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Successful Experiences for Overweight Children in Sport (SOS)

Project Summary

A three year mixed methods research project was conducted to understand successful experiences of sport, including the possible role of body weight. A secondary goal of the study was to explore how coaches, parents and peers influence the psychosocial outcomes of youth involved in sport. Parents, coaches and youth, between the ages of 10 and 14 years were recruited from a variety of community-based recreational facilities and locations throughout Halifax Regional Municipality, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, and North Bay, Ontario.

Methodological tools for the study included: surveys for coaches, parents and children, and in-depth semi-structured interviews for coaches and parents of children involved in sport and/or after school programs. In all, 442 completed surveys (201 parents, 201 youth and 40 coaches) have been collected and 11 semi-structured parent interviews have been completed and analyzed. Of note, due to the challenge of finding and recruiting overweight athletes, results more generally reflect young athletes of normal or healthy bodyweight.

Overall, both quantitative and qualitative results converged on social processes as the main driver of positive experiences in sport. Specifically, quantitative and qualitative results suggested (1) how a child perceives how others view his/her own self-efficacy likely may actually impact his/her self-efficacy, (2) that a child's social identity is associated with positive experiences in sport, (3) that there is a lack of spontaneity in youth sport, (4) that several challenges exist facing the recruitment and training of developmentally appropriate youth sport coaches, and (5) young athletes perceive hypothetical overweight teammates as having less self-confidence, and (6) coaches perceive mastery experiences—rather than teasing—as the primary driver of decreased self-confidence among overweight athletes.

Research methods

This project consisted of a dual-phase, mixed-methods design. To understand the context of sport experiences for young athletes, **phase I** involved collecting separate survey data from three different populations: (1) children participating in sport, (2) parents/guardians of children (ages 10-14) participating in sport, and (3) coaches/leaders of sports /programs. To gain a more in-depth understanding of the sport experiences of children of varying body weights, **phase II** involved qualitative data collection via semi-structured interviews with parents and coaches recruited in Phase I of the research.

Research results

Quantitative results

My Parents Think I Can Play...Kind of: Relationships Between Rise, Self-Efficacy and Parent Other-Efficacy within Youth Sport

Relation-inferred self-efficacy (RISE) beliefs (appraisals of how another views one's competence) are thought to be important in relationships where there is a power differential (e.g., coach-athlete, parent-child). Children in this study reported high RISE (parents: $M=8.29$) and high self-efficacy ($M=8.25$) while parents reported comparatively lower other-efficacy ($M=7.83$, $p<.001$). Both parent and coach referenced RISE beliefs were

positively associated with children's self-efficacy and sport satisfaction and higher self-efficacy was associated with greater satisfaction ($p's < .001$). Regression analyses revealed RISE (parents) and RISE (coach) to be significant predictors of self-efficacy accounting for 54% and 9% of the overall variance respectively. Further, family support ($B = .39$) and parents' other-efficacy ($B = .18$) were significant predictors of RISE ($R^2_{adj} = .20$). This data provides an initial demonstration of these theorized relationships within youth sport, and also serves to highlight the importance of communicating confidence in child-athletes' abilities.

Social Identity and Positive Youth Development in Recreational Sport

The identities that youth form through their membership in sport teams (i.e., social identities) have been found to influence teammate behaviour and team performance. A regression analysis was performed separately for four positive youth development (PYD) outcomes (personal and social skills, goal setting, initiative, negative experiences) with the three dimensions of social identity entered as predictors. Regression analyses revealed that ingroup ties ($B = .14$, $B = .11$) and ingroup affect ($B = .13$, $B = .08$) were positively associated with enhanced personal and social skills ($R^2_{adj} = .31$) and goal setting ($R^2_{adj} = .16$). Further ingroup ties ($B = .11$) significantly predicted initiative ($R^2_{adj} = .17$), while cognitive centrality ($B = .08$) and ingroup affect ($B = -.20$) were associated with negative experiences ($R^2_{adj} = .08$). The findings extend previous research highlighting the benefits of social identity on teammate behaviour and team performance, demonstrating how social identity may contribute to PYD through sport.

Qualitative Findings

Is it the End of Spontaneity? Exploring Supports and Challenges to Providing Successful Experiences for Overweight Children in Sport

Although previous research has explored the reasons why children may drop-out of sport, such reasons have not been fully explored among youth still engaged in sport. In this project, parents identified both positive experiences as well as challenges to their youth's participation. Positive experiences related to the formation of team identity and learning to be a good teammate, the benefits of wider social networks, skill building, self-esteem and confidence building, and the benefits of staying active. Challenges related to the structure and lack of spontaneity and aspects of play associated with participation in structured sport/recreation. More research is needed to critically explore the pressures extending to recreational level sport for youth if the positive elements are to be maintained and experienced.

Mixed-Method Findings

Why Are Overweight Youth Underrepresented in Sport? A Mixed-Methods Inquiry of Coaches' and Peers' Perspectives

While the importance of overweight athletes' self-perceptions is well established, it is less clear how these self-perceptions are constructed. Through qualitative analysis, a narrative emerged centered on the importance of self-perceptions and mastery experiences within the context of team sport. Quantitative findings revealed that children do perceive overweight athletes differently from tall athletes, and that decreased self-confidence is an important contributor to this difference. Together, these findings support the idea that overweight youth, just like all other youth, are concerned with performance experiences, and that the interdependent nature of team sport may intensify this concern and the associated negative experiences.

Policy implications

Coach training may need to focus more on the social nature of sport and how specific social processes are associated with important outcomes, such as successful experiences in sport. This study suggests that perhaps social identity, relation-inferred self-efficacy, and genuine mastery experiences (e.g., performance failures) are variables that need to be understood.

Specifically, it may be beneficial to train coaches regarding how to ensure overweight athletes experience personal success without the child feeling targeted or ostracized in any way.

Our qualitative findings suggest that spontaneous youth sport is a meaningful form of sport but is in serious decline. Policies that promote spontaneous or low organized sport may be important. Also, the need to continue to emphasize and support principles related to fair play was identified as critical to promoting positive experiences.

Improved methods of recruiting youth coaches that possess developmentally appropriate skills may be necessary. Our qualitative findings suggest that parents, coaches and sport clubs all recognize the need for properly trained coaches but also that such coaches are lacking.

NOTE: Given that our study was correlational, causation cannot be interpreted within the results. Thus, we can only suggest possible policy implications, and cannot predict the outcome of these proposed changes with any degree of certainty. Nonetheless, our group is hosting a workshop with Sport Nova Scotia in the coming months to discuss possible applications that arise from our findings, including how these results can inform provincial sport organizations.

Next steps

The difficulties we faced in recruiting overweight athletes seemed to stem from their absence in youth sport programs. This (non) finding may suggest that overweight athletes are not participating in sporting programs as frequently as healthy weight athletes, or are dropping out at ages younger than 11-12 years old. Future research may need to investigate the role of parents of overweight youth, or focus on studying overweight athletes sports at very early ages.

To further examine if mastery experiences are the primary driver of overweight youth dropping out of sport.

More experimental and longitudinal work is needed to test those mechanisms that facilitate successful experiences in sport. These mechanisms include how social identity is related to positive youth development and how relation-inferred self-efficacy beliefs influence individual's self-efficacy.

To further examine the implicit biases that may plague overweight athletes' experiences.

To better understand what is needed to support fair play in youth sport, especially competitive sport.

To explore what factors contribute to positive youth experiences among older youth that will support life-long participation.

Key stakeholders and benefits

- Coaches
- Parents
- Athletes
- Youth sport clubs
- Coaching Canada