Background Anger in Youth Sport: A Perfect Storm?

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Angry adult behavior at youth sport events is documented in scholarly literature (Kidman, McKenzie, & McKenzie, 1999), popular press sport parent books (Murphy, 1999), and the media (Abrams, 2006). Background anger (BA) involves the presence of an angry verbal, nonverbal, or physical interaction between two or more people that does not directly involve the observer (Cummings, 1987). Sustained exposure to BA is distressing for children and may result in long-term health consequences (Grych & Fincham, 1990), but little is known about how BA influences the sport experience and performance of children. Given recent interest in the behavior of youth sport parents, this paper adapts the BA construct to youth sport to further understanding of the influence of angry parent behaviors on children. Evidence that coaches, parents, and children frequently observe background anger in some youth sport environments is presented and implications for future research and educational intervention are discussed.

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For many youth, sport and family life work together to promote positive development, but for some the influence of parents in youth sport may be less than positive. In addition to fights involving youth sport parents, coaches, and officials that have been reported in popular media (Abrams, 2006; Kuyper, 2006), many children participate in youth sport while parents yell at or argue with officials, coaches, or other spectators in the background. Little is known about how exposure to potentially distressing behavior of parent spectators influences youth sport participants. Early research involving youth sport parents conducted during the 1980s focused on parents as a source of stress due to perceived parental pressure to perform (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984), pressure to continue participating in sport (Hellstedt, 1988), and fear of negative performance evaluation (Passer, 1983). Minimal attention (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2006) has been given to the behavior of youth sport parents as a potential source of stress for youth sport participants, therefore, the purpose of the present paper is to consider how exposure to angry youth sport parent behavior such as yelling at officials may influence children.

Investigation of parents in youth sport is not new (Hellstedt, 1987; Randall & McKenzie, 1987; Walley, Graham, & Forehand, 1982), but youth sport parent research has accelerated recently. Researchers have focused on the influence parents have on the young athletes participation motivation (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005), achievement goals and beliefs about success (White, Kavassanu, Tank & Wingate, 2004), motivational outcomes (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006), good and poor sport behaviors (Babkes Stellino & LaVoi, 2006), and the children's sport career (Gould, Lauer, Roman, & Pierce, 2005; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004). Other researchers have focused on relational considerations such as the mediating role parents play in the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005), joys and challenges of youth sport parents (Wiersma & Fifer, 2005), and the unique relationship dynamic present in the child-parent/coach relationship (Weiss & Fretwell, 2004).

With the exception of Walley et al. (1982) and McKenzie and colleagues (Kidman, McKenzie, & McKenzie, 1999; Randall & McKenzie, 1987) few investigations of the parent as spectator exist. Randall and McKenzie (1987) found that youth soccer spectators engage in silent observation for most (87%) of each game but spectators engaged in verbal interactions during the remainder of the game, offering mostly instructional (74.4%) comments, as well as positive (19.8%) and negative (5.8%) comments. Kidman et al. (1999) found that most parental comments are positive, however, more than a third of comments made by parents were negative.

More recently, Goldstein (2005) has focused on sideline rage. Shields and colleagues (Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, & Power, 2005; Shields, LaVoi, Bredemeier, & Power Shields, 2007) have examined perceptions of sideline behavior during youth sport competitions, and others...
have focused on the content of parent verbal reactions to sport performance (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, in press). Shields et al. (2005, 2007) found that large numbers of parents, coaches, and athletes report witnessing parents or other spectators angrily yelling at sport officials and coaches, while a smaller percentage of parents, coaches, and athletes report witnessing physical aggression such as a parent hitting another spectator. Previous research suggests adults engage in a variety of behaviors on the sidelines, including positive and derogatory verbal comments (Holt et al., in press), inattentiveness and booing (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2006), and physical altercations (Shields et al., 2007). Athlete perceptions of coach and spectator behavior influence athlete self-reported poor sport behavior (Shields et al., 2007).

In the absence of adequate empirical data, what is known about sport parent sideline behavior is largely gleaned from anecdotes and media reports of deviant and outrageous behavior at youth competitions which are unfortunately not uncommon. Recent news stories from across the United States indicate that adults sometimes engage in verbally aggressive behavior such as shouting at an official, nonverbally aggressive behavior such as mooning an official, and physically aggressive behavior such as kicking an official or shooting a coach (Abrams, 2006; Kuyper, 2006). In combination, anecdotal and empirical evidence substantiates the existence of background anger at some youth sport events.

The background anger construct is defined by the presence of a verbal, nonverbal, or physical conflict between two or more individuals that does not directly involve an observer (Cummings, 1987). Though we do not wish to discount the potential influence of anger expressed directly at a child, the focus of the present paper is on the influence of anger expressed between others in the presence of child observers. A focus on background anger is important for youth sport because popular media reports suggest that conflicts often directly involve only adults—parents, coaches, and officials—but frequently occur in the presence of children (Abrams, 2006; Kuyper, 2006). Furthermore, when anger is directed at one child, many other young athletes are exposed to background anger.

The present paper will (a) review evidence which affirms that exposure to background anger in the home is distressing for children and (b) consider how the background anger construct can be used to understand how angry verbal, nonverbal, and physical conflicts influence children at youth sport events. Currently, little is known about the frequency of such behavior, therefore, although the fundamental purpose of the present paper it to adapt the developmental concept of background anger to youth sport, data will be presented to illustrate the kinds and frequencies of behaviors that parents, coaches, and participants regularly observe, which meet the necessary and sufficient conditions of background anger.
Background Anger

Seminal child development research by Cummings and colleagues (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981) provides a framework to understand and investigate the influence of background anger (BA) on children in youth sports contexts. By conducting both laboratory and home-based studies, researchers have provided compelling evidence that all forms of BA can be emotionally arousing and distressing for children across the developmental trajectory, even among children as young as 12 months of age (Cummings et al., 1981).

Home-based studies typically involve training parents to record their child's emotional and behavioral responses to everyday conflict by completing daily narratives (e.g., Cummings et al., 1981) or emotional and behavioral response checklists (e.g., Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2003), whereas laboratory procedures typically involve recording the emotional, behavioral, and physiological responses of a child who is exposed to controlled stimuli such as a video clip of a man and a woman yelling at each other. Laboratory procedures allow researchers to corroborate self-report and observational findings with physiological measures such as heart rate, blood pressure (El-Sheikh et al., 1989), and galvanic skin conductance (El-Sheikh & Cummings, 1992).

Laboratory procedures also make it possible to more precisely specify and control the type of BA presented, thereby allowing researchers to determine that the magnitude of child distress experienced during exposure to BA is contingent upon: (a) the way anger is expressed (verbal, nonverbal, physical); (b) who is expressing the anger towards whom (man-woman, man-child, woman-child, etc.) and, (c) the degree to which the anger is resolved (resolved, unresolved, or conflicted resolution) (El-Sheikh & Cummings, 1992; El-Sheikh, Cummings, & Goetsh, 1989). Research in each contingent area is reviewed next, followed by a summary of the influence of BA on children. To avoid confusion, the term background anger refers to the presence of a verbal, nonverbal, or physical conflict that does not directly involve an observer, whereas the term conflict refers to a single angry verbal, nonverbal, or physical interaction involving two or more parties.

Anger can be expressed verbally, nonverbally, physically, or in combination, but regardless of the expressive type, children will perceive and react to anger. Cummings, Vogel, Cummings, and El-Sheikh (1989) showed video vignettes of angry verbal, nonverbal, or verbal-physical inter-adult conflicts to 4-9-year-old children to investigate the influence of different forms of anger. In all anger conditions, the staged interactions were perceived as negative events and elicited negative emotions in participants. Similarly, De Arth-Pendley and Cummings (2002) found that children's reactions to nonverbal expressions of anger are similar to children's reactions to verbal and physical conflict, however, there is evidence that the magnitude of distress is greater when children are exposed to physical conflicts between adults, or an adult-
child dyad, compared to verbal conflicts (Ballard & Cummings, 1990; Cummings et al., 1981; Harger & El-Sheikh, 2003).

The influence of exposure to BA is moderated by the composition of the dyad that is engaged in conflict. Anger expressed between adults is more distressing than anger expressed between an adult and a child (El-Sheikh & Cheskes, 1995), especially when one of the adults is male (Harger & El-Sheikh, 2003). Harger and El-Sheikh (2003) also found that children react more negatively to adult-child conflicts when the conflict occurs between a man and a child rather than a woman and a child.

The influence of BA on children is partially determined by the degree of unresolved conflict. Unresolved anger has a powerful effect on children, inducing more negative emotions and greater distress than resolved anger (Cummings et al., 1989). Because children as young as 5-years-old attend to both the content and emotional tone of conflict endings, they are able to recognize conflicts that are resolved, unresolved, or come to a conflicted resolution such as an angry apology. Strategies employed to settle conflicts result in relatively predictable emotional responses in children (Cummings et al., 2003), therefore, it is not surprising that children prefer adult conflicts to be completely resolved (El-Sheikh & Cheskes, 1995).

Background Anger: Outcomes on Children

Background anger is distressing for children of all ages, though there is some evidence that younger children compared to adolescents, react to BA with greater distress and perceived threat (De Arth-Pendley & Cummings, 2002). During exposure to BA, young children engage in coping behaviors such as sharing, preoccupation, and positive affect (Cummings, 1987) and are less likely to intervene in inter-adult conflicts than adolescents, possibly due to greater distress and perceived threat (De Arth-Pendley & Cummings, 2002). After exposure to BA, young children demonstrate increased verbal aggressiveness in play (Cummings, 1987).

Children as young as 12 months of age are aware of and show emotional reactions to angry interactions (Cummings, et al., 1981) and BA continues to occasion negative emotions (Cummings et al., 1989), including sadness (Cummings, 1987), anger, and distress (El-Sheikh & Cheskes, 1995), throughout childhood and adolescence. Emotional responses to BA obtained using self-report and observational methods are consistent with physiological measures such as heart rate, blood pressure (El-Sheikh et al., 1989), and galvanic skin conductance (El-Sheikh & Cummings, 1992).

In addition to immediate behavioral, emotional, and physiological responses to BA, children exhibit long-term maladaptive reactions. The majority of research on the influence of sustained exposure to BA is conducted within the family system and examines interparent conflict and its influence on children. Interparent conflict is perceived as a greater threat to a
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Children sense of security within the social environment (Cummings et al., 1981) and is more likely to involve shame or fear that they will be drawn into familial conflict than conflict between unfamiliar adults (Grych & Fincham, 1993).

Children of marriages characterized by conflict are at increased risk of developing adjustment problems. Exposure to parental conflict is associated with internalizing behavior such as depression (Davies & Cummings, 1994; 1998) and externalizing behavior such as aggression (Davies & Cummings, 1994, 1998; Jenkins, 2000), especially among boys who blame themselves for the conflict (Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000), even though girls are more likely to react to parental conflict with assumptions of personal responsibility (Cummings, Ballard, & El-Sheikh, 1991) and self-blame (Cummings, Davies, & Simpson, 1994). In addition, Grych and Fincham (1990) found that exposure to parental conflict also is associated with interpersonal, academic, and health problems (Grych & Fincham, 1990).

A Point of Departure

Originally the background anger construct was used to study the influence of inter-adult conflict on children in the home. While the family system continues to be a productive context in which the influence of BA is assessed, youth sport offers another important context to investigate the influence of BA. Outside of family life, it is difficult to imagine an environment in which children are exposed to the frequency and variations of inter-adult and adult-child BA that are evidenced at youth sport events. Furthermore, because youth sport events occur in public, exposure to BA may be uniquely distressing for the children of parents who are involved in the conflict due to feelings of shame and embarrassment. Perceptions of the prevalence of angry verbal, nonverbal, and physical conflicts in youth sport were collected from parents, coaches, and athletes to build upon limited research that documents the existence of BA (Shields et al., 2005; 2007) and to test three exploratory hypotheses:

1. Perceptions of BA differs by stakeholder (i.e., athlete, coach, parent)
2. Perceptions of BA occurrence differs by age of athlete
3. Perceptions of BA occurrence differs by gender of athlete

Method

Sample

Athletes (N = 192), parents (N = 412), and coaches (N = 145) within a mid-western metropolitan city were surveyed as part of a program evaluation aimed at documenting and subsequently changing the sideline behavior of youth soccer parents. Athlete participants (75 male, 105 female, 11 didn't specify) ranged in age from 8-18 years of age (M = 12.3 ± 1.8) and were
predominately Caucasian (93%), followed by Hispanic (2%), African American (1%), and Asian (1%), with others failing to specify their ethnicity (3%). Parent respondents (177 male, 213 female, 25 didn't specify) ranged in age from 27-67 years of age with 69% of parents falling into the 41-50 years-old age range. Parents indicated an average of 5.8 years (3.6) of soccer parent experience. Coach respondents (119 male; 18 female; 8 didn't specify) ranged in age from 20-75 years old ($M=42.4$ 8.4), had coached soccer across a variety of levels from 1-40 years ($M=8.7$ 6.6), and 82% held a Bachelors degree or higher. Racial demographics of parents and coaches were similar to athletes. Institutional research guidelines were followed and participants provided consent and assent.

Instrumentation

Items reflecting parental behaviors documented or used in previous youth sport research (Kidman et al., 1999; Shields et al., 2005, 2007; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004) were used to assess perceptions of parent sideline behaviors from three perspectives: athlete, coach, and parent. Items were answered on a 5-point Likert scale from never (1) to all the time (5). Sample items included: How often have people on the sidelines yelled at the referee?; yelled at teammates?; cussed loud enough for athletes to hear?; and got into it with someone? The items align with the description of background anger research in child development.

Six of the ten sideline behavior items are explicit examples of background anger by definition, as the items delineate conflict between one parent and a coach, official, participant, or second parent, as observed and reported by a third party. The other four parent behaviors acted in a way that was embarrassing, coached from the sidelines, encouraged athletes to play rough, encouraged athletes to play outside the rules—do not necessarily fit the definition of BA, though each could involve BA in some instances. Children often negatively perceive parental suggestions as outright criticism, and strategic suggestions are often delivered in an angry tone (Kidman et al., 1999; Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2006), which suggests that coaching and encouragement of rough play and rule breaking from the sidelines arguably reflect background anger. For the purposes of the present paper, the latter four items are considered forms of BA.

Design and Data Analysis

Given that little is known about background anger in youth sports, in the present study a non-experimental design was employed. The design chosen is both descriptive and analytical and is appropriate to document and describe a phenomena (Creswell, 2003) the type and frequency of BA that is perceived by athletes, coaches, and parents in youth soccer. Data were collected in two ways: (1) online, completed prior to an educational session, and (2) in person,
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at a youth soccer clinic. Though the design did not allow for matching athletes with their parents or coaches, all parents were parents of children who participated in the survey, and all coaches were coaches of youth in the survey.

To test the three exploratory hypotheses and investigate trends in the occurrence of BA at youth sport events, three ANOVAs were conducted. To further understanding, increase statistical power, and reduce the number pair- and familywise comparisons which can result in Type I errors and limit understanding of the phenomena (Field, 2005), BA items and child age were aggregated into latent variables. Scores for all ten BA items were collapsed into a composite BA variable, which demonstrated acceptable internal reliability (α = .87). Child age, which ranged from 8 to 18 years old, was collapsed into four age groups reflective of developmental and competitive youth sport experiences: 8-10 year-olds; 11-13 year-olds; 14-16 year-olds; and 17-18 year-olds.

Results

Descriptive statistics drawn from the surveys are presented in Table 1. Item means ranged from 1.2 (±.53) to 3.0 (±.99) suggesting background anger occurred with a moderate amount of variability from never to some frequency within the sample.

Despite differences in the frequency with which background anger was reported by athletes, coaches, and parents, all three respondent groups were in agreement on the two most common BA behaviors—coaching from the sidelines and yelling at the referee. Coaching from the sidelines was perceived to occur with the greatest frequency (i.e. sometimes) across all respondents: athletes (M=2.8 ±1.2), parents (M=3.0 ± .99), and coaches (M=3.0 ± .95). A survey of the numbers in Table 1 reveals 9.8% of athletes perceived coaching from the sidelines occurs all the time, which differs from parent (3.6%) and coach (4.0%) perceptions. However, parents (27.2%) and coaches (26.0%) reported coaching from the sidelines occurs a lot of the time with greater frequency than did athletes (14.9%). All respondent groups reported yelling at the referee was the second most frequently perceived sideline behavior. Athletes perceived yelling at the referee occurred slightly more frequently (M=2.7 ±1.1) than did parents (M=2.4 ±.94) and coaches (M=2.5 ± .85). Athletes (11.3%) perceived yelling at the referees occurs all the time, which also differs from parent (6.0%) and coach (6.0%) perceptions.

Athletes (M=2.3 ±1.0), parents (M=2.0 ± .91), and coaches (M=2.0 ± .83) report that people on the sidelines almost never yell at a teammate. The item assessing perceptions of how often someone on the sidelines yelled directly at their own child on the field reflects the greatest discrepancy. Athletes (M=2.2 ± .96) and coaches (M=2.4 ± .83) reported this behavior
Table 1. Descriptives and Percentages of Athlete, Parent and Coach Perceptions of Coach and Spectator Sideline Background Anger.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often have those on the sideline...</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>A lot of the time</th>
<th>All the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yelled at you/your child/their child</td>
<td>2.2 (.96)</td>
<td>1.6 (.79)</td>
<td>2.4 (.83)</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yelled at a teammate / child not their own</td>
<td>2.3 (1.0)</td>
<td>2.0 (1.0)</td>
<td>2.0 (.83)</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acted in a way that was embarrassing</td>
<td>2.1 (.98)</td>
<td>2.2 (.91)</td>
<td>2.2 (.77)</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yelled at a referee</td>
<td>2.7 (1.1)</td>
<td>2.4 (.94)</td>
<td>2.5 (.85)</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yelled at your coach/you</td>
<td>1.6 (.87)</td>
<td>1.6 (.74)</td>
<td>1.7 (.73)</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got into it with someone (fan/parent)</td>
<td>1.4 (.79)</td>
<td>1.6 (.76)</td>
<td>1.8 (.92)</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach ed from the sidelines</td>
<td>2.8 (1.2)</td>
<td>3.0 (.99)</td>
<td>3.0 (1.95)</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged athletes to play rough</td>
<td>1.6 (.92)</td>
<td>1.6 (.79)</td>
<td>1.5 (.75)</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged athletes to play outside rules</td>
<td>1.2 (.53)</td>
<td>1.4 (.68)</td>
<td>1.5 (.83)</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>64.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cussed loud enough for athletes to hear</td>
<td>1.4 (.72)</td>
<td>1.4 (.72)</td>
<td>1.7 (.91)</td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

occurred more frequently than did parents ($M=1.6 \pm .79$). Fifteen percent of coaches and 28.9% of athletes perceived individuals on the sideline never yell at their own child/at them directly, while a far greater percentage of parents (55.9%) reported this never happens.

Encouraging athletes to play outside the rules was perceived to occur with the least frequency across all respondents: athletes ($M=1.2 \pm .53$), parents ($M=1.4 \pm .68$), and coaches ($M=1.5 \pm .83$). Athletes (55.2%), parents (54.7%), and coaches (52.0%) similarly reported this sideline behavior never occurred. All respondents also agreed that cussing loud enough for athletes to hear, encouraging athletes to play rough, yelling at the coach, and the frequency with which those on the sidelines got into it with each other occurred infrequently. Results of the one item which assesses physical altercations (*How often do those on the sidelines get into it with each other?*) reflect that 0% of parents reported seeing those on the youth soccer sideline get into it all the time, while athletes and coaches reported this behavior occurred all the time with greater, albeit still low, frequency (1.5% and 2.0%, respectively). Conversely, 68.0% of athletes, 52.5% of parents, and 46.0% of coaches perceived those on the sidelines never get into it. Verbal items (e.g., yelling at referees, coaches, athletes) were clearly the most common forms of BA.

Three one-way ANOVAs were conducted to test the exploratory hypotheses. Results testing the first hypotheses indicated that perceptions of BA (10 item latent variable) differs by stakeholder (i.e., athlete, coach, parent), $F(2, 741) = 4.06, p < .05$. Games-Howell post hoc comparisons, a robust and appropriate test when group sizes are unequal (Field, 2005), revealed coaches ($M= 2.0$) and parents ($M= 1.9$) perceptions of BA were significantly different ($p < .01$). Athlete perceptions of BA ($M= 1.9$) were not significantly different from parents ($p > .05$) or coaches ($p > .05$).

For the second hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA confirmed that BA exposure significantly differs by child age group, $F(3, 736) = 24.02, p < .001$ (see Figure 1). Games-Howell post hoc comparisons, indicated that exposure to BA increases as children get older ($Ms = 1.6, 1.9, 2.1, 2.1$ for the four age groups, 8-10 year-olds, 11-13 year-olds, 14-16 year-olds, and 17-18 year-olds, respectively, $p < .01$). Results also indicated that 14-16 year-olds are exposed to significantly more BA than 11-13 year-olds ($p < .01$). No difference was found between 17-18 year-olds and either 11-13 year-olds ($p > .05$) or 14-16 year-olds ($p < .44$). However, exposure to BA is significantly greater ($p < .01$) for 17-18 year-olds than 8-10 year-olds.

For the final exploratory hypotheses two one-way ANOVAs indicated that adult (i.e., coach and parent), $F(1, 552) = .505, p > .05$, and athlete, $F(1, 175) = .056, p > .05$ perceptions of BA occurrence do not significantly differ by gender of athlete.
Results of the present study indicate that (a) coaches, parents, and athletes report moderately frequent angry interactions during youth sport events, (b) exposure of boys and girls to background anger is similar, (c) BA increases from childhood through adolescence, and (d) BA in youth soccer appears to peak around 16 years of age. Not surprisingly, parents report less BA on the sidelines compared to coaches. While frequencies from never to all the time varied across respondents, mean item responses were markedly similar. Athlete, coach, and parent perceptions of youth soccer parent behaviors across items are consistent with past research in youth sport (Shields et al., 2005). Yelling at you/your child/their child created the largest percentage and mean discrepancy, as parents compared to athletes and coaches reported people on the sideline less frequently yell at their child. This finding supports previous research that indicates parents yell most at their own child (Kidman et al., 1999), therefore it is more likely that an athlete's own parent would be yelling at them from the sideline. From results of this study, it appears as if parents are more willing to report when someone else yells at their
child, and may perceive their own yelling as positive encouragement and support. While the yell at you/your child/their child item directly captures anger targeting one child on the team, the item also indirectly indicates the frequency with which other children (i.e., the child’s teammates and opponents) are exposed to background anger.

Physical altercation in the context of the home is the form of background anger which has the greatest effect on children (Ballard & Cummings, 1990; Cummings et al., 1981; Harger & El-Sheikh, 2003). To assess the frequency of physical altercations involving individuals on the youth sport sideline, the item got into it with someone was chosen based on its colloquial use in this population to capture the idea of two or more parties being involved in a physical altercation. Fortunately, physical altercations on the sidelines appear to be relatively uncommon in this sample but were reported to occur. It is possible that some respondents perceived this item to include non-physical altercations, which may have inflated the reported frequencies. Results derived from this item should be interpreted cautiously.

Results herein are consistent with observational (Holt et al., in press; Kidman et al., 1999) and survey (Shields et al., 2005; 2007) research, which suggest that spectator comments and sideline behaviors are often characterized by anger. Some parents may dismiss such behavior as a benign part of the game, failing to realize that, collectively, parents can create a perfect storm in youth sport—a storm that may adversely affect the experience, well-being, and performance of youth sport participants.

Youth sport contexts which are characterized by: (a) verbal anger such as parents yelling at officials, coaches, and athletes, (b) nonverbal anger such as avoidant communication, stomping up and down the sidelines, or eye-rolling, and/or (c) physical anger such as shoving a coach after the game, punching an opposing parent, or grabbing a child angrily by the arm after a poor performance, may be uniquely distressing to children for a number of reasons.

First, anger expressed between adults is more distressing than anger expressed between an adult and a child (El-Sheikh & Cheskes, 1995; Harger & El-Sheikh, 2003). Popular press news reports indicate that background anger at youth sport events often involves conflicts between parents and other adults in the presence of children (Abrams, 2006). Second, most youth sport coaches and officials are men, and conflicts involving men are particularly distressing for children (Harger & El-Sheikh, 2003). Third, children of all ages report negative sideline behavior. In the present study children age 8-18-years-old reported similar frequencies of behavior, suggesting that children are exposed to BA throughout the duration of their youth sport careers. It has been found that children who are exposed to prolonged marital conflict become sensitized rather than desensitized to BA (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Thus, if children experience sustained BA within youth sports, the influence of BA on children may become increasingly distressing. Results of the present study indicate that exposure to BA increases as
children get older. A heightening or cumulative effect of BA could partially explain why many children drop out of youth sport around age 13 (Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk, 1992). Fourth, unresolved conflicts are more distressing than resolved conflicts (Cummings et al., 1989; 2003; El-Sheikh & Cheskes, 1995). Because background anger is most commonly manifest in the verbal expressions of parents towards officials, coaches, or opposing athletes, conflicts are often unidirectional and one-sided and resolution is nearly impossible. Fifth, sport provides a uniquely public context (Scanlan, 1996), therefore, the influence of background anger during youth sport events may be particularly distressing for a child, especially if their parent is involved in the conflict. Taken together, these factors suggest that some youth sport events have elements of a perfect storm due to the frequency, magnitude, type, and unresolved nature of angry adult behavior in youth sport.

Research conducted to assess the influence of sustained exposure to background anger typically focuses on conflicts that occur between the parents of the child who is exposed to the anger, therefore, generalizing background anger findings to the youth sport domain should be done with caution. That said, interadult conflict research provides reason to suspect that the influence of BA expressed in youth sport settings also may be distressing for children, especially when considering the public context of youth sport. Furthermore, the influence of sustained exposure to BA on youth sport participants may linger long after they have left the playing field. Fortunately, interventions aimed at curbing negative influences of BA in a familial context may provide promise for improving the climate of youth sport.

Given the negative child outcomes associated with parental conflict, Shifflett and Cummings (1999) developed the kids in divorce and separation (k.i.d.s.) psychoeducational program to increase parents understanding of the influence of interparent conflict on children and help parents learn to improve their behavior during interparent conflicts. Compared to a control condition, participants in the k.i.d.s. program indicated greater awareness of the influence of interparent conflict on children as well as awareness of their own behavior during conflicts.

Following the example of the k.i.d.s. program (Shifflett & Cummings, 1999), providing information about the influence of background anger on children in order to change the behavioral intentions of parents may be one approach to reducing BA at youth sport events. Meta-analyses indicate that behavioral changes are preceded by changes in intention to act (Webb & Sheeran, 2006), which can be achieved through educational interventions. Morgan, NuMan-Sheppard, and Allin (1990) indicated that parent education programs, which are common forms of intervention for helping children and parents cope with BA germane to divorce, can be effective in changing behavior and increasing participants confidence in dealing with future problems if training is specific to target behaviors. Specifically targeting BA in youth
sport through parent education programs such as Minnesota PLAYS™ (Parents Learning About Youth Sports; LaVoi, Omli, Wiese-Bjornstal, 2008), may be an effective strategy for reducing such behaviors, and therefore positively affecting the youth sport climate for everyone.

Currently, youth sport organizations employ a handful of strategies to manage the behavior of youth sport parents such as developing and enforcing a code of conduct, appointing a volunteer sideline monitor, leveling fines for inappropriate spectator behaviors, awarding fair play points for good sport behaviors of coaches, athletes, and fans, which are included in league standings (e.g., the Minnesota Hockey Fair Play Curriculum), restricting spectator interaction with athletes (e.g., fans are required to sit on the opposite side of the soccer field from the coaches and team), restricting spectator behaviors (e.g., Silent Sundays), and restricting attendance (e.g., parents are not allowed to attend competitions or practices), to name a few.

Although use of the aforementioned strategies in youth sports contexts is extensive, little evaluation of effectiveness exists and some strategies may not be entirely beneficial. For example, barring parents from competitions is not an optimal solution because a majority of children and adolescents enjoy when parents attend and watch competitions (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2006; Shields et al., 2005) and parents are a vital source of support for children (Fredericks & Eccles, 2004). Similarly, Silent Sundays, where parents are allowed to attend competitions but pledge to remain completely silent, may be ineffective because the influence of verbal and nonverbal background anger on children is similar (Cummings et al., 1989; De Arth-Pendley & Cummings, 2002). One reason why some efforts to manage sport parent behavior are ineffective is that strategies are employed, rules are made, and policies are implemented, without a theoretical rationale or any contribution from the sport science community (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004).

**Future Research Directions**

The purpose of the present paper was to adapt the construct of background anger to youth sport in order to further understanding of the influence of some forms of youth sport parent behavior on children. Background anger research in home settings provides initial theoretical evidence that some youth sport parent behaviors may be distressing for children. Data presented herein are consistent with previous research (Holt et al., in press; Shields et al., 2005), which suggests that BA is not uncommon in youth sport. Ob servational research is needed to more precisely understand the frequency with which men and women engage in these behaviors during team and individual youth sport events involving boys and girls at different ages.
The background anger construct could provide guidance for future investigation of the influence of some forms of behavior displayed at youth sport events. Compared to home life, youth sport is a more public context, therefore, research is needed to specifically assess the influence of BA on children in youth sport, including the influences of different forms of BA on sport performance outcomes in children. Future research also may include examination of: (a) gender differences in response to short and long-term exposure to BA in youth sport, (b) age differences in perceptions and responses to BA, (c) differences in the effects of BA involving a child's parent compared to unfamiliar adults, (d) occurrence of BA in recreational, in-house, and travel sports, and (e) links between coping styles and psychological and behavioral resilience to BA.

Given the prominence and value of sports in the lives of many children and their families, investigation of the influence of background anger could provide an important trajectory for youth sport and developmental sport psychology researchers. Understanding the antecedents of angry behaviors and the influence of BA on psychosocial and performance outcomes in youth sport participants will help practitioners develop research-based interventions to calm the storm in youth sport.

Footnote

The item got into it was based on the original item [How often have you seen a fan hit another adult (coach, another fan, or a sport official) during or following an athletic event?] previously used by Shields et al. (2005). It was suggested by the governing body who granted the research team access, that the language used in the original item was too strong and inappropriate for use with children, as it might evoke anxiety. After reviewing the item and through subsequent interviews with youth soccer players, the item was re-written [How often have your seen people on the sidelines get into it with someone (parent, coach, fan) to reflect appropriate and colloquial language used by this population. During interviews the research team also discovered the possibility of a socially desirable response to the original item, providing more evidence to reword the item.

References


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