

Fraser-Thomas, Jessica

York University

Harlow, Meghan; Brock University

SSHRC-SPRI Grant 2020

Tykes and Tots: Exploring and Optimizing Coaching Effectiveness in Preschooler Sport

Overall Purpose of Research...

Availability and uptake of organized sport programming amongst Canada's youngest demographic in sport (i.e., 3-4 year-olds) has grown in recent decades (Calero et al., 2018; ParticipACTION, 2018). Despite the climate of enthusiasm surrounding preschooler sport, many questions remain concerning the value of programming, how it should be delivered to ensure optimal experiences and outcomes for young children, and the role that coaches play in this process. Given that sport coaches are among the first non-parental adult relationships that children form who shape their earliest perceptions of sport, it is imperative to understand how coaches can be most *effective* in their roles and foster high-quality sport experiences. With the overall aim of **exploring and enhancing effective coaching (EC) for preschool-aged children in sport**, this SSHRC-SPRI funded project will use the Knowledge to Action framework (Graham et al., 2006) to inform the design, implementation, and evaluation of training tools to enhance coaches' effectiveness in preschooler sport. This research will be carried out in three key phases, where we will endeavor to: (1) explore key stakeholders' perceptions of EC within preschooler sport, (2) design and develop new evidence-informed training tools to facilitate EC in preschooler sport, and (3) implement and evaluate evidence-informed training tools for EC in preschooler sport.

Research in Progress...

Phase 1 of this study is currently underway, with early childhood educators (ECEs) (n=20) and preschooler sport coaches (n=20) across Southern Ontario engaging in semi-structured interviews. Coaches with a minimum of one year of experience working with preschool-aged children will be asked to reflect on their lived experience and perceived best practices of coaching preschoolers in sport, while ECEs will lend valuable insight into key components of EC, including: (a) developmentally appropriate outcomes programs should aim to develop, (b) EC behaviours (e.g., communication strategies with young children), and (c) suggested resources to support coach training- due to their expertise implementing programs that promote preschool-aged children's physical, emotional, and social development and well-being (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). In Phase 2 (forthcoming), findings from Phase 1, coupled with a review of existing coaching literature/resources will inform the design and development of new training tools (e.g., online-trainings, workshops and/or other formats), while Phase 3 (Year 2-3) will involve the implementation and evaluation of the training tools developed in Phase 2, with a

particular focus on (a) monitoring knowledge use, (b) evaluating outcomes, and (c) sustaining knowledge use, with delivery, data collection and data analysis (Years 3-4).

Anticipated Impact of Research...

The early years represent a critical time for learning, growth, and development (Mustard, 2007), as well as shape children's long term physical activity and sport habits and beliefs (Kirk, 2005). This study will be the first to examine how coaches can effectively deliver preschooler sport programs, taking steps towards ensuring coaches have the appropriate knowledge and skills to foster children's optimal outcomes through sport - contributing to children's positive and sustained involvement over time. The coach-tailored training tools developed in this project through consultation with ECE experts and experienced coaches may be utilized among the greater coaching community, in turn, supporting and encouraging more uniform best practices in preschooler sport. This research is timely and critical given tremendous growth in preschooler sport programs, with only minimal consideration to the psychosocial developmental needs of preschoolers within these programs, and how best to design programming to support them.

Keywords: Early-years, sport, coaching, age-appropriate, strategies, challenges.