

Developing mothers as youth sport coaches

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The discussion of mothers in sport to date has focused on issues of access, representation and constraints associated with participation in sport (e.g. Bialeschki & Michener, 1994; Brown, Brown, Miller, & Hansen, 2001). The International Olympic Committee recently recognized the role mothers have in promoting women's participation in sport (International Olympic Committee, 2008). However, mothers' voices are generally silent in the sport research literature. This silence is because much of their labor in sport is in the private sphere of the family and critical discussion regarding the impact motherhood has on their sporting experiences as leaders and vice versa is absent (Thompson, 1999). The literature surrounding coaching mothers is limited, focusing on mothers who are coaches at the Collegiate or elite level where being a coach is their job, reflecting the worker-mother duality (Bruening & Dixon, 2007, 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Leberman & Palmer, 2008). The purpose of the current research was to explore the experiences and perceptions of mothers coaching at the youth level.

Little is known about experiences of youth coaches in general, and mothers in particular. Fredericks and Eccles (2005) reported that very few mothers (4%) coached grade 4-6 children, compared to fathers (27.5%). This situation serves to perpetuate the gendered division of labor in youth sport where, mothers predominantly fill support roles such as team manager (Fredericks & Eccles, 2004; Thompson, 1999), and fathers take on the leadership roles of coaching (Davison, Cutting, & Birch, 2003; Fredericks & Eccles, 2004). Research (e.g. Vescio, Wilde, & Crosswhite, 2005) has suggested that the absence of female role models, affects children's expectations of the role of women both in sport and other contexts. In order to redress the situation in youth sport, which may then lead on to a changes at the collegiate level, sport managers need to understand why mothers do and do not coach. Soccer is one of the fastest growing sports in the USA (Sporting Goods Manufacturer Association, 2007), and as such provided a context within which to examine mothers experiences of coaching. This research was undertaken during October – November 2007 with a large non-profit Midwestern state-level Youth Soccer Association (YSA). The YSA is a highly organized youth sport organization and is a subsidiary of the parent organization – US Youth Soccer. Research by LaVoi (in press) has demonstrated in this YSA females are underrepresented in all positions of power (coach, assistant coach or team manager), at all age group, at all competitive levels and for both boys and girls. Females most frequently occupied the position of team manager and, where more likely to have a position of power in girls teams. A phenomenological paradigm was adopted, using semi-structured interviews (Cresswell, 2003) focusing on the experiences of a purposive sample of mothers whose common experience is that their children play youth soccer.

Four different groups of mothers (N=16) were randomly selected from 90 women who responded to the recruitment efforts, to reflect the potential range of mothers' experiences in youth soccer: (1) mothers who coached their own children in soccer and had collegiate athletic experience in soccer (N=5), (2) mothers who coached their own children in soccer and were not collegiate soccer players (N=5), (3) former collegiate soccer players who do not coach their children in soccer (N=1) and, (4) mothers who did not play collegiate soccer and who do not coach their children in soccer (N=5). An interview guide was specifically developed for mothers who had coached their children in youth sports and those who had not. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim into a word document leading to familiarization with the data. Transcripts were then imported into QRS NVIVO (v.7), a qualitative data management and analysis software package. A three step process was used to analyze the data – familiarization with the data, open coding and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The findings from part of the interviews are reported here - motives for coaching and barriers and benefits of coaching. The mothers, who coached, did so because they had a knowledge of soccer, it was fun and/or a need existed. The benefits of coaching were – time together with their children and getting to know their friends, role modeling (mother in leadership role out of home), life skills (coaching is about more than sport) and values (individual and social). Personal barriers included favoritism (being too hard or easy on their own child), role conflict between being a mother and a coach, and lacking knowledge and confidence, as well as lack of time. Societal barriers focused on the fact that most mothers interviewed perceived that men were seen as the norm in coaching and that they sometimes felt uncomfortable being the minority. The multidimensional barriers were associated with the intersection between the individual, the child and the context. Issues here were associated with age of child, gender, skill and competitive level. The overwhelming reason why mothers did not coach was due to a lack of knowledge and confidence. Other issues raised were lack of time, the male gender norm associated with coaching, and not being asked. The main strategy proposed to increase the number of mothers coaching was to offer women only education and training, followed by facilitating co-coaching as an option and encouraging mothers to start coaching when their children are young and providing ongoing support once they start coaching. If the number of female coaches at the Collegiate and elite level world-wide are to

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increase, sports organizations need to understand why women are not coaching at the youth level to ensure a pool of female coaches is available to move through the ranks. Given that youth sport is an important social institution in the United States (Coakley, 2007) and the increase in the number of girls and women participating in sport, it is crucial to realize the potential of mothers as coaches, to assist with creating social change and challenging stereotypical beliefs of children and their families relating to gender and leadership in sport.