

# Towards an Understanding of Parent Spectator Behavior at Youth Sport Events

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## Abstract

Watching a child compete in organized youth sport can be a stressful experience for parents. The emotional bond between parent and child, along with the stress of competition, may partially explain why some parent spectators act in inappropriate ways during youth sport events, including conflicts with coaches, officials, and other parents. Popular media (Abrams, 2006; Kuyper, 2006) and parenting books (Murphy, 1999; Sundberg & Sundberg, 2000) substantiate the existence of inappropriate parent spectator behavior and scholarly research (Fifer & Wiersma, in press; Kidman, McKenzie, & McKenzie, 1999; Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, & Power, 2005) indicates the variety and frequency with which these behaviors are observed. While there is a general consensus amongst youth sport stakeholders that some parent spectator behavior is problematic, little is known about how parents *should* behave during youth sport events. Therefore, research related to the parent spectator behaviors preferred by youth sport participants is reviewed as well. Given the gap between the actual behavior of parents and the behavior preferred by children, the need for research-based strategies to encourage good sporting behavior amongst parent spectators is addressed.

*"For the parents, a Little League game is a nervous  
breakdown divided into innings"*

—Earl Wilson

The observation of former Major League baseball player Earl Wilson provides insight into the emotional experience shared by millions of parents who watch their children compete in organized youth sport each year. Due to the emotional attachment that exists between parent and child, watching a child play a sport like baseball or soccer can be a stressful experience

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Spectators and fans are often used interchangeably in the literature (Wann et al., 2001). Spectators are individuals who actively witness a sporting event, while a fan is distinguished by an individual who is interested in and follows a team or individual athlete. Throughout this paper, the term spectator will be used as we are interested in predicting the behavior of parents who witness their child's sport events. We acknowledge that a majority of parent spectators are also likely sport fans.

for parents. This emotional bond, which is an important part of normal development, can partially explain why some parents may behave differently as spectators at youth sport events than they would normally behave in a different context.

Parents often remain highly involved throughout the sport "career" of their children and are often responsible for providing a child's first opportunity to participate in organized sport (Brustad, 1996). Most parents attend the majority of their child's games and some practices (McPherson & Davidson, 1980, as cited in Smith, 1988). Parents also provide emotional support, cheerleading, and coaching in addition to tangible support such as equipment and league fees (Green & Chalip, 1998). Given that a high level of parental involvement is common, some (Hellstedt, 1988) have suggested that it is possible for parents to become too involved or too emotionally invested in the sport careers of their children.

Negative parent behavior has long been blamed on parents "living vicariously" through the lives of their young athletes (Brower, 1979; Eitzen & Sage, 2003). While there may be some truth to this observation, no single explanation can account for parental behavior at youth sport events. The antecedents and mechanisms of negative behavior among and between parent spectators<sup>1</sup> at youth sport events are not well understood but it is clear that these behaviors do occur. Violent conflicts and other outrageous behavior among parent spectators has been reported in the media (Abrams, 2006; Kuyper, 2006), popular press parenting books (Murphy, 1999; Sundberg & Sundberg, 2000), and scholarly research (Fifer & Wiersma, in press; Kidman, McKenzie, & Mckenzie, 1999; Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, & Power, 2005) has documented less sensational forms of parent spectator behavior.

## *Point of Departure*

With a growing concern about the behavior of sport parents (real and sensationalized), the need to summarize what we empirically know about sport parent behavior is warranted. By summarizing what is known about the behavior of parent spectators, problem areas can be addressed, proactive prevention measures can be taken, and research-based educational interventions can be developed. We start by delineating what is known about the behavior of parent spectators, then contrast it with youth athlete perceptions of parent spectator behavior, and continue with children preferences for parent behavior. Finally, we address the need for research-based strategies to encourage good sporting behavior among parent spectators.

## *Parent Spectator Behavior: How Parents Behave*

Popular press reports and YouTube™ videos provide evidence of extreme forms of parental behavior at youth sports—albeit sensationalized—such as kicking an official, swearing tirades, sideline clearing parent spectator brawls, or shooting a coach (Abrams, 2006; Kuyper, 2006; www.YouTube.com). Beyond these newsworthy behaviors, what we currently know about the frequency of behavior of parent spectators at youth sport events is largely anecdotal and descriptive (Omli, LaVoi, Wiese-Bjornstal, & Rodd, 2007). Certainly, some parent spectators lack judgment and fail to comprehend that behaviors such as coaching from the sidelines, foul language, and criticism of the referee, are inappropriate.

Putnam (2000) has highlighted a societal trend toward moral codes based on individual self-interest, rather than a concern for the well-being of others or the group as a whole—reflecting a general trend of incivility in a micro-context such as sport.

Obtaining an accurate representation of parent spectator behavior is methodologically difficult (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001), but a few researchers have taken on the challenge. Observational data provides one glimpse into the behaviors of parent spectators. Randall and McKenzie (1987) found that parents of youth soccer participants sit silently for most (87%) of each game. When spectators do verbalize, most comments are instructional (74.4%) while others are positive (19.8%) or negative (5.8%). While the negative comments observed by Randall and McKenzie (1987) were minimal, the amount of negative comments made by spectators appears to vary greatly between youth sport settings (and possibly over time). Kidman, McKenzie, and McKenzie (1999) observed spectators of seven different youth sports and found that more than a third of comments made during these events were negative but frequencies ranged from 23.4% (t-ball) to 45.4% (soccer) by sport. More recently, observational data of soccer parent spectators indicated that instruction (35%) and praise/encouragement (35%) were the most common behaviors but similar to Kidman et al. (1999), that 30% of the comments were negative, derogatory, performance contingent, or included both negative and positive content (Omli et al., 2007). While little is known about the actual behavior of parent spectators, the Youth Sports Behavior Assessment System (Apache, 2006) offers promise as a reliable way to measure the behavior of youth sport audiences.

Survey data, which reflects perceptions of parents, coaches, and athletes, adds to observational data related to parent spectator behaviors. Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, and Power (2005) and Omli et al. (2007) have focused specifically on the nature and frequency of negative comments and other forms of conflict present at youth sport events. Shields et al., (2005) found that most parents, coaches, and athletes have observed parent spectators yelling at officials or coaches. The form of angry behavior most commonly reported by parents, coaches, and athletes is *yelling at the referee* followed by *coaching from the sidelines*, but *embarrassing behavior*, *swearing*, and *encouragement to play rough and outside rules* were also reported (Omli et al., 2007). Parents, coaches, and athletes less frequently report witnessing physical aggression involving parent spectators (Shields et al., 2005). However, in a study of 340 youth soccer parents, more than half reported experiencing anger during their child's soccer game, and responded with variant levels of aggression (Goldstein, 2005), and parents commonly cite aggressive behaviors of spectator parents as a deterrent of sport enjoyment for themselves and their children (Goldstein, 2005; Wiersma & Fifer, 2005).

While not all parents act in uncivil or egregious ways all the time, it is clear the behavior of some parents reflects room for improvement. From the perspective of coaches, most feel parents are a positive influence, but 35% of coaches feel parents prohibit player development in some manner (Gould, Lauer, Roman, & Pierce, 2005). Results indicate a majority of parents act appropriately and "get it right" (Fifer & Wiersma, in press) most of the time. However, parents report experiencing

difficulty acting appropriately at times (especially when the stakes are high or the event is highly competitive) and in a manner consistent with their professed child-centered philosophy (Fifer & Wiersma, in press). Other parents may act in inappropriate ways because they do not consider the perspectives of children. To determine how parents *should* act during youth sport events, it is helpful to know how children want parents to behave.

#### *Parent Spectator Behavior: What Children Prefer*

While some research findings indicate how parent spectators behave during youth sport events, little research has been conducted to assess how children want parents and other spectators to behave. In an investigation of the youth sport parent behaviors that are the most and least preferred by children, Omli and Wiese-Bjornstal (2006) found that parent behavior can be summarized by three roles—children prefer (a) the "supportive parent," but prefer parents avoid playing the role of the (b) "demanding coach" or (c) "crazed fan." The supportive parent role involves "attentive silence" during play, cheering after a positive outcome such as a goal scored in soccer or a base hit in baseball, as well as encouragement and praise at appropriate times (e.g., after the competition or during timeouts). The demanding coach role involves unsolicited advice, instruction, or commands, particularly at inappropriate times (e.g., when the ball is in play). The demanding coach role also includes "critical encouragement," which involves a positive message delivered in a negative, disapproving tone (e.g., "oh come on, you can do better than that!"). Finally, the crazed fan role involves angry behaviors such as yelling, arguing, derogation, and other distracting and embarrassing behavior such as zealous and disruptive cheering (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2006).

Omli (unpublished data) extended these findings by asking 7- to-14-yr-old athletes to report how frequently they prefer parents engage in specific behaviors. The least preferred behaviors included (a) *tell you to break the rules*, followed by (b) *swear or say "bad words" loud enough for you to hear*, (c) *say mean things to the other team*, (d) *argue with parents from the other team*, (e) *yell at you if you make a mistake*, (f) *walk onto the field during the game*, (g) *get angry if your team is losing*, (h) *complain if the other team is ahead by too much*, (i) *tell the coach what to do*, and (j) *blame a game your team lost on the umpire or referee*.

Despite frequent reports of unwanted parent spectator behavior (Shields, et al., 2005), children overwhelmingly want their parents to attend their youth sport events. In addition to simply attending youth sport events, Omli (unpublished data) found that the behaviors most preferred by children include (a) *tell you that you did a good job*, (b) *clap after your team does something good*, (c) *encourage you while you are playing*, (d) *encourage you after the game if your team lost*, (e) *control their emotions*, and (f) *say "good try" if you make a mistake*. When asked what youth athletes would tell parent spectators if they had the opportunity, the most common responses were "to shut up" and "just let us play the game" (LaVoi, 2005).

## Conclusions

A small body of empirical evidence is mounting to provide an accurate picture of how parent spectators usually behave, which is in contrast to sensationalistic media accounts of violent conflicts and other outrageous behavior. For example, most conflicts involving parent spectators are verbal rather than physical altercations (Omli et al., 2007). Contrasting what actually occurs with what young athletes prefer can provide a compelling picture for evidence-based parent education programs, which may be an effective strategy for reducing such behaviors, and therefore positively affecting the youth sport climate for everyone. For some parents, simply knowing how children want them to behave may lead to behavioral change.

Currently, youth sport organizations employ a handful of strategies to manage the behavior of youth sport parents such as developing codes of conduct, restricting spectator areas (e.g., fans are required to sit on the opposite side of the soccer field from the coaches and team; Holt, Tamminen, Black, & Sehn, in press.), "Silent Sundays" (parents are not allowed to make noise of any kind during a competition), providing lollipops to parents, and awarding "fair play" points for parental behavior. Use of these and other strategies in youth sports contexts is extensive but rarely informed by evidence-based or empirical data from the sport science community (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). By documenting from multiple methodologies how parent spectators behave on the sidelines, and contrasting it with what children prefer, progress towards effective intervention and preventative measures can be made. Observational research is needed to more precisely understand the frequency and variety of parent spectator behavior.

Research is also needed to understand the antecedents of parent behavior, particularly conflicts between parents, coaches, officials, and young athletes, at youth sport events. To move beyond incomplete "vicarious-living" explanations of inappropriate behavior, it is necessary to consider influences on the behavior of parent spectators, including (a) personal variables such as age, gender, personality, and sport experience of the parent, (b) social variables such as age and gender of the child participant, the quality of the officiating, the coaching practices employed during the event, and the behavior of other parent spectators, as well as (c) ecological variables such as the cultural norms associated with the sport and the physical context in which the competition occurs. Researchers should seek to identify the variables within each sphere of influence that are most predictive of parent spectator behavior at youth sport events.

Identifying the conditions under which negative behaviors are most likely to occur, how these behaviors influence young athletes, and how to deter these behaviors is important because (a) kids do not like it when parents are involved in conflicts with coaches, officials, and other parents (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2006), and (b) sustained exposure to these angry behaviors may negatively impact the experiences of children and may have long-term consequences for the emotional health of young athletes (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Omli et al., 2007). The development of effective, research-based strategies for encouraging good sporting behavior amongst parent spectators will accelerate when researchers and youth sport stakeholders collaborate to increase understanding of how parents actually

behave at youth sport events and increase awareness of how children prefer parents behave and how the behavior of parents influences children.

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