

YOUTH HOCKEY PLAYERS' ATTITUDES, PERCEIVED SOCIAL APPROVAL, SITUATIONAL TEMPTATION, AND ROLE MODELS

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Introduction

Attitudes and behaviours influencing sportsmanlike behaviours in ice hockey are well documented in both the scientific literature (see Weiss, Smith, & Stuntz, 2008) and the popular press (Dryden, 2004). Youth learn that unsportsmanlike, potentially injurious actions such as cross-checking and high-sticking may be justifiable strategies if they increase a team's chances of winning.

Smith's (1974, 1975, 1978, 1979) research on social learning of aggressive play among youth hockey players demonstrated that players' perceptions of significant others' attitudes have an impact on their behaviour on the ice. Such attitudes and actions are learned through modeling of and approval by professional players, coaches, teammates, parents. Stephens and Kavanagh (2003) found that likelihood for hockey players to behave in unsportsmanlike ways was best predicted by team norm—if teammates were perceived as likely to engage in unsportsmanlike acts, the more likely one's reported likelihood behave in unsportsmanlike ways.

Illegal, unsportsmanlike actions on the ice are likely to lead to concussions and other forms of injury. Research examining attitudes toward and perceptions of significant others' approval of unsportsmanlike behaviours inform educators *how* and *why* such actions come about as well as how to promote positive attitudes and behaviours in youth hockey.

Study Purposes

1. Assess competitive league and gender differences on attitudes regarding illegal, unsportsmanlike actions.
2. Assess relationships between perceived approval by significant others and youths' attitudes toward unsportsmanlike actions.
3. Assess whether specific hockey situations affect legitimacy of acting in unsportsmanlike ways.
4. Assess youth hockey players' NHL role models and whether type of model is related to youths' legitimacy beliefs toward unsportsmanlike behaviour.

Participants

- 278 youth hockey players (192 male, 86 female)
- League: Atom (age = 10.9 yrs; $n = 63$), Peewee (age = 12.6 yrs; $n = 122$), and Bantam/Midget (age = 14.8 yrs; $n = 87$)
- Years of experience: 1 to 11 ($M = 5.3$; $SD = 2.3$)
- Ethnicity: White (69.9%), Asian (10.9%), Multi-ethnic (5.8%), First Nations (2.6%), African-Canadian (.7%), Hispanic (.7%), and Other (9.4%)

How Did We Conduct the Study?

- Obtained permission from hockey camp directors in the greater Vancouver area
- Obtained parent and youth consent
- Administered surveys to youth hockey players during a 30-minute break

Questionnaire

Three different scenarios were presented to provide a context for questions and responses. Here is one scenario:

Sam is defending against Alex, who is on a 2-on-2 break. Alex makes a brilliant pass and tries to outskate Sam. Sam notices that Alex is still admiring the pass and not paying attention to Sam. To prevent Alex from outskating Sam, Sam could deliver a late hip-check on Alex. Sam knows that a late hip-check on an unsuspecting player is dangerous and Alex will probably get hurt. Sam has to decide whether to deliver a late hip-check on Alex.

As you can see, Sam is in a tough position. Imagine what it would be like to be in Sam's situation. When making a decision like this, you and Sam might consider a number of things. These might include desire to win, what coaches and teammates would want, what would be fair, or other reasons. Answer the questions below as if you were in Sam's situation. Try to be as honest as you can in answering the questions and circle each response.

1. Do you think it's OK to deliver a late hip-check on an opponent? (Never OK-Always OK)
2. How likely do you think you would be to deliver a late hip-check on an opponent? (Not at all likely-Very likely)
3. Realistically, how many players on your team would deliver a late hip-check on an opponent? (None-Everyone)

Now think about how other people in your life would view this type of action in hockey.

- 4-8. Does your [best friend on the team / coach / teammates / dad / mom] think it's OK to deliver a late hip-check on an opponent? (Never OK-Always OK)

Now think about the story with certain changes in the situation. Do you think it is OK to deliver a late hip-check on an opponent in the following situations?

- 9-13. Is it OK if [there is no risk of getting caught by an official / the game is close with only two minutes left / it will help your team win the championship game / your opponent did it first / it results in a serious injury to the opponent] (Never OK-Always OK)

14. Which situation from #9 - #13 is the most tempting for you to do? # _____

15. Imagine that you are actually in the situation you just chose in #14. How likely would you be to deliver a late hip-check on an opponent? (Not at all likely-Very likely)

What Did We Find?

1. Overall, average scores for legitimacy and intention were relatively low ($M = 1.96$ and $M = 2.06$, respectively), on a scale from 1 to 5. Thus, while some athletes scored high on legitimacy and intention, most did not approve of unsportsmanlike on-ice play.
2. Attitudes regarding unsportsmanlike acts increased with competitive league (see Figure 1), as did perceptions of approval by best friend, teammates (see Figure 2), coach, and parents. Male players scored higher than female players on legitimacy, intention, and friend, teammate, and coach approval.

Figure 1. Attitudes Regarding Unsportsmanlike Acts

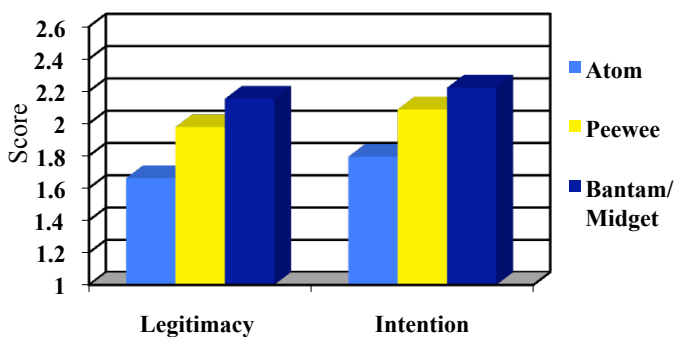
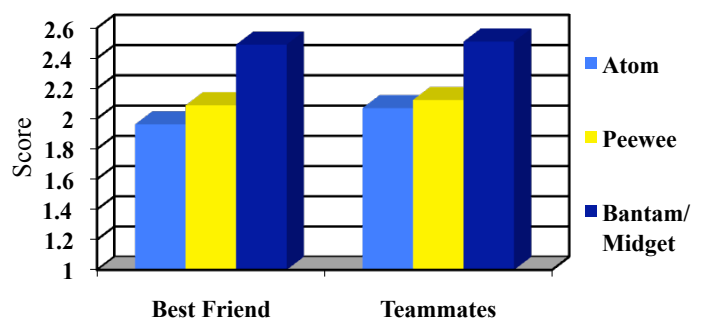
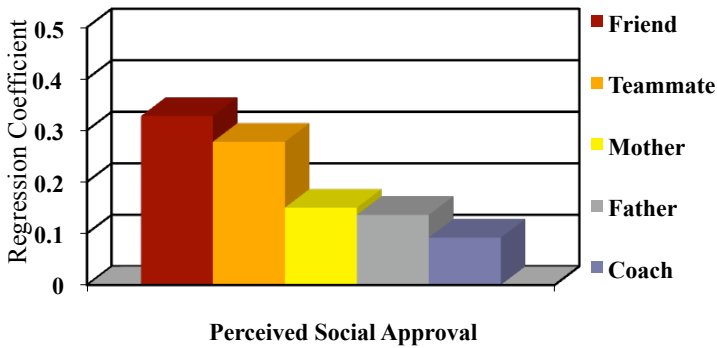


Figure 2. Perceived Social Approval



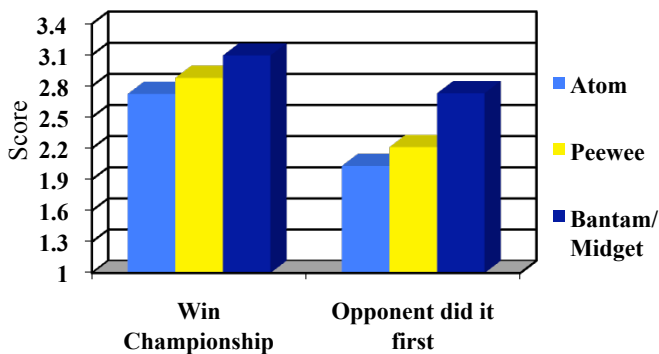
3. Strong relationships emerged between perceived social approval and unsportsmanlike attitudes. Best friend and teammates were the strongest predictors (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Predictors of Legitimacy Beliefs



4. Players indicated they were most tempted to engage in unsportsmanlike behaviour if it would help win the championship game, followed by if one's opponent did it first (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Situational Legitimacy Beliefs



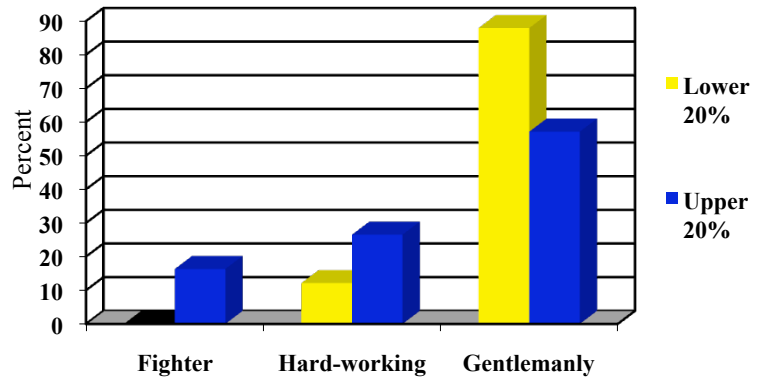
5. Youth were asked, "Who is your idol in the NHL?"

Idols named were coded into 1 of 3 categories:

- Aggressive (fighter) player (Sean Avery, Dion Phaneuf, Chris Pronger)
- Hard working player (Alexandre Burrows, Jarome Iginla, Nicklas Lidstrom, Trevor Linden)
- Gentlemanly, skillful player (Sidney Crosby, Wayne Gretsky, Robert Luongo, Alexander Ovechkin)

A comparison of players in the upper and lower 20% on legitimacy of unsportsmanlike actions showed that players scoring in the upper 20% ($M = 3.1$) were more likely than those in the lower 20% ($M = 1.0$) to name aggressive (fighter) players as their idols (16.3% vs. 0%) and much less likely to name gentlemanly, skillful players (57.1% vs. 87.9%) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Frequency of Idol Type for Upper and Lower 20% on Legitimacy Score



6. 47% of the players indicated they had missed at least one game due to injury, while 13% indicated they had to miss at least one game because they had experienced a concussion.

Conclusion

- Although legitimacy and intention scores were generally low, collective results suggest that unsportsmanlike aggression in hockey remains a concern for the physical and psychological well-being of young athletes.
- As players move up in competitive level (e.g., from Peewee to Bantam), they are more likely to endorse use of unsportsmanlike methods of play.
- If players think their best friend and teammates approve of an unsportsmanlike act, they are more likely to endorse such behavior.
- Players are most likely to endorse unsportsmanlike behavior when it would help their team win the championship or if an opponent did it first.
- Players with aggressive role models in the NHL were more likely to endorse unsportsmanlike acts.
- Coaches and parents should promote hockey skills and strategies in order to foster a positive learning climate.