Youth Sport Coaches’ Perceptions of Organizational Child Abuse Policies and Training

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Each year, 30 to 40 million children participate in a variety of sport-related programs throughout the United States, generating over $5 billion annually to the youth sport industry (Wagner, Jones & Riepenhoff, 2010). Because of the significant child population, it is paramount for sport organizations to implement measures for child protection (Kerr & Sterling, 2008). Of particular concern for youth sport administrators is the abuse and maltreatment of participants in their sport programs. High profile cases have brought attention to this issue, particularly in regards to coach-athlete relationships (Crouse, 2013; Drehs, 2011; Frecch, 2012). As coaches are charged with the development of children, the relationships they establish can, at times, lead to abuse (Ihmoud, 2011). Organizations that provide opportunities to youth have come under scrutiny to ensure that coaches of their programs do not engage in behaviors that are perceived as abusive in nature. To address this, many programs provide training to their coaches that educate them on how to identify and address issues related to identifying and reporting suspected child abuse (Noble & Vermillion, 2013).

Studies conducted on child protection in sport have indicated a number of issues appear to hamper the implementation of policies and other measures geared toward protecting children from abusive behaviors, such as a lack of resources, fear, and administrative difficulties (Parent, 2011). Research has also shown a policy void relating to child protection between sport federations and affiliated local clubs, indicating measures implemented by higher-level organizations rarely reach their lower-lever counterparts (Brackenridge 2002, Brackenridge et al., 2004).

Administrators of programs, though versed about their child protection policies, often encounter numerous administrative problems in carrying out said policies, such as long delays in criminal background checks or problems with regard to the sharing of information about offending coaches among sport organizations (Brackenridge et al., 2004). Other agencies fail to address allegations of abuse for fear of losing successful coaches and denying the existence of abuse in their organizations (Malkin, Johnson & Brackenridge, 2000). In terms of child abuse and coaching, previous research in this area have focused on issues primarily related to coaching education (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005; Wurtele, 2012), the prevalence of abuse from coaches in certain sports (Brackenridge, 1994; Gervis & Dunn, 2004), and the assessment of risks of abuse from coaches (Brackenridge, 1997). These studies have mostly been conducted in a European context, and current knowledge on the subject of child abuse awareness of coaches, particularly in the United States, remains scant (Parent, 2011).

The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions of youth sport coaches’ awareness of their organizations’ policies relating to signs and symptoms of child abuse, and reporting procedures concerning such abuse. It seeks to investigate youth sport coaches' self-reported knowledge related to the following: 1) signs and symptoms of child maltreatment, 2) reporting procedures for child abuse, 3) their awareness of their organizations’ policies pertaining to child abuse, and 4) the perceived effectiveness of training provided by their organization regarding the reporting of child abuse.

Youth sport coaches from public recreation departments, non-profit organizations, educational institutions, and for-profit businesses that offer youth sport and recreation programs were targeted by the researcher. For the purpose of this study, a youth sport coach is defined as one who is responsible for the instruction of sport and recreation activities to children 17 years of age and younger. A convenience sampling of 500 coaches of youth sport programs throughout the United States were identified as potential subjects through an Internet search of organizations with youth sport programs. The survey instrument incorporated elements of a questionnaire developed by Brackenridge (2002), used to determine the nature and scope of organizational policies and practices. The first portion of the survey uses a 5-point Likert scale assessing their level of agreement with 12 statements related to (a) competence in identifying and assessing various types of child abuse, (b) knowledge of reporting procedures, and (c) attitudes toward their organization's policies and procedures regarding child abuse. The second portion of the survey requests specific demographic information, such as gender, ethnic background, experience coaching youth sports, sport(s)
coached, years in their current position, and educational background. Content validity of the instrument was established through an extensive review of pertinent literature, and evaluated by a panel that consisted of two experts in the field of child abuse prevention (one case worker and one prevention program manager), three youth sport coaches with a variety of coaching experience (working in public, non-profit, and private settings) and two sport management faculty with extensive (10 years or more) experience in management and survey research. The panel was asked to provide their opinions of the questionnaire and give feedback on the measure and procedure. Based on their feedback, some items were changed for readability (Andrew et al, 2011). Results from the survey will be compared with the demographic data using measures of central tendencies. Group differences will also be examined using chi-squares.

At the time of this submission, the study was in progress, and will be completed by the date of the presentation. It is anticipated that the results of this study will contribute to existing literature in assisting youth sport administrators and coaches in the development and implementation of policies and procedures that place the safety of their youth participants as their main priority (Brackenridge, 2002). Discussion will include the practical implications of the results for administrators of youth sport programs, as well as limitations and suggestions for future research.