

TALK ISN'T CHEAP: USING THE WORDS OF YOUNG GIRL ATHLETES TO IMPROVE THEIR SPORT EXPERIENCES

Courtney Robinson, BGSU Katie Barak, BGSU
 Sally Ross, University of Memphis Vikki Krane, BGSU
 Cathryn Lucas-Carr, University of Iowa



REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Girls value physical activity.

In sport, girls enjoy:

- Being physically active
- Being challenged and pushing themselves
- Learning skills
- Perfecting their skills
- Achieving their goals

Social relationships play an important role in their participation.

Social benefits include:

- developing peer relationships
- developing adult relationships
- learning life lessons

Girls also learn:

- gendered life lessons
- socially accepted body ideals
- social expectations of gendered physicality

Girls find challenging:

- negative peer relationships
- parent pressures
- psychologically challenging sport environments

(Azzarito et al., 2006; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Hills, 2007; Zeiff, 2006)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

(1) What are the sport experiences of young girl athletes?

(2) How can we use their comments to improve their overall sport experiences?

PARTICIPANTS

- 52 girls
- contacted through summer soccer, softball, volleyball, and gymnastics teams and camps
- average age = 11 (range: 8-14)
- mostly White and middle-class

"...your friends [in sport] are always there for you"

"I like the adrenaline you get from playing"

"...having all the pressure on you."

"...if I can't do it right, I get mad."



METHOD

- Conducted 10 semi-structured focus group interviews
- Interview questions examined for this presentation:
 - What do you like best about sport?
 - What is hard about sport?
- Open and axial coding of the data

(Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998)

FINDINGS

BEST THINGS ABOUT SPORT

- Having fun
- Being with and making friends
- Being involved in competition
- Gaining Life lessons
- Fitness



"...even if you do lose, it makes you stronger and you don't ever want to lose again. And you learn a lot about life and not just about your sport."

HARDEST THINGS ABOUT SPORT

- Conditioning
- Developing skills
- Social sacrifice
- Pressure (from peers, coaches, & parents)
- Staying motivated

"Knowing that you have teammates to help you get through it all ... makes you want to play better."



"Sports like take up a lot of your life. And you can't really hangout outside of school. And that really starts to get to you."

"...the conditioning, running, you can't [stop], you got to keep going, you got to finish. Like if you're tired and you just want to quit, it's not fun"

DISCUSSION

Our findings revealed the best things about sport include the social benefits and being competitive. Sport difficulties included social, physical, and emotional demands. Our findings rebuke stereotypes suggesting girls only want to have fun and be with friends; girls also want to work hard and be competitive.

STRATEGIES FOR COACHES AND PARENTS

Create opportunities for success and skill improvement

- Smart Scrimmages: Play worthy opponents to foster skill development.
- Break down new skills/plays into multiple steps.
- Provide equal amounts of instruction to all players; encourage everyone to keep improving.
- Allow athletes to work individually on the skills they need to improve.

Teach skills to cope with pressures

- Vanishing Act: Have athletes use imagery to *erase* the crowd
- Relaxation: deep breathing; spaghetti legs/arms
- Feedback: Reframe mistakes as learning opportunities & building blocks to success

Find Social Balance

- Allow some social time at practice (e.g. when stretching/warming-up)
- Be flexible about conflicts
- Be realistic with the amount and timing of practices

Improve coach/parent awareness

- Be supportive and encouraging
- Recognize emotional and physical demands
- Don't be a source of pressure
- Listen to what the athletes say
 - What do they like? Dislike?
- Notice what the athletes don't say
 - Changes in mood or motivation
 - Signs of fatigue
- Evaluate Yourself as a Coach/Parent: Are you a source of pressure? stress? encouragement?

(Hogg, 1997; Smith, 2010)