**High-performance adolescent female basketball players’ views on parental involvement**

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**Introduction**

Given the wide range of benefits associated with children’s and young people’s participation in sport (see, Bailey, 2006) factors contributing toward dropout from sport (see, Wall & Côté , 2007) form a significant focus for studies in youth sport. The sudden increase in dropout from sport around the age of twelve to thirteen is of particular concern and is particularly marked with girls. A ‘massive’ number of teenage girls drop out of sport from the age of thirteen Given the wide range of benefits associated with children’s and young people’s participation in sport (see, Bailey, 2006) factors contributing toward dropout from sport form a significant focus for studies in youth sport (see, Wall & Côté , 2007). The sudden increase in female dropout from sport is particularly marked with girls from the age of thirteen to fifteen and has attracted research attention across a range of settings (Sarrazin, Vallerand, Guillet, Pelletier & Cury, 2002). It has, however, tended to focus on girls playing sport at participation level at the expense of studies on girls playing at more competitive, performance levels where the factors operating to shape dropout are likely to be very different, but just as significant.

There is a wide range of biological, social and psychological factors shaping adolescent girls’ experiences of participation in sport and their decisions about continuing or dropping out (see Wall & Côté , 2007) but some of the youth sport research has identified the significant influence that parental involvement has on participation in sport and particularly as children and young people moving into what Côté and colleagues call the specialising phase in their Development Model for Sport Participation (DMSP) from the age of 13 to 16 (Côté & Hay, 2007; Knight & Holt, 2014).

Focused on girls aged fourteen to fifteen playing high performance level basketball in one team within a Melbourne basketball club to examine the influence that their parents have on their enjoyment of playing basketball at this level. It follows on from the positive approach taken by Light, Harvey and Mermmert’s study on swimming in Australia, France and Germany to look for the positive aspects of participation that encourage them to continue their participation at that level. Basketball has a very high participation rate among children and youth and is a high profile female sport with the women’s national basketball team ranked second in the world.

**Parents and youth sport**

With growing recognition of the deep and lasting learning that arises from young people’s and children’s participation in sport research, suggests that parents not only influence children’s socialization into sport, but also that they have a deep impact upon the nature of their experiences of participation that shapes their psychological, physical, social and cognitive development (Brustad, 2003; Côté & Hay, 2001; Knight & Holt, 2014; Light, 2008).

Modern organized youth sport has moved a long way from being unstructured child’s play toward being far more serious and competitive activity to the extent that there is concern over the imposition of competitive adult values and the ethical learning that takes place through participation in sport (Kerr, & Stirling, 20113). However, while participation in youth sports can yield physical, psychological and social benefits it is still imperative that children and young people have fun playing sports and are allowed to benefit from the positive social and moral learning ath is possible from participation in sport (Kerr & Stirling; DeMartelaer, de Brouw & Struyven, 2013). This means that coaches and parents alike need to keep in mind that young athletes are not miniature adults and to keep in mind that as children they have the right to play and enjoy it (Kerr & Stirling, 2013). Youth sports are first and foremost a play activity, and the children deserve to enjoy sports in their own way, making it important that programs remain child centered and do not become adult dominated (Kerr & Stirling).

**The Development Model for Sports Participation (DMSP**

The DMSP suggests that children and young people pass through three distinct phases in a process of socialization into sport. In the sampling phase (6-12 years) they ‘sample’ a range of different sports with an emphasis on fun and deliberate (structured) play and can drop out of organized sport or shift into recreational sport or leisure activities during this phase or move on into a specializing phase from the age of around 13 to 16. During the specializing phase children move from deliberate play to deliberate (structured) practice aimed at improving performance. They reduce participation in other sports and take part in more serious practice that still maintains fun and enjoyment as a central element of their participation. From the specializing phase young people are then seen to move into an investment phase that involves an increasing focus on one sport with a commitment to intensive training and competitive success from around the age of 16. In this phase young people ‘invest’ time and effort in a single sport. This progression seems to be relatively linear as long as young people stay involved in organized, competitive sport but during all three phases in the DMSP children and young people can move sideways into recreational sport where participation is more fun and informal or by drop out of sport completely. The girls in this study were fourteen to fifteen years of age at the time of the study, which places them in the specializing phase of the DMSP.

**Methodology**

A constructivist grounded theory approach was used, where the generation of theory is grounded in the data was developed through and ongoing process of developing emerging theories from the data that were tested in subsequent rounds of data generation, leading to the identification of theory grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006). The data generated reflected the participants’ meanings originating from their interactions with their setting. The data drawn on in this article were generated from a larger study on the nature of participation in high level basketball for girls aged 14-15 years.

***The site***

The study was conducted in the under 16 A team within one of the strongest basketball clubs in Australia located in the city of Melbourne.

***The participants***

Six girls were randomly selected from those who responded to an invitation sent to all girls playing in under-16 years teams to participate to volunteer to take part in the study. The study had ethical clearance from Federation University Australia. They are referred to under the pseudonyms of Breanne, Kiera, Laura, Tayla, Beth and Zoe (Ricardo, you have to change these names because they are their actual names)

***Data generation & analysis methods***

The data were generated through an initial questionnaire sent to all girls in the four under sixteen year’s teams in the club. Analysis of this data was then used to develop the questions for the first interview in a series of three, conducted before training on Sundays over the season and of approximately 40 minutes duration, giving a total of approximately 720 minutes of interview data. Analysis was conducted using grounded theory methodology.

**Results**

***1. Passive support and encouragement***

The strongest theme was the need for unquestioning support from parents: “My parents support me completely. If you are having a rough trot and are down they will help you back up. They drive you around. Whether I am doing good or not so good they are there” (Beth).

They all played basketball at the highest level for their age in Australia and took great pride in their team’s performance over a long and testing season. However, as enjoyable as it seemed to be for them, and as cohesive as the team seemed to be, playing at this level created pressure for them, even if only from their own expectations of success and their deep desire to do the best for the team. This meant that they wanted support and understanding from their parent, and not more pressure.

Young people in the specialising phase need emotional support from their parents and for them to be understanding (Côté, 1999) instead of ‘parent coaching’. They wanted support but, at other times, to be left alone: “If I need them they are there, but if I don’t want them around, they understand that I kind of need my space” (Breane). The girls expressed gratitude for their parents giving up their time to drive them to practice and competition games. They were also thankful for the ways in which their parents tried to lift their spirits when they were down, to motivate them and to boost their confidence when needed. When asked what parents in general should do to help their children, Liera said that they should: “Encourage them and keep a positive attitude”.

***Active support: Pushing them when they need it***

In addition to what we suggest could be seen as providing passive support when needed, the girls valued being ‘pushed’ when they needed it. This was a case of them wanting their parents to be a little more assertive than just being there for support or offering words of encouragement: “Yeah they are always encouraging me and pushing me to do better... They are always running us around to training and games. They wouldn’t do it if they didn’t see something in it for us” (Laura). When asked who had helped her enjoy basketball and develop her talent, Tayla nominated her mother: “My mother, because she supports me all the time and pushed me when I need it. She is really involved”.

*Constructive criticism*

In addition to seeing a need to be pushed at times several girls suggested that a little “constructive criticism” was helpful at times because they did not want to always be told how good they were. This honesty was also something they valued with their coach. Although the literature suggests that parents of young people in the specialising phase should just take a back-up role these girls wanted some parental input that was critical, but not personal. When asked what advice she would give to parents of girls of her age in any sport Breane said that:

…maybe, giving constructive criticism saying, ‘you’re really good at this but this needs to improve’ and I think the communication channels are something that a lot of girls struggle with because they can’t deal with a lot of yelling whereas, if you have the approach like, spoke to them in a different manner, I think they’d be more motivated.

Beth comes from a family that has a big involvement in basketball with both parents and her sister playing basketball. She is happy with their involvement and with getting some constructive criticism and some sport-specific advice:

Mom and dad always, if they are watching my game, they’re always helping me to try to improve what I’m doing and stuff. When I was younger it was really important. They pushed me to stay in sports, like in “*a*” sport. It didn’t matter what sport. I chose basketball because my sister was doing it and I think that’s the big thing I wanted to be like her. (…) and my parents just helped me to get where I am.

Tayla’s advice for parents provides a good summary of all the six girls’ belief that the ideal role a parent should play is not limited to providing support but should extend to pushing their children to do things that they may not want to at the time:

Encourage them, like if they don’t want to do something, and you know that it’s good for them, push them to do it. That’s what my mom had to do, find a way to do camp or something. I really didn’t want to go and she pushed me to do it and I end up liking it and learning a lot from it. Make sure that they always have fun but learn at the same time and always stay positive during everything. And know that you are going to have fun but also work hard at the same time.

**Discussion**

The extensive data generated over eight months provides deep insight into the nature of the girls participation in their team and the social meaning it held in their lives but its focus on only six girls in one team does not allow for generalizing from the results. However, the findings of this study lend support to previous research suggesting the positive influence of support from parents on children and adolescents’ self-perceptions, affective responses, and motivation (Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Brustad, 1993). They also highlight the crucial role that positive perceptions of support and care can play in promoting motivation, self-esteem and self-worth in schooling and participation in sport (see, Agne, 1992; Harter, 1993; Jones, 2009; Kentel, 2011; Martinek, Schilling & Hellison, 2006). They support Côtè’s (1999) contention that, despite high expectations, parents of athletes who make it to elite status ‘back off’ during the specializing phase to ‘facilitate’ their children’s progress. They do, however, provide a little more detail to identify a range of support from *passive* to *active* that the girls in the study felt contributed to keeping girls their age in sport and helped them be their best. This *active* support involves parents being assertive but, at the same time, positive by giving the positive feedback and providing the supportive socio-cultural environment required to motivate young athletes and help them to realise their talent (Keegan et al, 2009; Wuerth et al, 2004).

This study lends support to claims about the importance of creating an appropriate environment for developmental needs and the best interests for children and young people (Kerr & Stirling, 2012) but suggests that stepping back and providing support in the specializing phase can and should, at times, still involve some direct involvement that could be seen as being *active support,* as long as it is always positive.

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