Parent Evaluations of Their Children’s Summer Sport: Effects on Satisfaction and Retention

Yen-Chun Lin, University of Texas at Austin
Laurence Chalip (Advisor), University of Texas at Austin

Managing and marketing youth sport brings its own set of challenges, as parents are the consumers although children are the users of the service (Green, 1997). Previous work has demonstrated that there can be centrifugal social forces that work against the stability of youth sport leagues (Chalip & Scott, 2005), and that the values, needs, and expectations of parents need to be factored into program design and club administration (Kirk & MacPhail, 2003). The use of post-season surveys of parents has been demonstrated to provide information that can be useful to club and league organizers (Chalip, 1989).

Several factors seem to be important for the ongoing stability of youth sport organizations because they can affect parental satisfaction and the consequent retention or loss of membership. The degree to which children are thought to improve their skills and to learn to strive have been demonstrated to be important (Martin, Dale, & Jackson, 2001). These are a function of both the quality of skill coaching and the management and communication styles of coaches (Black & Weiss, 1992; Smith & Smoll, 1997) Friendships formed or strengthened through the sport experience are also important to children, adolescents, and their parents (McCarthy & Jones, 2007; Ulrich-French & Smith, 2006, 2009). The sense of community that parents obtain in their children’s sport program may be particularly important, as it has been shown to mediate or complement the relationship between friendships and satisfaction in schools (Vieno, Santinello, Pastore, & Perkins, 2007) and communities (Cicognani, Albanesi, & Zani, 2008). Finally, an organization’s communication with its customers has been shown to play a key role in customer satisfaction and retention (Ford, 2003; Hennig-Thurau, 2000).

In order to examine the relationships among these variables in a youth sport setting, a web-based survey was sent to parents in 338 families in a newly formed summer swimming league in the southwestern United States six weeks after the season’s end. One parent (105 mothers, 24 fathers) from each of 129 families completed the survey (38.2% completion rate).

It was expected that parents’ satisfaction would drive their likelihood of returning to the league the next year, and that their sense of community with their club, their sensed that their children had improved their swimming, and their sense that their children had learned to strive and set goals would drive their satisfaction. It was expected that friendships would drive their sense of community, while their assessment of the coaches would drive their sense that their children had improved and had learned to strive. Finally, communications were expected to affect their sense of community and their evaluations of the coaches.

The survey included a three-item measure of parents’ overall satisfaction (Nicolao, Irwin, & Goodwin, 2009) \([\alpha=.73]\) and an eight-item measure of sense of community (Obst & White, 2004; Peterson, Speer, & McMillan, 2008) \([\alpha=.92]\). In addition, respondents rated the likelihood that their family would participate in the league next year on a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from “definitely will participate” to “will definitely not participate.” Their sense that their children improved their swimming during the season and their sense that their children learned to strive and set goals were each measured on six-point Likert-type scales ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The perceived effect of participation in the league on friendships was measured with reference to parents and children separately. For parents and children, two items were used – one that asked them to rate whether they had obtained new friendships and one which asked them to rate whether they had strengthened existing friendships. Each was measured on a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The perceived quality of coaches’ communication with children, the perceived quality of their management, and the perceived quality of their coaching of butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke, and freestyle were each measured using six-point Likert-type items ranging from “very poor” to “excellent.” The four stroke coaching items were highly intercorrelated and had an alpha of .95 Therefore, the four stroke coaching items were averaged to obtain an overall rating of the perceived quality of stroke coaching. Finally, the quality of club and league communications through email, bulletin boards, and the website were each measured on six-point Likert-type scales ranging from “very ineffective” to “very effective.”

Path analysis was used to examine the relationships among variables. After the expected direct effects were tested, the possibility that other predictors were important was tested hierarchically. This enabled testing of partial versus full mediation.

Parents’ overall satisfaction, sense of community with their swimming club, and sense that their children had improved their swimming significantly predicted the likelihood that their family would participate in the league the following year \(R^2 = .38\). Parents’ sense of community was driven by the sense that they and their children obtained and strengthened friendships as well as their evaluation of email and bulletin board communications \(R^2 = .64\). Parents’ sense that their children had improved their swimming, that their children had learned to strive and set goals, and that there was a strong sense of community at their
swimming club significantly predicted satisfaction ($R^2 = .52$). Their sense that their children had improved their swimming was predicted by their perceptions of the coaches’ communication with swimmers and the quality of their management ($R^2 = .31$). Their sense that their children had learned to strive and set goals was predicted by their perceptions of coaches’ communication with children, their management, and their stroke coaching ($R^2 = .38$). Their perceptions of the coaches’ quality of communication with children was predicted by their perceptions of the quality of email communication and bulletin board communication ($R^2 = .10$). Their perceptions of the coaches’ quality of management was predicted by their ratings of bulletin board communications and the website ($R^2 = .25$).

It is concluded that the sense of community parents obtain in their children’s sport organization plays a pivotal role in their overall satisfaction and in their intentions to return. Further that effect complements the effect of their sense that their children improve their skills. It is also noted that club and league communications affect parent evaluations of coaches and their sense of community. Friendships play a vital role in sense of community, as do club and league communications. Finally, the coaches’ role as a manager and communicator is as important to parental evaluations of the sport experience as is the coaches’ role as an instructor. Implications for program design and the management of youth sport clubs and leagues are discussed.