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Journal of Applied Sport Psychology

ISSN: 1041-3200 (Print) 1533-1571 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/uasp20

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To cite this article: Tom Webb & Camilla J. Knight (2024) Sports officials and parents as spectators: Diffusing tensions on the sidelines, Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 36:4, 568-579, DOI: 10.1080/10413200.2023.2286952

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2023.2286952

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Published online: 26 Dec 2023.

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JOURNAL OF APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY
2024, VOL. 36, NO. 4, 568–579
https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2023.2286952

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NOTE

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Sports officials and parents[1] as spectators: Diffusing tensions on the sidelines

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ABSTRACT

Youth sport competitions are often emotionally charged events, with children, parents, coaches, and officials reporting emotions ranging from anxiety and stress through to enjoyment because of their involvement. One of the sources for the negative emotions and experiences associated with youth sport is the behaviors displayed by spectators on the sidelines. Typically, in youth sport events, these spectators are the parents of the children involved in the competition. Recognizing the detrimental consequences that arise for children when parents are inappropriately or negatively involved on the sidelines, sport psychology researchers and practitioners have increasingly targeted interventions at improving parents' involvement in competitions. Although such interventions are valuable and important for improving children's youth sport experiences, their focus is typically exclusively upon the interactions and relationships between parents and their children. However, negative behaviors from parents on the sidelines can also impact others in the environment, particularly sports officials who report abuse and aggression from the sidelines as one of the primary reasons for leaving their roles. As officiating numbers decline, sporting organizations are considering how to best tackle these attrition rates and one area that may be worthy of consideration is the interaction between parents and officials. To-date, limited consideration has been given to the bi-directional interactions between parents and officials or to steps that could be taken to improve interactions. To this end, the purpose of this commentary is to increase awareness, initiate conversations, stimulate research, and enhance applied practice targeting the interactions between officials and parents in youth sport.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 21 April 2023
Revised 4 November 2023
Accepted 10 November 2023

Parental involvement and influence in sport has received considerable attention over the last decade (Dorsch et al., 2021; Knight, 2019). Researchers have suggested that without parents' support and involvement most children would be unable to participate in youth sport in its current form (Harwood, Knight, et al., 2019; Holt et al., 2011; Knight et al., 2017). Moreover, the evidence consistently illustrates that when parents are appropriately involved in youth sport, parent's positively influence children's experiences and

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opportunities to reach their potential (Burke et al., 2023; Dorsch et al., 2021; Rouquette, Knight, Lovett, Barrell, et al., 2021; Rouquette et al., 2021). However, there is also evidence that not all parents are involved in youth sport in appropriate or beneficial manners—particularly at competitions (Bowker et al., 2009; DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997; Holt et al., 2008; Kidman et al., 1999). A quick perusal of social and print media rapidly illuminates issues associated with parental involvement, with global sport headlines such as "Pushy parents still ruining sport for kids in pursuit of glory" (Hannigan, 2019), "Wellington secondary school sport can play on, but spectators not allowed" (Witton, 2020), and "Primary school bans parents from sports day for bad behavior" (Badshah, 2019) all too easy to locate. Meanwhile, within research, observations of parents at youth sports competition have indicated that up to 30% of parents may be involved in negative or inappropriate ways ranging from shouting instructions to physically abusive behaviors (Bowker et al., 2009; Holt et al., 2008; Ross et al., 2015).

When parents display negative behaviors on the sidelines, it can have a range of detrimental consequences for children. For instance, such parental behavior can impact children's long-term sport engagement, increase anxiety and stress and reduced self-esteem (Bois et al., 2009, Holt et al., 2008). Moreover, poor parental behavior at competitions can impact the quality of the parent-child relationship (Knight & Holt, 2014). Given such consequences, increasing research attention has been given to developing interventions to improve parental involvement in youth sport (e.g., Burke et al., 2021; Thrower et al., 2023). In general, these interventions have shown positive benefits for parent-child interactions, as well as parents' and children's experiences within youth sport.

However, the consequences of inappropriate parental behavior on the sidelines are not limited to children. There are consequences for everyone present in the youth sport environment, including sports officials. Sports officials enforce the rules of sport competitions, and include roles such as referees, umpires, judges, and scorekeepers. Just as research regarding parental involvement in sport has been growing, there has also been an increase in research pertaining to sports officiating (Hancock et al., 2021; Pina et al., 2018). Through evolution of the research, we have an enhanced understanding of the issues sports officials encounter, including abuse (Cleland et al., 2018; Dawson et al., 2022; Mojtahedi et al., 2022; Webb, Dicks, et al., 2020; Webb, Rayner, et al., 2020; Webb et al., 2019).

When defining abuse, we can draw on previous work in sport, particularly focused on athletes and coaches. For example, both verbal emotional abuse and physical contact abuse were categorized by Stirling (2009) within the larger category of relational maltreatment. According to Stirling and Kerr (2008), emotional abuse is a pattern of purposefully non-contact behaviors that occur in a critical relationship (such as one between sports officials, players, coaches, and spectators) and have the potential to be harmful or have an impact on the person receiving it. Abuse in these relationships can take the form of negative verbal behavior, such as demeaning statements, as well as negative physical behavior, including throwing things and punching (Stirling, 2013).

It is important to acknowledge that there can be differences in the interpretation of what constitutes abuse, and authors have consequently categorized abuse in different

ways. For example, when considering the abuse of officials in sport, Downward et al. (2023) define physical abuse as "unwanted physical contact such as invading your personal space, pushing or punching etc." Whereas nonphysical abuse was defined as "ridicule, humiliating or aggressive remarks, threats and gestures etc" (p. 3). Radziszewski et al. (2023), also focused on sports officials, identified psychological abuse, which included both verbal (e.g., insults, yelling, complaining), and non-verbal (e.g., throwing arms in the air, snickering, offensive gestures) abuse, and physical abuse, defined as being shoved, grabbed by their shirt, or having someone block their path (p. 10). Moreover, Radziszewski et al. (2023, p. 10) also recognized indirect abuse as both psychological (e.g., a coach being abusive toward players) or physical (e.g., parents fighting)—actions particularly interesting to this commentary.

Across sporting contexts, the source of abuse toward officials can be players, coaches, and spectators (Downward et al., 2023; Webb, Dicks, et al., 2020; Webb, Rayner, et al., 2020). However, studies have typically identified spectators as the most frequent abusers (Ackery et al., 2012; Rayner et al., 2016), with parents the primary source of abuse in youth sports (Cleland et al., 2015; Webb et al., 2019; Walters et al., 2016). The impact of abuse may differ depending on the sport, definition, or classification of the sports official in question (cf., Hancock et al., 2015). However, the intention of officials to quit increases when they experience any type of abuse (Downward et al., 2023; Radziszewski et al., 2023).

In response to the abuse officials are facing, as well as a recognition of the importance of officials for the integrity of competitive sport at all levels, several sporting federations have introduced campaigns encouraging the promotion of good behavior in sporting environments. For example, the English Rugby Football Union (RFU) launched the 'keep your boots on' initiative (The RFU, n.d.). Aimed at coaches and officials, and anyone who is involved in player safety, the campaign was designed to provide good practice resources, ranging from training and development to developing mentors. The English Football Association (FA) has also initiated information-based programs, such as the Respect Program (The Football Association [FA], 2008). Administered by the FA and implemented by the County FAs, the Respect Program was created to be used across all levels of football in England, with an emphasis on improving working conditions for officials due to the increasing discontinuation of these officials (Cleland et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2017).

Similar initiatives also exist outside the United Kingdom (UK). The Football Association in the Netherlands (KNVB) implemented a violence prevention initiative for example, which targets young people who have been exposed to violent attacks in football (Webb, Rayner, et al., 2020). Meanwhile, in Australia, a junior umpire program was run by Hockey New South Wales aiming to give officials a secure environment in which to develop. Through tailored training, the program intended to equip umpire coaches with the authority to discipline any coaches, fans, or players who mistreat umpires (Webb, Rayner, et al., 2020).

Moreover, recognizing the impact parents have on children and officials in youth sport, many organizations have introduced initiatives directly targeting parents' involvement at competitions. These initiatives have typically focused on behavioral strategies (i.e., introducing an action to limit or address specific behaviors parents display) such

as parent codes of conduct (e.g., England Athletics, n.d; Rugby Football League, n.d), "carding" parents, whereby parents are given a yellow or red card if their behaviors are inappropriate (Holt et al., 2008), and implementing "silent support" (e.g., Phillipson, 2022), which are competition days when parents can watch but must remain silent. Additionally, a collection of studies have evaluated researcher created interventions targeting parents (see Burke et al., 2021) as well as organization developed educational programs (e.g., Tamminen et al., 2020). Typically, such interventions have focused on providing information to parents to improve their involvement with respect to their children's sporting participation and development; none have explicitly focused on improving interactions with, or experiences of, officials.

However, despite the introduction of the various initiatives by organizations to address issues of official abuse and parental involvement more broadly, it is unclear to what extent they are effectively impacting on the negative interactions that occur between parents and officials. The limited research that has sought to examine the impact of policies and practices introduced by organizations to regulate parents' behaviors has suggested the overall positive impact of them is often limited (Elliott & Drummond, 2015; Knight & Newport, 2017). This limited impact may be because, although some evidence-based interventions have taken parents' experiences into account (e.g., Thrower et al., 2017), the focus is typically on providing strategies to regulate parents' behaviors rather than addressing factors that may underpin these behaviors (Knight et al., 2017).

When considering the factors that contribute to some of the negative behaviors parents' display on the sidelines, it is clear there are a myriad of interacting considerations. For instance, youth sport competitions are emotionally charged events, during which parents witness their children's joys, disappointments, successes, and failures (Knight & Holt, 2014). When reflecting on their experiences at competitions, parents recall numerous sources of stress including officiating decisions, particularly if the decisions are perceived to be unfair, unjust, or negatively affecting the performance of their child or child's team (e.g., Eckardt et al., 2022; Harwood, Thrower, et al., 2019; Lienhart et al., 2019). Moreover, studies exploring negative emotions experienced at competitions, such as anger, often point to concerns regarding officiating decisions (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008; Omli & LaVoi, 2012).

Clearly, within the complex youth sport context (Dorsch et al., 2022) parents and officials are influencing each other. Specifically, the behaviors some parents display on the sidelines are a source of stress, anxiety, and potentially abuse for officials and may contribute to officials leaving the role. Meanwhile, perceptions of poor officiating contribute to the stress and negative emotions that some parents associate with their children's sporting competitions and have been suggested to contribute to the behaviors they display on the sideline. However, despite this clear link between parent and official's behaviors, there is currently extremely limited research or applied practice recommendations which explicitly focus upon the interactions between officials and parents. Within the current social and political climate which is, appropriately, emphasizing the importance of sport environments being safe, free from abuse and striving to achieve safe sporting environments for all (Bekker & Posbergh, 2022; Kerr, 2021; Kerr & Stirling, 2019), developing a better understanding of parent-official interactions and

subsequently developing applied strategies, practices, and policies to overcome issues of official abuse is both pertinent and timely.

Moving forwards

Our evaluation of the material to date reveals a bi-directional and reciprocal interaction between officials and parents in the competition setting that has yet to be adequately documented or considered in study and practice. Thus, we believe that sport psychology academics and practitioners should consider the interactions between officials and parents together (rather than individually) to inform practice in a way that benefits everyone in the sport environment. Similarly, interactions between officials and athletes' parents must be examined in the broader context of competition. This includes the impact of players and coaches on interactions between officials and parents, as well as the values and beliefs of sport organizations and wider society. Below, we outline (a) future research directions and (b) applied recommendations to improve the likelihood of positive sport experiences for everyone in the sport environment.

Future research

As already alluded to, parent-official interactions have yet to be explored in a meaningful manner, which accounts for their reciprocal and bi-directional influence. Thus, there are numerous avenues for future research, including those we have highlighted below:

1. There is a need to ensure research is conducted which explicitly focuses on understanding bi-directional interactions and clearly explores not just what behaviors are causing conflict or challenges for each party, but why these behaviors are occurring and how they are related. This may be addressed through qualitative studies integrating both officials and parents who can share their views on the behaviors of the other party as well as shared perspectives on their interactions. Quantitative studies which examine the relationship between parents' and officials' behaviors and different psychosocial outcomes for each party, and young people, may also be beneficial.
2. We should critically examine interventions and strategies that have been, or will be, put in place to address the behaviors of either party (i.e., parents or coaches) to identify if they will be effective in addressing their interactions or if, in the worst case, they might have negative impacts on the other party. For instance, when parents are banned from commenting at competitions (i.e., silent Saturdays), while this might reduce the abuse directed at officials it can increase the stress and negative emotions parents experience. Subsequently rather than reducing negative competition behaviors, such initiatives could increase the likelihood of parents engaging inappropriately during or following competitions (Knight & Newport, 2017). Developing and evaluating initiatives which consider both parents and officials (as well as other social agents such as young people and coaches) is necessary to overcome such issues arising.

3. Consideration of parent-official interactions cannot, however, occur only in competition settings. Research demonstrates that there are issues both on and away from competition related to the interactions between sports officials, players, coaches, and spectators (Webb, Dicks, et al., 2020; Webb, Rayner, et al., 2020). Webb, Dicks, et al. (2020) identified in and out groups within sport, with officials forming the outgroup, and players, coaches, and parents forming the ingroup. These groups have evolved due to the divergent aims and objectives of the different groups during a sporting fixture (i.e., Players, coaches, and parents focused upon wanting to win, whereas officials are present to uphold the laws of the game and maintain integrity). These opposing aims have, over time, created tensions between these stakeholder groups (Webb, Dicks, et al., 2020; Webb, Rayner, et al., 2020). As such, research exploring the broader factors that may contribute to issues within parent-official interactions is needed. For instance, utilizing a bioecological lens (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 2005), examinations of the independent and inter-dependent influence of immediate and more distal relationships on interactions between parents and officials may be beneficial.
4. Linked to above, the interactions that take place between different parties within youth sport contexts are also influenced by the values and beliefs of sports organizations and society more broadly (cf. Dorsch et al., 2022). As such, research should be conducted across sports to understand the similarities and differences regarding sideline behaviors throughout the spectrum of youth sports. Such insights will allow for identification of not only the trends and patterns of parental behaviors toward officials, but whether the specific sport context influences this.
5. Moreover, a critical evaluation of the values of youth sport and societal values pertaining to sport and parenting and the subsequent expectations, attitudes, and perceptions of parents and officials would be beneficial. With such insights, explicit consideration of changes and development of tailored interventions that are needed within the youth sport culture can be identified and, while a lofty goal, hopefully addressed or at the least reduced.

Overall, to ensure the applied nature of future research, the prioritization of co-production and partnerships between academics, researchers and stakeholders employed within sport organizations, officiating associations and also government, should be prioritized in order to effect and implement change to policy and practice. This work should contribute to the reduction of the research to practice gap, with studies in sport related research (Leggat et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023) and beyond (Shaikh et al., 2021; Wurz et al., 2021).

Applied recommendations

Practitioners working within youth sport may consider numerous approaches when trying to address parent-official interactions, and the associated psychosocial consequences that arise when interactions are negative. Specifically, practitioners may wish to consider

working directly with parents, directly with officials, and/or working with clubs and organizations. Some suggestions are provided below:

Working with parents

There is a growing body of research- and practice-based evidence regarding strategies to enhance parental involvement in sport. However, to further enhance this work, with a specific emphasis upon improving parent-official interactions, tailored guidance and support pertaining to sideline behaviors may be beneficial. Specifically, recognizing that one of the factors that may trigger negative comments from parents is concerns about their child's safety associated with officiating decisions, practitioners may wish to provide tailored guidance and support regarding re-appraising injury concerns and developing strategies to cope with injury-related anxiety. More broadly, working with parents (either in group or one-to-one settings) to develop a "toolkit" of emotion regulation strategies that they could employ during competitions may be beneficial. Alongside this, holding sessions in which parents and officials share stories and experiences of youth sport competitions may be useful. Such insights can help parents better understand the experiences of officials, which may stimulate changes in behavior. Such stories may also enable parents to start to anticipate the challenges and experiences they might have when watching their children compete at different levels, thus providing an opportunity for them to prepare strategies to manage different issues before they encounter them.

Working with officials

Although sport psychologists are increasingly being employed to work with elite officials, to our knowledge little, if any, focus has been given to officials working in other contexts. However, to better prepare officials, reduce issues they encounter, enhance their wellbeing, and hopefully retain them within their roles, we would argue that specific psychological support should be provided to them. Specifically, we suggest that this should be funded through sports organizations and integrated within their training, but if this cannot occur the provision of private psychoeducation or 1–1 sessions for officials should be available. Specifically, based on the evidence pertaining to parent-official interactions, working with officials to teach them conflict management and communication strategies. Moreover, techniques to manage stress and regulate emotions would also be particularly beneficial. Some workshops or education for officials regarding the sport parenting experience may also be useful to help them better contextualize some of the behaviors they see from parents and, potentially, support them in changing their approaches or actions if appropriate.

Working with clubs and organizations

In addition to the suggestions provided above, there are several strategies that could be implemented by clubs and organizations, with the support of sport psychologists:

- Firstly, organizations or leagues may want to organize social activities at the start of the season to enable parents and officials (and other stakeholders) to interact, get to know each other, and see each other as people with lives outside of their

sporting roles. This may help to overcome some of the in-group and out-group issues that have previously been identified.

- Secondly, more formalized sessions in which officials and parents (and if appropriate, young people) review and discuss the rules and regulations of the sport (tailored to different ages) and discuss any areas of confusion or misinterpretation. This may help parents to understand what officials are doing in different situations and help officials to understand why or when parents might misinterpret their actions or decisions.
- Third, all parties involved may want to co-produce some expectations pertaining to parent and official behaviors and interactions, focusing on strategies to maximize positive interactions rather than critique individuals. Specifically, publicly recognizing and rewarding positive interactions and behaviors among parents, officials (coaches and athletes) may be useful.
- Fourth, introduce pre-game meetings involving coaches, officials, and captains to establish a positive tone and ensure understanding of expectations for behavior and sportsmanship.
- Fifth, schedule periodic feedback sessions where parents, coaches, and officials can discuss their experiences, concerns, and suggestions for improvement.
- Sixth, involve parents, coaches, and officials in decision-making processes that affect the team or league, fostering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility.

By implementing these interventions, psychologists and sports organizations can create an atmosphere of respect, collaboration, and mutual support among parents, officials, and coaches, ultimately benefiting the growth and development of all involved.

Conclusion

To understand and improve interactions between officials and parents, there must be an increased comprehension of the complex inter-relationships that exist within youth sport and an understanding of any triggers for negative behaviors that do occur. Such insight would lead to an improved and more positive sporting environment for all participants. However, any such behavioral change also requires sport governing bodies and federations to implement and maintain any initiatives targeting this issue, to discuss any such enterprises within their organization, across administrators who operate within officiating, and also who work in the areas of coaching, playing, and spectating. Recent research has called for further investigation of the coverage of the views and actions of coaches, players, and parents or spectators in these interactions (Webb, 2022). Presently, our understanding is somewhat limited to the experiences and perceptions of sports officials themselves or of parents reflecting upon their stressors and negative emotions. Although this understanding is invaluable and has assisted in the development of the wider research agenda related to sports officials and parents, in-depth examination of their interactions, including the perceptions and experiences of athletes, coaches, parents, and officials, is required. Greater knowledge of the interactions between these

groups would expand coverage of the issue as well as guide governing bodies' decisions and interventions (Webb, 2022).

Note

1. For the purposes of this article, the term parents is used to refer to parents, guardians, primary caregivers etc.

Data sharing statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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