

Exploring the Experiences of Youth Athletes and Their Parents Prior to a Sporting Transition

Rachel C. Dunn¹ & Katherine A. Tamminen¹

¹University of Toronto

Background & Purpose

- Athletes experience a variety of transitions during their athletic career, including: transitioning into competitive sport, become a Varsity athlete, transitions to a national or international team, and retirement from sport. (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004).
- Little knowledge exists regarding the experiences of youth athletes as they transition into select teams, that mark the beginning of their athletic career.
- With youth sport becoming increasing organized, monetized and competitive in North America (Coakley, 2016), parents play a pivotal role in supporting and encouraging their children to pursue competitive sport.
- The current research aimed to explore how pre-adolescent children and their parents prepare for transitions into a competitive sports league (Ontario Player Development League, AAA Hockey League).

Methods

Participants and Procedure:

- Five parent-child couples from soccer and hockey teams in the Greater Toronto Area took part in the research.
- Players (male = 1, female = 4, Mean age = 11 years), competing in the U10 & U12 divisions, and looking to transition to the OPDL and AAA hockey within the next 12 months.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and children, transcribed and subject to phenomenological analysis.

Data Analysis:

- Interviews were transcribed verbatim, sent back to participants for further comments and then analyzed by the lead researcher and a research assistant.
- The experience of each parent-child dyad was analyzed to explore the child and parents' views on preparing for their competitive sports trajectory.

Results: Themes and Supporting Quotes

Parental Expectations

While some parents expected their children to maintain sport recreationally, others had high expectations for their children to be challenged and pursue competitive sport.

"If she ever said, you know, 'mom it's too much, I can't do it anymore, I'm just not interested', I would find out why ... and then see if those are things that we could get past. Because obviously at that point you've invested so much time, not to mention money ... and especially if she's very talented, it would be very difficult to say, 'ok let's just give up'." (Tina, mother)

"You're looking at the kids on the ice and you're going 'my kid is the best kid on the ice' and my kid is not getting pushed." (Dan, father)

Parent-Child Communication

Parents reported struggling to understand what their children wanted from sport and instances of poor communication.

"I don't know whether maybe she doesn't want to voice any concerns because she knows that I'm, you know, sort of like 'well if you're not 100% sure then we're not going to do it.' So maybe she might be worried that if she voices concerns, that might be endangering the whole plan." (Mike, father)

Parental Role in Soccer

Parents are required to support their children in multiple ways, often mediating coach-athlete issues.

"Sometimes the pressure from the coaches is high... Sometimes there is yelling... And that has affected her a few times and we've had to kind of really talk that one through. I spoke for Claire and it worked out very well ... we didn't even bring Claire into it." (Tracy, mother)

"She was moved down in the spring to tier 2 again. Initially they hadn't - we just received an email about it ... which meant it was basically left to me to tell her. And I didn't, you know, I said 'you guys [coaches] are going to tell her.'" (Mike, father)

Planning for OPDL

Youth athletes were aware of potential sacrifices following their transition.

"Realize that they might have to lose a few things that they love." (Jackie, 10 yrs old)

Pre-Transition: Psychological Factors

Athletes reported feelings anxious about aspects of their upcoming transition.

"Mostly the biggest thing I'm worried about is the try-out ... Because people are always like telling me that I'm good, but what if I'm not good enough to be on that level of the team?" (Susie, 12 yrs old)

Pre-Transition: Coping

Athletes struggled to articulate their emotions, but did attempt to cope with their concerns about sport.

"When I keep stuff inside me it doesn't always feel good, and so, when I tell my parents all this stuff I feel like I'm getting it all out ... Once in a while I'll journal about it in my book." (Claire, 10 yrs old)

Discussion

- Pre-adolescent athletes (<13 years of age) in the current sample are experiencing specialized, competitive sport, which could lead to detrimental sporting outcomes such as drop-out, burnout and injury (Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2008).
- Young athletes experience psychological concerns regarding their transition to more competitive, provincial-level soccer, but struggle to articulate these concerns. Such psychological concerns could lead to difficult and unsuccessful transitions.
- Parents and children expressed different expectations for their children's sporting pursuits. Parents and children demonstrate challenges in communicating their expectations of competitive sport.

Recommendations

- Coaches and parents should be aware of the developmental challenges that face youth as they approach competitive sporting transitions.
- Sports organizations could do more to help youth athletes and parents prepare for the transition into competitive sport, in order to maintain participation and encourage positive youth development.