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Organized Youth Sport, Parenthood Ideologies and Gender Relations: Parents' and Children's Experiences and the Construction of "Team Family"

Project Summary

This study sought to understand how family relationships, interactions, and values are shaped by children's sport involvement, and the social and cultural context in which their sport participation occurs. The themes that emerged from this study reflect the contradictory nature of organized youth sport, including the strengthening of familial relationships, as well as the tensions and disagreements arising out of divergent perspectives. Emphasis is put on the public nature of parenting in the youth sport context and its relationship to social constructions of being a "good parent". In terms of broader implications, the study emphasizes the close connection between organized youth sport, and changing cultural ideals and practices associated with gender and parenting.

Research Methods

Semi-structured interviews and on-line participant journals (10 days duration) were used to discover divergent experiences of mothers, fathers, and children. Individual semi-structured interviews occurred in the family home. Informal observations and conversations were also recorded while spending time with family members sharing meals and at other informal family gatherings. A purposive sample of seven families (19 children, 7 mothers, and 6 fathers) participated in the study. Data analysis was guided by a constructivist grounded theory approach to facilitate understanding of participants' perceptions and meanings of youth sport participation.

Research Results

Data analysis revealed three major themes: "Understanding Children's Experiences", "Parenting in Public and Private Spaces", and the "Nexus of Family Experiences". From these themes, a core theme emerged reflecting the idea of "Upholding Team Family".

"Understanding Children's Experiences" revealed the intensity of the children's activities and how it had become a way of life for many of them. Children clearly enjoyed the "fun" and social aspects of organized youth sport, and also understood the socio-cultural importance of their participation as it related to living a healthy and active lifestyle. Children's participation in organized youth sport also had implications for their relationships with their siblings in ways that both strengthened and caused considerable tension. For some children, organized youth sport gave them common interests, regardless of their age or gender that appeared to provide a sense of unity. Yet, for other children, living with a "star athlete", particularly when the "star athlete" was younger, created feelings of tension and inadequacy for the older sibling and a desire to drop out of sport.

The second major theme “Parenting in Public and Private Spaces” revealed the parents’ perspectives on the high cost of youth sport for the family unit (emotional, physical, and financial cost). Yet, organized youth sport was believed to be a highly valued activity. The provision of such opportunities was characterized as a necessary characteristic of being a “good parent”. The parents’ own beliefs were then used to evaluate other parents (in the community, their spouse, and the grandparents) and their moral worth as a good parent. Observations of the other parents’ behaviour in the community, and their level of involvement/support for their children’s activities, as well as their behaviour at games, provided the basis for their judgment. Further, parents also expressed a sense of obligation to the sport organizations related to their volunteer responsibilities. The organizational politics were revealed to create heightened tension and frustration within the family unit. The parents’ volunteer responsibilities were also seen to shape the parent-child relationship (both strengthen and weaken). The gendered nature of the parents’ organizational responsibilities (fathers in highly visible roles, and mothers in hidden periphery roles) and the mothers’ primary responsibility for the coordination of their children’s activities was also evident.

“The Nexus of Family Experiences” illustrated the intersections of the children’s and parents’ perspectives. In particular, this theme revealed the complexity of the decision-making processes. On the surface it appeared that the children made their own decisions, but underlying this discourse was a sense of the subtle and not so subtle pressures exerted by the parents. At times, the children were coaxed in a particular direction and this was shaped by parental pressure related to family resources (e.g., time, money), parents’ preferences for specific sports, and parents’ notion of commitment and “sticking it out”. Moreover, underlying pressures by family members, other children, and broader society, as they related to cultural values of gender-appropriate activities, shaped the children’s decisions for their sport involvement.

From these three major themes, a core theme emerged reflecting the idea of “Upholding Team Family”. Throughout the three major themes, there was an overall sense of organized sport creating a shared family identity and sense of belonging, and at the same time, the significant sacrifices to family life that were made in the creation of this identity. Moreover, the sense of upholding team family was revealed in both the public and private spheres of family life.

Policy Implications

Through education and awareness to youth sport organizations and parents, promote aspects that encourage positive experiences for parents and children:

Recognition of mandate of youth sport program and appropriate level of intensity. Many parents talk about the long and intense seasons that were often perceived as too much for the recreational level. Thus, families make the decision to limit the number of sport opportunities rather than supporting multi-sport/seasons, and/or drop out of the sport program altogether. Also, significant strain to family life is evident with the numerous “extras” (i.e., tournaments) that require additional financial resources and time commitments.

Recognition of the high time commitment of volunteers who are often parents of children on the team. This commitment shapes the nature of the parent-child relationship with their other children (often perceived negatively). It also heightens the parents’ exhaustion and fatigue, and consequently, is a strain on continuing to support children’s active participation. Consider alternate models such as “job sharing” to help minimize the time commitment as well as provide parents with the opportunity to spend time with their other children and family members.

Educate parents on how youth sport participation can shape sibling relationships. Some children may need to be supported in different programs/activities from their siblings to enhance feelings of being proficient and skilled, rather than live in the shadow of their athletically talented sibling (which for some increases their desire to drop-out).

Recognition by sport programs that youth sport becomes a venue where the quality of parenting may be judged by other parents. Development of support programs (e.g., formal car pooling schedules) to support families with diverse employment contexts (i.e., shift work, evening/weekend jobs, low-income) that constrain parents' ability to support their children's sport participation.

Next Steps

The present study was limited to the experiences of selected families. Clearly it will be important in future research to capture the experiences and meanings of other families. For example, the families who participated in this study were a fairly homogenous group with two heterosexual parents who were married (with no indication of being a "second-marriage"), and Caucasian. Families from diverse family forms such as co-habiting or gay or lesbian families may reveal diverse perspectives. Blended and single-parent families may also have different experiences related to time pressures and conflicting familial demands. Families from different race and ethnic groups may also attach different meanings to family life and organized youth sport. Further, many of the participants in this present study expressed a clear pro-sport ideology, and this may affect the applicability or transferability of the findings to other families who do not have similar pro-sport values and beliefs.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

Grass-root community sport organizations such as "True Sport" and other federal/provincial governing minor sport organizations, may benefit from understanding how organized youth sport shapes family life, and consequently, the type and frequency of children's participation.