



Experiences in Youth Sports: A Comparison Between Players' and Parents' Perspectives

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Youth Sport, Perspectives, Parents, character development, teamwork, sportsmanship, play, recreation administration

ABSTRACT

A key difficulty for administrators of youth sport programs is satisfying both parents (as those who make the final decision of participation) and players (as those for whom the program is designed). While both stakeholders have important viewpoints, the potential exists for stark differences between the two. This paper explores the differences between players' and parents' perspectives of a youth sport experience. Results suggest that players generally tend to think more positively than parents of the youth sport program, including areas such as skill development, teamwork development, character development, sportsmanship, and fun. Suggestions for practitioners on how to address these issues are included.

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Introduction

One of the difficulties in managing parks and recreation agencies is the necessity of creating programs that simultaneously satisfy multiple stakeholders (Baker & Witt, 2000), which turns into a major factor whether designing programs for adults, youth, or families. Accordingly, in youth sports, both parents and children are the customers, and administrators need to satisfy both groups to ensure customer loyalty. For youth sport administrators, the experiences of young athletes are of primary concern, since these youths are ultimately the individuals for whom such programs exist; therefore, creating positive experiences for them is of paramount importance. Administrators, however, must be concerned with more than just the players' perspectives concerning youth sport programs. Parents, for example, make final purchase/participation decisions regarding their children's involvement in youth sports programs (Howard & Madrigal, 1990). As such, understanding parents' antecedent and ongoing expectations of youth sport programs can help administrators attempt to meet expectations, secure parents' loyalty, and

ensure the further support of programs. To better understand how to satisfy both customer groups, administrators must understand the varying perceptions and perspectives different family members bring with them to youth sport experiences.

In general, youths, mothers, and fathers harbor differing experience expectations for sport or family leisure pursuits. Depending on the ages of children or overall stages in the family life cycle, experiences in sport or leisure can vary greatly from person to person. For example, youths often have lower intrinsic motivation and less positive affect regarding participation in family leisure than do their parents. This is especially true for adolescents (Larson, Gillman, & Richards, 1997). Mothers, meanwhile, often continue in the role of family caretaker by providing or facilitating leisure experiences for others (Dyck & Daly, 2006). Serving as leisure providers, mothers typically feel less free, interested, or able to enjoy family leisure activities. Fathers, on the other hand, often feel leisure time can be used for just that—leisure—without feelings of obligation or caretaking. When involved in youth sports as

family leisure, fathers frequently offer feedback, criticism, or direction to their children regarding their sport skills and abilities (Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2003). Overall, family members have very different perspectives of sport or family leisure experiences. Youth sports, however, may provide one venue for each family member to fulfill individual expectations or wants that are separate from other family members.

The influences of parents and the differing reasons parents may have for initiating their children's participation are major factors of youth sport experiences, and parents choose to enroll their children in youth sports programs for many reasons. In many cases, parents choose youth sport programs for their children based on desires to influence their children's environment and free time periods to provide more opportunities to develop or socialize them into healthy, responsible, goal-driven, self-motivated people. Parents also may believe that by controlling the free-time environment, they can influence what values, attitudes, or life skills their children learn during this time (Coakley, 2006; Hutchinson, Baldwin, & Caldwell, 2003; Kanters, Bocarro, & Casper, 2008). This philosophy is particularly present among parents in the United States, as Coakley (2006) affirms that Americans have a long-held belief that sports participation can provide positive character-building experiences for youths (Coakley, 2006).

Many parents also report feeling particular joys about life skills and other benefits they perceive their children to learn because of participation in sports (Wiersma, 2007). Similarly, learning responsibility is a parentally desirable byproduct of sport participation. Parents may expect this to occur as the children keep their equipment clean and organized, regularly attend practices, and play in games. Children may also learn to appreciate goals and accomplishments through participation,

and this is another reason parents register their children for sport participation. Watson (1977) indicates that young athletes who enjoy setting and attaining goals may become more self-motivated to do so in school, sports, or life in general. Other studies have found that parents who enrolled their child in a Little League Baseball program wanted their child to learn self-confidence, while parents who registered their children for tennis were looking for an activity the family could share, as well as to model a work ethic for their children (Monsaas, 1985; Watson, 1977). Parents concerned specifically with their children's weight, health, or physical activity level may look to youth sports to provide structured, healthy, fun physical activities (Bergeron, 2007).

Another way parents become involved in their child's youth sport experience is through the purchase of services. Purchasing such sport experiences appears to be a decision that rests firmly with parents. While parents frequently consider their children's feelings and experiences in such decisions, the final decision remains with the adults (Petlichkoff, 1992). It follows, then, that parents should be studied as consumers acting on their children's behalf (Green & Chalip, 1998). Within families, the burden of supporting young athletes typically rests with mothers, who often have the greatest influences on purchase decisions (Howard & Madrigal, 1990). Because of this role, mothers typically have a prominent role in every step of the decision-making process by gathering information about programs, then making final decisions to enroll their children and purchase sport services (Assael, 1987; Howard & Madrigal, 1990; Wackman, 1979).

While their reasons may differ from their parents, research identifies several benefits that can be obtained from youth sport experiences that influence children to choose to participate in them. These reasons can be grouped into four categories: competence, affiliation with

friends or a team, to be physically active, and to have fun (Weiss & Petlichkoff, 1989). Generally, children choose to participate in activities in which they believe they are reasonably competent (Petlichkoff, 1992). Multiple studies have supported this idea and found that perceived competence was a main reason youth participated in, enjoyed, and remained active in sports (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986; Wankel & Kreisel, 1985; Wiersma, 2001). Competence may also play a role in increasing motivation, because research indicates that those who are naturally talented may want to further demonstrate their skills, or even show off their superior abilities (Biddle, Wang, Chatzisarantis, & Spray, 2003).

Another factor motivating youth participation is the sense of affiliation children gain when they are part of a team. Children generally want to be accepted by their peer groups, and as they age, they may prefer to spend more time with their peers than parents (Larson, Gillman, & Richards, 1997). Youth sport programs provide venues in which to enjoy the company of peers and other adults. Previous researchers have linked enjoyment in youth sports with positive peer and adult interactions in the same setting (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Brustad, 1988). Other studies have reported that team sport participants were more satisfied with their experiences than individual sport participants, indicating that children enjoy team or peer affiliation (McCarthy, Jones, and Clark-Carter, 2007).

Sport programs also provide youth with an opportunity for physical activity. Multiple studies have found that children joined sports teams because they wanted to be more physically active or wanted to improve their level of physical fitness (Gould, Feltz, & Weiss, 1982; Longhurst & Spink, 1987) and/or that physical activity levels improved through sport participation (DeBate, Gabriel, Zwald, Huberty, & Zhang, 2009). Such findings fit

with the surplus energy theory, which posits that children build up energy during the day and eventually need a way to release it. Easily accessible outlets such as youth sports, recess, or other physical activities are often considered safe or beneficial ways to release this stored energy (Segrave, 1983). In a study of 12-14 year olds, sport participation was found to be a means of significant energy expenditure, particularly when related to more sedentary behaviors such as television viewing (Katzmarzyk & Malina, 1998).

An additional reason why youths say they want to participate in sports is because they want to have fun. In multiple studies, youths from various sports and different competitive levels all listed fun as a main reason for participation (Gill, Gross, & Huddleston, 1985; Klint & Weiss, 1986). One grounded theory analysis of fun resulted in four dimensions of the construct; free choice, involvement, sense of competence, and opportunity to do the sport again (Harris, Horn, & Freysinger, 1995). Thus, fun could be found in at least two of the dimensions already mentioned as reasons youth participate in sport—skill development and affiliation—which relate directly to competence and involvement respectively. With regard to fun and skill development, researchers have suggested that fun can occur when players have a balance between their skill and challenge levels (Petlichkoff, 1992). When challenge or skills are either too high or too low, frustration or boredom can occur instead of fun, resulting in dropout from youth sports. Having fun with friends could be especially important for children who do not find a skill/challenge balance, as their enjoyment would come from interaction with peers rather than their physical abilities.

Finally, young athletes may transfer or cease their participation in youth sports if any of their expectations for participation are not met. Similar to motivations for participating,

reasons for transferring or ceasing participation include not having fun, wanting to play another sport, not being as skilled as the child wanted, or not liking the pressure (Gould, Feltz, Horn, & Weiss, 1982, Klint & Weiss, 1986). Also, as interests or abilities change, children may switch the sport or competition level at which they participate but continue to seek competence, affiliation, fitness, and fun. Transferring, which many young athletes choose to do instead of dropping out when they are dissatisfied with their experience, indicates that youth place enough value on the sport experience to navigate the positive and negative aspects until they are satisfied (Weiss & Petlichkoff, 1989).

Overall, meeting customer expectations with regard to youth sport services is important because it can increase stakeholder satisfaction, which leads to increased loyalty to a recreation agency. Customer loyalty is vital to recreation administrators because it can lead to continued revenue while simultaneously reducing marketing costs (Madrigal, 1995; Yi & La, 1994). The degree to which programs or services meet customers' needs will influence the consumers' purchase satisfaction (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). If consumers are satisfied, they are more likely to return for future purchases, as well as try to influence others to purchase from the same agency through word-of-mouth (Bloch, Black & Lichtenstein, 1989). More specifically, with youth sport, Green and Chalip (1997) found that when parents were satisfied with their child's sport program, the parents were more committed to the organization, which could lead them to be more loyal and return for future seasons and with future children.

Clearly, recreation administrators are met with dual challenges of trying to satisfy both parents and children as the main stakeholders in youth sport programs. This duality of children and parents as stakeholders creates difficult situations for administrator, who must design

programs that create positive experiences for people who seemingly have starkly different perspectives. Effective programs will attempt to combine multiple stakeholders' expectations into one cohesive whole (Witt, 2004).

Although previous studies have compared the perspectives of multiple stakeholders in other environments (Baker & Witt, 2000; Hyland & Jackson, 2006; Lee, Altschuld, & White, 2007; Lester, Tomkovick, Wells, Flunker, & Kickul, 2005; Piat et al., 2004), little if any of this research has been conducted in a youth sport setting (Kanters, Bocarro, & Casper, 2008). Understanding the similarities and differences in what these individuals prefer to experience in youth sport programs can be very helpful to administrators who are attempting to create the best programs possible. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to compare the perspectives of antecedent, ongoing, and outcome expectations of players and parents in youth sport experiences.

Method

Setting and Participants

Data were collected from both parents and players involved in a youth football program in the Midwest. This league offers football to participants in first through eighth grades and at five different weight classes. Questionnaires were distributed and collected by league board members prior to the final game of the season. Players and parents responded to the questionnaires separately in an attempt to minimize the influence of parents on their children's responses. A total of 367 questionnaires were collected: 143 from parents, and 224 from players. Ages of the players ranged from 6 to 14, with a mean of 11.14. Players and parents were from a total of 18 teams, with an average of 8.22 parents and 12.44 players responding per team. A total of 397 players took part in the league over

the course of the season. Only one parent per child was asked to complete the questionnaire, meaning that the overall response rate was 36.02% for the parents and 56.42% for the players.

Measurement

A questionnaire was developed in conjunction with league administrators. Questions were designed to assess whether the league was meeting its goals from both parent and player perspectives. The questionnaire for the players consisted of nine questions ($\alpha = .78$) that referred to the youths' perspectives of their experience. Examples include the amount of fun, sportsmanship, skills, teamwork, and respect for the coach, among other variables. The wording of each of these items was appropriate to the lowest grade level involved in the study. All of the questions for the players were completed on a four point Likert-type scale (1 = Needs a Lot of Improvement, 4 = Could Not Be Better).

Ten questions were included on the parents' questionnaire ($\alpha = .89$). These questions referred to the parents' perspectives of their children's experiences in the program and were similar to those answered by the players. Examples include the amount of fun the child had, the sportsmanship in the league, the skills and teamwork developed over the course of the season, and the respect the child had for the coach. Eight of these questions were on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = Needs a Lot of Improvement, 7 = Could Not Be Better). The two remaining questions (willingness to play for the same coach and likelihood of playing again next season) were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = Certainly Will Not, 5 = Certainly Will). One question on the parents' questionnaire (perceived value of the program compared to cost), was not included in the analysis. Responses to this item were intended for the benefit of administrators, and no similar question existed on the players' questionnaire.

Therefore, it was eliminated from the results of this study, although the information was provided to the administrators of the organization.

Due to the fact that different scales were used for the players and the parents on most questions, the data from the players' questionnaires needed to be converted to allow for comparisons of the two sets of perspectives. After data were entered, players' responses were mathematically converted to either a 7-point or a 5-point scale depending on the format for the corresponding parents' question. This was done with a simple mathematical equation in which each individual answer was divided by four and then multiplied by the number of responses available on the corresponding parents' questionnaire (e.g., $x/4 * 7 = y$).

Results

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each of the nine variables before conducting analyses to compare results. Means for all nine variables tended to be close to the higher end of the scale (see Table 1). The variables that were closest to the maximum were the players' perspective of fun during the league (mean = 6.98, out of 7) and players' willingness to play for the same coach (mean = 4.53, out of 5). Variables on the lower end of the scale included parents' perspective of the overall experience (mean = 5.33, out of 7), and parent willingness to register for the league again the following year (mean = 3.99, out of 5).

Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare the perspectives of players to parents on each of the nine variables: skills learned, teamwork learned, coach's effectiveness at developing character, respect for the coach, sportsmanship present in the league, overall experience, how much fun the player had, likelihood of participating in the

league again next season, and willingness to play again for the same coach. In all cases but one, a significant difference existed between the players' and parents' perspectives (see Table 2). The only non-significant difference between the two perspectives was related to the amount of sportsmanship demonstrated in the league during the course of the season ($p = .41$). Those perspectives with the largest differences included the amount of skills learned ($t = -5.33, p < .01$), the amount of teamwork learned ($t = -5.26, p < .01$), and the overall experience ($t = -7.54, p < .01$).

Discussion

Interpretation of Results

Results from this study suggest that players do, in fact, perceive the experience of playing in a youth sport league differently than their parents. Although many of the means were close, the only variable without a significant difference between perspectives was the sportsmanship seen in the league in which parents and players saw the sportsmanship

Table 1
Means for Parents and Players

	Parents		Players	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Skill Development	5.39	1.35	6.09	1.14
Teamwork Development	5.64	1.27	6.30	1.086
Character Development	5.42	1.37	6.07	1.11
Coach Respect	5.55	1.45	6.14	1.21
League Sportsmanship	5.61	1.27	5.73	1.30
Overall Experience	5.33	1.33	6.31	1.12
Fun in the League	5.923	1.181	6.98	4.76
Play in the League Next Year (scale of 5)	3.99	1.49	4.49	.99
Play for the Same Coach Next Year (scale of 5)	4.15	1.23	4.53	.88

Table 2
Differences between Parents' and Players' Perspectives

	t	df	p
Skill Development	-5.33	364	<.01
Teamwork Development	-5.26	364	<.01
Character Development	-4.92	360	<.01
Coach Respect	-4.22	361	<.01
League Sportsmanship	-.83	361	.41
Overall Experience	-7.54	363	<.01
Fun in the League	-2.57	362	.01
Play in the League Next Year (scale of 5)	-3.78	352	<.01
Play for the Same Coach Next Year (scale of 5)	-3.32	339	<.01

as the same (parents = 5.61, players = 5.73). However, one interesting finding worth noting is that while players rated sportsmanship as the lowest of all variables, parents rated it in the middle of all variables. Although no significant differences were found for it, the relative

placement of scores for the sportsmanship variable is noteworthy. Such variation in placement might spring from a difference in perspective of what sportsmanship means between parents and players. Players may be continuing to observe and learn behavioral norms that may differ between social and competitive settings, while parents may have concretized notions and individualized delineations of appropriate/inappropriate behaviors, as well as their variations between social and competitive settings. Another reason for the variation might be because fans may be somewhat physically removed from action on the field and are consequently unable to observe sportsmanship issues that may be occurring.

While the sportsmanship variable was found to be statistically similar between parents and players, as related to other measured variables, players tended to have more positive views of their football experiences than did parents. These young athletes said that they thought they learned skills and teamwork, developed character, respected their coach, had a good overall experience, had fun, wanted to play in the league again, and wanted to play for the same coach again, all more than their parents did.

These results might be caused by two different factors. First, this might result from the fact that children tend to be more positive in general (Seligman, 2006). This might mean that the results may not be as different as they originally appear. On the other hand, these results could also mean that young athletes may simply be looking for different experiences or may hold differing expectations than their parents. They could be judging their experiences by different standards than parents. If so, parks and recreation professionals must clearly understand that starkly different perspectives and sets of expectations regarding youth sport experiences may exist between the

two groups, and an important part of their jobs will include finding ways to better align these two perspectives.

These issues are particularly important for parks and recreation professionals who hope to maintain long-term participation by youths in their programs, which will not only financially benefit the recreation agencies but also the health and well-being of the young athletes. While positive experiences for children in youth sport programs rate as a high priority, perhaps more effort could be made in enhancing parents' youth sport experiences, since they are the ones who will make final decisions about their children's future participation. Enhancing parents' perspectives might not be a matter of changing the actual youth sport experience, but instead attempting to help them change their perspectives on the existing experiences. Parents could benefit from learning to better appreciate how much fun their children are having, along with the skills they are learning and friendships they are making.

Limitations

Although this information serves as an introduction to the similarities between players' and parents' perspectives in youth sport experiences, several limitations exist which may limit the generalizability of its results. This study was conducted on male athletes from a select football program. Less serious athletes and parents with different perspectives may have yielded different results. Experiences that would occur in girls' or co-ed leagues may have also changed the results. In addition, the participants involved in this study tended to come from middle-class families and live in a suburban area. The perspectives of both parents and players—and consequently the relationship between the two—may have been drastically different if the sample had been derived from individuals from urban and/or rural environments and/or other levels of socioeconomic status.

Implications for Research

Future studies may want to expand upon the findings and conclusions generated by this study in several ways. First, one interesting research pursuit might involve similar examinations applied to different sports and different levels of competitions. Data for this study were generated solely from a select football program; therefore, attitudes and experiences may differ within other recreational programs and other sports. For example, attitudes between parents and the young athletes may be more similar for a recreational league than for traveling, elite teams. Additionally, differences also might exist when comparing attitudes generated within different sports. Some of the attitudes and beliefs of parents may result from the potential future opportunities they believe may be derived from sport participation, such as the hopes for college scholarships or playing professionally. Such perspectives may lead to differences in attitudes between sports such as football, basketball, and baseball when compared to lacrosse and rugby, which are not commonly seen as having those same opportunities. Further differentiation might occur between team and individual sports. Future studies could compare perspectives of parents and youth from individual sports such as track, swimming, gymnastics, tennis, and wrestling, with those involved in team sports such as soccer, basketball, and baseball.

Other variables that might be interesting to study include demographics of gender and age. Gender was not a variable part of this study, since all participants in the sport program were boys. Other research could further incorporate the variable of gender into the study by comparing perspectives of players and parents based on shared and opposite genders. Also, age might be an important variable to consider, as expectations for programming may be more

similar for participants at younger ages than older ages.

Implications for practice

Results of this study provide a series of ideas that could help parks and recreational professionals better design and implement programming for youth sport programs. First, determining the goals of the program at the beginning of the season and making those goals known to all participants and parents would be a beneficial, concrete first step. Too often, programs are run simply according to precedence of previous years. In other cases, program goals and missions are lost in evolutions of programs. If both parent and participant groups understand the aims of the program at the beginning of the season, parents and children may be more closely aligned in their evaluations at the end of the season. Program administrators must also clearly communicate and reinforce program goals and objectives throughout the season so that parents, players, and coaches continue to be aware of reasons why they are participating and what the program hopes to provide for the young athletes. Specific examples of such ongoing communication efforts might include creation of logos and slogans that specifically emphasize program goals and are included on all forms of program communication, as well as jerseys, t-shirts, and posters that can be stationed throughout program facilities as continuous reminders of program priorities.

Perhaps more importantly, parents must recognize the value that the young athletes feel they are gaining from the activity, regardless of whether such value is directly observed by parents. Often, parents may have much higher expectations for an event or activity than participants, and when those expectations are not met, they may then rate the experiences less positively than their children do. They may also have broader perspectives based on

prior involvement with other children in other programs, whereas young athletes may have no such previous points of comparison. Regardless of reasons for incongruent expectations, the fact that they indeed exist could unfortunately lead directly to conflict between parents and children, or possibly between parents and program administrators. Many parks and recreation professionals express frustration with parents complaining that their children do not experience enough playing time or receive enough attention when in reality, such views are held solely by the parents and not the participants. To combat this outcome and further seek to align stakeholder perspectives, programs may seek to host chat sessions between the young athletes and parents, along with administrators and/or coaches, to help clarify any misperceptions that may exist. Administrators could host similar pre-season meetings with both parents and players to ask about each group's expectations. This would enable everyone to be on the same page regarding the exact benefits they seek as a result of participation.

Poor parental behavior at youth sporting events is one major modern social issue widely observed and publicized that may directly stem from incongruence between stakeholder perspectives like that found within this study. If such incongruence was discovered, discussed, and dissolved, parents may be much less likely to engage in negative behaviors at youth sporting events as a result. If parents were more aware of what their children actually feel during games or practices, they may be less likely to exhibit negative involvement such as screaming unconstructive comments or trying to inappropriately influence coaches' decisions.

The differences that exist between parents' and players' perspectives in youth sport present both challenges and opportunities for professionals. This study offers several ideas

regarding how youth sport program managers can effectively manage these differences and generate positive program results. By addressing these issues, both the parents and (more importantly) the players will hopefully begin to view their experiences as increasingly positive, leading to future participation that mutually benefits the players, parents, and the programs.

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