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Insight Grant 2019**

*A skills and knowledge-based approach to parent education and support in youth sport*

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### **Project Summary**

We conducted a series of studies to inform the development of a youth sport parent education and support program. Our aim was to develop a program that can provide parents with knowledge and skills that enable them to be positively involved in their children's sport experiences. We were particularly interested in understanding features of relationships between children and their parents and what types of skills and knowledge could be used to enhance these relationships to promote more positive youth sport experiences.

Three studies were conducted in order to inform the development of the program: 1) a study examining relationships between parent-coaches and their children, 2) an exploration of how sport parents engage in autonomy-supportive parenting, and 3) a scoping review of parents' emotion abilities in youth sport.

The findings of each of the three studies informed the educational content of our sport parenting program, the Sport Parent Emotions and Coping Support (SPECS). Specifically, we were able to identify important elements of the knowledge and skills parents may find useful for enhancing their relationships with their children in sport. We then developed educational modules to address those areas.

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### **Research Results**

Relationships between parent-coaches and their children may be some of the most complex parental relationships in youth sport. We anticipated that understanding more about the nature of these complex relationships could produce useful information to inform the development of our sport parent program. As such, the first study examined the relationship between parent-coaches and their children through individual interviews with eight father-coach/daughter dyads. The father-coaches were asked about their coaching styles and parenting styles (e.g., How does your parenting style compare to your coaching style?) and their daughters were asked to describe their experiences being coached by their parent. During data analysis it became apparent that the dyads could be coded as being either more "harmonious" or more "conflicted."

The parents in the more harmonious dyads were relationship-oriented, whereby they emphasized building positive relationships with their children and other children on the team. They consistently adopted autonomy-supportive coaching and parenting styles. On the other hand, parent-coaches in

the more conflicted dyads were described as loud, emotional, and intense, and they were inconsistent in how they approached coaching and parenting.

The second study built on the concept of autonomy-supportive parenting by seeking to identify *how* sport parents engage in autonomy-supportive parenting, particularly in the family home. We examined data from seven families (seven parents and nine children), previously identified as autonomy-supportive, using a theoretically focused qualitative analysis based on the three dimensions of autonomy-supportive parenting (i.e., autonomy support vs. control, involvement, and structure).

We found that sport parents engaged in autonomy-supportive parenting through a high level of involvement, engaging in flexible conversations, supporting their children's decision making, setting boundaries, and establishing values-based expectations. This theoretically informed qualitative study provided some insights into the knowledge and skills autonomy-supportive sport parents use to engage in social interactions with their children.

In addition to illuminating features of autonomy-supportive parenting, both studies revealed some of the emotionally-laden features of being a sport parent. For instance, in the first study, the parent-coaches in the more conflicted dyads were described as "loud, emotional, and intense". In the second study, autonomy-supportive parents appeared to be able to understand their children's emotions and respond accordingly. Indeed, sport parents experience a range of emotional demands when it comes to their child's sport participation. Guided by these results along with insights provided by other sport parenting researchers (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2015), we decided that the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) could be a valuable approach for informing the development of a knowledge and skills-based parent education and support program.

To further understand these emotional aspects of the parent-child relationship in sport, in our third study (led by PhD student Shannon Pynn) we explored how parents manage the emotional demands of youth sport. Using Mayer and Salovey's (1997) model of EI as a framework, we conducted a scoping review of the extant sport parenting literature to identify how parents identify, use, understand, and manage emotions in youth sport.

The findings of the scoping review identified how sport parents' EI abilities manifest in the context of youth sport. Specifically, we identified ways in which parents empathized with their children, understood the causes and consequences of their own and others' emotions in youth sport, provided emotional support, and managed their own emotional reactions in competitive settings. Ultimately, the findings from this review and the previous studies demonstrated ways in which EI could be used to enhance parents' involvement in youth sport.

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### **The Program: Sport Parent Emotions and Coping Support (SPECES)**

Led by PhD student Shannon Pynn, we developed SPECES ([specsprogram.ca](http://specsprogram.ca)), an online program aimed at enhancing sport parents' EI abilities. The program consists of four educational modules and an online community where parents can access evidence-based resources, read research reports, and interact with other parents in a discussion forum.

The four educational modules are directly informed by the studies outlined above. For example, the learning objective of each module is centered around an EI ability as described by our scoping review (e.g., Module 1: Identifying and Expressing Emotions). Each module is structured to provide parents with **knowledge** about the EI ability, followed by associated **skills** that can be used during interactions with their children and others in the sport environment. Parents are also taught about autonomy-supportive parenting and how to develop more harmonious and communicative relationships that help them gain a better understanding of their children and their goals for sport.

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### **Policy and Program Implications**

Educating and supporting sport parents is a priority for sport organizations in Canada (Holt et al., 2018). Our long-term aspiration is that the SPECS program can be used by sport organizations and clubs as a way to deliver evidence-based parent education initiatives to sport parents across Canada.

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### **Next Steps**

Research suggests that sport organizations prefer to use research evidence in ways that are designed for the specific context of their sport (Holt et al., 2018). In the academic literature this is known as knowledge tailoring, which involves adapted more generic research findings to a specific context (Graham et al., 2006). As such, the next step is for the SPECS program to be adapted for the context of minor ice hockey. From there, a mixed methods program evaluation of the program will be conducted to examine the effectiveness of the program and its influence on ice hockey parents' emotion abilities and sport parenting behaviours.

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### **Knowledge Translation Plan**

Currently, the SPECS program is being developed specifically for minor hockey parents in Canada and can be found at [specsprogram.ca](http://specsprogram.ca). Social media accounts have also been created to promote the program (@specsprogram). Ultimately, we will reach out to minor hockey organizations across Canada to ask them to share the hockey-specific program with parents within their organizations. The findings of our research will also be distributed through other social media channels (e.g., PYD SportNET, a SPRI-funded initiative).