

# Minnesota PLAYS™ (Parents Learning About Youth Sports): A Research-Based Parent Education Solution

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As one of the most powerful societal institutions, sport impacts children, youth, families and communities. Organized youth sports can provide a positive, meaningful context for youth development and family engagement. However, the impact for some can be negative and the challenges facing thousands of children and families as a result of their involvement in youth sports are broad and complex. These include burnout, drop out, overuse injuries, cheating, violence, over-scheduling, inequalities, inadequately trained coaches, parental over/under involvement, oversight and policy issues (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004).

Thousands of children enter youth sport each year through school and community-based programs and the quality of their experiences and resulting outcomes are determined by adults—the coaches, administrators and parents who create, manage and influence youth sports. These adults are often searching for help in developing an optimal sport experience for children and youth in sports, but fail to find accessible, centralized research-based expertise. Parents play a critical role in providing opportunities for their children to participate in youth sports (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004), but parents receive very little education on how to create a positive sport experience for their child-athlete. Recently, a panel of interdisciplinary experts completed a Youth Sport Report Card that assigned a “D” grade to the status of Parental Behavior and Involvement in youth sports (Citizenship Through Sports Alliance, 2005). To address this community need, and fulfill the mission of a land-grant institution, members of the Minnesota Youth Sport Research Consortium (MNYSRC), housed within the School of Kinesiology at the University of Minnesota developed Parents Learning About Youth Sports—PLAYS™.

## What is PLAYS™?

PLAYS™ is a research-based curriculum for parents of youth athletes. The PLAYS™ program is unique in four distinct ways, it; 1) is developed organically, in collaboration with the local community or youth sport organization to meet their needs and objectives, 2) incorporates data of parents' perception of the youth sport climate in their community, 3) is a customized, rather than a “one size fits all” program which enables parents to personally reflect on their own behavior in comparison to locally collected data pertaining to perceptions

of sport parent behavior and, 4) uses original research and research-based strategies from multiple disciplines to help parents increase awareness, and change behavior.

The format is based on effective adult learning praxis which is interactive and blended—including discussion, lecture, video, and short activities (Silberman, 1998). The curriculum combines existing research in child development, sport psychology, positive youth development, moral development, and educational psychology, with data collected within each organization that partner with PLAYS™. As an organic (i.e., a program that occurs or develops gradually and naturally, without being forced or contrived) community-based educational program that integrates data collected on-site, PLAYS™ is adaptable to the unique needs of different youth sport communities. To date, PLAYS™ has been delivered to predominately white, middle- to upper-class, suburban sport parents. Efforts are underway to customize PLAYS™ with evidence-based information, to address issues that influence the behaviors of sport parents in diverse populations.

An objective of PLAYS™ is to increase the likelihood that parents and parent-coaches will create a positive climate from the outset of their child's sport participation. A positive climate is one in which intrinsic motivation—the type of motivation that sustains participation, fosters enjoyment and well-being, and makes optimal development and performance more likely to occur—is developed and maintained. PLAYS™ helps parents understand their roles in creating healthy, family-friendly youth sport opportunities that not only benefits everyone in the community, but helps ensure *all* children PLAY, stay, and enjoy sports! PLAYS™ is targeted toward “rookie” sport parents—parents of first and second grade children—who are well intentioned and relatively new to the realm of youth sports. PLAYS™ educates parents at the genesis of their child's sport “career” before relatively destructive or maladaptive behaviors that might have deleterious effects of children have time to develop, become entrenched and normalized—and therefore become harder to change. PLAYS™ helps educate parents on how to “get it right” rather unintentionally act in ways that create a toxic climate or undermine intrinsic motivation for their children.

With the perception of growing problems associated with the increased professionalization of organized youth sports (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004) PLAYS™ is a proactive program designed to combat and prevent common negative parent behaviors documented in youth sport settings (Omli, LaVoi, & Weise-Bjornstal, 2007). Negative parent behaviors occur more often within a professionalized youth sport setting due to investments of time and money, over involvement, and a highly-competitive adult driven focus on winning rather than fun and enjoyment of the children (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). While not empirically tested, arguably parent behaviors such as yelling at the referees, coaches, and athletes on the field for example, may be distracting, embarrassing, and create anxiety and stress for children that in time may lead to sport dropout (Omli & LaVoi, 2007). PLAYS™ is founded on the idea that reaching parents “early on” might help prevent the onslaught of youth sport drop out that peaks around adolescence (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1996). By keeping children engaged in youth

sports, they are afforded the opportunity to reap the developmental benefits associated with participation, including regular physical activity and sustained contact with caring adults.

### **The PLAYS™ Process**

*PLAYS™* is a program designed in collaboration with local communities. The *PLAYS™* process is different than “one size fits all” approaches common in sport parent education. What makes *PLAYS™* unique is the first step in the process—working with the community or youth sport organization to identify needs. This is accomplished through discussion and by meeting with the board or key stakeholders. Next, survey data is collected online to assess parent perceptions of the current climate of youth sport in their specific community. The multi-section survey includes demographics, perceptions about: the degree to which background anger occurs on the sidelines (*How often to you see people on the sidelines 'get into it' physically?*), youth sport impact on family time (*To what extent does youth sports interfere with family meal time?*), the moral atmosphere (*How many of the parents of your child's teammates feel playing rough is part of the game?*) and satisfaction with the youth sport experience (*How satisfied are you with your child's sport experience?*). The survey items have been used and been proven reliable and valid in the youth sport literature (Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi & Power, 2005; Shields, LaVoi, Bredemeier, & Power 2007). Online data collection is used for convenience and utility, in addition to the fact that web-based surveys appear to be an effective means for collecting data in middle class communities (Lonsdale, Hodge, & Rose, 2006). Community data is analyzed and woven into the curriculum to provide a compelling case for parents to address issues within youth sport, including their role in the creation of a positive climate. The *PLAYS™* program is then piloted with the youth sport organization board for formative evaluation and to ensure that the leaders of the organization have “bought into” the program. Changes are suggested and slight modifications are made to the program to ensure the program meets the needs of the youth sport organization. The program is finalized, marketed to the community and delivered to parents of first and second grade children. *PLAYS™* faculty also encourage the youth sport organization to invite and collaborate with school system, parks and recreation, and community parent groups (i.e. Parent-Teacher Association [PTA]) in order to achieve the most impact on the community and help everyone get on the same page in creating a positive climate in youth sports. *PLAYS™* appears to be a unifying force for those who care about youth in the community, and groups have been very open to coalescing around delivery of the program. Opinion surveys are collected at the conclusion of the program to be utilized to discern if additional modifications of the program are necessary. Additional online data is collected once a year, so the community may monitor changes—if they choose to do so—in parents' perceptions of the climate of youth sport programs. The process of developing and administering the *PLAYS™* program is unique within the current marketplace of sport parent education; but is also designed to be exportable and sustainable. Local data can be quickly imported into the

curriculum to attain customization, cost is effective, length of *PLAYS™* requires minimal commitment, and the delivery mechanism is replicable.

### **Components of the PLAYS™ Program**

The *PLAYS™* program combines research findings from fields such as sport psychology and child development with original research done by the MNYSRC. Research components of previous scholars which have been detailed elsewhere and are utilized within *PLAYS™* includes: participation motivation (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1996), parent created sport climate (LaVoi & Babkes Stellino, in press; White 1996; 1998), achievement goal theory (Nicholls, 1984; 1989; Duda & Nicholls, 1992), and moral development (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Complementing existing knowledge are newly developed ideas based on the research and community involvement of the MNYSRC related to reducing negative parental behavior at youth sport events, some of which are summarized below.

KIDS SPEAK (Omli, 2007) is a research project involving child preferences for parent spectator behavior at youth sport events. Understanding the behaviors preferred by children is important because some parents engage in behaviors that are distracting, embarrassing, or hurtful, simply because they do not know how children *want them* to behave. Findings from the KIDS SPEAK project are presented to parents in order to promote “attentive silence,” a pattern of behavior preferred by children that involves watching the action in a game or match silently until a positive effort or result occurs, at which time children prefer cheering and encouragement.

*PLAYS™* specifically addresses negative and inappropriate parent behavior by educating parents on the effects of “background anger” on children. Background anger (Omli & LaVoi, 2007) is operationalized as the presence of a verbal, nonverbal, or physical conflict between two or more individuals that does not directly involve an observer (Cummings, 1987), but nonetheless can potentially produce negative consequences for the observer. Data related to the frequency and variety of background anger is collected both from the local community, and is compared to aggregate results collected from other local youth sport contexts.

For some parents, understanding that children do not want them to act as demanding coaches or crazed fans is enough incentive for parents to act appropriately. For others, understanding the potential negative effects of their behavior on children and appealing to parents to act in ways that promote the collective good will motivate parents to act appropriately. In addition, if these incentives are not enough, *PLAYS™* also includes discussion of the “cocktail party phenomenon” (Cherry, 1953; Moray, 1959) to raise parental awareness of how their behavior can influence the performance of their children. Parents are told that what they say on the sidelines can indeed be heard by their child—much in the same way one can hear their name across a crowded noisy room at a cocktail party—and that it unnecessarily distracts, if even for a moment, the child's attention from the sport task at hand. Lastly, parents are taught personal and collective strategies to help improve the youth sport climate for everyone. Two noteworthy practical strategies include: a)

"The Bridge" (Johnson & Johnson, 1997) a communication tool to employ and resolve conflicts with other parents, coaches, and sport administrators in a "win-win" manner and, b) The ABC Model, which teaches parents to "Ask" children what they prefer rather than assume, "Believe" what the children say, and then work to "Change" their behavior to meet the needs and preferences of the child (Omli, 2006), rather continue unaware or use means to resolve problems that contribute to background anger in the youth sport climate.

### Conclusion

There are currently a number of national (e.g., Positive Coaching Alliance, National Association of Youth Sports) and local (e.g., *Sports Done Right [Maine]*, *PACT™: Parents and Coaches Together [Minnesota Youth Soccer Association]*, *Youth First: Parents Learning About Youth Sports [Nevada]*, *Play Like a Champion [Indiana]*) educational programs designed to reduce or eliminate negative sport parent behaviors currently under scrutiny in the media and across many youth sport contexts in the United States. The *PLAYS™* program is an evidence-based solution to help reduce conflict and aid parents who are relatively new to youth sports, in working together from the genesis of their child's sport trajectory, to create a positive climate for youth athletes. It helps parents increase awareness pertaining to how their behavior may affect their child—as well as other children, coaches, and surrounding parent spectators—not to mention their own experience and enjoyment! *PLAYS™* is an organic process and locally customized educational solution and to a common—and perceived to be growing—national problem in youth sports. The program helps parents to create a positive climate in youth sports, one in which children sustain participation and continue to reap the developmental benefits which can accrue in and through sports participation. Organizations that are interested in more information about implementing Minnesota *PLAYS™* for their own communities should visit the MNYSRC web site [[www.MNYSRC.org](http://www.MNYSRC.org)].

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