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Independent Study and Mentorship - 3A

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**Parental Engagement in Youth Sports**

**Assessment 18**

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"The nature and target of parents' comments during youth sport competitions." The Free Library.

1999 University of South Alabama 06 Mar. 2019 <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+nature+and+target+of+parents%27+comments+during+youth+sport...-a054194987>

**Assessment:**

As research for my Final Product, which is a study on parental involvement in youth sports, I read the article "The nature and target of parents' comments during youth sport competitions." This article details a study very similar to the one that I intend to complete for my final product, except it takes place in New Zealand, involves multiple sports, spans over a larger time period, and does not measure the reactions of athletes in response to parent comments. Therefore, the study conducted in the article provided an example of an experiment and observation set-up that I will be able to follow with little deviation in my study and provided categories to group comments into for simpler analysis following the observation and data collection period.

In the observation phase of the study conducted by researchers at the University of South Alabama, two researchers attended each game for each sports team studied and randomly selected two parents who they wrote down every comment from. My Final Product study will work similarly to this, except I will be the only one collecting data and I will not be able to attend every sports game for each of the teams I am studying. The method of focusing on only two parents at once allows for the accurate recording of every statement made by those parents. Dealing with a larger group of parents at once would be difficult to keep up with, especially since parents will likely comment on the same major events throughout the game.

The researchers at the University of South Alabama utilized categories to group the comments into to allow for easy analysis and comparison, which I have also decided to do for my Final Product. I developed categories for the nature of parent comments, target of comments, and event occurring when the parent comment was made, similar to those in the study from the article. I also made a list of responses that could be expected from athletes after hearing parent comments. The focus on athlete response will make my study different from the one at the University of South Alabama. My Final Product study will also differ from studies that I have researched because I plan to attend both baseball and softball games and compare the breakdown of comments made to athletes of both genders.

Researching the nature of parent comments made at youth sporting events has helped me to prepare for the observation and analysis phases of my Final Product study by providing examples of how data can be efficiently and accurately collected. Additionally, I have learned about the findings of other studies related to the percentages of positive versus negative comments, the most frequent targets of comments, and the events occurring when comments were made. Generally, the findings of other studies have been somewhat surprising to me, as I would have expected more negative results than those provided. After reading this article and reports of other similar studies, I feel more prepared to begin observing sporting events for my Final Product study.

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# **The nature and target of parents' comments during youth sport competitions.**

Parents play an important role in determining their children's sport involvement (Smoll, 1993). Indeed, Wood and Abernethy (1991) have reported that parental support can have a positive influence on the experiences of children in sport, yet there are numerous reports of the negative influence that parents can exert on their children's sporting experiences. For example, there have been cases in Australia and the United States where parents have been banned from attending their children's sporting contests (Evans, 1993). In a recent incident in New Zealand, a parent was seen to trip an opposition player in an under 12 year-olds' rugby game because the player was about to tackle his son ("Father Tackles", 1994). In another incident, spectators of an under-12 rugby team were seen hitting members of the opposing team with umbrellas (Umbers, 1995). This extreme behavior is relatively rare in children's sport, however it seems that almost every coach, athlete, referee, and parent has a story about negative parents' behaviors at sporting events. The occurrence of such behavior highlights the concern for the type of competitive experiences that young children encounter.

Parents have different expectations of their children in sport. Some may wish their children to do well because they feel that they missed out on the same opportunities when they were young. Others may wish to live vicariously through their children, and hope to gain glory from their children's success (Brower, 1979). Whatever the reason, most parents do not understand or are unaware of their own motivations for their children to participate (Grisogono, 1985). Parental ambitions sometimes exceed those of the children, to a point where children participate in a particular sport as a duty, rather than for pleasure (Evans, 1993). According to Gould and Petlichkoff (1988), these are the children who are most at risk from dropping out of sport.

Petlichkoff (1993) suggested that negative parental behaviors at children's sport events can lead to competitive stress, inhibit sport performance and cause children to drop out of sport. This view has been supported by a number of researchers (e.g., Evans, 1993; Gould, 1993; Gould, Feltz, Horn, & Weiss, 1982; Randall & McKenzie, 1987). In contrast, parental encouragement and support can significantly enhance children's experiences in competitive sport (Isaacs, 1981). Indeed, parental support is crucial to the success of children's participation in sport (Bond, 1993; Hoffman, 1986; Martens, 1990; Smoll, 1993). In a study that examined competitive stress, Scanlan and Lewthwaite (1988) found that male wrestlers (aged 9-14 years) who reported greater parental pressure to participate, were more likely to experience pre-match stress. Conversely, those who felt that their parents and coaches were more satisfied with their wrestling performance, and who perceived more positive adult involvement in the sport context, reported greater enjoyment than their counterparts with fewer positive perceptions.

Few studies have investigated the specific effect of parents' (as spectators) behavior on youth sport participants during competitions, although some research has described overall spectator behavior during sporting competitions. The results from such studies may provide useful comparison data for studies focusing on parents as it seems likely that many of the spectators at youth sport events would be the parents of the participants. Randall and McKenzie (1987) assessed the nature of spectator behavior in youth soccer matches and found that spectators only interacted verbally for 12.5% of the total game time and for the remainder of the time were engaged in silent observations. Most of the spectators' comments were instructional in nature (74.4%), with 19.8% of comments classified as 'positive,' and the remainder (5.8%) as 'negative.' Further research has confirmed that spectators generally tend to sit and watch, read newspapers or socialize with friends during competitions (Crossman, 1986; Walley, Graham, & Forehand, 1982). These studies were among the first to attempt to observe and record spectator behaviors in actual competition settings. However, despite these findings, there has been little research into the specific verbal comments made by parents to their children, other competitors, coaches, and other spectators during sporting events.

Often, parents and other spectators unwittingly create pressure on children by being "too involved" with the children's sport. Indeed, Randall and McKenzie (1987) stated that,

When the youth sport environment is characterized by intrusive spectator behaviors (e.g., shouting criticisms and insults, coaching from the sideline, and distracting attention), competitive stress may be increased. Similarly, excessive spectator verbalizations can lead to reduced motor performance by bombarding the young athlete with too much information (p. 201).

One of the consequences of excessive spectator comments, and especially those that attempt to tell the child what to do, is that learning is inhibited because the child simply follows the instructions from the sideline. Indeed, research has suggested that learning does not occur when the decision-making process is removed (Hellison, 1985). If children are given the opportunities to apply their own interpretations of information, then more learning and retention of information take place. Furthermore, Evans (1993) pointed out that competitive sport is an already stressful context for children because their athletic ability is publicly scrutinized and evaluated by parents, peers, and coaches. The additional burden of an intrusive parent is likely to exacerbate this situation because children will not only be anxious about their ability to perform to expectations, but also about how their parents may behave during the game or event.

A number of studies have investigated the type of support that children most desire from their parents (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1988; Wood & Abernethy, 1991). For example, Wood and Abernethy (1991) surveyed elite swimmers regarding their perceptions of supportive parental behaviors. The least desirable behaviors were those that created pressure on the athletes. The greatest pressure was created when parents placed judgement on the swimmer's self-worth. Excessive pressure also occurred when the swimmers' parents pushed them to excel or to train harder. The most supportive behaviors were identified as those where the swimmers' parents encouraged their participation in competitive swimming, especially by way of congratulations following a race. Wood and Abernethy (1991) concluded that parents need to be aware that it was the swimmer's perceptions of the parents' actions, not the intentions of their actions that were important. Indeed, the parents' intentions did not necessarily match the swimmers' perceptions of the actions portrayed.

Little research has investigated the specific behaviors of parents and the effect of these behaviors on children's sport participation (Randall & McKenzie, 1987), although numerous studies have been conducted to determine the most effective behaviors of coaches (e.g. Black & Weiss, 1992; Smith & Smoll, 1990). It has been suggested that coaches may at times overemphasize winning, give little positive reinforcement and provide athletes with noncontingent feedback. According to Petlichkoff (1993), these behaviors may lead to a decrease in self-esteem, increased competitive stress, and decreased motivation for many young athletes. However, while coaches have some influence over children's attitudes and behaviors, parents have the greatest influence over their children's motivation and subsequent participation behavior (Smoll & Smith, 1988). While the effect of such behaviors is an important area of study, it is logical to first determine the nature of the behaviors that parents are exhibiting at their children's sporting events. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine the nature of parents' verbal behaviors during selected youth sporting events.

This study differs from previous research in specifically identifying parents rather than spectators as the target of the investigation. In addition, it used an instrument that employs event rather than interval recording (Crossman, 1986; Randall & McKenzie, 1987). The study was conducted in a New Zealand context, which may provide data that could be used in possible cross-cultural analyses, and specifically targeted selected team sports that have not been investigated in previous research.

**Method**

**Sample**

The subjects were 296 parents who attended their children's competition games from the team sports of netball, hockey, miniball, cricket, t-ball, soccer, and rugby. The teams comprised children between the ages of 6 and 12 years. One hundred and forty seven games/matches were observed and 8,748 parents' comments were recorded. Data were collected from 17 T-ball, 8 Cricket, 21 Miniball, 33 Soccer, 24 Rugby, 23 Hockey, and 22 Netball matches. All teams were from the greater Dunedin (New Zealand) metropolitan area.

**Observation Instrument**

A systematic observation instrument known as the Parent Observation Instrument Sport Events (POISE) (Kidman & McKenzie, 1996) was used to collect the data. The POISE was adapted from previous instruments (Randall & McKenzie, 1987; Walley et al., 1982) that had been used to collect and analyze data regarding the nature of parent and spectator verbal behaviors. Inter- and intra-observer reliability for POISE was established at 92% and 97% respectively, using procedures advocated by Siedentop (1991). Construct validity was established by the principal researcher and a research assistant, who identified and defined observed parent behaviors, then asked two experts to validate the definitions. During data collection every comment made by two randomly selected parents was recorded, as well as the target (e.g., athlete) of the comment and the event (e.g., ball in play) that was occurring when the comment was made. Data collection was handwritten and used event recording.

The target of comments. The intended recipient of each comment was identified. Categories included; Other Team (OT), Parent (P); Official or Administrator (O); Team (T); Son or Daughter (SD); Fan (F); Athlete (A); Coach (C); Self (S); Other Child (OC); Umpire or Referee (U). Examples included: "Let's go Robert, you know how to play this pitcher" (comment made by parent to athlete [A]). "Oh c'mon, she was in by miles! Play fair" (comment made by parent to umpire [U]). "I guess you're afraid of losing" (comment made by parent to the opposing team [OT]).

Event. The event was the action occurring at the time that the comment was made. Several events may have been occurring when the comment was made. Categories included: Ball in play (BP); Penalty (P); Scoring (S); Ball not in play (BNP); Winning (W); Losing (L); Tied (T); Injury (I); Accident (A); Act of violence (V); Pre-game (PG); After-game (AG); Half-time (HT); Time-out (TO); Controversial Umpire's Call (U). Examples included: "Way to go team, great batting!", (comment made when the team has just scored [S]) or "Go, go, Barbara, go... run fast!" (comment made by a parent to their daughter [SD] while the ball was in play [BP]), or "What a ridiculous decision" (comment made when the umpire made a call [U]).

**Procedures**

Data were collected by trained research assistants using a procedure described as "unobtrusive language analysis" (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1981). The research assistants attended selected games for the seven identified sports and observed and recorded all of the verbal comments made by two parents who were randomly selected prior to the start of each game. At least one research assistant recorded handwritten data at each of the games every weekend throughout the season. No parent, player, spectator or team names were identified during the data collection.

After initial training in the use of POISE, the research assistants participated in random reliability checks prior to and during the data collection period to determine whether observations were being recorded in a consistent and systematic manner. The research assistants were instructed to locate themselves as inconspicuously as possible in the sporting environments to minimize the reactivity of the parents being observed.

**Data Analysis**

The verbal comments were analyzed for the nature (i.e. positive, negative, or neutral) and target of the comments (e.g. athlete, referee, other parents), and the event (e.g. ball in play, injury) during which the comments were made. Table 1 shows the categorization of verbal comments recorded using the POISE instrument. The frequencies of the verbal comments were tabulated and expressed as numbers and percentages according to the various sports, the nature and target of the comments, and according to the event in which the comment was made.

**Results**

Table 2 indicates that the majority of the comments made by parents were positive, although a considerable number of negative comments were recorded. Of the 8,748 comments that were recorded, 47.2% were positive (n = 4,126), 34.5% were negative (n = 3,016) and 18.4% were classified as neutral (n = 1,606). A further breakdown of these comments revealed that the most frequent positive comments were those classified as reinforcing comments (27.0%), and the most frequently recorded negative comments were those in which the parent was correcting their child regarding some aspect of their play (26.8%).

Table 3 indicates the total number and percentage of comments for each of the seven sports that were observed. The sport with the greatest percentage of positive comments was miniball (58.5%), and cricket parent spectators delivered the smallest percentage of positive comments (40.3%). The greatest percentage of negative comments was made by parents of soccer players (45.4%), whereas parents of t-ball players exhibited the lowest percentage of negative comments (23.4%). The parents of netball players exhibited the highest percentage of neutral comments (25.1%), while soccer parents made the smallest percentage of these comments (9.3%).

A breakdown of the negative comments into Correcting and Other Negative Comments (Scolding, Witticism and Contradicting) shows some interesting variations. Table 4 shows that Soccer had the most Correcting comments (40.7%) and Cricket the least (8.3%), but when all Other Negative Comments (Scolding, Witticism and Contradicting) are examined, quite different results become apparent. Cricket exhibited the most 'other' negative comments (17.8%), whereas Rugby was the least negative (4.5%).

It was found that 12.0% (n = 1048) of all the comments made by parents were directed towards their own son or daughter. According to Table 5, 51.2% of these comments were Positive, 36.6% were Negative, and 12.2% were Neutral.

The parents of rugby players exhibited a high percentage of negative comments overall (40.8%), and almost half the comments directed at their own children were negative (45.6%). The parents of cricket players made a relatively small number of negative comments overall (26.1%), but this figure rises to 39.6% when the comments are directed towards their own children. Also, miniball players' parents exhibited the greatest percentage of positive comments (58.5%) overall, and when the comments towards their own children were examined (60.1%). Netball players' parents displayed 46.6% positive and 28.3% negative comments overall, but increased percentages of positive (55.2%) and negative (31.8%) comments were found when the comments were directed at their own sons and daughters.

**Table 5**  
**Comments That Were Targeted at Own Son/Daughter**

Positive : Negative : Neutral : Total  
  
Netball 153 (55.2%) 88 (31.8%) 36 (13.0%) 277 (100%)  
Cricket 35 (36.5%) 38 (39.6%) 23 (24.0%) 96 (100%)  
T-Ball 67 (53.6%) 42 (33.6%) 16 (12.8%) 125 (100%)  
Miniball 98 (60.1%) 60 (36.8%) 5 (3.1%) 163 (100%)  
Rugby 41 (39.8%) 47 (45.6%) 15 (14.6%) 103 (100%)  
Hockey 64 (53.8%) 42 (35.3%) 13 (10.9%) 119 (100%)  
Soccer 79 (47.9%) 66 (40.0%) 20 (12.1%) 165 (100%)  
TOTAL 537 (51.2%) 383 (36.6%) 128 (12.2%) 1048 (100%)

Examples of some of the typical comments made by parents included: "Tackle," "Spread out," "Come on," or "Good shot." Moreover, a typical behavior was one of applauding after an event. Some examples of the more 'extreme' comments that were made by the parents included: "I'll bop ya," "Hit it hard. C'mon, over the back there, or you'll be walking home," "If you don't bowl well, you can stay here and walk home," "Matt had a four knocked off him by a girl !," "All my yelling at practice might have worked," "Get out and score a few goals," "Five bucks a try [goal] wasn't it?," "That's your whole life, you're always asleep." In addition, there was evidence that the children were listening to their parent's comments. Examples of this included:

1. Parent Comment: "Get out and score a few goals."

Child's response: "But I'm subbed off."

2. Parent Comment: "Come on Simon!."

Child's Response: "It's not as easy as you think Mum."

**Discussion**

The results indicated that most of the comments made by parents were positive (see Table 2). However, there also were a considerable number of comments that were classified as 'negative'. The effect of such comments on the children's participation motivation and stress levels would be dependent on their perceptions of these comments and is beyond the scope of this study, but Evans (1993) has suggested that such comments may cause decreased levels of participation motivation and increased levels of stress.

Overall, the incidence of negative comments was too high to create a sufficiently supportive environment for children participating in sport. In support of this, the overall ratio of positive to negative to neutral comments was approximately 4:3:2, which demonstrates a higher ratio of negative comments than that which is normally recommended by pedagogists (Randall, 1992). This result would suggest that parents should decrease the number of negative comments (including correctional comments) that they make, and increase the number of positive comments. In addition, there were some sports in which the parents tended to make decidedly more negative comments than others.

The parents of soccer (45%) and rugby (40.5%) players recorded the greatest percentage of negative comments (see Table 3). The evidence from these two sports in particular indicates a need for parents to change the nature of their comments during youth rugby and soccer matches. This notion has been endorsed by the administrative bodies for each of these sports, who have indicated that inappropriate behaviors on the part of parents is an ongoing problem.

The findings of this study partially support the findings of previous studies by Randall and McKenzie (1987) and Walley et al. (1982), who found that the majority of comments made by spectators were positive. However, in the present study, correcting (instruction) comments by parents were classified as negative by POISE because the decision-making process was taken away from the children when such comments were made. These types of comments were accorded a separate category by Randall and McKenzie (1987) and Walley et al. (1982) (whose categories were 'Positive,"Negative,' and 'Instruction'), and therefore the comparison of findings between these and the present study (whose general categories were 'Positive,"Negative,' and 'Neutral') must be treated with some caution. In addition, the observation instruments used for each of the studies were slightly different. Whereas the previous studies had used interval recording in their data collection procedures, this study used event recording to record every behavior that occurred. This may have provided differing results.

The high number of negative comments made to children by their parents, as indicated in Table 4, may have contributed to increased competitive stress levels for those children. Evans (1993) indicated that participation in competitive sport is already stressful for children because their athletic ability is under scrutiny from their parents and other spectators. The additional burden of parental criticism and other negative comments can only exacerbate the already existing stress levels, and may contribute to a decrease in the children's perceptions of their self-worth (Smoll, 1993). Such excessive stress levels can be detrimental to the enjoyment of sport for children, which is a major factor in their motivation to participate, and may therefore contribute to the high dropout rates that are evidenced for children's' sport (Petlichkoff, 1993).

The results also indicated (see Table 5) that parents provide many correctional comments about how to execute skills, or which strategies to use next during their children's performances. According to Rotella and Bunker (1987), such comments direct children to perform particular play-by-play actions and leave no room for decision-making by the children. It was observed during the data collection that the children often stopped and tried to hear what their parents were saying, and then attempted to follow their specific instructions. Such behavior by parents undermines the children's ability to make their own decisions about what to do in certain situations, and therefore inhibits the learning process. A reduction in the number of these types of comments would enhance the children's rate of learning and contribute to a more positive sport experience.

Given the range in ages of the children in each of the sports that were investigated (six to 12 years), it was thought that age may have been a mediating variable in terms of the relative percentages of the various types of comments that were recorded. However, the organization of many of the sports was such that children from all of the relevant age groups participated together on the same teams. This rendered impossible any analysis of parents' comments relative to the age of the child participant. For those sports where this was not the case, it was not possible to record the comments made in a sufficient or equal number of games in each age category to make any meaningful comparisons between participant age groups. Future researchers should consider this variable when designing their investigations.

**Conclusion**

The collection of additional data from other sports and other countries using the POISE instrument will enable further analyses to be completed in which specific comparisons can be made between various combinations of data groupings. For example, it will be possible to determine whether more negative comments are made by parents when their child's team is losing the match, whether male or female parents make the majority of the comments (positive or negative), and whether it is the coach, the parent's own child, the referee, or some other person who is the target of most of the comments.

The results from the current study represent findings from an ongoing research project, and have been the catalyst for the second phase of the study, which involves the introduction of an intervention to determine whether coaches are able to positively influence parents' verbal behaviors at youth sport events. It is hoped that the results will help to raise parents', coaches', and administrators' awareness of the types of behaviors that are being evidenced during children's sport, and to increase these adults' understanding of the possible effects of such comments on their children's performance, enjoyment and ongoing participation in sport.

If it is possible to change the behaviors of coaches, as has been achieved in other studies (e.g. Kidman, 1994; Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979), then it also should be possible to offer workshops in an attempt to modify parents' behavior. In this manner, it is hoped that the amount of detrimental verbal comments by parents can be significantly decreased, thereby ensuring that the sporting experience is decidedly more positive for children in sport.

Table 1

Categorisation of Behaviors Using POISE (Parent Observation Instrument for Sport Events)

PARENT VERBAL BEHAVIOURS

**Positive**

Reinforcing (R): a comment (or clapping) which demonstrates pleasure with a certain behavior or the indication that a specific behavior should be repeated or continued in the same manner (e.g. "Way to go", "Great pitching", "Good girl").

Hustle (H): a comment made with the intention to motivate the athlete in order to intensify his/her performance (e.g. "Go, go, go, go...", "Wicket keeper, c'mon", "C'mon, let's get behind these guys").

**Negative**

Correcting (C): a comment that is made which establishes that a specific behavior was not satisfactory and should be altered. The intention here is to correct or change the athlete's technique/form, directly or indirectly, or to attempt to suggest a change in the athlete's behavior in some way. The comment is usually directly related to the subject matter (e.g. "Take your time, watch the ball .... use your feet", "John, arms straight up").

Scolding (S): a comment that indicates that the performance was inappropriate. The comments display displeasure at the circumstance, and can be degrading (e.g. "Don't sit on your bottom, get up", "Don't hit the rubbish.").

Witticism (W): a comment which often involves irony, ridicule and/or sarcasm. These comments often have an element of jest and are judgmental (e.g. "Your sister looks better in the mask than you", "Your father could hit better than that".)

Contradicting (CO): a comment made which varies in content or valance (e.g. positive to negative). For example: "That's the story. No, think about it", "Hit the ball to the centre. You should've hit it to the right!

**Neutral**

Direct Questioning (DQ): a question about the event (e.g. "Why did you swing at that?", "What were you aiming at when you kicked that ball?").

Indirect Questioning (IQ): a question that is not about the event (e.g. "What are you doing after this?", "Where are you going this weekend?").

Rhetorical Questioning (RQ): a question is directed to another person but does not require an answer (e.g. "Would you please stop talking" or "Why did she kick the ball then?.... oh she wanted to pass it?"). The first directs the athlete to do something, the second requires no answer by the person it was directed to.

Extrinsic Rewarding (E): a comment that refers to an extrinsic reward (e.g. money, food, travel), in order to increase the athlete's motivation (e.g. "I owe you a buck for that move", "We promised Paul a trip to the museum if he scored").

Social (S): a comment that is not related to the game or event (e.g. "How was your weekend?").

What If (WI): a comment that occurs in retrospect of the event or game and may be related to the outcome of the event or game (e.g. "If the coach had picked my daughter we would have won", "If only we'd batted first, we'd have won").

Nothing (N): No comment is made (e.g. silently watching).

Other (0): Any comment that does not fit into any of the above categories.