The Physical Educator Vol. 76 • pp. 661–675 • 2019
https://doi.org/10.18666/TPE-2019-V76-I3-8814

COACHING EDUCATION

Parents' Perceptions of Coaching Behaviors Toward Their Child With a Hidden Disability in Recreational Youth Sports

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Abstract

Athletes with hidden disabilities (HD) often exhibit behaviors that are not conducive to the sporting environment (e.g., inattentive behaviors, inability to remember plays). Coaches may label these athletes as problematic or challenging and may negatively adjust their behaviors toward these athletes. As frequent observers of their children, the parent/guardian's perception of coaching behaviors is particularly pivotal because this perception can guide that of the child, as well as whether the child continues to participate. This study sought to investigate parents' perceptions of their young athletes' experience in recreational sports. Three hundred eleven parents/guardians were surveyed; 30 indicated that their child had been tested for learning disabilities. Parents of athletes exhibiting HD behaviors reported higher frequencies of negative behaviors in coaches.

Within the United States, approximately 10% of children have a disability, which can include varying levels of deficit in the areas of

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language processing, attention, impulse control, and motor control (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Examples of these disabilities include specific learning disabilities, emotional behavioral disorders, mild intellectual disabilities, and speech/language disabilities. However, common among all of these disabilities, there are no, or very few, outward or visible signs in settings outside of the educational setting, such as the athletic and recreational playing fields.

These hidden disabilities (HD) can interfere with socialization and result in poor peer relations and peer rejection (Bagwell, Brooke, Pelham, & Hoza, 2001). Individuals with HD may also have difficulty understanding and following directions, with physical coordination, remembering plays or strategies, and sustaining attention (Barkley, 1990; Harvey & Reid, 1997). However, the learning needs of athletes with HD can be addressed with proactive instruction and simple changes to the practice environment (Flores, Vargas, & Beyer, 2017). These include differentiated activities, organized and structured practice environments, clear directions, consistent language, instruction that includes modeling and visual aids, immediate and specific feedback regarding performance, emphasis on positive reinforcement rather than punishment, and goal setting.

Athletes with HD may have learning needs that differ from their peers without a disability, and a supportive environment and positive interaction with a coach is the first step toward meeting these needs. However, for athletes with HD, coaches may not always recognize a disability is present (Beyer, Flores, & Vargas-Tonsing, 2008; Vargas, Beyer, & Flores, 2015; Vargas-Tonsing, Flores, & Beyer, 2008) and thus may view the athlete as "challenging" or "problematic." Such a perception will alter a coach's behavior toward that athlete, often negatively, and will result in a self-fulfilling prophesy for the coach (e.g., the child is difficult, the coach yells/punishes the child frequently, the child quits trying to please/coming to practice, and the coach was correct). This can be magnified at the youth sport level where coaches are often volunteers, many times parents, and high school and college students, and where training is not always required (McCallister, Blinde, & Kolenbrander, 2000). Unless the volunteer coach is or has been a teacher, they are usually not

prepared in pedagogical skills, nor are they likely to know where to look for available resources in this area.

At the youth level, the parent/guardian is the primary advocate and supporter of the young athlete. Most parents/guardians value their children's participation in youth sports, perceive it as an important family activity, and enjoy viewing their children's progress in a sport (Na, 2015). Therefore, having a strong understanding of the parent/guardians' perceptions of coaching behaviors may be instrumental in helping educate coaches and advocating for quality coaching for all participants. In 2014, Neely and Holt found that parents believed sport to have a myriad of benefits to their child, including the exploration of abilities and building positive self-perceptions; however, they also believed that these benefits were acquired dependent on the environment established by the coach. Tsai and Fung (2009) interviewed 49 parents of individuals with intellectual disabilities. The parents interviewed sought inclusive sporting experiences, but often removed their child and "gave up" due to rejection by staff and peers. Parents also noted a lack of understanding of individuals with HD. In other research, parents noted that sports improved their child's overall functioning (Bjorklund, Moody, Beal, & Burton, 1988). Therefore, parents are frustrated when they recognize the benefits of sport for their child with HD, but have difficulty finding the coach and sporting environment that can foster these benefits. Not surprisingly, parents' levels of satisfaction, coupled with their interpretation of their young athlete's sporting experience, are an important predictor of future sport participation (Brustad, 1993). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of parents of young athletes with HD with regard to their child's experience in recreational sports.

Method

Participants

Youth sport parents (n = 311) representing 29 youth sport teams participated in this study. Their children were an average age of 10 (SD = 2.53), had played sport for an average of 4.18 years (SD = 2.16), and had played for their coach an average of 1.39 years (SD = 1.09). Of these children, 30 had been tested for a learning disability. Children who had been tested for a learning disability (12 male, 18 female)

reported an average of 4.67 years (*SD* = 1.81) of playing experience. For 76.7% of the children, this was their first year playing for their coach.

The coaches (21 male, 8 female) of these youth sport teams were an average age of 40.42 (*SD* = 9.37) and had an average of 7.93 (*SD* = 8.004) years of experience coaching sports. Of these coaches, eight reported experience working with children with HD; however, it is unknown how the coach knew they had worked with an athlete with HD.

Procedure

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the institutional review board for human subjects. Youth sport coaches were contacted via e-mail and their assistance in data collection was requested. With the coach's consent, a practice was selected for the researcher to speak with parents to solicit participation. Parents who agreed to participate were then given the surveys to complete at that practice. Teams with participating parents received a gift card for a pizza party.

Measures

Parents were given four questionnaires to complete: the Leadership Scale for Sports (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980), the Coaching Behavior Scale for Sport (Côté, Yardley, Hay, Sedgwick, & Baker, 1999), a Checklist for Hyperactivity and Inattention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015), and a demographic questionnaire.

Leadership Scale for Sports. The Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS; Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980) is a 40-item scale that measures five dimensions of leader behavior including social support (8 items), democratic behavior (9 items), autocratic behavior (5 items), training and instruction (13 items), and positive feedback (5 items). The questionnaire was modified with the stem question changed from "I" to "my child's coach," which allowed parents to complete the LSS according to their perceptions of their child's coach's behavior toward their child. Cronbach's alphas for the modified parental version were .83, .76, .83, .90, and .69, respectively. All alphas either surpassed or approached the recommended value of .70 (Nunnally, 1978).

Coaching Behavior Scale for Sport. The Coaching Behavior Scale for Sport (CBS-S; Côté et al., 1999) is a 47-item scale that measures seven dimensions of coaching behavior including physical training (7 items), technical skills (8 items), goal setting (6 items), mental preparation (5 items), competitive strategies (7 items), personal rapport (6 items), and negative rapport (8 items). The questionnaire used the stem "The coach(es) most responsible for my child's…" to allow parents to complete the CBS-S according to their perceptions of their child's coach's behaviors. Cronbach's alphas for the modified parental version were .9, .95, .94, .94, .94, .93, and .92, respectively. All alphas were above the recommended .70 (Nunnally, 1978).

Checklist for Hyperactivity and Inattention. A symptom checklist downloaded from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website was given to participating parents. There are two categories of behaviors: inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity. Parents were asked to rate the frequency of the behaviors from *never* to *always* (*never*, *seldom or 25% time*, *occasionally or 50% of time*, *often or 75% of time*, *always*). If parents rated five or more behaviors in a category as *often* or *always*, this represented an area of concern. For the purposes of this study, this checklist provided a means of coding and grouping athletes who exhibited some of the behaviors typical of children with HD.

Demographic questionnaire. A demographic questionnaire was given to parents and coaches. The parents were asked questions regarding their child's age, gender, sport experience, and whether the child had been tested for a learning disability. Coaches were asked to indicate their age, gender, coaching experience, and whether they had experience with individuals with HD.

Data Analyses

Data were analyzed via SPSS version 22. Parents were grouped according to whether their child had been tested for a learning disability, whether their child was considered inattentive, and whether their child was considered hyperactive. A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted and differences in perceptions of coaching behavior explored.

Results

Thirty parents (9.7%) indicated that their child had been tested for a learning disability. Twelve children (3.9%) were categorized as being inattentive, and nine youth athletes were categorized as hyperactive (2.9%). These numbers are consistent with that of the general population (Polanczyk, Silva de Lima, Horta, Biederman, & Rohde, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), and due to these low numbers, the data were analyzed by item for insight into parents' perceptions.

Significant differences were found for multiple items on the LSS and CBS-S between parents' perceptions of their child's coach when their child had been tested for a learning disability and that when their child had not been tested for a learning disability. Parents' perceptions on the LSS indicated a significant difference in coaches explaining the techniques and tactics of the sport, F (1, 242) = 10.54, $p < .01$; paying special attention to the child's mistakes, $F(1, 240) = 6.49$, $p = .01$; and helping the child with personal problems, $F(1, 234) = 5.92$, $p < .05$. Parents' perceptions on the CBS-S indicated a significant difference in parents' perceptions for coaches providing specific feedback for correcting technical errors, $F(1, 239) = 5.25$, $p < .05$; providing visual examples to show how a drill should be done, $F(1, 239) = 4.69$, $p < .05$; using verbal examples that describe how a skill should be done, $F(1, 239) = 3.40$, $p < .05$; making sure my child understands the techniques and strategies being taught, $F(1, 238) = 6.12$, $p = .01$; and providing my child with immediate feedback, $F(1, 238) = 5.08$, $p < .05$. In all cases, parents of children tested for a learning disability reported lower means for the occurrence of these coaching behaviors.

Significant differences were found for numerous items on the LSS and CBS-S when children qualifying as inattentive were compared to children not considered inattentive. Parents' perceptions on the LSS indicated a significant difference in coaches getting my child's opinion on important matters before going ahead, $F(2, 254) = 3.87$, $p < .05$; lets my child share in decision making, $F(2, 259) = 3.38$, $p < .05$; encourages my child to make suggestions for ways of conducting practices, $F(2, 252) = 4.04$, $p < .05$; [coach] refuses to compromise a point, $F(2, 253) = 4.63$, $p = .01$; and [coach] keeps to him/herself, $F(2, 251) = 4.67$, $p = .01$. Parents' perceptions on the CBS-S indicated

14 items of significance. Examples of these include maintains confidentiality regarding my child's personal life, $F(2, 243) = 4.51$, $p < .05$; uses fear in his/her coaching methods, $F(2, 252) = 11.75$, $p = .00$; yells at my child when angry, $F(2, 252) = 3.82$, $p < .05$; shows favoritism toward others, $F(2, 253) = 4.48$, $p = .01$; and spends more time coaching the best athletes, $F(2, 253) = 7.51$, $p < .01$. With the exception of maintaining confidentiality (in which parents of children considered inattentive reported lower occurrences), parents of children considered inattentive reported higher means for the occurrence of these coaching behaviors.

Differences in perception were also found on the LSS and CBS-S between parents of children characterized as hyperactive and parents of children not considered hyperactive. On the LSS, parents' perceptions were significantly different for gets my child's opinion on important matters before going ahead, $F(2, 254) = 5.47$, $p < .01$; lets my child share in the decision making, $F(2, 259) = 5.92$, $p < .01$; lets my child try his/her own way even if they make mistakes, $F(2, 252) = 3.64$, $p < .05$; encourages close and informal relations with my child, $F(2, 251) = 3.81$, $p < .05$; works relatively independent of the athletes, $F(2, 249) = 4.15$, $p < .05$; and compliments my child for his/her performance in front of others, $F(2, 252) = 3.28$, $p < .05$. Of these results, parents of children characterized as hyperactive reported higher and more positive means on all items except for complimenting their child in front of others than their counterparts did. On the CBS-S, significant differences were found for helps my child set short-term goals, $F(2, 250) = 3.46$, $p < .05$; helps my child identify target dates for attaining his/her goals, $F(2, 250) = 5.62$, $p < .01$; has a consistent routine at competition, $F(2, 249) = 3.34$, $p < .05$; deals with problems my child may experience at competitions, $F(2, 248) = 3.16$, $p < .05$; maintains confidentiality regarding my child's personal life, $F(2, 243) = 3.89$, $p < .05$; uses fear in his/her coaching methods, $F(2, 252) = 3.09$, $p < .05$; and intimidates my child physically, $F(2, 252) = 3.20$, $p < .05$. Of these results, parents of children categorized as hyperactive reported higher means than their counterparts. Tables for all means and significance may be requested by contacting the authors.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate parents' perceptions with regard to their child with HD's experience with his or her coach in recreational sports. The results show that coaches engage in behaviors that are conducive to a positive learning environment (Felton & Jowett, 2013). Parents reported that coaches asked for athletes' opinions regarding important matters, considered athletes' suggestions regarding practice activities, and engaged in shared decision making. These behaviors build self-determination and have been linked to positive affect and increased self-esteem (LaGuardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007). This is beneficial for all athletes, but may be particularly important for athletes with HD, whose experiences associated with learning, such as school, that have not been successful and remedial academic activities may not provide this level of choice and shared decision making.

Athletes with HD have learning characteristics associated with language processing (understanding verbal direction, responding to questions, following verbal directions), attention (attending to directions, attending to all parts of directions or tasks), and negative experiences with repeated failure (Friend, 2014). A coaching environment that parents perceive as responsive to their child's needs would likely address these characteristics that are shared across athletes with HD. However, while this study found many positive reported coaching behaviors, parents of athletes with HD also reported coaching behaviors that would not be considered as responsive and conducive to a positive coaching environment as described by Felton and Jowett (2013).

For example, parents of athletes with learning disabilities reported lower rates of coaching behaviors that would address language processing deficits, the most common deficit of children with learning disabilities (Mercer & Pullen, 2009). Working with athletes with language processing deficits should include clear directions; however, when compared to their counterparts, parents of children with learning disabilities reported lower incidence of coaches explaining the techniques and tactics of the sport and using verbal examples to describe how to complete a skill. An approach to addressing athletes' language deficits is supplementing verbal description with visual

aids such as diagrams, pictures, or demonstrations, yet parents reported that coaches engaged in lower rates of visual examples of drill execution. While this is often common procedure within the educational system, it may not be included within coaching curriculums, and coaching educators should teach and continue to reinforce this basic concept. In addition, parents reported that coaches did not make sure that children with learning disabilities understood the techniques and strategies being taught. This relates to an affective characteristic of children with learning disabilities, which is repeated experience with failure; without the coach checking for understanding, the athlete does not receive corrective feedback that might prevent mistakes in execution. Furthermore, parents reported that coaches did not attend to their child's mistakes or correct errors. Both of these coaching behaviors increase the likelihood that athletes with learning disabilities will make mistakes and experience failure. Failure is a natural part of the learning process, but repeated failure without appropriate feedback may result in frustration and decrease interest and engagement.

Parents of children characterized as inattentive also reported coaching behaviors that would detract from positive interactions and coaching environment. The coaching behaviors described by parents of athletes who were inattentive did not include instructional behaviors to the extent reported by parents with athletes with learning disabilities. Instead, they appeared to be related to poor athlete–coach interactions. Parents reported higher rates of yelling at children and use of fear in coaching methods. Parents also reported behaviors that indicated that coaches did not prefer working with their child.

Parents of children characterized as hyperactive reported similar results. For example, they reported that coaches used fear as a coaching method more often than parents of children not considered hyperactive reported the coaches use of fear. However, this negative interaction style was more extreme as perceived by this group of parents; they reported that coaches used physical intimidation to influence their child. Parents also reported that coaches complimented their child in front of others less often than they did other athletes.

Parents' reported perceptions differed based on type of HD. Parents of athletes with learning disabilities reported issues related to learning and instruction. This might be because athletes with learning disabilities present deficits that interfere with instruction if no accommodations are available. Youth sport coaches may not be aware of learning differences or know how to address them, especially since youth sport coaches are volunteers whose training and expertise would be based on sport, not necessarily on education and instruction (McCallister, Blinde, & Kolenbrander, 2000). Parents of athletes with learning disabilities may be more likely to observe issues related to learning given their child's history of learning deficits in school. Parents of children with deficits related to attention (inattention and hyperactivity) reported issues related to aggression and hostility that parents of children with learning disabilities did not report. This may be due to the nature of behaviors displayed such as (a) athletes who are inattentive failing to follow directions more often because they do not attend to part or all of the command and (b) athletes who are hyperactive engaging in undesirable impulsive behaviors such as making inappropriate comments, or failing to follow directions because the athlete acts before thinking (Gaub & Carlson, 1997). These behaviors may be frustrating to coaches, and this could explain their hostile responses in the form of yelling, use of fear, and physical intimidation.

There are similarities among the parents' reports related to coaches' understanding and knowledge of athletes with HD's characteristics. Coaches may misinterpret the behaviors of athletes with HD. Behaviors associated with inattention and hyperactivity may be perceived as defiance, insubordination, and a threat to authority. This would not be surprising as coaches have reported lower efficacy in their ability to recognize signs of HD (Vargas-Tonsing et al., 2008). Yelling, intimidation, and inspiring fear may be an attempt by the coach to assert authority.

With regard to behaviors associated with coaching, behaviors are associated with a failure to provide instruction and a lack of preference. A lack of preference is a natural response to a coach's repeated failure to provide effective instruction. If coaches understood these behaviors in a different way, one that has a biological component or one that can be changed with instruction, they might be more

responsive. For example, if coaches understood the needs of athletes with learning disabilities and believed that athletes with learning disabilities can learn with simple changes to instruction, they may be more likely to provide these. Accordingly, if coaches understood the needs of athletes who are inattentive or hyperactive, they may change their perceptions of athletes' behaviors, which would lead to less frustration and more positive responses.

According to Neely and Holt (2014), parents believed that participation in sports was beneficial to their children, but these benefits were dependent upon a supportive environment established by the coach. The results of the current study are mixed. Parents reported supportive activities related to development of self-advocacy in the form as shared decision making and choice. However, instruction and behavior management were not described as particularly supportive for athletes with HD. Athletes with learning disabilities received insufficient instruction and feedback; the potential for repeated failure will not likely build the positive self-perceptions reported in Neely and Holt's study. The negative interactions with coaches reported by parents of athletes who were characterized as inattentive or hyperactive are not consistent with parents' hope for a supportive learning environment in youth sports (Neely & Holt, 2014).

Some of the results of this study are consistent with those found by Tsai and Fung (2009). Athletes in their study stopped participating. Their reasons for leaving included rejection and coaches' lack of understanding of their children's needs. Although, coaches in the current study included athletes in decision making, negative coaching behaviors continued. Athletes with learning disabilities did not receive instruction that reflects a coach's understanding of the characteristics associated with learning disabilities. Athletes who were characterized as inattentive were less preferred by their coaches, which would likely be interpreted as rejection. Athletes who were characterized as inattentive or hyperactive were reportedly treated with hostility and aggression, reactions that would be related to misunderstanding the nature of the athletes' behaviors.

Limitations

The study is limited in its size. Some items approached significance and may have been interpreted differently with a larger sample

size. Although the number of athletes with HD was consistent with the incidence of disabilities, future research should include larger sample sizes. The study is also limited in its approach with a one-time survey of parents. The nature of the survey research provides limited responses because parents who have a particular perception are more likely to participate. The researchers may not have captured the true reports of parents' perceptions, because the views of parents who declined participation are not included. Another limitation of this study is that information is based on parents' reports rather than observation and evaluation of coaching methods and coaches' interactions with athletes with HD. Future research should extend beyond self-report and include observation of youth sport environments. Last, this study captured parents' views at one point in time, and it is unknown how the respondents' previous experiences shaped their responses. Future research might address this with a longitudinal study in which families of athletes with HD can be followed. With a study of this type, issues related to children who discontinue sport participation may be captured, as well as conditions that encourage continued persistence in sport. Future research could also utilize qualitative components in which focus groups would elaborate upon their survey responses. For example, when parents report that their child does not receive feedback or that a coach intimidates their child, these would be better understood with details regarding why parents developed these perceptions.

Implications

Parents of athletes with HD reported that their children had mixed experiences with supportive youth sports environments. Young athletes should have sport experiences that encourage them to stay and persist so that they can reap the benefits of participation, such as the development of positive relationships with others, cooperative skills, and social skills (Holt, Kingsley, Tink, & Scherer, 2011). Including athletes in decision making and providing choice supports these potential outcomes. Other reported coaching behaviors may discourage participation. To address this, more research needs to investigate the extent to which athletes with HD's instructional and behavioral needs are met within recreational sport settings, as well as through current coaching curriculum and resources such as the National Council of Youth Sports. As youth sport coaches are often

volunteers, if can be difficult to request them to undergo additional and lengthy training, and thus, they may only receive basics such as first aid and drill examples. It is important to review the current options for volunteer coaches and to research their effectiveness and efficacy in promoting positive and effective coaching behavior. Youth sport coaches should be prepared to work with athletes who have diverse learning needs. Simple changes to instruction, practice structure, and knowledge of HD may address the issues reported by parents in this study. More research is needed with regard to practical implementation of recreational coaching preparation and training and how to best address needs with limited resources.

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