

Youth Sport Report: Parent Perceptions of How Frequently Youth Sport Interferes With Family Time

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Youth sports informed by sport science and “done right” can provide a positive, meaningful context for youth development and family engagement. Yet for some families, concerns about the professionalization of youth sport are intensifying due to overuse injuries, early specialization, pressure to achieve, and increased commitment and time demands, which place the health and well-being of children and youth at risk. The fears underlying these concerns as outlined by the media and some scholarly work are twofold: that for affluent communities youth sports may 1) contribute to heightened child distress due to subjectively experienced feelings of pressure, and 2) compromise family leisure time. Some argue the time commitment required for organized youth sport participation is so extensive that traditional family activities, arguably key for optimal development—meals, family outings, and even simple discussions between parents and children—are sacrificed. Conversely, researchers have argued child perceptions of parental pressure around sport achievement are far more deleterious than the amount of hours spent participating or the degree to which it interferes with family functioning. However, little is known about parents’ perceptions of how youth sport interferes with family functioning. The data presented in this report aims to fill that gap.

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Participant Demographics

Midwest, suburban parents ($N = 1954$, 60% female) voluntarily filled out the online survey. Most parents were White (90.1%) and possessed a high level of educational attainment (41.4 % BA/BS, 27.4% graduate degree).

Children ranged in age from 5-19 years old ($M = 10$ yrs of age) and participated in 16 different sports (IH = in-house, T = traveling): IH Baseball, IH Basketball, IH Football, IH Volleyball, IH Lacrosse, IH Softball, IH Soccer, IH Track, H Wrestling, T Baseball, T Basketball, T Soccer, T Football, T Fast Pitch Softball, T Volleyball, and Kickball.

Parents were asked how often youth sport interfered with five common family functions: religious services, sleep, homework, vacations, general family time, and family meals. *Survey Response Key*: 1 = Never, 2 = Almost Never, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = A Lot of the Time, 5 = All the Time.



Level of Play

Parents report Travel sports more frequently interfered with family activities than in-house/recreational level youth sports. Differences between level of play on all variables were statistically significant ($p < .00$). Based on the data, it appears travel level youth sports, typically characterized as more “serious” and competitive, demand more commitment of family resources and more frequently disrupt family functioning.

Family Time

Based on the data in Figure 1., parents report youth sport most frequently interfered with family meals, with the mean score ($M = 2.55$) falling between “sometimes” and “almost never.” Parents also reported youth sports “almost never” to “never” interfered with family time in general, family vacations, children’s homework, children’s sleep or attendance of religious services.

Figure 1. Parent Perceptions of Interference of Youth Sport with Family Variables

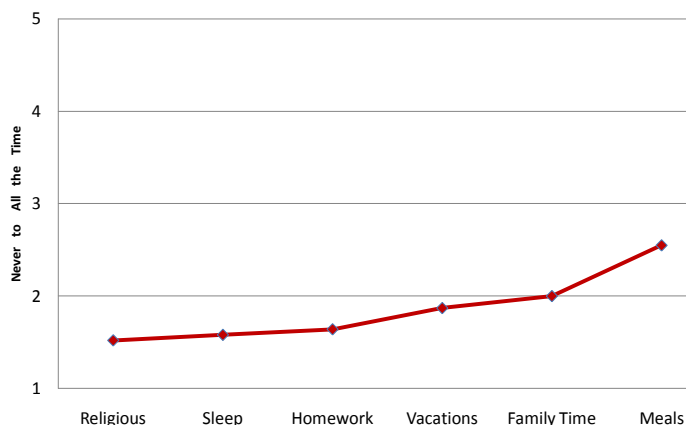
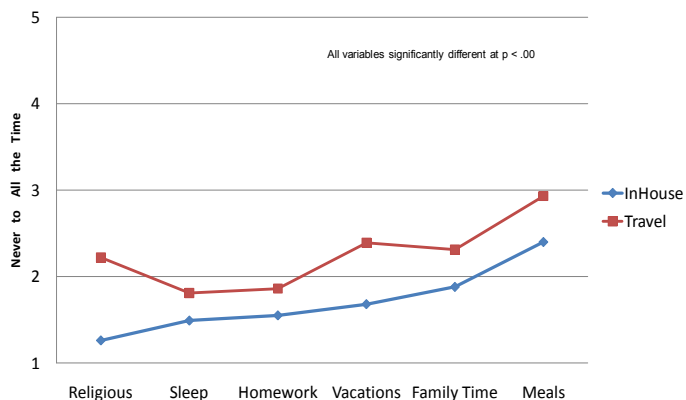


Figure 2. Parent Perceptions of Interference of Youth Sport with Family Variables by Level of Play

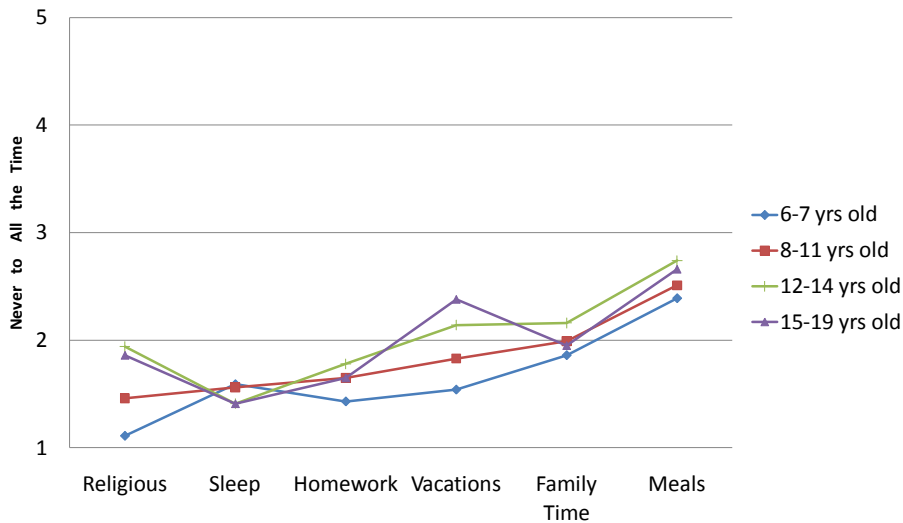


Age Group

Parents of 12-14 year old athletes report the most frequent disturbances to family functioning compared to parents of younger children. The exception is parents of athletes 15-19 years old, who report the most frequent disruption of family vacations. This is likely due to the intersections of



Figure 3. Parent Perceptions of Interference of Youth Sport with Family Variables By Age Group



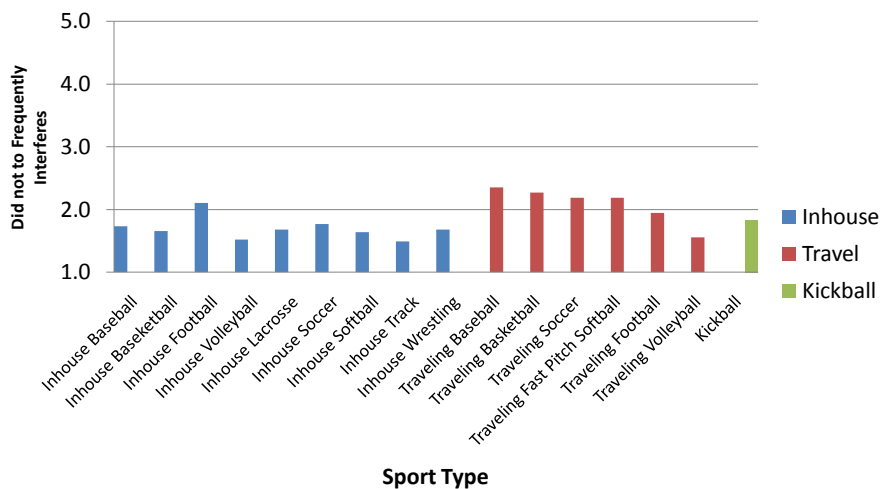
increased commitments that come with playing at higher levels as athletes mature with age (i.e., high school sports, travel teams). Parents of the youngest children report the least disruption to family functioning.



Sport Type

Parents with children in traveling Baseball, Basketball, Soccer, Fastpitch Softball and in-house Football report the most frequent family disruptions, with means just above “almost never.” Parents reported that in-house sports were less disruptive than travel level sports.

Figure 4. Parent perceptions of how frequently youth sport interferes with family variables by sport type



Conclusions

Contrary to some scholarly and media reports of “overscheduling” problems—namely maladaptive child outcomes, and interference with family meals, vacations, and attendance of religious services—due to participation in youth sports, parents in this sample perceived **youth sport minimally interferes with family functioning**. Data herein provides some divergent evidence, in the form of parental perceptions, to the notion that some children and youth are overscheduled and experience negative outcomes as a result of youth sport participation.

Scholars assert the degree to which youth sports interferes with family functions is much less damaging to children than child perceptions of parental criticism and under involvement (Luthar, Shoum, Brown, 2006). Youth sports for many provide a context in which meaningful family connections, relationship building, support, and care occur (Wiese-Bjornstal & LaVoi, 2007). Mahoney, Harris and Eccles contend (2006) little evidence supports the notion that young people develop problems as a result of their extracurricular participation, and that “generally the soccer moms have it right and organize after-school activities that benefit their children.” Based on the evidence, the benefits of sport participation far outweigh the problems that may arise when youth sport interferes with family functioning.

This data also reveal that suburban youth sport parents view the degree to which youth sport interferes with family time as normal and unproblematic and likely explain it as “this is just what we do.” It is also likely parents under-report such interferences. Clearly, for some families participation in the professionalized structure of youth sport goes unchallenged and unquestioned. Individuals, family units or groups who challenge the status quo and strive to change the system by “taking back youth sports” are scarce (e.g., see <http://www.balance4success.net/youthSports.php>), and alternative options to highly structured youth sport are limited in most communities.

A concern greater than the impact of youth sport on family functioning is the fact that approximately 20% of youth are *completely inactive* and do not participate in *any* physical activity, and therefore are at risk for health disparities and

fail to accrue developmental benefits (Centers for Disease Control, 2009).

Interference with family meals which scholars argue lead to a host of positive outcomes for youth (Burgess-Champoux et al. 2009; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006) and the intersection of youth sport warrants further investigation. It is likely many families eat meals together on the run to and from youth sport events, in the car or on the sidelines, but do not eat a traditional family meal characterized by sitting around the kitchen table.

This data provide fruitful ground for future research. Researchers should examine if the location of a family meal (i.e., in the van vs. on the sidelines vs. around the dinner table) influences the quality of family relational interactions, transmission of family values, nutritional value of meals, and subsequent youth outcomes. Additionally, the perceptions and impact of interferences on younger siblings, who have little autonomy and whose lives are dramatically influenced by (typically) forced attendance of older siblings’ athletic events, warrants investigation. Researchers have long shown parent and child perceptions rarely align, therefore children and youths perceptions of the degree and frequency to which youth sport interferences with family time is likely to differ.

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