



PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN YOUTH SPORTS: PERCEIVED AND DESIRED BEHAVIOUR BY CHILDREN

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Abstract:

Little is known about parent support and perceived pressures in sport. Therefore, we assessed the perceived and desired parental involvement by children and examined their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with any specific behaviour. By Parental Involvement in Sport Questionnaire (PISQ), discrepancy scores revealed that children reported excessive Active Involvement and Pressure, insufficient Praise and Understanding but satisfactory Directive Behaviour from their parents. Findings suggest that excessive parental involvement could be a source of pressure among children that would rather have greater parental participation characterized by praise and understanding. Thus, parents should be advised on how to support their children in a positive and non-invasive way, preventing burnout and dropout.

Keywords: pressure; praise; understanding; directive behaviour; dropout

1. Introduction

Sport experiences in children might give opportunities for personal growth and development in physical, cognitive, affective, social and moral domains (Brustad, Babkes, & Smith, 2001; Bunke, Apitzsch, & Bäckström, 2013; Müller & Sternad, 2004). Parents are important contributors to this participation, as they typically initiate children's sport involvement and provide functional and emotional support for children throughout their youth sports careers (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Howard & Madrigal, 1990). At the same time, the nature of parent involvement in organized youth sport is often critiqued

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(Jellineck & Durant, 2004), pointing to a need to better understand parent involvement in this developmental context. Parent involvement is a multidimensional construct consisting of parent support and pressure behaviours (Stein, Raedeke, & Glenn, 1999). Parent support has been linked to adaptive outcomes such as child enjoyment and enthusiasm, autonomy, and self-perception of sport skill (Gagné, Ryan, & Bargmann, 2003; McCullagh, Matzkanin, Shaw, & Maldonado, 1993). Parent pressure has been linked to maladaptive outcomes such as perceptions of a threatening sports performance environment, discontent with sports performance, and performance anxiety and negative affect (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2008; O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2011).

Parents are those responsible for the introduction of their children to physical or sporting activity (Edwardson & Gorely, 2010) and are guarantors of transport, access (Durand-Bush, Salmela, & Thompson, 2004), and emotional and economic support. All these aspects, as well as parents' physical activity and the importance or interest they show in getting their children physically active, are the issues which determine their attitudes and positive or negative behaviour towards their children's sport practice (Lewis, & Butterfield, 2005; Spink, Strachan, & Odnokon, 2008; Wilson, Spink, & Whittaker, 2007;). Thus, it is important to examine the involvement parents can have in their children's sport, and the pressure they exert, because these aspects might condition children's commitment in those activities (Anderson, Funk, Elliott, & Smith, 2003; Fuemmeler, Anderson, & Mâsse, 2011). As a result, parental involvement has been associated with sport participation in early ages, but little is known about the understanding of the parent support and pressure perceptions in sport. In fact, despite the identifiable positive influence of parental support, some studies have reported negative aspects. For example, it has been shown that parental expectations are a source of stress among young athletes, quite possibly as a result of the extent of the athletes' awareness of their parents' commitments (Dunn, Dorsch, King, & Rothlisberger, 2016; Ryan, 1995).

In line with these theories, Lee and MacLean (1997) called active involvement the extent to which children consider their parents to be actively involved in their sport experience, is generally a parental behaviour to which young athletes react positively and about which they feel happy and satisfied (Hoyle & Leff, 1997; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004). Directive behaviour (Lee & MacLean, 1997), namely, the extent to which children feel controlled by their parents in sports, promotes instead the perception of parental pressure (Wuerth et al., 2004). Parental pressure towards children's sport can cause lowered self-esteem (McElroy, 1982), feelings of distress and guilt (Donnelly, 1993), a decrease of enjoyment (Anderson et al., 2003), and burnout (Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Tuffey, 1997) in young athletes. In contrast, parental participation characterized by praise and understanding (Lee & MacLean, 1997), which elicits parental encouragement characterized by children's perception of parental empathy displayed towards their sportive activity, promotes an increase of players' enjoyment of and motivation for sport (Sánchez-Miguel, Leo, Sánchez-Oliva, Amado, & García-Calvo, 2013).

Therefore, in the interest of improving understanding of parent involvement in sport, as support and pressure perceptions, two primary purposes were pursued in the present study. The first purpose was to assess the perceived and desired parental involvement by children, while the second purpose was to examine children's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with any specific behaviour represented by discrepancies between ratings of perceived and desired behaviour. Guided by existing works, it was hypothesized that excessive parental involvement could be a source of pressure among young athletes.

2. Material and Methods

2.1 Study design

This analytical-observational study design was developed to collect the data from a standardized psychological scale (i.e., PISQ) and to compare discrepancies between perceived and desired behaviour ratings versus satisfaction value. Data were also analysed to detect possible correlations between continuous variables.

2.2 Participants and procedures

Participants were 80 male soccer players aged 11–14 years belonging to a soccer sport club near Bari, Italy, who volunteered to take part in the study. Recruited with the collaboration of their sports team, participants were informed as to the main objectives of the study. Children whose parents consented to their participation in the study then filled out a self-report questionnaire before or after a regular training session, in the presence of their coach and of a research team member (response rate: 100%). All participants were treated in agreement with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association with respect to consent, confidentiality, and anonymity of the answers.

2.3 Measures

To measure how children perceived and desired their parents' involvement in their sportive activity, we used the *Parental Involvement in Sport Questionnaire (PISQ)* (Lee & Mclean, 1997). The cross-cultural validity of this questionnaire had already been established by several previous studies (Danioni, Barni, & Rosnati, 2017; Giannitsopoulou, Kosmidou, & Zisi, 2010; Torregrosa et al., 2007; Wuerth et al., 2004). Using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = never to 5 = always), each item was structured to ask children about the frequency with which each behaviour was (a) exhibited by, and (b) desired of their parents.

The scale allowed to compute three scores to assess the exhibited behaviour of the parents: (1) active involvement (AI; 5 items, e.g., "Do your parents discuss your progress with your coach?", $\alpha = 0.72$), (2) praise and understanding (PU; 4 items, e.g., "Do your parents show they understand how you are feeling about your sport?", $\alpha = 0.74$), and (3) directive behaviour (DB; 10 items, e.g., "Before a contest, do your parents tell you how to compete?", $\alpha = .88$). Also, the single item "Do your parents put pressure on you concerning your sport?" was intended to assess exhibited parental pressure (Pr; $\alpha = 0.92$).

Next, the same subscales evaluated the desired behaviour of the children towards their parents: (1) active involvement (AI; 5 items, e.g., "Would you like your parents to discuss about your progress with your coach?", $\alpha = 0.74$), (2) praise and understanding (PU; 4 items, e.g., "Would you like your parents to show they understand how you are feeling about your sport?", $\alpha = 0.75$), and (3) directive behaviour (DB; 10 items, e.g., "Before a contest, would you like your parents to tell you how to compete?", $\alpha = .90$). Finally, the item "Would you like your parents to put pressure on you concerning your sport?" was used to assess desired parental pressure (Pr; $\alpha = 0.91$). Cronbach's alpha for all subscales showed satisfactory internal consistency.

Children's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with any specific behaviour was represented by discrepancies between ratings of perceived and desired behaviour: Discrepancy = Perceived Behaviour - Desired Behaviour. The range of possible discrepancies was -4 to +4.

2.4 Statistical Analysis

All analyses were performed using SAS JMP® Statistics (Version <14.2>, SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, USA, 2018) and the data presented as group mean values and standard deviations. Normality of all variables was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test procedure. To compare the scale discrepancy scores with satisfaction value (i.e. zero), a single sample t-test was used. Effect size for the one-sample t-test was calculated by Cohen's *d* and a value equal to 0.20, 0.50 and 0.80 indicates a small, moderate, and large effect size, respectively (Cohen, 1992). Also, to measure the direction and strength of the relation between two continuous variables was used the Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient (*r*). An *r* value of 0.5 to 0.7 is considered low, 0.7 to 0.8 is moderate, and 0.9 or above is good for predicting *Y* values from *X* (Vincent & Weir, 2012). Finally, to assess the internal consistency of the psychological measures, Cronbach's alpha was used; scores from 0.70 to 0.79 were considered reliable, from 0.80 to 0.90 as highly reliable, and > 0.90 as very highly reliable (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). We accepted $p \leq 0.05$ as our criterion of statistical significance, whether a positive or a negative difference was seen (i.e., a 2-tailed test was adopted).

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive statistics

Means, ranges and standard deviations for the four patterns of parental involvement in sports activity collected by PISQ appear in Table 1. Children's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with any specific behaviour was indicated by significant differences from satisfaction value (i.e., discrepancy = 0).

Table 1: Perceived and desired parental involvement in sports activity by children.
(scores are shown as mean, range (1-5) and standard deviations)

Statistics	Active Involvement*		Praise and Understanding†		Directive Behaviour		Pressure*	
	Perceived	Desired	Perceived	Desired	Perceived	Desired	Perceived	Desired
M	3.59	2.87	2.20	2.46	3.05	2.94	3.58	2.45
Range	1.4-5.0	1.2-5.0	1.0-5.0	1.0-5.0	1.4-5.0	1.4-5.0	1.0-5.0	1.0-5.0
SD	0.80	0.88	0.96	0.86	0.80	0.88	1.08	1.21

Note: Self-report based on n=80 male soccer players aged 11–14 years. Satisfaction value: perceived – desired = 0. *Excessive behaviour: significant difference from satisfaction value ($p < 0.05$). †Insufficient behaviour: significant difference from satisfaction value ($p < 0.05$).

3.2 Levels of satisfaction

Single sample t-tests of the scale discrepancy scores revealed that children reported excessive Active Involvement ($x = 0.72$, $t_{(79)} = 6.95$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.78$), insufficient Praise and Understanding ($x = -0.25$, $t_{(79)} = -2.98$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.33$) but satisfactory Directive Behaviour ($x = 0.11$, $t_{(79)} = 1.37$, $p = 0.175$, $d = 0.15$) from their parents. Similar analysis of discrepancies in the perceived and desired levels of pressure as measured by the single item variable indicated that children experienced excessive levels of pressure from their parents ($x = 1.13$, $t_{(79)} = 5.94$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.66$). Figure 1 shows the discrepancy scores.

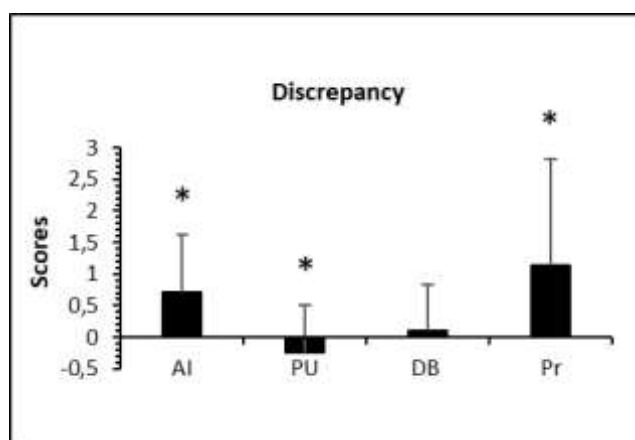


Figure 1: Discrepancies between ratings of perceived and desired behaviour (Discrepancy = Perceived Behaviour - Desired Behaviour. The range of possible discrepancies was -4 to +4. Satisfaction value = 0. AI: Active Involvement; PU: Praise and Understanding; DB: Directive Behaviour; Pr: Pressure. *Significant discrepancy ($p < 0.01$))

3.3 Pearson correlation of the PISQ scale

We calculated the bivariate Pearson correlations (r) between ratings of perceived and desired behaviours by children and their discrepancies in the parental involvement in sports activity. Results showed that desired Active Involvement was positively related both with Desired Pressure ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$) and the Pressure discrepancy ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.05$).

4. Discussion

This study supported and extended the results known so far about parental involvement in youth sport. The first aim was to assess the perceived and desired parental involvement by children. Inspection of the mean scores indicates that children perceive moderate to high levels of both parental involvement and pressure, low levels of praise and understanding, and moderate levels of directive behaviour. This result is in contrast with Ede, Kamphoff, Mackey, and Mork Armentrout (2012) who reported that children perceived their parents as using more praise and understanding than active involvement or directive behaviour. On the other hand, mean scores indicate that children desire lower levels of parental involvement, directive behaviour and pressure, while desiring higher levels of praise and understanding. The second purpose was to examine children's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with any specific behaviour represented by discrepancies between ratings of perceived and desired behaviour. Findings showed excessive Active Involvement, insufficient Praise and Understanding, but satisfactory Directive Behaviour on the part of parents; this disagrees with Marsh, Zavilla, Acuna, and Poczwadowski (2015) who found that active involvement and praise and understanding were positively correlated. Also, children experienced excessive levels of parent pressure. We hypothesized that excessive parental involvement could be a source of pressure among young athletes. Results confirmed our hypothesis because the correlation analysis found that the desired Active Involvement was positively related both with Desired Pressure and the Pressure discrepancy. This could mean that children desire low levels of parental involvement and, consequently, low parent pressure. Furthermore, a lower active involvement could decrease pressure discrepancy and increase the satisfaction level by children. Sánchez-Miguel et al. (2013) agree with our findings, however, in other studies (Giannitsopoulou et al., 2010; Marsh et al., 2015) it seems the opposite situation and, in general, all the athletes desired more parental pressure. In specializing years, athletes desired more praise and understanding. The way that parental involvement is perceived by the athletes is different in each phase, and it can become more salient over the years (Knight, Neely, & Holt, 2011; Stefansen, Smette, & Strandbu, 2016; Strandbu et al., 2019). Giannitsopoulou et al. (2010) explain how the difference of perceived involvement and pressure of parents, by the youth athletes, can be different in each culture.

Our findings do not agree with Lee and MacLean (1997) that support the view that directive behaviour is the critical variable in promoting the perception of parental pressure among young athletes. Also, results do not confirm that pressure perceived by young athletes was related to parental behaviours that were directing and controlling (Wuerth et al., 2004), whereas Sánchez-Miguel et al. (2013) showed the opposite working on the climate and motivational orientation of parents. Conversely, the children showed to be satisfied with the Directive Behaviour of parents, whereas the excessive Active Involvement was related to the parents' pressure. Indeed, parental involvement was often criticized (Jellineck & Durant, 2004), since it is a multidimensional construct consisting of parent support and pressure behaviours (Dorsch et al., 2016; Gagné et al., 2003; Gould et al., 2008; Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Lewthwaite & Scanlan, 1989; McCullagh et al., 1993;

O'Rourke et al., 2011; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986; Stein et al., 1999). However, some studies (Hellstedt, 1990; Sánchez-Miguel et al., 2013; Torregrosa et al., 2007; Wuerth et al., 2004) demonstrated the opposite. The children appreciate the participation and interest of parents in monitoring their sport activities, but parents must be alert and aware of the level and manner of their engagement so that the experience of their children in the sport context be positive (Anderson et al., 2003; Fuemmeler et al., 2011; Heitzler, Martin, Duke, & Huhman, 2006; Jago et al., 2011; Lewis, & Butterfield, 2005; Moore et al., 1991; Spink et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2007).

As the literature discussed and the results obtained in the study show, depending on the degree and form of this parental involvement this can be negatively perceived by the athlete. Some studies seem to relegate this interpretation to subjective perceptions (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006). Such some athletes may perceive support from their parents as enjoyable and intrinsically motivating (Babkes & Weiss, 1999), others may perceive such support as contingent upon participation or high performance, and therefore as pressuring (Hellstedt, 1990). We emphasize that parents should be aware that their actions may result in negative perceptions that contribute to low levels of motivation and loss of enthusiasm towards sport and, consequently, results in stress, conflicts between parents and their children, as well as burnout and dropout (Anderson et al., 2003; Donnelly, 1993; Jago et al., 2011; McElroy, 1982; Ryan, 1995; Udry et al., 1997; Wuerth et al., 2004). Parents can be Excitable or Fanatic (Byrne, 1993), controlled or autonomous (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008); the latter are most aware of their actions than the former. In the same way, Pulido (2018) argues that participating parents show high values of involvement in their children's sport, but these parents are interested in maintaining a positive parent-child relationship. Likewise, the results found relating to the children's questionnaire highlight that young athletes feel that their parents are significantly involved in supporting and understanding them. The support from parents is almost always needed. But there is a fine line between being supportive and being overbearing and it depends on the styles of being involved in children's sporting participation (Hollins, 2016; Holt et al., 2008). For these reasons, we agree with Sacks, Tenenbaum and Pargman (2008) that report the necessity of parents to be guided by the coaches or through courses and seminars that can provide support, direction and clarification on why and how they can support and participate in the sporting life of their children in a positive and non-invasive manner. For example, through social learning processes such as observational learning (Bandura, 1999), the coach-created motivational climate may shape parent support and pressure. That is, parents may take cues from coaches that subsequently impact their involvement behaviours (Atkins, Johnson, Force, & Petrie, 2015; Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2015; Ommundsen et al., 2006).

The strength of this study, to our knowledge, is to provide evidence for the understanding of parent involvement in sport, namely that excessive parental involvement may be a source of pressure among young athletes. This could be explained by the fact that the link between the amount of financial resources that a family spent on the children's sport experiences was found to be related to the children's perceptions of

sport enjoyment, parental pressure, and their commitment to participation (Dunn et al., 2016; Horn & Horn, 2007). Indeed, the more parents invest financially in their child's sport participation the greater the risk of placing pressure on the child that may result in less enjoyment and lack of commitment. For this reason, Gould, Cowburn, and Pierce (2013) recommended adopting an authoritative parenting style—balancing being responsive to a child's emotional needs while providing structure and setting limits and appropriate challenge and independence—as it is associated with optimal development of young athletes.

In interpreting our results, some limitations must be kept in mind. First, the cross-sectional design of the study limited causal inferences from the data. Second, given that the study only examined participants from an Italian city, who were selected according to the willingness of their sports team to take part in the study, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. Further studies should take into consideration the role of the organisation (i.e., Sports Club's aims, rules and educational-ethical approach, the Management attitude, Federation rules for the age levels studied) as influencing factors on parents' choices and behaviours. Third, children were our only informants; parental responses were not included in the study. Thus, while we considered children's perceptions of parental involvement in their sportive activity, we did not consider the effective involvement of their parents. Fourth, we used a single-item measure to assess children's perception of pressure on the part of their parents. Finally, not differences were studied between Mother and Father. Ede et al. (2012) found that athletes were satisfied with the parents' level of praise and understanding but dissatisfied with the levels of directive behaviour and active involvement of the mother and father. Instead, the study of Bloemhoff, Coetzee, and Raubenheimer (2016) found that athletes wanted more active involvement and more praise and understanding from their parents, especially from their fathers. Furthermore, they seemed satisfied with the amount of directive behaviour exhibited by their parents. The practical implications of these findings could serve to improve the experience of participants in youth sport.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, findings provided an encouraging step towards identifying sources of parental pressure on young athletes. It was found that excessive parental involvement may be a source of pressure among children. Also, children would prefer greater parental participation characterized by praise and understanding. Thus, the data provided some indication of the complexity of parent-child relationships among participants in sports activities, indicating that parents can play a highly positive or highly negative role in the youth sports experience. Finally, we recommend that parents be guided by the coaches that can advise how they can support and participate in the sporting life of their children in a positive and non-invasive manner, preventing burnout and dropout.

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Conflicts of interest

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