Understanding the Impact of Competitive Youth Sport on the Family System

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In her review of literature in sport management regarding sport and the family, Kay (2000) noted that almost all existing research has focused on how the family influences sport participation. Findings indicate that the family is one of the primary influences for both sport entry and continued participation. In fact, Kay and Lowrey (2003) noted that in some families, sport becomes so important that it becomes a defining characteristic of the family. Thus, it appears that sport can also impact family identity and functioning, although this perspective (i.e., sport impacting the family) is currently underdeveloped (Kay, 2000; Kay & Lowrey, 2003). This study contributes to the literature by examining the impact of sport on the family unit.

One way that participation in organized sport can impact the family unit is through consumption of resources (Dixon, Warner, & Bruening, 2008; Kay, 2000). Kay (2000) found in her interviews with 20 families of elite athletes that this impact could be conceptualized in three categories. The first and most important way in which sport had an impact on the family was financial. Second, families noted a large time commitment, which often prompted what Kay (2000) referred to as an alteration in family activity patterns. Participants noted that the time demands from sport affected their daily schedule in a way that caused some families to change vacation plans and/or work hours and even had one parent resort to sleeping in his car after dropping his child off at swim practice to gain a few hours of additional sleep. The third impact was on the relationships and the emotional well-being of family members. For example, siblings who did not participate in sport often felt jealousy toward the sport participant, or that his or her parents valued the participant’s relationship higher than their own.

To further explore this relationship between sport and the family, a family systems framework is applied in the current study (Broderick, 1993). In this framework, both the family as a whole, as well as the interrelations between parts of the system, are examined. In a basic sense, quality family functioning is maintained when the family system is in balance and a sense of homeostasis is maintained (Cox & Paley, 1997). However, individuals within the family are constantly interacting with the external environment, which in turn affects the interactions they bring to the family system and its existing subsystems. These changes affect other individuals who interact with the environment, which leads to further adaptations. The level of interdependence, the flexibility of boundaries, and the ability to be adaptive in response to external forces (to maintain stability and reorganize if necessary) all play a role in how the family system exists and functions in the broader social context (Cox & Paley, 1997).

Sport, youth sport in particular, is one element of the social context that impacts the family. As family resources are consumed particularly with the focus on one child, it is likely that siblings and parents will experience both positive and negative outcomes. Using a family systems perspective, this study examines the impact on the family of participation in competitive youth sport.

In order to gain empirical insight into the impact of sport on the family, a quantitative approach is utilized in this study. Specifically, an online survey is currently being conducted with parents, siblings, and participants of a youth sport club with branches in four Southwestern cities. Participants are 400 families (parents and children) involved with the youth sport club. Specifically, at least one parent, and all children in the family over 13 years of age have been recruited to participate in the study (the measures utilized in the study have only been validated for this age range).

The instrument is composed of four separate scales. These measure social identity, impact on the family, youth sport values, and family life quality. The measure of social identity is adapted from a scale developed and validated by Bond and Hewstone (1988); it is a seven-point, likert-type scale with responses scored from strongly disagree to strongly agree. An example question is: “Overall, my membership with the sport club has very little to do with how I feel about myself”. Sport impact on the family is measured using Stein and Riessman’s (1980) Impact on the Family Scale, which measures how a situation that demands large amounts of resources impacts the family. The youth sport values questionnaire was developed and revised by Lee, Whitehead, Nioumanis, and Hatzigeorgiadis (2008). This thirteen item scale consists of three dimensions: status, moral, and competence. To measure the overall life quality in families, we utilized the Perceptual Indicators of Family Life Quality scale (Rettig, Danes, & Bauer, 1991).

Each family in the sport club was contacted via email with an explanation of the study, opportunity for consent (for both adults and children), and a study participation number (to track families and match children’s and parents’ responses). The email contained links to both the parent and child surveys. Parents were asked to help their children log-on to the site, but to please allow their children to complete the survey without supervision, so they could respond as candidly and openly as possible.
This data for this study are currently being collected. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and multiple regressions will be utilized to examine the parent’s, the participant’s, and the other siblings’ perspectives on the sport participation experience, patterns in responses on each scale, as well as the relationship of demographics (e.g., family income, family structure) to the outcomes, and the relationships between demographics, social identity, and youth sport values on family functioning and life quality.

The expected results from this study (based on the literature and on pilot data) are that there will be some families that are able to adapt to the demands of having a child participate year round in youth sport and some families that do not. We expect that shared sport values, family structure, and family resources (e.g., education, income) will relate to both family functioning and life-quality (cf. Dixon et al., 2008; Kay & Lowrey; 2003). Implications for club managers, coaches, and families will also be discussed.