

## INTRODUCTION:

- In recent years, there has been an increase in sport program offerings for and participation among toddlers and preschoolers (i.e., 2-5 years) (Calero et al., 2018; ParticipACTION, 2018)
- Coaches are seminal to youth sport experiences and outcomes (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005 ), yet little is known about coaches' abilities within, or preparedness for, working with children during a critical age of development (i.e., 2-5 years).

## PURPOSE:

- To examine coaches' experiences within early-years sport settings, including the challenges-faced and strategies drawn-upon for effective coaching.

## METHODS:

- Multiple-Case Study Design (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003).
- Maximum- Variation Purposeful Sampling of 7 Sport Programs in South-Eastern Ontario
  - Multi-sport, Soccer (x2), Dance, Rugby, Hockey, and T-ball with children 2-5 years of age.
- Semi-Structured Interviews (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).
  - 10 Coaches ( $M_{age} = 38$  years; 3 female, 7 male). See Table 1 for additional coach details.
- Inductive-Deductive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF COACH CHARACTERISTICS

COACH	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Age	44	27	27	44	46	39	42	57	20	32
Sex	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Male	Female	Male	Male	Male
Sport	Multi-sport	Soccer	Soccer	Dance	Hockey	Hockey	T-Ball	T-Ball	Rugby	Rugby
Program Type	Private for-profit	Private for-profit	Private for-profit	Private for-profit	Community-based non-profit	Community-based non-profit	Community-based non-profit	Community-based non-profit	Club-based non-profit	Club-based non-profit
Experience Coaching*	20 years	3.5 years	10 years	6.5 years	1.5 years	6 months	8 years	6 years	6 months	2 months
Position	Full-time- Paid	Part-Time- Paid	Part-Time- Paid	Part-Time- Paid	Volunteer	Volunteer	Volunteer	Volunteer	Part-Time- Paid	Volunteer
Days/Week	6	2	1	2	3	2	1	1	1	1
Education	Undergrad	Undergrad	Graduate	Secondary School	College	Undergrad	College	Secondary School	Undergrad	College
Coaching Qualification	60+ hours Internal Training	3 months Internal training, First Responder	Certified Child and Youth Coach, First Responder	National Ballet School Teaching Certificate	Level 2 Certified, Respect in Sport	Respect in Sport	Coach Clinics	Coach Clinics	Level 1 Certified	Level 1 Certified
Sport Experience	Competitive Wheelchair Basketball, Squash	Recreational Boxing, Soccer, In-School	Competitive Soccer	Professional Dance	Competitive Junior A Hockey, Lacrosse	Recreational Hockey, Soccer, Skiing	School-Based, Women's Fastball	Unstructured, Pick-up Hockey	Varsity Rugby	Competitive Hockey, Rugby, Baseball
Dual Role	-	-	-	-	Current Parent	Current Parent	Former Parent	Former Parent	-	Current Parent

## SUMMARY OF COACHING CHALLENGES:

"Keeping them - I guess, entertained... they get bored very easily, so as teachers you have to be prepared" -Coach D, Theme 1

"The [organization] lessons they sent me were too elevated...they have all the drills, and they put together a lesson plan, and in the second week you're teaching them how to pitch, and it's like really? They don't even know how to hold the ball yet! Like - it advanced too quickly" -Coach H, Theme 2

"The problem here is that you'll end up with kids (...) there's kids that will never catch the puck. So, if we consider [CHILD]'s team - already on his team we have seven players -three of our players score 95% of our goals" -Coach E, Theme 3

"There's always a struggle to find volunteers... especially qualified volunteers. In the older levels you find some more non-parent volunteers, but at this level - it's all volunteers." -Coach F, Theme 4

"I guess the biggest thing would be having parents want more and more, and wanting a lot too soon. (...) The U6's only train once a week for an hour. And there's lots of parents you know, who are like, "Is there a place where we can do more soccer? Can we get more games? Can we move up an age-group?" -Coach C, Theme 5

Main theme	Sub- theme
1. Children's (Lack-of) Engagement	○ Hesitancy to participate
	○ Time of day considerations
	○ Limited attention-spans
2. Limited Coach Resources/ Training	○ Lack of age-appropriate resources
	○ Learning through trial-and-error
3. Children's Varied Ability Levels	○ Differing baseline fundamentals
	○ Differing sport skill levels
	○ Safety concerns
4. Coach Turnover	○ Volunteerism
	○ Revolving-door coaches
5. Parental Pressure	○ Wanting 'more'
	○ 'Authentic' sport environment
	○ Performance- orientated

## SUMMARY OF COACHING STRATEGIES:

"There is no 'one size fits all' approach. Have a general idea of what you want to teach, but know how to adapt your plan when needed (...) Being flexible, and able to adapt/ think on [your] feet... given that you don't know what children will be like at any given session" -Coach I, Theme 1

"Ask them simple questions like, 'Where should you go?' 'Should you do this?' They'll say 'yes, or no'... and that's when we know that they're listening" -Coach B, Theme 2

"They [children] don't necessarily realize they're actually, say, stick handling in hockey. I'm actually saving Dory's family, and we're taking them to the coral reef, and we have to watch out for the jellyfish. And so, you put it in some kind of imaginary [way]. So, anyone can tell a story, but it's about how well you can sell the story to the kids right?" -Coach A, Theme 3

"I think that's really important when working with kids...if someone really wants to be there and they have that genuine love for working with children." -Coach A, Theme 4

"Doing your homework, going on YouTube or you know, Netflix. And then just being able to then make up some sort of story that can translate into what skills they're doing" -Coach C, Theme 5

Main theme	Sub-theme
1. Maintaining Children's Engagement	○ Flexible/adaptable
	○ Coach-child ratios
2. Classroom Management	○ Spatial boundaries, rules, and routines
	○ Ask questions
	○ Behaviour management strategies
3. Age-Appropriate Program Delivery	○ Story/imagination
	○ Modelling skills - physical
	○ Modelling skills - life/social
4. Ideal Coach Personality Traits/ Characteristics	○ Animated/funny
	○ Passionate about working with children
	○ Patient
5. Actively Seeking Knowledge	○ Seeking online resources
	○ Learning by trial-and-error

## DISCUSSION:

- Study findings highlighting unique experiences, challenges-faced, and strategies utilized by coaches across diverse toddler and preschooler sport coaching contexts, where interpersonal (i.e., communicating and interacting with children) and intrapersonal (willingness towards ongoing learning) knowledge/coaching skills appear most critical (Côté & Gilbert, 2009).
- Most strategies were offered by coaches from private and club-based programs, who on average, had more experience, received more support, and offered more strategies; volunteer coaches belonging-to community-based programs had less experience and access to resources and training, leading to issues around coach turnover/ burnout.
- Regardless of program/ organization, all coaches faced parental expectations and pressures (e.g., for more 'authentic' practice environments involving scrimmages), and were challenged by children's (lack-of) engagement and varied ability levels; identified challenges and best practices may support early-years sport coaches in their day-to-day roles, and highlight future training needs.