The role of a parent in youth sport participation is an important one. After all, a parent typically initiates a child’s sport endeavors while providing the necessary resources and support for the child to participate (e.g., Dixon, Warner, & Bruening, 2008; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Wall & Cote, 2007). Therefore, parents also have their own important experience within youth sport, and this experience may significantly impact their own and potentially their child’s attitudes and future sport participation. For example, Dorsch and colleagues’ (2009) highlighted the importance of parent-peer relationships in youth sport and noted that the parents frequently spoke about the opportunity to meet others in the community through youth sport. In addition, Lally and Kerr (2008) concluded that a child’s athletic retirement from elite sport had a significant impact on the parents’ personal and social relationships, sometimes leading parents to pressure their children to continue participation. While much of the youth sport literature has focused on child participants and their sport experience (e.g., Coakley & White, 1999), very little work has examined the quality of the parent’s experiences (Green & Chalip, 1997). Since parental buy-in is critical to ensuring healthy sport participation, a greater understanding of the parental experience and its impact on youth participation is needed (e.g., Byrne, 1993; Dixon et al., 2008).

The first step toward this end is to more clearly understand parents’ experiences and outcomes related to youth sport. Work in the area of sport and sense of community suggests that sport can be an effective site for building community among sport participants (Clopton, 2009; Swyers, 2010; Warner & Dixon, 2011). Elements in the sport community such as a common purpose, competition, shared emotional connection, trust, and fulfillment of needs have been found to build a sense of belonging and community among sport participants (McMillian & Chavis, 1986; Warner & Dixon, 2011, in press). This increased sense of community leads to higher commitment levels, increased satisfaction, and increased persistence in sport for the participants (Warner, 2010).

It is likely that these same (or similar) elements could also work toward building community, with its associated outcomes, for parents. Parents also could share a common purpose, emotional connections, trust, and fulfillment of needs with other parents during the youth sport experience. Along with offering many life-quality enhancing benefits (Berkman et al., 2000; Davidson & Cotter, 1991), a heightened sense of community for parents could also lead to greater satisfaction with their children’s sport experience and may also increase their desire for their children to participate. In other words, if the parents are experiencing community through their children’s sport, they are likely to want them to continue participation. These assertions, however, call for empirical testing. Therefore, the guiding research questions of this inquiry are: 1) Do youth sport parents report enhanced sense of community over the course of the season? 2) What impact does sense of community have on parental satisfaction with their child’s sport experience and their desire to have them continue participation?

A pre- and post-test survey design will be utilized. Two youth sport leagues have agreed to participate, and data collection began in October. It is anticipated that the parental survey sample size will be approximately 200 parents. The 47-item parental survey, which has been reviewed by a panel of experts for face and content validity, consists of measures drawn from the community psychology literature (e.g., Chavis, 2008; Peterson et al., 2008) geared at assessing parent’s sense of community. It also includes items regarding their overall satisfaction with their child’s sport experience, and intent for their children to continue participation. In order to determine if any significant changes in social outcomes from the pre-season to the post-season for parents are observable, the data will be analyzed using a one-way repeated measures ANOVA. Relationships between sense of community and attitudes toward the youth sport program will be assessed with multiple regression.

The results of this study will help determine if any significant parental social outcomes are being achieved through the sport leagues. Since social outcomes and sense of community are related to improved life quality and overall health (e.g., Berkman et al., 2000; Davidson & Cotter, 1991), it is vital to assess the role of sport for all those involved.
Next, the impact of these outcomes on parental perceptions of the sport league will then be determined. It is expected that these will results will provide sport managers with important knowledge regarding the role of the youth sport parent. In summation, this study will contribute to the growing body of sport and sense of community literature by examining the impact on a secondary community related to sport (i.e., not just the primary participants). Practical recommendations for sport organizations in light of the results will also be discussed.