

# Exploring the role of parents in the group dynamics of youth sport teams: Qualitative findings, practical implications, and future research directions



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## Introduction

- Parents are important gatekeepers to youth sport participation (Frederick & Eccles, 2004).
- Youth sport experiences can be positively (e.g., competence, enjoyment; Brustad & Partridge, 2002; McCarty & Jones, 2007) and/or negatively (e.g., pre-competition anxiety, fear of failure; Collins & Barber, 2005; Sagar & Lavalley, 2010) influence by parents.
- Sport parents can also impact team-related variables (e.g., roles, motivational climate; Godfrey & Eys, 2020; Keegan et al., 2009) at all levels of competition.
- Perceptions of group dynamics may influence the willingness for youth, volunteers, and coaches to continue participating in sport (Eys et al., 2020; Bruner et al., 2014).
- Understanding the full extent of parental influence on team-related factors in sport is a necessary research direction.

## Purpose

To explore possible parental influences on group dynamics in youth sport:

**Objective 1:** Ascertain which group dynamics constructs were perceived to be influenced by parents in youth sport.

**Objective 2:** Explore how parents come to influence those constructs.

## Method

- Qualitative semi-structured interviews ( $N = 31$ )
- Demographic questionnaires

### Participants

- Parents ( $n = 11$ ), coaches ( $n = 13$ ), parent-coaches ( $n = 7$ )
- Sports = hockey, basketball, baseball, soccer, football, and ringette.

### Data Analysis

- Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012)

### Rigor

- Bracketing interview, pilot interview, critical friend process, reflexive journaling

## Results

**Objective 1:**  
Parent Influence on youth group dynamics



**Team Environment**

**Team Structure**

**Team Unity**

**Team Processes**

**Objective 2:**  
Pathways of parent influence



**Public Behaviours**

**Through Athletes**

**Through Coaches**

**Through Parents**

Strategies to manage parental influence



**Coach Behaviours**

**Organization Regulations**

**Parent Education**

## Discussion, Implications, and Future Directions

### Application and Practice

- Parental influence extends beyond their own children to affect the sport experiences of other athletes, parents, and coaches.
- Specific strategies are needed to help coaches and parents work together to create positive sport group experiences for all athletes regardless of competition level.
- There are potentially problematic parent behaviours to be wary of in the youth sport environment.
- This serves as a starting point to work toward improving the sport experiences of athletes, coaches, and parents in sport. Supporting these individuals is essential as parents are needed to build, operate, and improve organized youth sport.

### Theory and Research

- Parents are an important aspect of youth group dynamics worthy of further academic exploration.
- Parents impact elements of group dynamics not previously explored by researchers (i.e., team unity, team processes).
- This study is one in a four-study dissertation. Studies 2 and 3, currently underway, quantitatively examine the relationships between parental expectations, beliefs, involvement, and important group dynamics constructs (i.e., roles, motivational climate, cohesion).
- The fourth study, forthcoming, will collate the findings from the previous phases to create an intervention for positive parental involvement in sport teams.

## Key Practical Takeaways

1. There is a need to consider the inclusion of coaches in sport parent interventions.
2. Sport parent programming may benefit from the inclusion of group dynamics content.
3. Parent behaviours such as investing in team experiences, supporting relationships with teammates, creating and maintaining cohesive groups of parents, supporting the coach, volunteering with the team, and setting boundaries and expectations for coach-athlete interactions have the potential to positively impact group dynamics in youth sport and should be encouraged.