

Kids Speak: Children's Preferences for Coach and Parent Behavior

Jens W. Omlil & Diane M. Wiese-Bjornstal, University of Minnesota, USA

Using a grounded theory approach, qualitative interviews of 3-to 14-year-old tennis participants ($N= 72$, $n= 35$ males, $n= 37$ females) were conducted to better understand how children want their coaches and parents to behave during youth sport events. While previous research has furthered understanding of coaching behavior in youth sport environments (e.g., Smith, Fry, Ethington, & Li, 2005; Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979), studies have been conducted primarily from an adult-expert perspective (e.g., Smith, Smoll, & Hunt, 1977) or have utilized standardized behavioral measures which narrow the range of possible responses. Though youth sport coaching research has progressed for several decades, researchers have only recently become interested in youth sport parent behavior (Gould, Lauer, Roman, & Pierce, 2005; Holt & Wall, 2005; Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to allow children to express their preferences about coach and parent behavior more freely through interviews and focus groups. To assess preferred coaching behavior and coach characteristics, children were asked to describe their favorite and least favorite coaches. Themes which emerged from the data indicated that, in general, as children get older, they become increasingly demanding of (or less easily satisfied with) coaches. For younger children, being "nice" appears to be a necessary and sufficient condition for being a good coach, while older children expect additional qualities. For example, older children prefer coaches who are nice *and* are able to demonstrate and describe sport skills effectively. Conversely, children clearly did not favor yelling behavior by their coaches. To assess preferred parent behavior, children were asked to describe (a) how they would prefer parents behave and (b) how parents typically behave at youth sport contests. In general, children indicated a preference for parent behavior characterized by attentive silence; however, children reported that actual parent behavior includes praise, criticism, and instruction for coaches, officials, and participants. Older children indicated greater differences between preferred and actual parent behavior than younger children. Results of the present investigation expand on previous findings by more specifically identifying child preferred parent and coach behaviors, and provide important implications for helping coaches and parents know how to best behave in ways that support the continued sport engagement of their young athletes.