An Exploration of Immigrant Fathers’ Influence on Ethnic Youth Sport Programs

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Fathers play a significant role in their children’s sport participation choices (Jeanes & Magee, 2011). It is often a father who corrects his child’s grip on a baseball bat and teaches him where he should run after a hit. There has been a long tradition of fathers engaging in sport with their children (Kay, 2009); however, the tradition does not always translate to other cultures. The meaning and significance of fatherhood is based on the social and cultural context in which it occurs (Strier & Roer-Strier, 2010). As more and more sport organizations work to recruit children into their programs, fathers may serve an important marketing function through their influence on the sport consumption choices of their children. While substantial efforts in sport management have been made to research parental influences on developing youth sport (see Green & Chalip, 1997, 1998), a father’s role in children’s sport participation may be changing due to changes in current family structure and parenting views.

Child-rearing is widely instructed by cultural models that vary from country to country (Harkness & Super, 1996). Immigrant parents’ child-rearing encompasses a complicated process in which both ethnic and mainstream cultures are neither parallel nor opposite of each other (Nguyen, Messe, & Stollak, 1999). For example, immigrant fathers’ ethnic values and beliefs might shape negative perceptions of children’s sport, resulting in less fatherly involvement in their children’s sport. However, an immigrant might be more willing to take a chance to be more involved as a sport parent in accordance with their immigration to the U.S. This situation presents an obvious opportunity for sport managers and programs, especially in youth sport. However, we are still not sure how immigrant fathers in the U.S. get involved in children’s sport programs and how they affect children’s sport participation. Thus, this study serves (a) to describe various roles immigrant fathers exhibit in children’s sport programs, (b) to identify facilitators and/or barriers affecting their involvement in children’s sport participation, and (c) to explain how the interplay of immigrant fathers’ cultural values and acculturation affect their children’s sport participation.

Korean immigrant fathers whose children are participating in sport programs at an ethnic community school formed the sampling frame. The school is located in a mid-sized urban city in the southwestern area of the U.S., and all of the youth sport programs took place during weekends. Most of the students are Korean and Korean-Americans whose ages range from three to ten. In preliminary in-depth interviews, five Korean fathers have voluntarily participated in research to date. Interview transcripts were carefully reviewed multiple times by several researchers including ethnic and American researchers to interpret and explain the differences and similarities that emerged from the interviewees. In the data analysis, meaningful pieces of information were identified through coding schemes that each individual researcher developed, and then common features among them were found based on the coding schemes. This process was iterated until full saturation was achieved among researchers and no new themes and information were emerging.

The interview data suggest that the roles Korean immigrant fathers exhibited in children’s sport programs were similar to those of U.S. fathers (e.g., providing transportation, volunteering for youth programs, purchasing equipment, coaching teams, mentoring, observing and encouraging children, and practicing together). Identified constraints were a lack of time and information, a lack of opportunity due to a spouse’s tight control over child-rearing, existing cultural bias, and a sense of strangeness with immigrant life. On the other hand, facilitators were mainstream media, other ethnic friends, a desire for acculturation, breaking the child-rearing routine, and the receptiveness of the sport program (i.e., ethnic school). Still, the cultural values of immigrant fathers served as an obstacle to children’s sport participation. In Korean fathers’ traditional values of Confucianism, they were more likely to perceive youth sport activities as a mere supplement to children’s better academic achievement (see Farver, Kim, & Lee, 1995). However, it was found that immigrant fathers were susceptible to the design of sport programs. For example, one father, who had very few opportunities to play with his three-year-old daughter in Korea, confessed that he could become a part of “real child-rearing” through a parent-child sport program, which to him,
was more of a parenting role than a mere ‘breadwinner.’ In addition, immigrant fathers perceived ethnic sport programs as a catalyst by which they were able to acculturate to mainstream culture (e.g., experiencing volunteerism) and to initiate a child’s sport. Providing the sense of becoming a “real father” through sport programs and a high receptiveness of the sport program caused immigrant fathers to become involved in youth sport so that their children could develop through sport.

In fact, a lack of understanding of cultural differences might produce conflicts among sport participants with contrasting interpretations of the phenomenon (Suzuki, Davis, & Greenfield, 2008). For sport managers and developers, the challenge lies in creating the bridge between ethnic cocoon and formal, traditional sport system. A study of immigrant fathers’ sport fatherhood provides sport organizations with significant implications to develop and grow a new market in that they will be in a position to leverage this knowledge to design and implement programs that appeal to a diverse group of sport participants.