Exploring Youth Attrition in the Oakville Soccer Club

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The attrition of children from sport and physical activity is a concern within Canada as sport and recreational administrators at the community, provincial, and national levels work to keep young participants involved. The large majority of youth and adult Canadians who report regular participation in organized sport are engaged in a community-based club of some kind (Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, 2005). Community sport organizations (CSOs) are nonprofit and volunteer based organizations that provide accessible and affordable pathways to participate in sport and physical recreation in our communities (Cuskelly, 2004). However, there is high turnover within these clubs, with over 90% of young sport participants dropping out of at least one sport between Grades 2 and 10, and only 5% still participating in every sport they started (Butcher, Lindner, & Johns, 2002). As such, is increasingly important to retain those that are currently members of CSOs, helping them to maintain a healthy lifestyle and becoming active for life.

Individuals may choose not to participate in recreational sport programs because of a variety of perceived leisure constraints (Young, Ross, & Barcelona, 2003). Constraints to leisure sports are any factors that limit or block the duration, frequency, and quality of an individual's participation (Ellis, & Rademacher 1987), and can be separated into three categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991; Hawkins, Peng, Hsich, & Eklund, 1999). Jackson et al. (1993) later suggested that these constraints are nested in a single hierarchical model. Intrapersonal constraints are internal and related to perceptions of oneself (e.g., perceived self-skill, perceived appropriateness of activities) (Crawford et al., 1991); in Jackson et al.’s 1993 hierarchical model, intrapersonal constraints are the most powerful of the three categories. Interpersonal constraints are those that are derived from relationships with others, such as the inability to find friends with whom to pursue the desired activity, and lack of social support (Balaska, Alexandris, Kouthouris, & Poltidou, 2012; Crawford et al., 1991). Structural constraints are external constraints and are related to the limited or lack of resources for activity participation (e.g., transportation, facility availability, opportunity availability) (Crawford et al., 1991), and are considered the most distal and least important category in Jackson et al. (1993)’s hierarchical model of constraints.

Constraints literature within the recreation context has focused on the relationship between perceived constraints and level of participation. Research has found a negative relationship between perceived constraints and sport participation (Alexandris & Caroll, 1997; Caroll & Alexandris, 1997; Casper, Bocarro, Kanters & Myron, 2011; Son, Mowen, & Kerstetter, 2008; White, 2008). However, perceived constraints can affect more than just participation or nonparticipation, including activity preference as individuals do not want to participate in activities that they perceive they cannot do (Crawford & Godbey, 1987).

Despite a wide range of studies on the relationship between sport participation and perceived constraints, few studies have focused on the constraints perceived by parents and guardians of child participants in sport (Armentrout & Kamphoff, 2011). Parents have been shown to be key influencers in their children’s sport participation through the transmission of family cultures (Birchwood, Roberts, & Pollock, 2008) and through their role as ‘gatekeepers’ of economic and social resources for their children (Armentrout & Kamphoff, 2011; Wheeler, & Green, 2012). Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine barriers and constraints to continued child participation in a recreational program from the perspective of parents/guardians. Crawford et al.’s (1991) framework of constraints to leisure sports guided an exploration of the experiences of lapsed consumers, and their perceived constraints to continued participation.

The context of the study is the Oakville Soccer Club, a large not-for-profit soccer club with more than 12,000 players and over 900 volunteer and professional coaches that has identified youth attrition across its summer outdoor house league programs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six parents or guardians of seven previous
participants. Prospective interviewees were contacted with an invitation to participate in the study via email by the soccer club on behalf of researchers. Telephone interviews were arranged at the interviewee’s convenience and conducted by the first author. The semi-structured interview guide explored the experiences and barriers to continued participation perceived by both the parents/guardians and their child(ren). Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis is underway and comprises a priori (deductive) coding based on Crawford et al.’s (1991) framework, and emergent (inductive) coding to identify any sub-themes within those broader categories (Patton, 2002).

Preliminary findings indicate that parents/guardians experienced a broad set of constraints to their child’s participation in the soccer program, primarily consisting of intrapersonal, and structural constraints. Interpersonal constraints (such as perceptions of their child’s skill level) were a strong factor in withdrawal from the soccer club. Additionally, structural constraints, such as facility schedule and suitability, as well as availability of skilled coaches, played a role in attrition. However, interpersonal constraints, such as financial resources and time availability did not play an important role in continued participation. Preliminary findings thus indicate that intrapersonal and structural constraints may be the most limiting for continued youth participation in CSOs.

Findings will add to the leisure constraint literature through an understanding of the constraints that parents, as key decision makers in their child’s sport and leisure participation, perceive and the role that these constraints play in the final decision to withdraw participation. Findings also have implications for strategies that community sport clubs can implement to limit perceived constraints and thus retain young participants.