CHAPTER 6: PARENTAL INFLUENCES ON YOUTH SPORT PARTICIPATION

Gregory J Welk
Megan L Babkes
Jodee A Schaben

INTRODUCTION

Millions of children engage in physical activity and participate in competitive youth sport programs around the world. Involvement in these programs provides important health benefits and helps children learn physical skills that they can use throughout their life. Through the social interactions in sport programs children build friendships and learn important interpersonal skills such as cooperation and teamwork. Sport involvement also provides an opportunity for children to develop characteristics and values that may assist with academic or personal growth as they mature (e.g. perseverance, commitment, dedication). While there are many benefits associated with sports involvement, there are also some potential downsides. The emphasis placed on achievement in our society can put excess pressure on children to perform in sports and physical activity. Because not all children have equal motivation or genetic potential for success at sports, some may experience negative emotions or develop negative self-perceptions through their involvement in athletics. The inherent social evaluation or public display of ability in sports must be carefully considered to ensure that children develop positive perceptions and have healthy experiences through sport participation (Scanlan, 2002).

In the past twenty years, considerable attention has been focused on the impact that parents have on their children’s sport and physical activity experiences and the psychosocial development associated with such involvement (Brustad et al., 2001). As a result, the knowledge base on the influence that parents have on young athletes is more comprehensive than ever before. This research consistently indicates that parents are critical agents in the process of children’s sport socialization (Brustad and Partridge, 2002; Greendorfer et al., 2002). Mothers and fathers play a central role in the initial exposure of children to organized sport. They are generally the ones who seek out the opportunities, provide transportation, equipment and financial support. As children continue involvement in sport, parents not only maintain the provision of many resources, but also provide the necessary support and
encouragement. Throughout this process, parents provide the primary source for filtering the meaning of sport experiences. Children come to believe in their abilities, have certain expectations of themselves and develop sport-related value systems based, in large part, on the attitudes and behavior of their mothers and fathers.

The influence from parents can be positive and negative depending on how it is received and perceived by the child. Praise, encouragement and support can help to enhance a child’s perception of their ability and increase their interest and involvement. Pressure and criticism, on the other hand, can damage a child’s confidence and take the inherent enjoyment out of the activity. Often there is a fine line between pressure and support, and parents need to learn how to provide the right type and amount of assistance. Parental attitudes (e.g., beliefs and values) and behaviors (e.g., involvement with child or personal physical activity engagement) can also impact youth experiences both positively and negatively.

This chapter reviews the research on parental influences in youth sport and physical activity. The first section describes the predominant theories that have been used to study and understand parental influence in youth sports. The second section reviews various sources of parental influence that have been studied and highlights the impact they have on children’s interest and involvement in sports. Particular attention is given to the types of influence that are grounded in socialization and developmentally based motivational theories. More descriptive forms of influence such as support, parental evaluation and the perceived meaning of athletic participation are also discussed. This section uses the described theoretical frameworks to more clearly describe the mechanisms through which parents influence children’s attitudes and perceptions. The last section presents an integrative model of parental influence that incorporates elements from the different theoretical frameworks. The model is presented as a guide to understanding the complex nature of parental influences in sports and physical activity programs.

The majority of literature on parental influences in youth sport has typically been oriented toward social or psychological constructs of the young sport participants, e.g., stress or perceptions of competence, and the impact of various beliefs and behaviors of parents on the particular construct of interest (Brustad et al., 2001; Brustad and Partridge, 2002). In this review, the focus is instead on the nature of the various forms of influence exerted by mothers and fathers, and subsequently how these impact children’s sport experience, emotional responses, and beliefs systems. An important distinction with previous reviews is that sports participation is viewed as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. In other words, the primary goal of youth sport programs should be to provide positive experiences and support so that the