in a rural region, parents may be limiting the breadth of sport activities that

are accessible to their children (Hardy, Kelly, Chapman, King, & Farrell, 2009), but also affording them a greater opportunity to participate at higher levels (Côté, MacDonald, Baker, & Abernethy, 2006).

Time. Time is considered a crucial aspect of any conceptualization of development (Elder, 1998) and we therefore believe it should be compulsory in any discussion of developmental outcomes. In light of this, we urge scholars to consider when sport participation occurs within the context of history. Specifically, empirical and anecdotal reports highlight the recent professionalization of youth sport (Dunn, Dorsch, King, & Rothlisberger, 2016; Gregory, 2017). It is plausible that this both drives and is driven by parental involvement in the context. Therefore, parenting in youth sport in 2017 is likely a very different experience (with very different accompanying expectations) than it was a generation ago, in 1987. We also encourage scholars to consider at what stage of an individual's life sport participation occurs when assessing its developmental ramifications (see MacMillan & Copher, 2005). As noted by Côté (1999), the expectations of parent involvement vary based on the age, physical development, and stage of sport participation of the child. In short, parenting a six-year-old recreational athlete is likely very different than parenting an 18-year-old Olympic hopeful.

Two time-related factors that may impact parents' role in fostering positive youth development are youth's age and stage of athletic development. The Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP; Côté, 1999; Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007) outlines three prototypical trajectories of youth's sport involvement across childhood and adolescence. The early specialization trajectory is characterized by specialization in a single sport during childhood, and a focus on high amounts of practice. Early specialists may reach high levels of performance, but are at a greater risk of injury and burnout. In contrast, the early diversification pathway is characterized by sampling of a wide range of sports during childhood, followed by progressive specialization in a single sport throughout adolescence. This trajectory is also more likely to be associated with the attainment of elite status in sport, without many of the negative side-effects of early specialization. Finally, the third pathway involves a period of sampling during childhood and participation in sport at a recreational level during adolescence. Regardless of an athlete's specific trajectory, the DMSP suggests that parenting roles and involvement fluctuate over time as a result of changing demands across a young athlete's development. For example, during childhood, parents are encouraged to introduce their children to an array of play activities, and provide age-appropriate feedback and support (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2013). Youth's specialization in a single sport (in either childhood or adolescence) should be met with an increased level of tangible support from parents, along with the careful management of the family's resources and investments. Across development, parents should strive to create a task-oriented climate and generally focus their feedback on their child's effort and attitude, rather than performance (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2013; Knight et al., 2011). In doing so, parents can help to facilitate positive development across the lifespan.

Conclusion

The overwhelming majority of North American youth participate in organized sport at some point over the course of development (Clark, 2010; USDHHS, 2010). As a result, parents become active designers, facilitators, and interpreters of this participation. Largely, parents adopt these roles in an effort to enhance the developmental outcomes experienced by their children. Indeed, given our hypothesis that sport can be purposefully utilized as a positive developmental context for youth, and that parents can play a major role in that development over time, parent involvement is an important construct to understand.

One theoretical lens through which researchers can design, enact, and assess parents' roles in the development of their children in sport is Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Adopting such an ecological perspective affords researchers the opportunity to investigate the many integrated factors that impact children's outcomes in sport. Specifically, understanding the primary processes (e.g., parent-child communication) that drive children's development is an important first step. Moreover, understanding person characteristics (of the parent *and* child) offers potential moderators and/or grouping variables for further exploration. Similarly, examining the contexts in which youth sport participation takes place allows for an appreciation that no two cultures, communities, or families experience sport in the same way. Finally, it is important to recognize and acknowledge that time plays a necessary role in the development of all young people.

Despite researchers' systematic understanding of parenting in organized youth sport (e.g., Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009, 2015; Holt, Tamminen et al., 2008; Leff & Hoyle, 1995), and despite a broad literature highlighting sport's role as a positive developmental context (Holt, 2016; Holt et al., 2017), the two areas have yet to be effectively merged. In short, we know little about the role parents play in fostering PYD outcomes in their sport-participating youth. However, it is important to keep in mind that the literature on PYD in sport has only taken root in the last 15 years, whereas research on sport parents can be traced back to foundational work in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s (e.g., Felker, 1968; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978; Lewko & Ewing, 1980). Indeed, it has been argued that PYD research is simply "old wine in a new bottle" (Weiss, 2016) because it builds upon a more mature line of sport psychology research that has examined similar underlying constructs.

In light of this critique, researchers interested in PYD should be sure to draw upon the wealth of knowledge from the sport parent literature to develop integrative directions for future study, which marry both the sport parent and PYD areas. Specifically, future research could extend our understanding of the relationship between coaching behaviors (e.g., role modeling, intellectual stimulation) and PYD (Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2013), and explore whether similar parenting behaviors are associated with positive developmental outcomes. Moreover, despite the fact that researchers have explored the strategies enacted by model youth sport coaches to teach life skills (e.g., Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012), less is known about how sport parents can model and teach important life skills to their children across the stages of development (see Fraser-Thomas et al., 2013).



A study addressing this issue would bolster both the family and sport literatures, and could potentially provide a basis for evidence-based parent education programs in youth sport. Following these and other related pathways would inform the utilization of sport as a positive developmental context for youth, as well as the roles of parents in that development over time.

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