The Effect of the STAR Sportsmanship Education Module on Parents’ Self-Perceived Sportsmanship Behaviors in Youth Sport

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In 2000, Thomas Junta watched his son participate in team drills at a youth hockey practice in Reading, Massachusetts. What happened next would impact more than just the practice; it would change the lives of everyone involved. In a fit of rage, Junta confronted, attacked and beat to death Michael Costin over what witnesses said was a disagreement about how rough the practice had gone. When the assault ended, Costin lay unconscious in a pool of blood as his children helplessly looked on. Two days later, Costin was pronounced dead (Dahlberg, 2001; Pallerino, 2003). This incident did not end with Costin’s death; it ended when Junta was sentenced to 6-10 years in prison for manslaughter. Incidents like this illustrate the level of unsportsmanlike conduct by parents in the youth sport environment.

More and more parents seemingly are becoming overly disruptive, hostile, and even violent (Bach, 2006) at youth sporting events. Unruly parent behavior and violent confrontations at youth sporting events have become increasingly frequent (Learning Through Sports, 2007). Consequently, these behaviors have damaged parent’s relationships with coaches, officials, spectators, other parents and even their own children (Singh, 2006). If parents are the critical factor in shaping both the meaning of sport and the role that sport plays in their child’s life, then educators and youth sport administrators must create a system that addresses both the youth leagues’ expected values and subsequent behaviors surrounding the production and consumption of youth sport.

The purpose of this study was to examine how the STAR Sportsmanship education module for parents’ effects parent behavior attached to their experience of their child’s sporting endeavors. The STAR module educates parents on sportsmanship concepts in the context of youth sport. This module seeks to facilitate the immediate application of information presented by its users. This particular teaching tool provides multi-media that illustrate key principles, contiguity, modality, redundancy, coherence, and personalization to get the point across to parents without condemnation.

Using the Parent Experiences in Youth Sport (PEYS), data on parent’s (N = 95) self-perceived behavior in youth sport was collected. The PEYS consisted of an 18-item survey focused on how each participant rated their behavior as he/she experienced their child’s participation in some type of youth sport activity. Each participant was administered the PEYS before and following the STAR Sportsmanship education module for parents. Participants rated their behavior based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (always) to 1 (never). Psychometric testing (e.g. content validity, known-group validity, test-retest reliability, and internal consistency) was conducted on the PEYS to provide validity and reliability evidence. Data were analyzed using SPSS 16.0 to calculate descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations). The research question was addressed using a paired t test to examine parents’ sportsmanship behavior in pre and post data.

Broadly speaking, findings from this study indicated that (a) the PEYS is a reliable and valid survey for the assessment of parent sportsmanship behavior in youth sport and (b) the STAR Sportsmanship education module for parents was an effective tool in teaching sportsmanship concepts to parents. In addition, parent’s behavior scores increased as a result of the STAR sportsmanship education module for parents.

Overall, this study can be added to the body of knowledge that encompasses sportsmanship knowledge, behaviors, and values. The PEYS and the STAR Sportsmanship module are promising sportsmanship assessment and educational tools, respectively. Researchers and sport administrators, who hope to implement effective sportsmanship education and training for parents in youth sport, will gain insight needed to make informed decisions regarding the role of parents engaged in their youth sport programs by utilizing the PEYS and the STAR Sportsmanship education module. Sportsmanship can be taught, learned and even required, but without careful examination of the athletic environment and why parents behave the way they do, the desired behaviors will not be perpetuated or valued by those for whom the sport activity was created for in the first place – the child.