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TAKING THE 'SPORT' OUT OF SPORTS PARENTING: TOWARD A THEORY OF  
SPORT RELATED PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION COMPETENCY

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A Thesis

Presented to  
the Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by

Marissa Metala Yandall

August 2009

Advisor: Dr. Fran Dickson

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Title: Taking the 'Sport' Out of Sports Parenting: Toward A Theory of Sport Related Parent-Child Communication Competency  
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Degree Date: August 2009

### Abstract

Research has shown that over-emphasis on winning is the number one reason why approximately seventy percent of the forty million children who participate in youth sports will quit by age 13. This study utilized a constructivist grounded theory approach to investigate the role of parent-child communication within the context of youth sports. A total of 22 athletes and 20 parents were recruited through a Western university to discuss messages exchanged during youth sport participation. The results suggest that the delineation between messages of support and pressure is largely dependent on discursive work done by both parent and child. Parents who employed competent communicative strategies to avoid miscommunications regarding participation and sports goals were able to provide support and strengthen the relationship despite pressurized situations. The present study frames the youth sport dilemma within a developing conceptualization of communicative (in)competence and offers theoretical implications for *sport related parent-child communication competency (SRPCCC)*.

## Acknowledgements

I would first like to extend my sincere gratitude to my advisor Dr. Fran Dickson. I am forever grateful for her willingness to take a chance on an unknown with no background in research or communication. She believed in me when I had nothing to show but my presence in her office. She supported, challenged, nurtured and guided me through many difficult times and, consequently, will always be the voice in my head. I would also like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Suter for introducing me to my theoretical soul mate, grounded theory, and for her devotion to furthering my teaching goals. This degree and manuscript would not have been possible without the love and support of my amazing cohort; people I have come to know so intimately in such a short time who were always available for whatever I needed.

My family has been unbelievably patient and understanding throughout my struggle with acclimating to academic life. I would especially like to thank my mother and father, Sandra Walters and Christopher Yandall, for their love and support and for showing me that nothing is impossible. Their lives are my everyday inspiration. I would also like to thank my partner Jared Floyd for his unwavering love through all of my ups and downs and his commitment to me and my dreams.

Finally I would like to dedicate this manuscript to the memory of Rosalie Pero, Patricia Yandall and Sheri Yandall for their strength, courage and grace. My life has been blessed by exemplary female role models and I pledge to carry on the tradition.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Do not confine your children to your own learning for they were born in another time.

Hebrew Proverb

### Preface

I begin this manuscript by introducing myself. It is important to me that the reader understands my interest and experience with my thesis subject. Although the reviewed literature, proposed study, and results are primarily offered in an objective manner, my personal voice functions to critically interrogate the presented material throughout the paper. I do not offer my interpretations as fact or truth; simply as a voice, informed through scholarship and experience, dedicated to improving relational communication. I first became interested in researching parent-child communication within the context of sports, during a conversation with my advisor. I had recently attended a youth hockey game of my cousin's cousin Brett (alias). Brett's father spent the whole game screaming and yelling at Brett and the coach. He paced back and forth with his head in his hands, cursing and shouting. I was so embarrassed. Brett's wife shook her head and rolled her eyes; "just ignore him," she said. How could I possibly ignore a grown man screaming at a six year old in public? And how could anybody for that matter? As my advisor and I discussed this situation, I knew it was the perfect topic to begin my journey into independent research. The following paragraphs summarize my personal experience with sports.

My participation in youth sports spanned the length of my childhood, beginning at age 3 and culminating with high school graduation. I enjoyed a variety of activities such as gymnastics, martial arts, baseball, basketball, softball, soccer, horseback riding, archery, riflery, skiing, snowboarding, skateboarding, and swimming. I travelled in and out of state to attend sport related camps, clinics, tournaments and conventions. In addition to actual participation, I also volunteered in the athletic training room throughout high school. During my undergraduate education, I spent two years as a student of athletic training (but did not complete the intended dual degree) and a total of 4 years travelling with the club men's lacrosse team as their athletic trainer. Throughout college I participated in year-round intramural and club sports programs in addition to organizing athletic events such as the Inter-dorm. I also held various sport related job positions working as a sports official/supervisor and giving ski/snowboard lessons to both able-bodied and adaptive patrons. Upon starting my MA education, I founded a club men's baseball team which competes in a nationally sanctioned collegiate league. Presently, I remain the club's president and general manager and am responsible for daily team operation and organization. I continue to participate in a variety of sport related activities on a weekly basis including gymnastics, boxing, skateboarding, and weight lifting.

In order to gain additional perspective on the present study, I procured an intern position with a youth sports camp. I spent over 400 hours assisting the camp director with day to day operations including but not limited to: staff hiring and training, camper schedules, maintaining policy and procedure, camper discipline, parental issues and

concerns, creating lesson plans, staff issues and concerns, coaching and event organization.

My interest in *sport related parent child communication* is simple: improving the youth sport environment by educating parents on the communicational challenges plaguing the institution of youth sports and charging parents with the individual and social responsibility to cultivate and maintain a supportive and positive youth sport experience. The following study has led me to three realizations: 1) Parents represent both a vital component of and the serious problem with youth sports, 2) The sport related parent-child relationship encounters many complex situations (e.g., managing schedules and resources, negotiating participation choices) and 3) Parental education/orientation and accountability are part of the necessary process seeking to end the “violent and abusive behavior plaguing youth sports” (NAYS, 2001, p. 1).

As I began research for this study, I became incensed by the myriad of stories detailing inappropriate parental behavior. I was quick to agree with those who believe parents are out of control and are ruining youth sports. However, after conducting the interviews and working with the youth camp, I came to better understand the integral role and responsibility parents must assume when involving one’s child in youth sports; not only for their child but for their sport community. Removing parents from youth sports is a weak solution and temporary fix at best. Just because parents are being removed from games and banned from practices doesn’t mean the damage has been avoided or corrected; it has simply been removed from public view. Moreover, parents are a vital and necessary component of youth sports. There has to be a way to better integrate

parents into a positive system of participation rather than concentrating on removing them from it.

Fingers have been pointed, blame has been arbitrarily assigned, and experts have convened to address this serious, prevalent, and pervasive problem. Changes in institutional and organizational policies have and will continue to encourage positive progress but in order to really inspire the necessary transformation in youth sports, the work must be done daily at the interpersonal and family level. It is the responsibility of the parents, both as individuals and collectively as local youth sport communities, to demand and enforce a positive, encouraging, and moral environment for young athletes and to encourage those athletes to take part in that responsibility.

All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.

Edmond Burke

### Statement of the Problem

Of the estimated 40 million children who participate in sport related activity, approximately 70% will quit by age 13; over-emphasis on winning is cited as the number one reason children are dropping out of youth sports (ABC, 2000; Fish, 2003). The “winning is everything” mindset, which is intricately woven into American sports ideology and perpetuated through capitalist philosophy has been internalized by sports parents, leading to the pervasive incidence of inappropriate behavior and sports rage that is plaguing youth sports.

Although various campaigns have been implemented to combat sports rage and misconduct, this study argues that without education, communicative competency, and accountability at the *parental* level sports rage will continue to desecrate youth sports. Parents are a necessary component of support within youth sport participation. However, Mean and Kassing (2007) draw attention to the nature of the support, not its arbitrary presence, as the key to positive involvement. Examples of inappropriate parental behavior continue to afflict youth sports; from the fatal incident that brought national attention to the issue of sports rage, in which a parent beat a hockey coach to death at a youth hockey practice, ironically because he felt the game was getting too rough (CNN, 2002), to the following incident which occurred on July 4, 2008:

A 14 year old umpire was publicly abused both verbally and physically at a youth baseball game in New Jersey. Repeated expletives and belittling remarks were

verbalized by various adults regarding the young umpire's calls. One parent stood behind the boy, banging at the fence and harassing him continuously. When the boy asked the parent to stop and threatened to call the police, the man punched the fence which hit the boy in the face and knocked his mask off (Conte, 2008).

The most troubling aspect of this incident is that it was permitted to escalate to the point of violence. A crowd of people sat watching, some partaking in the public humiliation of a child officiating a youth baseball game which ended in physical violence. Why did no one come to the boy's defense before the situation got out of hand? O'Connell, Pepler, and Craig (1999) found that observer's of bullying episodes intervened only 25% of the time. Despite the obviously unacceptable circumstances of the incident, people refrain from intervention. The fact that a group of parents could collectively look the other way while such actions took place is arguably unforgiveable. It also provides a glimpse into the dark side of sport related parent-child communication.

Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) call our attention to the darker side of communication through investigating "processes that people perceive as moral or productive, but that function in deceptively dysfunctional ways" (p. 7). Hurtful messages, teasing and bullying, and psychological abuse are both components of sport related parental misconduct and current topics of research in the dark side of interpersonal communication (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). The youth sports process is overwhelmingly perceived as moral and productive yet, dysfunction functions insidiously through indifference, ignorance, and absence in youth sport communities. A communicative standpoint offers to inform and aid in the resolution of these barriers by focusing on messages within the sport related parent-child relationship.

Through my thesis project, I emphasize the importance of using a communicative lens to investigate and address the issues of sports rage and misconduct. Following the hockey fatality of 2000, the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS) launched a national campaign called Time Out! For Better Sports for Kids. Just prior to its commencement, NAYS President Fred Engh stated:

It is a sad indictment of all of us that we have to have programs to tell us [adults] how to behave. We need to swing the pendulum back to where it rightfully belongs, and that's in the hands of children, who deserve fun and socially rewarding experiences, so that the next time we turn around we won't face the startling fact that 70% of the millions of children who play organized sports in this country will have dropped out by age 13. We are the ones to blame, not them (ABC, 2000).

This study is a step toward swinging the pendulum back to the side of positive and rewarding youth sports participation by focusing on both the positive and negative messages influencing the youth sport community. For the purpose of this paper, youth sports are defined as any sport related participation through high school graduation. The objectives of this study are threefold: 1) Careful examination of the messages constituting the youth sport environment in order to, 2) explicate both the role and the process of sport related parent-child communication, and 3) make the results available to parents and youth sport communities and organizations in an effort to improve parent-child communication and youth sports participation. Using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), the present study frames the youth sport dilemma within a developing conceptualization of communicative (in)competence and offers theoretical implications for sport related parent-child communication competency.

## Warrant

The former and current perception of youth sports in America is overwhelmingly supported by beliefs that not only should children participate in sport related activity, but that this participation will undoubtedly build the character and skills necessary to become a competent and productive adult (Sage, 1998, p. 260). These beliefs are embedded in American sports ideology, however, little research has been conducted to validate the basis of the ideology's claims. Further, current and former child athletes have stated that the competitive youth sport environment was both harmful and hindering to their growth and independence (Coakley, 1994, p. 97; Fish, 2003). It has been suggested that boredom among youth in sport related participation can take the form of resistance or reaction to adult control (Hutchison et al., 2003; Kloep & Hendry, 2003). Parental pressure and focus on winning can reduce enjoyment, increase stress, damage self-esteem, and lead to drop out (Gould, Feltz, & Weiss, 1985; Hirsch & Loughead, 2000; Hoyle & Leff, 1997). Inappropriate parental behavior can also derail the fun of sport participation. This phenomenon known as *sports rage* is defined by the Rutgers Youth Sports Research Council as:

Within the context of an organized athletic activity, any physical attack on another person, such as striking, wounding, or otherwise touching in an offensive manner, and/or any malicious, verbal abuse or sustained harassment which threatens subsequent violence or bodily harm (New Jersey's Code of Conduct Law, 2002).

The National Youth Sports Safety Foundation agrees that the prevalence and severity of parental misconduct has damaging emotional effects on young athletes and lists two main barriers to the prevention of parental misconduct: 1) People may not be

clear what behaviors constitute maltreatment or abuse, and 2) Young athletes may not recognize what's happening to them is abusive (NYSSF, 2001). Competing parental and youth goals can contribute to this misunderstanding (Sillars, 1998).

The recent implementation of programs to prevent and control sports rage and parental misconduct implies that organized youth sports do not necessarily provide a safe and supportive environment. It also calls to attention the need to hold the youth sports community accountable to maintaining that environment. For example, the majority of parents and athletes participating in the present study recall witnessing numerous instances of misconduct, yet parents did not feel compelled to intervene nor was there any administrator/supervisor present to handle such situations.

In spite of the national focus on issues of misconduct over the past decade, sports rage and emotional abuse continue to persist in youth sports (McMahon, 2006). Although there is ample parental opinion regarding the youth sport environment; children's voices have been grossly underrepresented on this topic. However, when young athletes do speak, they support the alarming incidence of inappropriate parental behavior. In 2001, a survey of 3000 children found that 74% had witnessed parental misconduct at sport related events (NAYS, 2001, p. 14). While many of these concerns are current topics of debate, research has yet to take a communicative standpoint that focuses on the interactional dynamics between parents and their children within the context of youth sports. Several programs have focused on educating parents and children to remedy issues within organized youth sports (Bach, 2006; Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2006), but few explore and deconstruct the verbal exchanges within and around the parent-child

relationship despite the evidence pointing toward a communication based solution (Turman, 2007).

In 2001, the National Alliance for Youth Sports hosted a National Summit on Raising Community Standards in Youth Sports. The Summit identified misconduct as a serious issue and urged youth sport communities to take “aggressive action at all levels” (NAYS, 2001, p. 3). The main recommendations advised communities to appoint an administrative supervisor to enforce community standards and to hold all community members accountable for inappropriate behavior. The results of the current study and articles in the popular press (Conte, 2008) indicate that the necessary administrators largely remain absent from youth sports programs and community members are not being held accountable for misconduct.

This study underscores insufficient and inappropriate communicative strategies within and around the parent-child relationship as the crux of the overarching issue. Kassing et al. (2004) call upon communication scholars to address sport related issues as a valid area of research. Considering the prevalence of youth sport related misconduct and its perceived communicational significance within the parent-child relationship, this study was structured to answer that call. *Sport related parent-child communication* occurs during two important stages of childhood development; middle childhood and adolescence.

The necessary skills for social competence cultivate during middle childhood (Stafford, 2004) and extend to adolescence, which is perceived by family scholars as difficult and volatile time for parent-child communication (Sillars, Koerner, &

Fitzpatrick, 2005; Steinmetz, 1999). When coupled with sport participation, adolescence can become particularly treacherous to the parent-child relationship. This overview highlights the necessity to carefully examine the messages constituting the youth sport environment and the role and process of parent-child communication within youth sport participation.

## Sport Related Parent-Child Communication

*Sport related parent-child communication (SRPCC)* is conceptualized to discuss verbal and non-verbal interactions between young athletes and parents within the context of sport-related activity. For the purpose of this study, parental interaction extends, to a degree, to all children within their sport community. This concept will be further explicated in the results/discussion chapter. Sport related activity encompasses any physical activity involving some level of competition whether team or individual. The term parent refers to any primary caregiver(s) assuming the role of a parent. The following section will review and critique the recent scholarship involving parent-child communication, communication competence, and current youth sports themes and ideology.

First, the section on parent-child communication will summarize pertinent findings to assist in the conceptualization and unpacking of SRPCC— of which there is little existing scholarly discussion (Turman, 2007). Second, the importance and role of communication competence will be discussed in the context of parent-child communication and youth sports participation. Finally, the youth sports literature is grouped by five themes relevant to the current study's objectives (*Moral Justification of Sports, Value Transmission, Structured v. Unstructured Activity, Parental Control-Youth Resistance, and Parental Support-Parental Pressure*) to carefully examine the messages constituting the youth sport environment and the role of parent-child communication in youth sport participation.

## Literature Review

### *Parent-Child Communication/Socialization*

Parent-child communication and the process of socialization are central tenets involved in conceptualizing SRPCC. It is this study's intent to situate SRPCC as a component of the socialization process of social and communicative competence.

This study approaches the sport related parent-child dyad from a family communication perspective; focusing on the interactions and communication constructs that constitute the sport related parent-child relationship (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999, p. 690). Family communication has traditionally been studied from a variety of perspectives including systems, social learning, relational, and typology (Bandura, 1977; Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Littlejohn, 1999; Rogers, 1989; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Research has emphasized the role of the family during the process of socialization (Bandura, 1977; Goodnow, 2005; Mead, 1934; Stafford, 2004; Scrodt et al., 2008) Mass communication scholars have also developed a model of family communication patterns (FCP) that connect youth socialization to family communication (McLeod & Chaffee, 1972). While the reviewed literature situates the family as a primary influence during socialization, Turman (2007) posits that little is known about the interaction that occurs between parents and children during the sport socialization process and implores “the opportunity to apply a communicative lens to help families address interaction problems that emerge within and about sport” (p. 173).

Considering that over 40 million children currently engage in some form of sport related activity, sport related interactions represent a vital area of inquiry for

communication scholars (Kassing et al., 2004). Youth sports participation occurs during two important stages of childhood development that play an integral role in parent-child communication and socialization— middle childhood and adolescence. Schrodt et al. (2008) maintain that “family communication and socialization processes provide the primary mechanisms through which children develop social competencies” (p. 5). The social skills perceived to develop during these stages align with the skills children are perceived to develop through youth sports. The nature of the youth sport environment offers numerous scenarios for children to practice social competence through their interactions with other children and adults. In addition, these scenarios enable a space for parent and child to strengthen their communicative efforts through the socialization of these skills.

Peer relations and academic performance are considered “cultural priorities” during the elementary school years; competency skills affecting peer relations such as forming and maintaining friendships, showing empathy, conflict management skills, and managing anger develop during middle childhood (Stafford, 2004, p. 311). Evangelista (2001) finds social and peer competence to be instrumental in academic success in primary school. Children who participated in sport related activities demonstrated “higher levels of social competence and psychosocial maturity” than those who did not (Fletcher, Nickerson, & Wright, 2008, p. 654). Youth sport participation during middle childhood ideally offers a space for young children to exercise social skills through interaction and structured play. An appropriate introduction to sports provides an opportunity to socialize with other children, learn from mistakes, and negotiate teamwork. This study suggests

that successful socialization and development of social competencies during middle childhood coupled with continued sport related participation could potentially assuage the communicational difficulties facing the parent-child relationship during adolescence.

Communication during adolescence is complicated by many factors including relational transition, differing perceptions and expectations, and issues of autonomy (Collins, Gleason, & Sesma, 1997; Collins & Luebker, 1994; Steinberg, 2001). Research has shown that the frequency and quality of parent-child communication tend to decline during adolescence, however relationships with a history of positive communication patterns may negotiate the difficult periods with less turbulence (Laursen & Collins, 2004). Additionally, adolescence marks a time of socialization and exploration; scholars have increasingly become more aware of the “importance of affection and autonomy [during adolescence] in the development of mental health and well-being” (Steinmetz, 1999, p. 373). Parents who are able to incorporate affection and autonomy during adolescence may improve relational communication.

It is plausible that the parent-child interaction patterns, social skills and competencies facilitated through youth sport participation during middle childhood are carried into adolescence and could increase communication quality in addition to providing another level of connection (Laursen & Collins, 2004). Sport participation necessitates considerable time and conversation between parent and child regarding practice, games, and time management. While decisions regarding participation (i.e. choosing a sport) allow adolescents some autonomy, conversations discussing the negotiation of responsibilities (e.g. time management, commitment) both increase

communication opportunities and further assist in the acquisition of social and communicative competence for parent and child.

### *Communication Competence*

Defining communication competency presents a difficult task as competency has been extensively researched via a multitude of methods and conceptualizations that have not been coherently explicated or theoretically grounded (Greene & Burlison, 2003). As communication competence may vary depending on culture and context, communicative adaptability can exemplify competence (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). In their comprehensive review of parent-child social-communicative competence, Hart, Newell, and Olson (2003) position communicative “interpersonal problem solving strategies” employed toward achieving personal and relational goals as an integral aspect of social competence (p. 754). Externalizing (aggressive, impulsive, disruptive) and internalizing (embarrassment, anxiety, fearfulness) behaviors are identified as social and communicative skill deficiencies (Hart et al, 2003). Within the context of youth sports, externalizing behaviors are components of inappropriate parental behavior and sports rage that often lead to internalizing behaviors by youth (Leff & Hoyle, 1997; Jellinek & Durant; 2004). Doty (2006) suggests that the sport community at large encourages externalizing behaviors by dismissing such behavior by professional and collegiate athletes as part of the game. A study found antisocial behavior coupled with athletic talent in boys largely accepted by peers (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). It seems fair to posit that inappropriate and often negative behaviors can hold different meanings surrounding sport and society. This behavioral exception warrants specific

exploration of sport related communicative competence considering that social behavioral norms do not necessarily apply within the context of sports.

In addition to combating the potentially normative antisocial behaviors that can accompany sport related activities, parents also face a variety of communicative situations including: speaking to coaches, interacting with parents and children, and speaking to children about their performance. These situations become complicated by context. If a child is having a problem with another child or the coach, should the parent intervene or help the child deal with the situation him/herself? Is it appropriate to stand on the sidelines and direct a child's play when one is not the coach? How do parents know if their avid support is also exerting unknown pressure? Upon entering the arena of youth sports, parents become exposed to new and challenging situations. The current study argues that the incidence of parental misconduct is directly related to parents who are not sufficiently prepared to competently negotiate such situations. SRPCC recognizes that learning to appropriately and effectively communicate in these contexts is a process and mistakes will be made<sup>1</sup>.

It is not necessary to have all the answers before enrolling a child in youth sports. It is, however, essential to recognize that difficult situations will arise and just as children must learn to appropriately deal with the frustrations, disappointments, and victories that accompany competition, so must parents. In order to better understand the complexity of

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<sup>1</sup> Because sport related competence represents an understudied aspect of the competence literature, I am not yet ready to explicate or position *sport related parent-child communication competence* theoretically. However, it is my intention to pursue an in-depth and theoretically grounded explication of SRPCCC following the completion of this thesis project.

negotiating parent-child communication in youth sports, current themes in youth sports research are reviewed.

### *The Moral Justification of Sports*

It is a common belief in America that sport provides a training ground to build character and instill morals and values. The following section traces the root of that belief and its current manifestation in American sports ideology.

At the turn of the twentieth century, President Theodore Roosevelt supported, with the backing of affluent businessmen, the implementation of the Public Schools Athletic League (PSAL); its mission statement, “to provide opportunities for educating students [young boys] in physical fitness, character development and socialization through an athletic program that fosters teamwork, discipline and sportsmanship” (cited in Zirin, 2008). Youth sports were largely recognized as of means of social control and as preparation for both work in the factories and war (Davies, 2007; Gorn & Goldstein, 1993). The goals of the PSAL have carried into the twenty-first century and provide a foundation for current American sports ideology. In other words, this study claims that youth sports are largely believed, without question, to instill important American morals and values in today’s youth.

Moral justification is the number one reason parents initiate and/or approve of youth sports participation; recent studies acknowledge the parental belief that youth sports will introduce values and produce moral benefits in the lives of their children (Dunn, Kinney, & Hofferth 2003; Coakley, 2006; Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007; Ryska, 2003). The assumption that youth sports inherently provide these moral benefits is problematic. First, there is no guarantee of moral benefits. On the contrary without supervision and intervention, the youth sport environment, especially during middle

childhood, can easily turn to unsportsmanlike behavior (e.g., issues with wanting to be first, play a specific position, rules, keeping hands to self, etc...). Second, the acquisition of morality hinges on “routine experiences with intimates” (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007, p. 5). In short, children learn moral lessons as they are guided through daily social interactions by competent adults.

The notion that sport builds character is widely accepted. Whether or not sport related activity actually builds character is currently a topic of debate. Doty (2006) argues that sports have wandered away from instilling morality, ironically, to justifying immoral behavior in the name of competition; “Cheating, scandals, drugs, violence, disrespect, and other inappropriate behaviors in sport have almost become expected or the norm” (p. 1). A nationwide implementation of programs that combat the inappropriate behavior of parents and coaches and seek to promote sportsmanship among athletes and spectators at all levels of competition supports this claim (Bach, 2006; Butler, 2000; Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2006).

The West Point Fair Play Project and the Parents Association for Youth Sports Program represent two major initiatives launched to repair the state of youth sports at the start of the twenty-first century. Both programs highlighted the following tenets as the keys to successful intervention: discussing the importance of sportsmanship through education and rewarding positive behavior, less emphasis on winning, appointing a supervisor to ensure inappropriate behavior is dealt with immediately, encouraging parents and communities to safeguard their sport environments, and guiding athletes through immoral scenarios to aid in making moral decisions (Butler, 2000; Goldstein &

Iso-Ahola, 2006). While these programs and others with similar guidelines have achieved successes, inappropriate behavior has persisted over the last decade. In 2005, one hundred incidents were reported in Detroit alone, and that statistic merely represents documented situations (McMahon, 2006). The copious incidence of unsportsmanlike conduct, on and off the playing field, of professional, collegiate, high school, and child athletes as well as coaches and parents (Buford May, 2001; Kidman, McKenzie, & McKenzie 1999; Pappas, McKenry, & Catlett, 2004; Ryska, 2003) suggests that main premise of American sport ideology, that sport is a moral avenue to instilling values and promoting prosocial behavior and well-being, should be investigated. SRPCC brings attention to holding all involved accountable for upholding the intended premise and discussing the ramifications when lapses occur.

Absent in the literature are children's perceptions of morality at work in their activities. According to social learning theory, there are seemingly deleterious effects when children recognize morally wrong behavior and actions as supported and encouraged by parents and coaches (Kunkel, Hummert, & Dennis, 2006). This paper asserts that the discrepancy of morally justifying sport and the evidence discrediting that justification not only demands scholarly attention and discourse, but opens a communicative space in parent-child relationships to constitute and account for morality. Incidentally, the current tendency toward unsportsmanlike conduct prevalent in American sports provides daily opportunities for parents to point out how not to act. Parent-child conversations become vitally important to discuss the contradictory messages that prevail in American sport.

In 2000, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) instituted the educational outreach program, Stay in Bounds (SIB), to help young athletes achieve a RICHER (Respect, Integrity, Caring, Harmony, Excellence, and Responsibility) experience through “good character and ethical conduct” (NCAA, 2008). Stahley and Boyd (2006) found the program to exemplify a *paradox of excellence* through its barrage of mixed messages:

The explicit SIB definition of excellence for school children is “trying one’s best” or, in other words, hard work resulting from self motivation. The definition of excellence as winning, on the other hand, is clearly implied by the championship-focused text that is SIB and its surrounding Hall of Champions (p. 324).

Although the RICHER principle is privileged throughout the program, “excellence per trying one’s best” is cleverly undermined by “excellence per winning” through the actual delivery of the message. As children navigate the SIB program within the Hall of Champions (a museum dedicated to NCAA athletes from which SIB operates) they continuously encounter past NCAA champions, through videos and athlete profiles. While children are given the message that trying your best is what counts, they recognize that only winners have a place in the hall of champions. The importance of sportsmanship and safety is often paraded across the youth sports arena, however a survey of youth sports in Minnesota found that “45.3% of young athletes say they have been yelled at or insulted, 17.5 % said they have been hit, kicked, or slapped while participating, and 21% have been pressured to play with an injury” (NYSFF, 2001). Plainly speaking, what is held up as truth is not being enforced. By formally addressing these moral

inconsistencies, parent and child strengthen and clarify their communicative efforts in addition to facilitating the appropriate socializing of moral concepts.

There are many mixed messages surrounding youth sports and morality. This study argues that sports do not arbitrarily build character and instill morality in America's youth. Instead, parents must use youth sports as a means to identify immoral behaviors and actions and encourage their opposite. It is through these communicative efforts that parents are able to effectively transmit the intended values.

### *Value Transmission*

Youth sports become morally justified through the process of transmitting values. Discipline, sportsmanship, teamwork, character building, and physical fitness in regards to America's youth remain as important to parents today as they were over one hundred years ago.

The majority of studies reviewed indicate that while parents structure their children's activities according to certain goals or benefits for the purpose of transmitting values (Dunn, Kinney, & Hofferth, 2003; Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007; Ryska, 2003; Shaw & Dawson, 2001; Zaff et al., 2003), the main reason children participate is to have fun (Adler & Adler, 1994; Coakley, 2007; Pugh et al., 2000; Shaw & Dawson, 2001). A recent study of family leisure activities included perspectives from parents and children; however, because of starkly opposing viewpoints, Shaw and Dawson (2001) decided to focus solely on parental discourse. Their research concluded that parents believe family leisure to encourage positive family interaction, increase family cohesion, and provide a means to teach values and moral lessons (pp. 223-225). The current study highlights the

importance of analyzing both viewpoints and their opposing goals in order to improve parent-child communication in spite of those differences; a collaborative effort is necessary if both parent and youth goals are to be achieved. Another study of 32 families supports the claim that sport functions as a “socializing tool for culturally cherished skills and values in daily family life” in formal, informal, and passive settings (Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007, p. 35). In light of the evidence that parents primarily view sport as a means to transmit values and children are more interested in fun, this study asserts the importance of establishing a common ground to avoid privileging parental goals at the expense of the child’s. This common ground is necessary because learning morals and values increases social competence and is vital, not only for parental goals but for positive social development.

Current research in value transmission advises against methods of controlling and instructing; when a child perceives that the ultimate parental goal is control, he/she is likely to reject parental instruction (Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2004; Knafo & Schwartz, 2003). Valued skills such as problem-solving, self-esteem, perseverance, and integrity cannot be learned by mandate. Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that support of autonomy is essential in value transmission. Children need to feel independent in adaptation of values and not forced or coerced. Restricting independence can inhibit transmission and socialization while parental warmth and encouragement are associated positively with value reception (Rudy & Grusec, 2001). This study asserts that children who are not involved in the selection of the sport related activity and degree of commitment to that activity in which they participate are likely to feel forced into something at the expense of

parental needs. In other words, this study suggests that children who are provided some autonomy through being included in choices regarding their own participation, will be more receptive to receiving the intended value driven messages. Their enjoyment can be a useful point of departure in the teaching of moral lessons.

The goal of value transmission is a salient parent-child tension in sport related activity. Children's need for fun in and of itself can become secondary to the parental desire to transmit values. Children may understand and recognize these parental goals while simultaneously acknowledging their own needs failing to be met. The literature supports that youth sport related activity is morally justified by parents as means of transmitting values. This study contends that while structured activities can sometimes be restrictive because of goal-driven activity, they provide a space to learn social skills and work through frustrations. Unstructured activity becomes an important space to allow for the cultivation of creativity in order to provide balance to the structure of organized activities such as sports and school.

#### *Structured Activity v. Unstructured Activity*

There are two types of sport related activity in which children can participate. Both are important in their individual contexts. This study argues that a balance of both provides the ideal environment for the acquisition of social competence, effective transmission of values, promoting independent thinking and creativity, and fun. Organized sports provide structure through rule-based play in a controlled setting. This type of activity usually involves teams, uniforms, practice, and scheduled games. Unstructured activity, though not nearly as prevalent as it once was (Coakley, 2006),

usually takes place away from adult supervision, is often spontaneous and involves rules made up by the children who play.

Multiple studies reveal the parental belief that structured sport participation will produce positive outcomes in the lives of their children (Dunn, Kinney, & Hofferth 2003; Coakley, 2006; Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007; Ryska 2003). These studies are complemented by warnings about unstructured leisure time and socially constructed views that adolescents and teenagers left to their own devices will inevitably get into trouble (Kloep & Hendry, 2003; Larson, 2001; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). Whatever their specific reasoning, parents prefer organized and supervised activities. Current research emphasizes considerable parental influence in the selection and prioritizing of children's activities (Shannon, 2006; Wingard, 2007). This study highlights the importance of allowing children to choose, or at least take part in the decision of what sport they will participate in. It is also important to carefully select the level of competition in which a child will participate.

In a six year study of after school activities of elementary and middle school age children, Adler and Adler (1994) define five levels of play: spontaneous, recreational, competitive democratic, competitive meritocratic, and elite. Of the five, only spontaneous play offers a space where kids rule with imagination and creativity while fun is the primary objective. At this level, skills such as problem solving, adaptation, inclusion, rule-making/enforcing, compromise, and team building are identified as learned through negotiating naturally occurring issues (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 312-313). Each of the other levels involves adult organization, adult structure, and adult control escalating at

each level. As children climb up the competitive ladder, they must negotiate the increased focus on competition and winning that is ultimately constructed by the adults. It is because of the increased attention toward competition that this study advises the inclusion of unstructured activities to provide balance.

Regardless of the inherent benefits of unstructured activity, most parents situate it secondary to structured or goal driven activity (Shannon, 2006; Shaw & Dawson, 2001). Additionally, several studies have determined unstructured leisure as indicative of problematic behavior in children and adolescents (Larson, 2001; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). While some research privileges structured over unstructured activity, there are contradictory findings regarding the positive benefits of structured sport participation. Eccles et al. (2003) found that while high school sport participation was significantly correlated with educational progression, student athletes more frequently consumed alcohol. In studying benefits of youth organized activities, Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin (2003) discovered sport activities indicate “higher rates of negative experiences, specifically, negative peer interaction and inappropriate adult behavior” (p.47).

The contradictory findings for structured and unstructured activity necessitate a closer examination of youth sport related activity, if not a complete re-organization of the current structure. Gerdy (2003) calls to “de-organize” youth sports for children under age 13 and “let the kids have their games back” (p. 5). As a youth sports director, he observed detrimental effects of adult goals and structured activity. Pediatric experts corroborate, stating that sport focus for children under 12 should be “fun, friends, and fitness” (Jellinek & Durant, 2004, p.2). Gerdy also noted that the children of lower socio-

economic status who were unable to afford the structured programming, were having more fun and developing better social skills.

Guided by the underlying objective to improve sport related parent-child communication and youth sport participation, the present study seeks to re-structure the messages driving the structured vs. unstructured discourse in a more constructive manner. Components of both types of activity are vital to positive youth sport participation. Blended together, these components feasibly represent a much needed compromise in order to meet both parental and youth goals and improve the youth sport experience. The current study hopes to add to this discussion by providing data-driven guidelines to unpack the structured vs. unstructured discourse.

Competing goals involving choice of activity, structure, and level of commitment can create tension between parent and child without appropriate attention. Unattended, this tension can strain the parent-child relationship.

#### *Parental Control-Children's Resistance*

Parental control-children's resistance can best be illustrated as a situation in which a parent does not allow a child some element of choice in selecting a sport related activity or program. Consequently the child resents his or/her lack of choice and resists participation.

In the realm of youth sport related activity, control takes the form of parental overprotection, time management, allocation of resources, and choice of activity type (Coakley, 1994, p. 117; Kloep & Hendry, 2003; Shaw & Dawson, 2001; Wingard, 2007). Kloep and Hendry (2003) argue that parental protection through structured learning

environments fails to effectively stimulate adolescent growth and conversely facilitates social conformity. They further found that in spite of involvement in numerous activities, adolescents report infinite boredom. A 17 year old girl confirms, “I play orchestra on Mondays, tennis on Tuesdays...in summer I go swimming, cycling and play soccer...but there is nothing to do here. We are often together with some older guys...because bored is exactly what you are nowadays” (p. 30-31). Escape from the boredom of controlled settings can result in deviant behavior such as sneaking out, drinking or smoking, and deception (Kloep & Hendry, 2003).

A young man in a study of adolescent perceptions of parental messages describes his overt engagement in a parental approved activity (band) while covertly participating in a unacceptable activity (skateboarding): “They don’t get it...it’s the one thing I’m good at...but they just think of skateboarders as losers so I keep my skateboard at [friend’s] house...” (Shannon, 2006, p.407). In this case, the young man did not agree to his parents’ reasoning of skateboarding as unacceptable and instead recognized their messages as a form of control. While he appreciates, but does not fully embrace that control, he is able to satisfy their needs (band) as well as his own (skateboarding). Unfortunately, he must deceive his parents to achieve harmony.

Strained interaction and communication difficulty between parent and child during adolescence are well documented by family scholars as part of the developmental process (Laursen & Collins, 2004). However, because of the time and commitment associated with sport related participation, this study suggests that the sport related parent-child relationship and communication will benefit from parental flexibility in

choice. It is understood that parents may stand firm on requiring a child's participation in structured activities such as sports, art, and music. In such cases this study claims that allowing the child to choose particulars (e.g. type of sport, instrument or genre of music, style or method of art) allows some autonomy and can assuage resistance. Moreover, this study argues that SRPCC will benefit from parent-child conversations regarding participation and goals. An important aspect of SRPCC involves a discussion and understanding of both parent and child goals in order to facilitate communication and avoid misunderstanding.

Shannon's (2006) study of adolescents perceptions' illustrates that while parents may articulate the importance of activity for fun, enjoyment, and balance, adolescent's do not perceive those intentions. The parental messages instead convey that activity should be a stepping stone to some future benefit. Adolescents also become confused when there is word-deed inconsistency. Knafo and Schwartz (2003) implore the importance of word-deed consistency in value transmission. If a parent says that fun and balance are important and subsequently fails to demonstrate that importance in his/her daily life, the message becomes self-contradictory. In a similar vein, if a parent supports sport related participation as an avenue of fun and then becomes angry when a child does not perform well, that inconsistency is salient to the child. The "do as I say, not as I do" philosophy hardly seems effective in parent-child communication. Ambiguous messages are recognized as parent control instead of parental support.

This study assumes that parents ultimately want what is best for their child and sometimes what is perceived to be "in the child's best interest" is not always of the

child's interest. To assuage the control-resistance tension, sport related participation should be negotiated within the parent-child relationship through an open dialogue where both parent-child goals are expressed and acknowledged. This dialogue enhances understanding and reduces message ambiguity. The ambiguous nature of the parental messages highlighted in this section necessitates a closer look at the distinction between parental messages of support and control as well as the effects of those messages.

#### *Parental Support-Parental Pressure*

Without clear communication of parent and child goals, messages can become confusing to young athletes. For instance, Danny wants to play basketball but his father and brothers all played football. Encouragement from Danny's father regarding football may be perceived as pressure by Danny to play football instead of articulating his desire to play basketball. In addition, parents who continually offer unsolicited instruction can also exert pressure.

Pomerantz and Eaton (2000) demonstrate how parental help and instruction inhibit a child's sense of autonomy and elicit feelings of inadequacy. Although monitoring and guidance are consistent with supportive measures, parental over-involvement can undermine self-sufficiency in children. Padilla-Walker and Carlo (2004) found that when parent teaching is interpreted as parent preaching, adolescents are less receptive (p. 399). These findings further implicate the role of autonomy as essential to adolescent development. While the provision of autonomy remains a salient tension during adolescence, sport related participation can assist in that provision. For instance, consider the following scenario. A child is having a difficult time with another player. A

parent may choose to call the parent of the other player or the coach or even to confront the child. Instead of stepping in, this study suggests that parent and child discuss the specifics of the issue and then parent helps child to confront the situation him/herself. The latter choice strengthens the parent-child relationship by affirming the child's competency, providing autonomy and independence by encouraging and assisting the child in handling the situation, and facilitating positive interaction that ultimately builds and strengthens social and communicative skills. Although autonomy is important, sport related activity requires parental participation.

Structured sport related activity is dependent on parental support. Participation in competitive programs requires serious time commitment and financial obligation from parents. Consequently, the depth of parental involvement has led to an over-identification with children's performance (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2006). This study recognizes that parents may feel that the time and money invested obliges a right to critique ability and talent level and force participation. Pediatricians warn that "unrealistic parental expectations and or/exploitation of young athletes for extrinsic gain can contribute to negative psychological consequences" (American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness, 2000, p. 156). It is understandable that parents can become emotionally involved when time and money are invested. This further supports the necessity for clearly discussing parent and child goals of participation before a commitment is made. Parental goals attached to parental achievement and glories can negatively affect the parent-child relationship. Coakley (2006) describes this phenomenon by connecting children's success, or lack thereof, with the moral worth of a

parent; “talented child athletes, therefore, become valuable moral capital” (p. 160). Parents are not perfect and will make mistakes; even a respected child sports psychologist admitted to becoming caught up in the moment and reacting inappropriately at his daughter’s soccer game (Fish, 2003). At the moment a parent recognizes him/herself acting inappropriately, this study suggests that parents need to communicate their reaction or action as a mistake and prevent the child from interpreting the inappropriate action as a message that his/her performance on the field directly affects the parent’s love/feelings for the child. Without such communication children can develop intense feelings of parental pressure.

Anshel and Delany (2001) directly relate poor performance to acute stress in child athletes, indicating perceived pressure. Interviews with elite eleven year old baseball players disclose the adverse effects of parental pressure (Pugh et al., 2000); one athlete states, “It gets on your nerves when people yell at you. It’s not good to pressure a kid, because they get all tensed up and don’t play to their potential” (p. 778). Another young boy further classifies parental instruction as inappropriate: “The ideal parent just lets you play...Let me do what I’m doing and you (the parents) just cheer. Let the Coach coach me” (p. 778). The athletes above support the claim that support can be interpreted as pressure. They indicate the importance and type of communication they need from parents to perform with confidence. Although parents sometimes feel the need to coach from the stands, those instructional messages are often interpreted negatively.

Negative parental behavior is prevalent in youth sport related activity (Bach, 2006). A study of parental comments documented over one hundred and forty seven

youth games and distinguished 34.5% of total comments as negative (Kidman, McKenzie, & McKenzie 1999). From a dialogic standpoint, negative parental communication adversely influences the constitution of the parent-child relationship. Evaluations and criticism are the most frequently reported types of hurtful messages (Leary et al., 1998; Vangelisti, 1994). Because parental behaviors can be interpreted as both support and pressure, communicative effort is vital to the health and maintenance of the parent-child relationship.

Throughout the review of related literature this study cites miscommunication and lack of appropriate communication strategies as the leading causes of parental misconduct in sport related activities. Messages of morality and value-transmission drive and support youth sport participation yet, unsportsmanlike conduct and focus on winning are prevalent at all levels of sport from youth to professional. Structured activities have been privileged over unstructured activities in spite of inherent benefits of spontaneous play. Parents and children have competing goals when engaging in sport related participation that can lead to ambiguous messages regarding participation. Messages of support can be interpreted as pressure when goals are not clearly explicated and messages are not communicated appropriately. The current study proposes to facilitate and improve SRPCC and the youth sport community at large by implementing and explicating a sport related communicative process.

## Rationale & Research Questions

The literature review highlights interactional issues in sport related parent-child communication. The differing viewpoints of parents and children underscore the importance of equal voice representation within the relationship, especially when considering the life-consuming nature of competitive youth sports. Parent-child tension is salient in the youth sport arena. Many programs are banning parents from practices and games (New Jersey's Code of Contact Law, 2002), while others have started mandatory parent education programs to clean up sideline behavior (Bach, 2006). Sports historian Gerald Gems asserts this parental education as merely a band aid; citing the "win at all cost attitude" as the root of unsportsmanlike behavior (Lord, 2000). This attitude is not only at the heart of organized sports, but pervades American society through capitalist ideology (Sage, 1998) which hardly motivates positive and moral behavior.

Ideally, youth sport related activities have the potential to provide a positive environment for parent and child to co-participate in learning moral behavior, values, fitness, and fun. Emphasizing winning, however, encumbers this possibility. There are countless repercussions to instilling a "win at all cost" philosophy into young children including inevitable failure (Hirschhorn & Loughhead, 2000). In order to prevent young children from adapting this "no-win" philosophy, which thwarts the intended acquisition of morals and values equated with participation, parent and child should enter into sport participation as a collaborative effort. In other words, this study submits that the sport related parent-child relationship and communicative efforts as well as the youth sport

experience will benefit from the inclusion of the child's voice and perceived experience as valued and respected.

Youth sports offer a unique and relatively unstudied context to investigate parent-child communication. Unfortunately, the *intentions* of sport related participation have dominated the youth sports conversation with little accountability. Youth organizations boast opportunities for moral learning and character building through sport participation (Dunn, 2003) yet various studies indicate increasing unsportsmanlike conduct, decreasing enjoyment of activity, and inappropriate parental behavior as prevalent issues in youth sports (Coakley, 1992; Doty, 2006; Kidman, McKenzie, & McKenzie 1999). Just as mixed messages are internally disrupting sport related parent-child communication, they are additionally confusing perceptions of youth sport related activities.

The literature supports the claim that parents and children have different goals regarding sport participation. While parental goals of moral lessons and value-transmission have been sufficiently documented, there are minimal studies including children's goals and perspectives and the effects of differing goals on communicative efforts. Research also reveals that messages of support and pressure can be problematic when goals are not clearly defined and messages are inappropriately communicated, however the delineation of ambiguous messages is not explored. This study's objectives include a: 1) Careful examination of the messages constituting the youth sport environment in order to, 2) explicate both the role and the process of sport related parent-child communication, and 3) make the results available to parents and youth sport

communities and organizations in an effort to improve parent-child communication and youth sports participation.

To remedy the gaps in the literature and pursue the intended objectives, this study includes perspectives from both parent and child regarding the perceived moral environment constituting youth sports and messages of support and pressure and their affect on the parent-child relationship and communicative efforts. This study highlights the inclusion of the child athlete's voice as well as comparing and contrasting specific parent and child messages. The following research questions are proposed to examine the phenomena that occur within sport related parent-child communication:

1. What parental actions and messages are defined as support and/or pressure within the context of youth sports?
  - 1a. What are the differences or similarities between parent and child definition?
2. How does the sport dream of the parent and/or child influence their relational communication (sport dream defined as college or professional aspirations)?
3. What are the messages and actions about morality embedded within the youth sport experience?

## CHAPTER TWO: METHOD

### Grounded Theory

Grounded theory methods have been utilized to investigate new theoretical concepts derived from data (Strauss, 1987). This study follows the constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and recognizes the researcher's interpretation of the data as both a valid and integral to theory construction. Grounded theorists "look at studied life from multiple vantage points, make comparisons, follow leads, and build on ideas" to achieve theoretical sensitivity (Charmaz, 2006, p. 135). The present study was designed to understand and compare multiple points of view regarding parent-child communication in youth sports. Data analyzed from the initial sample produced preliminary categories. An additional theoretical sample, comprised of six parent-athlete dyads from the initial sample and five new parent-athlete dyads, was chosen specifically to substantiate and expound the preliminary categories.

### Participant Selection

Participants for this study were recruited at a private Western university through flyers posted in the athletics building as well as an electronic announcement posted on the main student webpage. A verbal announcement and email were also delivered to the Club Sports Board. Each flyer/announcement contained the researcher's email address. Once athletes expressed interest in study participation, a preliminary questionnaire was sent via

email to ascertain qualification for the study (see Appendix A). The two main measures of study qualification were 1) having participated in youth sports for a minimum of five years, 2) having a parent willing to participate. Parent selection was left to the discretion of the athlete and parental information was obtained through the participant after he/she completed the interview.

## Data Collection

### *Initial Sample*

Athlete interviews took place in a quiet room on campus or in the athlete's home and lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. Following the interview, athletes were asked to select a parent to complete the parental questionnaire. Athletes were given two days to contact their parent and request he/she participate in the study. The parent was then contacted briefly via phone by the researcher and sent the questionnaire via email. Both athlete and parent were asked not to discuss their respective interview/questionnaire with each other until the parent had returned the questionnaire. Participants were also asked if he/she knew of anyone else who might want to participate in the study. A consent form outlining the measures taken to ensure confidentiality was discussed and signed before the actual interview.

### *Initial Interview Protocol*

Both interview and questionnaire protocol (see Appendix B) was structured to elicit detailed descriptions of the youth sport experience. Athletes responded to twenty questions in a three-part format (warm-up, main, and close). The warm-up questions (e.g.

What sport[s] do you play? How did you become involved in your sport[s]) were intended to put the athlete at ease and get him/her talking comfortably. The main questions (e.g., Tell me about your parents' messages or actions that you experienced as support or pressure when you played your sport. How did you respond? Describe how sportsmanship or unsportsmanlike conduct was communicated in your youth sport experience. Describe a situation when you felt your messages or actions exerted parental pressure.) were designed to answer the research questions and further explicate the youth sport environment as perceived by parents and children. The research questions were formulated from perceived gaps in the literature review; parent and child experiences and perceptions are included to better understand how messages are misinterpreted. Closing questions were structured to end the interview on a positive note and asked for the participants' opinion regarding parents and athletes (e.g., What was your best experience sport experience involving your parents? What advice would you give young athletes and their parents today? Is there anything I didn't ask that you feel is important?).

The parental questionnaire contained 9 questions that mirrored the athlete interview protocol (e.g., What messages or actions did you use to provide support? Describe a situation where you felt your messages or actions exerted parental pressure. Describe how sportsmanship or unsportsmanlike conduct was communicated in your child's youth sport experience.). The athlete/parent protocol was structured to look at how messages and actions are respectively interpreted by parents and athletes. A review of the literature found no prior studies researching sport related parent-child communication in this way.

Prior research in word-deed consistency or discrepancy between parental message and action (Knafo & Schwartz, 2003), parental help and/or instruction (Pomerantz & Eaton, 2000), adolescent perceptions of parental messages (Shannon, 2006), young athletes perceptions of parental pressure (Pugh et al., 2000) and the pervasive moral justification of sports (Dunn et al., 2003; Coakley, 2006; Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007; Ryska, 2003) led the researcher to specifically examine parent and child perceptions of parental messages, parent-child communication, and messages of morality in youth sports.

A pre-test was administered to a friend who fit the participant criteria in order to test the flow of the questions and their ability to provoke rich responses. The pre-test was successful and indicated that the interview protocol appropriately spoke to the underlying research questions.

### *Theoretical Sample*

Following grounded theory methods, a theoretical sample was selected to explicate the preliminary categories emerging from the initial data set. Six dyads from the initial sample were selected based on the availability of both parent and athlete and their prior indication of participating in a follow-up interview. Five new dyads were recruited through the initial participants.

### *Theoretical Interview Protocol*

Athlete interviews took place in a quiet room on campus or in the athlete's home and lasted approximately 25-35 minutes. Verbal consent was obtained, recorded, and filed digitally. The researcher contacted the parent by phone to schedule a phone

interview. Phone interviews lasted approximately 30 – 45 minutes. Verbal consent was obtained, recorded, and filed digitally. The same precautions were taken to ensure confidentiality of both athlete and parent participants. All athlete and parent interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher with the exception of one parent who declined audio recording. To respect the wishes of the participant, the researcher took detailed notes of the interview and reviewed the answers with the participant before ending the interview to maintain detail and accuracy equivalent to the transcribed interviews.

The theoretical sample protocol (see Appendix C) was structured to explicate the preliminary categories emergent from the initial data set and answer the research questions (e.g., Explain how choices and commitments regarding your youth sport participation were discussed and decided upon. What was the process? In regards to parental critique of your performance, under what circumstances was it acceptable or unacceptable?). Both parent and athlete protocol included 5 questions.

## Data Analysis

### *Analysis*

Data analysis was informed by Charmaz's (2006) guide to constructing grounded theory; interviews and questionnaires were line-by-line and subsequently focus-coded by athlete/parent dyad with the exception of the two athletes whose parents' declined participation. A list of emerging categories from the initial sample was generated from the focused codes. Theoretical memos were written following the coding of each dyad as well as intermittently throughout the coding process to explicate relationships between

and among dyads, athletes, and parents. Successive memos were written to continuously compare and contrast previous codes and memos to identify underlying structures, overarching categories, and future implications.

The line-by-line coding involved coding each line with gerunds in order to focus on underlying processes (e.g., losing focus, spending time together, changing level of commitment). Focus coding grouped similar line-by-line codes to outline categorical conditions. The memoing process helped facilitate and organize categorical formation by providing a space to “free write” about emerging ideas and concepts after coding each transcript.

Focused codes were grouped by relevance and diagrammed to form preliminary categories. Categories with the strongest support, based on focused codes grounded in the data, were assigned quotes directly from the interview/questionnaire data. The categories and quotes were then compared with the original diagram, resulting in five categories with corresponding sub-categories: *Relational Foundation*, *Choices/Commitments*, *Youth Sport Community*, *Sportsmanship/Life Lessons*, and *Messages of Support/Pressure*. Category number was not pre-determined. Following grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006), strict adherence to the data guided initial category formation and provided the areas of focus for subsequent theoretical sampling.

Data analysis of the theoretical sample followed the same guidelines as the original sample and continuously compared emerging concepts with the data from the initial sample. The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed

to stay grounded in the data through each step of analysis in order and produce fully developed theoretical categories.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Study Objectives

The purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory of sport related parent-child communication competency through the pursuit of the following objectives:

1) A careful examination of the messages constituting the youth sport environment in order to, 2) explicate both the role and the process of sport related parent-child communication, and 3) make the results available to parents and youth sport communities and organizations in an effort to improve parent-child communication and youth sports participation. This section has been organized to address the previously stated objectives in the order they have been presented.

First, demographic information is presented. Then a careful examination of the messages constituting the youth sport environment will be detailed through the thematic categories that emerged through the analysis of interview transcripts. Following the categorical presentation and analysis, the research questions will be addressed in conjunction with the interview data. The results from the interviews will be used to propose a conceptual model of *sport related parent-child communication competency*. Finally, the study results have been formatted into two practical resources for a youth sport program (see Practical Applications). The resources presented here are geared specifically for the youth program observed in tandem to this study. While the youth

camp observations both inform and support the conclusions drawn in this study, observational data from the camp has been removed from the current study. However, the analysis of data from the current study was used to construct the two practical resources and will be utilized by the camp this summer.

### Demographic Information

The initial sample included 11 athletes, 5 men and 6 women, between the ages of 18 – 33 ( $M = 21$ ) and 9 parents, 6 fathers and 3 mothers, between the ages of 35 – 60 (parental age was not solicited; range is approximated). After initially consenting to participate, two parents declined; the corresponding athletes were permitted to remain in the sample. Although the recruiting process took place on campus, participants were not limited to students; one participant held a coaching position and another was a former student athlete turned professional.

The theoretical sample included six dyads from the initial sample (3 males, 3 females; 6 fathers) and five additional dyads (3 males, 2 females; 1 father, 4 mothers). The additional dyads were recruited through the initial participants. Following grounded theory methods, the additional dyads were chosen specifically to further explicate the preliminary categories. Criteria included: willingness of a parental participant and at least 8 years of youth sport participation.

In the initial study, 6 participants responded to the flyer announcement and 5 were recruited through snowball sampling. The initial participants who were asked to participate in the theoretical sample were chosen based on the following criteria: parent and athlete indicated interest in participating in a follow-up, athlete's participation in

youth sports for at least 8 years, parents who submitted the most detailed responses to the questionnaire.

Overall, athletes participated in youth sports for a minimum of 8 years ( $M = 9.5$ ) in a variety of sports including: swimming/diving, baseball, soccer, lacrosse, hockey, figure skating, basketball, cycling, football, rugby, volleyball, track/field. All participants currently participate in sport related activity in some fashion including: 3 currently on full athletic scholarship, 2 have been recruited by professional organizations, 1 currently participates professionally, 3 competing at the collegiate level, and one collegiate level coach. Name, age, and sport have been altered to maintain confidentiality.

#### Categorical Analysis

A grounded theory analysis of the experiences shared by the participants in this study led to the unearthing of a process embedded within youth sport participation. The developing theory of *sport related parent-child communication competency (SRPCCC)* is conceptualized through the following theoretical and processual categories: *building a relational foundation, navigating choices and commitments, negotiating the sport family, delineating messages of support/pressure, and learning/teaching life lessons*. Following the analysis, a definition of SRPCCC will be presented.

#### *Thematic Categories*

##### *Building a Relational Foundation*

This category undergirds the overarching analysis and serves as the theoretical foundation for *sport related parent-child communication competency (SRPCCC)*. Sport participation as a means to build the parent-child relationship, through spending quality

time together and as an avenue of communication, served as a fundamental component of both parent and athlete experiences. Participants emphasized the positive relational effects that sport participation facilitated through the constitution, maintenance, and strengthening of their relationship throughout the process of sport participation.

Early memories of sport participation were described as family events such as backyard ball games, street hockey in front of the house, or basketball in the driveway. Learning and playing sport related activities early on enabled a space for parents and children to spend quality time together and create memories that are now held dear. For some participants, sports and sport related talk represented the only connection between parent and child. The following examples illustrate sport participation as a reason or occasion to talk or spend time together that both constituted and enhanced communication and relational development:

“Playing football with my parents...those were the best memories. Just having fun and falling in love with the game with my parents out there playing and my mom even played with us so that was the best.” (Thomas, 20, Football)

“It definitely gave me something to talk about with my dad...it was hard to talk to my dad about stuff but I could always hockey or he could talk hockey to me.” (Jack, 25, Hockey)

“The time we spent together around her sports activity created another facet of our relationship by giving us a common link, something to talk about that was special to the two of us.” (Father of Kristi, 20, Basketball)

“Taking an interest in your child’s sports builds bonds with your child and that fact is worth your participation.” (Mother of Brian, 21, Soccer)

Participant messages constituting the *building a relational foundation* category are essential to conceptualizing SRPCCC. While parents and athletes varied in their experiences of participation, the most cherished moments involved the co-creation of relational bonds. These memories had less to do with particulars such as wins and losses than the time and love shared in those moments. Parents connected through the joy induced from watching their children have fun. “You should have seen the smiles on our faces, it was classic!” (Father of Gabby, 18, Golf, describing playing wiffle ball in the back yard when she was 4). Similarly, children connected to their parents’ appreciation of the child’s enjoyment. “I love just seeing them in the stands because you know they care and if things aren’t going well you know they are there and they love you and are supporting you.” (Heinrich, 20, Basketball).

Careful constitution of the sport related parent-child relationship was fundamental to future communicative efforts. Whether or not passion for particular activities was shared, it was the understanding and acknowledgement of the other’s pleasure that facilitated meaningful relational connection. The sport related parent-child relationship, grounded in shared meaning and memories, essentially provided the foundation for successful and competent sport related communication. The relationship built while the child was young also helped to positively stimulate future relational pursuits. Although at times one father felt that sport participation took away from family time, he reflects on the benefits of supporting his daughter’s interests. “It has helped build our relationship.

We spent a lot of quality time together [this summer] which I think stems from doing all those things together [early on], sports and music, and the bonding that goes on practicing whatever it is.” (Father of Rachel, 22, Softball, regarding his daughter’s last summer at home before graduating college). The relational bonds built through sport participation served as the lens through which parents and children understood and negotiated their sport related relationship and the process of participation.

### *Navigating Choices and Commitments*

Sport related participation necessitated a multitude of choices and commitments for both parents and children whether the child was just starting out or thinking about college athletics. Choices and commitments were inextricably linked and not mutually exclusive. There were no choices without pending commitments and each commitment involved some element of choice. For these participants, the strength and success of the sport related parent-child relationship relied heavily on the competent negotiation of choices and commitments. No matter the situational particulars, participants discussed successful and unsuccessful negotiations through a recurring communicative process which has been divided into four sub-categories: *fostering open communication, instilling values as participatory parameters, communicating shared responsibility, differentiating skill and passion, and negotiating complex choices.*

*Fostering open communication.* Open communication was interpreted as a critical component of competently negotiating choices for varying situations of sport participation. Participants articulated the importance of open discussion throughout the decision making process in order to construct a space for issues to be discussed freely and

to allow children some autonomy. The following examples illustrate how fostering open communication laid the groundwork for proficient communication, assisted children in making decisions, and increased social competence.

We have always tried to talk everything through...placing all options on the table and talking openly about feelings and motivations. She may have been only 14 but it is her life and we felt she had to make those decisions...we were there to assist as a sounding board (Father of Cheryl, 21, Lacrosse)

“It was something we all discussed as a family...we are very open and if something was bothering one of us we would speak up.” (Heinrich, 20, Basketball)

“It is important to communicate with your child and offer choices and let them decide how to proceed...that way they have to take responsibility for their own decisions.” (Mother of Brian, 21, Soccer)

“We didn’t say we are going to sit down and talk about it one time and make the decision and that’s it. We have a very open relation with Thomas, so that process was more of a continuation of multiple conversations. (Father of Thomas, 20, Football)

No matter the specifics of the choices and commitments, open family communication allowed for ideas and feelings to be expressed and investigated. Fostering open discussion also enhanced communicative competency by incorporating emotions and motivations into the decision making process. Implementing discussion early in the early stages of sport participation opened an important dialogic space for parents and children to enter before making sport related decisions. This space helped children to understand how to effectively negotiate the decision making process by talking about

desires, motivations, and logistics. Additionally, children developed social competency skills as parents provided them with the tools to make and support their own decisions.

Fostering open communication in the sense of SRPCCC requires parents to constitute a space for children to discover their own desires and to take a personal stance. It enables children to decide that they may not like a particular sport, in spite of it being the favorite sport of a parent. Parents help guide their children to consider options and make choices.

*Instilling values as participatory parameters.* Sport related parameters varied by family situation and presented in the form of choices such as which sport(s) to play, how many different sports to play, and level of competition. Parameters served as participatory boundaries and were often connected to parental values and availability of resources.

“I was limited to one big activity a season because I had a sister who also deserved attention and time and travel...and my mom and dad worked full time.”

(Rachel, 22, Softball)

“...they definitely didn’t support jumping from one thing to another, they wanted me to stick with something and commit to it, so I made sure activities didn’t overlap. And it was always education first.” (Ben, 27, Baseball)

“...we did not like Sunday morning games because of church...and we didn’t want sports to take over the family.” (Father of Rachel, 22, Softball)

“We were in a position financially where cost didn’t really matter and I was a stay at home mom, so as far as getting her places that was never an issue either.” (Mother of Mia, 21, Swimming)

Identifying participation parameters facilitated competence in sport related decision making. Stipulations varied by situation. Some parents allowed their children to engage in more than one sport per season and some only allowed one sport per season. Other commitments such as academics and family time also influenced activity choice. Rachel (22, Softball) ended up dropping a sport, after the season had ended, because it interfered with church on Sunday. Heinrich (20, Baseball) attended alternate services when his participation conflicted with the usual church time. Thomas (20, Golf) was home schooled around his participation schedule while Ben’s (27, Baseball) parents were firm on sports participation being scheduled around education.

Whatever the specific conditions, participation parameters that aligned with family values held greater meaning. As athletes discussed parameters, they were understood and internalized through the importance of the underlying family values. Considering that the foremost motivation for participation is socializing morals and values, it proved important to define parameters in those terms. Through the co-construction of value laden parameters, sport related rules and boundaries communicated important familial and relational meaning and enabled parent and child to improve SRPCCC. When children understood the meanings behind their participation parameters and viewed their participation as a joint process, values and rules were more easily communicated and respected.

*Communicating shared responsibility.* Before engaging in sport related participation it was important for parents and children to cultivate a shared sense of responsibility. Parents encouraged children to understand the parental investments (e.g. time, financial support), division of resources, and moral obligations that accompany participation. Although experiences varied, understanding and communicating responsibilities as *shared* played a vital role in SRPCCC.

Kids need to realize that parents are giving up time and sometimes a ton of money [to play] and parents need to realize that they need to be flexible and this is something their kids are having fun with...and it really does help you develop socially so that communication is really important. (Kelly, 20, Soccer)

“Expenses were high and we talked a lot about my commitment and goals...they wanted me to realize my commitment should match their commitment.” (Bob, 18, Diving)

“...there is also a commitment to the team and they are counting on you and if you are going to do something then you need to see it through.” (Mother of Bob, 18, Diving)

I am from a small town where not many people have money to play sports...my brother and I would talk it out [with my parents] and have a budget/payment system. It was a good thing because we learned how to be responsible and own up to what we wanted to do. (Marcella, 22, Rugby)

Understanding participation through a sense of shared responsibility allowed for parents and children to appreciate the efforts of all involved. Whether or not resources were abundantly available to parents, children gained competency through their understanding of the resources necessary for participation and directly contributing, in some form, to the allocation of those resources. Conversations surrounding shared

commitment varied depending on the age of the child, parental resources, number of family members, and other commitments such as school. Regardless of individual circumstance, discussing participation as a shared responsibility provided children a safe space to achieve ownership in their experience and begin to develop social and personal responsibility. Parents fostered social competence by holding children accountable to their choices and desires. Thoughtful discussion regarding goals and desires enabled parents and children to negotiate responsibilities as a collaborative effort and improve SRPCCC.

*Differentiating skill and passion.* Skill and passion were not always equal. A crucial and difficult component of SRPCCC involved the ability to differentiate between skill and passion and to accept a child's change in desire regardless of the athletic potential and skill possessed. Competent differentiation stemmed from parental recognition of demonstrated passion or lack thereof.

“She performed [sports] brilliantly, but at an early age it was evident her passion was in school and not sports in general.” (Father of Chelsea, 19, Soccer)

“They just knew that when I was playing I was really happy and had a passion for the sport and loved it...so they saw that and wanted me to go for my dreams.” (Mia, 21, Gymnastics)

I can't tell you how many times he had to get up at 5 in the morning. He never complained, not once. He was constantly fiddling with gear in the garage or practicing. It was something he had a passion for...we didn't have to push him. (Father of Thomas, 20, Golf)

“I didn’t want to be playing baseball my whole life so I decided to stay and play with the high school team and do the normal thing and not play at the highest level.”

(Steve, 21, Baseball)

Differentiating between skill and passion required parents to be truly engaged with the child’s participation in order to recognize the child’s desires. As children were encouraged to discuss the emotions and motivations attributed their participation, parents were able to distinguish between potential, desire, and the child’s want/need to please. When Steve (21, Baseball) turned down his opportunity to pursue participation that would ultimately lead him to professional competition, it was difficult for his father to negotiate. Imagine having a child who is being recruited by all the top teams and having the strength and competence to recognize that despite the child’s athletic talent and opportunity, he/she does not have the passion or desire to pursue that level of participation. Steve’s father describes negotiating this tension:

I thought a lot of times about saying to my wife or Steve...maybe we should re-think this, but I never did because we talked about what his friends [who were also heavily recruited] were doing and it didn’t seem to motivate him to do more than he was. I never thought the MLB was the greatest thing if he wasn’t dreaming it on his own. I had friends who would push their kids to the point where they would quit the sport and it didn’t make any sense to do that. If anybody thinks back and says ‘what if?’ it’s me, but I don’t say it publicly or speak to Steve about it.

When asked if he thought that Steve still supported his decision in retrospect, his father replied, “Yeah. I do. I wish I understood it.” The situation described here reflects many of the complex tensions that face the sport related parent-child relationship. This situation exemplifies how components of SRPCCC equip parents and children to competently communicate. Steve and his father both spoke frequently about their love for

baseball and the relational connection it afforded them. That relational foundation along with open and ongoing discussion regarding future goals and desire enabled two crucial communicative moments to happen. First, Steve, at the age of 14 was able to recognize that his athletic abilities outweighed his passion to pursue collegiate and professional baseball. Despite his talent, his age, and his father's disappointment (however overtly miniscule), Steve was able to openly communicate his needs and make a decision in his best interest. Second, Steve's father was able to recognize, in spite of not fully understanding, that Steve's heart was not in that level of competition. He was able to separate his own dreams of Steve's potential to truly hear Steve and trust that, even at 14, Steve was able to competently negotiate this life altering decision. While Steve's father contemplated initiating discussion to re-think the situation, he realized that discussion would only serve his desire.

Pride in a child's talent and success is expected, however, SRPCCC highlights the ability to place the child's passion before parental pride. Competent differentiation of skill and passion served as a pre-requisite to negotiating difficult situations. Not only were parents more in tune with their child's emotions and desires in addition to their own, but they fostered an environment where children were able to distinguish their emotions from the emotions of the parent. This level of competence relied heavily on the relational foundation and communicative patterns that were co-constructed during the initial stages of participation.

*Negotiating complex choices.* Complex choices manifested in a variety of ways and involved a change in commitment. Decisions were complicated by multiple levels of

commitment and the number of people affected by the commitment. The situation described above between Steve and his father emphasizes the importance of SRPCCC in negotiating complex choices. The following examples illustrate some of the complex situations and tensions that participants faced and further explicate the role of competent communication in such negotiations.

...his grades were not at a level we thought he had the potential to achieve, however it was very difficult to take diving away as a punishment pretty much for two reasons. First, he would do better in school the semester he was actually participating and the second issue was, how do you take away a sports program from a kid who is physically active...what do you replace it with...when it is helping him keep his anxiety, nervousness and hormonal growth in tact...how do you take that away? We did a lot of cajoling and soul searching and yelling and screaming about 'you made this commitment to us and the team' we handled it with a lot of threats and I think it was marginally effective. It was an intense commitment for my husband and I and we were seeing limited playing time and limited growth opportunities and not seeing the academic success we expected. (Mother of Bob, 18, Diving)

We [mother, sister, and I] moved to another state to play high school baseball and it was a huge family commitment. Not too many families are willing to separate like that. Plus, when you have a sibling, it can't be about one kid or the other...[sister] has been so supportive, I am thankful she wanted to go. We talked about conditions...if my dad couldn't make it [fly out] every weekend we weren't going to do it. We kept our two spots in our schools here in case we hated it we could come right back. There were times when we wanted to throw in the towel and say enough's enough but looking back we made the right decisions and it was the best. (Heinrich, 20, Baseball)

...the crux of the difficulties of that discussion was that it was a very weighty decision for a 14 year old...regarding a future she couldn't imagine yet. I think we all felt torn between the societal pressure of 'hey you are talented and there is an opportunity here' and putting sport in perspective and remembering why you are doing it in the first place. I remember at the time not being sure if I agreed with her decision but I felt that it was vital that *she* make that choice. (Father of Cheryl, 21, Lacrosse)

In our family we have open communication and most of our decisions were based on the best long term option for Thomas so we discussed what his goals were academically, athletically and what was best for him at any particular time and

tried to make a family decision. He had an opportunity to join the National team. We wanted to know if he was emotionally ready to move away from family and friends at such a young age to pursue golf. At 15 years old, sometimes your enthusiasm is naive and we wanted him to understand that. We wanted to make sure he knew what he was getting into...and he did. He wanted to do it. It was something we didn't push at all. (Father of Thomas, 20, Golf)

The examples above have varying circumstances; however they all reveal complex tensions regarding goals, emotions, and commitments that require competent communication strategies. Negotiating complex choices represented a crucial and multifaceted component of SRPCCC. The following analysis unpacks each situation in order to extract the communicative strategies utilized.

In the first example, Bob's (18, Diving) mother articulates several tensions. First, Bob's grades are not consistently where they were agreed to be, however, they were during the Diving season. Second, despite the enormous commitment by parents and child, playing time was not at the expected level. Finally, Bob's parents struggled with the appropriate decision regarding the continuation/cessation of participation. The difficulty of negotiating these tensions was salient in the telling by both Bob and his mother. The levels of commitment in this situation strained the parent-child relationship. Both parents initially recognized Bob's skill and passion and collectively pursued a higher level of participation and commitment.

This situation highlight's several key issues that were reflected across participants' experiences: 1) No matter how committed parents and children may be, playing time is not guaranteed. It behooves parents to takes this fact into consideration before making commitments that strain the family resources (e.g. time, money). In this situation, the family felt that Bob's potential and passion were worth pursuing and were

willing to take that chance; 2) Even though parameters (i.e. academic performance) are agreed upon up front, kids are kids and do not always fulfill their part of the commitment. Negotiating that lapse in commitment becomes complicated by factors such as: the level of commitment by parents, the various ways in which participation positively affects the child, and the perceived consequences of possible actions. Bob's mother divulges there was a lot of yelling and screaming that occurred out of frustration. While yelling and screaming may not be appropriate in all situations, in this family, because of the relationship built around sport participation and the ongoing communicative efforts implemented to thoroughly discuss how participation and commitment affected all involved, the parent-child relationship thrived despite the difficulty negotiating the situation. Although Bob's competitive participation ended with high school, the difficulties encountered did not damage the parent-child relationship or his passion for diving which he continues to pursue recreationally in college.

In the second example the tension was not about the resources to make the commitment, but whether or not such an intense commitment that would separate and affect the entire family, was appropriate. Heinrich, at the age of 13, was presented with an opportunity to attend a school well known for grooming baseball players. Pursuing this opportunity involved moving himself, his mother, and his 9 year old sister across the country. Staying together as a family was an important component of this commitment. The family decided that if Heinrich's father was not able to spend every weekend with the family, the commitment would not be made. Because this decision presented itself while both Heinrich and his sister were so young, the parents wanted to make sure the

children understood that they had a safety net and could choose to return home. Heinrich recalls that it was a tough time for all of them but when things got rough, they talked openly as a family, made sure emotions were expressed and needs were being met. Depending on the sport and athletic talent, some children in this study were faced with decisions during adolescence that ultimately changed the course of their life. In order to negotiate this situation effectively, the family competently assessed Heinrich's skill and passion, discussed the parameters for making such a commitment, and initiated ongoing discussion to ensure that the decision continued to be the appropriate choice for all involved.

The third example involves Cheryl's (21, Lacrosse) decision at age 14 (8<sup>th</sup> grade) to quit playing competitive club basketball in order to play several different sports in high school. Many athletes in this study were talented in more than one sport. Here, Cheryl was being recruited by competitive basketball teams that would lead her straight to a college scholarship. However, Cheryl did not want to pursue that path. She desired to compete solely within her high school. While she was very talented at basketball, it was more important for her to compete at the high school level, which enabled her to be a teenager and have social time and play multiple sports. Cheryl's father discusses the tensions of having coaches' persistently recruiting Cheryl and offering all kinds of opportunities, knowing that she had the talent to achieve a college scholarship in basketball via the competitive route, and recognizing that Cheryl's skill did not match her passion for basketball. He articulates the importance of 'keeping sport in perspective' by acknowledging that this decision would ultimately affect *her* life course and should be

made by her. The fathers of both Cheryl and Steve underscore the competence necessary to follow the child's desire, even when it is not fully understood. Cheryl recalls that although the decision was difficult and caused some relational strain, she felt supported in her decision despite recognizing that her father felt otherwise.

The final example delves further into the engagement necessary to competently negotiate major choices that face adolescents. Thomas (20, Golf), at 15, was invited to join the National golf team, which meant he and his mother would have to move to another state. Thomas's father highlights wanting to be sure that Thomas was emotionally ready. Emotional readiness was assessed through multiple conversations about moving away and pursuing golf as a future career over a period of time to because 'enthusiasm can be naïve at 15.' Thomas' passion was evident through his actions of pursuing golf beyond the scheduled practice times and his unwavering commitment. His parents were able to separate the excitement that comes with having your child invited to compete at the National level and negotiating whether or not this decision was in Thomas' best interest.

Not all sport related decisions involve life-changing moments and weighty commitments. SRPCCC becomes increasingly critical as competition and commitment level increase. For these participants, negotiating complex choices was facilitated by the following competent communicative strategies: 1) Parent-child relationships were built through relational experiences early on. When difficult situations arose, the appropriate perspective was achieved through the positive intangibles that sport participation brought to the relationship (e.g. quality time, enjoyment, socialization) NOT the opportunities that

resulted from participation (e.g. scholarships, National level competition); 2) Open communication was fostered from the beginning. Children were encouraged to question their motives and desires. Through ongoing open communication, parents were able to better understand their own motivations and desires and separate them from the child's motivations and desires, thereby enabling parents to competently assist children to make choices without exerting personal desires as influence; 3) Participatory parameters were laid out and discussed through family values. Each family had varying stipulations regarding time and resources allocated to participation. In addition, conditions (e.g. finishing a season, one sport per season) were outlined before participating. By connecting parameters to family values, parents were able to successfully transmit important values to their children which they continue to retain today.

Parents were able to competently navigate varying degrees of choices and commitments by establishing a communicative framework that both modeled and enabled constructive sport related dialogue. A positive framework existed when children felt the reality of commitments and parental emotions without being controlled by them.

### *Negotiating the Sport Family*

Sport participation inherently invoked regular interaction with other parents and children involved with the activity. While type of sport and level of commitment dictated the depth and frequency of interactions, some form of interaction among community members accompanied all levels of participation. Many participants referred to other members in familial terms such as "second mom" or "sport family." Much like families in general, relationships within the sport family were not always positive, nor were all

members interested in developing such relationships. Aspects of this category were described as both positive and negative and have been appropriated into the sub-categories of *developing communal resources/relationships* and *addressing parental politics*.

*Developing communal resources/relationships.* Parents and children in this study discussed the importance of their sport family— other parents and children on the team who took on the role of extended family members. Sport participation often took a toll on family time and resources; the following examples illustrate the development of relationships within the sport family to ease the strain of participation commitments and provide additional support.

...the people he played with until he was 15, they are my family. We did our vacations every year...our kids grew up together...they were so supportive...I still hang out and go away with them. I can remember sometimes coming home with three children who weren't my own because mine were somewhere else. [parents] were competitive, don't get me wrong, it was one of the top four teams in the state, there was rivalry but it was a family. (Mother of David, 22, Basketball)

“...we travelled with all of these parents and had a pretty close knit group that we ended up socializing with and if there was ever a problem there were several people I could call and we backed each other up” (Mother of Mia, 21, Gymnastics)

“...she was always there as a second mom...it was really nice to have the second support system even though I competed against her daughter” (Kristi, 20, Basketball)

Not all parents had the time and resources to successfully promote their child's participation on their own. Parents talked about working together to help share the burden of commitments. When Thomas' (20, Golf) team began to travel, he explained how one

mom would travel with three boys each trip to save time and money. Parents' described the invaluable support they received as they worked together to enable participation. Children also spoke of the importance of their second family who were able to provide additional support and perspective. For those participants whose parents could not afford to attend all events, there was a sense of relief for both parents and children to have extended family on hand. Developing relationships with other parents not only constituted a pool of communal resources, but initiated personal connections that provided love and support throughout youth participation and remain integral to families today.

Support through the sport family extended beyond shared commitments such as travel and supervision to the invaluable resource of additional perspective. Jack articulated the advantage of having another parent's point of view.

...it took a lady that wasn't into sports as much [as my parents], but was always there for her kid to tell me, 'hey this is nothing...pee wee hockey is not something I need to stress about.' I know my parents told me something like that but it took hearing it from her [for me] to take it to heart...she was a different kind of person than my parents were. (Jack, 25, Hockey)

Although his parents had provided similar messages, Jack was better able to hear the message from another source; in his case, from a parent who was not as heavily involved in sports as his parents were. Although this other parent was present at sport functions as frequently as his parents were, he delineates the nature of the support. For Jack, sports were an important part of the family structure. He understood his parents' interest in sports beyond his own participation. Because of his parents' passion for sports, certain messages around the value of sports and his participation were difficult for him to

receive. This example unearths an important component of negotiating inherently ambiguous messages which will be discussed further in the categorical analysis of *delineating messages of support/pressure*.

The previous analysis of *developing communal resources/relationships* reflects the positive influences of the sport family; however, the issue of parental politics is also introduced in the examples provided by Kristi and David's mother. Both statements validate the sport family as positive while alluding to rivalry and competition among parents. The situations described above reflect positive outcomes in spite of the internal competition. Kristi expressed feeling true support and warmth from the mother of another athlete whom she competed against and David's mother highlights the rivalry between parents but underscores how the sense of family trumped the rivalry. Although relationships within the sport family were primarily amiable, the politics of playing time frequently disrupted parental interactions.

*Addressing parental politics.* While parental politics manifest in a variety of contexts, the experiences shared in this study all reduce to the not-so-simple issue of playing time. Whether a matter of pride, exposure, or pursuit of collegiate/professional play, parents found themselves in socially awkward situations as their children competed, internally, for positions and playing time.

...you have parents that are very competitive and if you are playing above [the level of] their daughter, they don't want to talk to you or your family. When my mom is waiting for me [after games] it's like the starting players' parents in one group and then everybody else's parents...and it sucks because it segregates the team and brings down morale. (Marcella, 22, Rugby)

“...some of the other parents can’t even watch [their child] participate because they are so emotionally involved.” (Father of Kristi, 20, Basketball)

...so I am dealing with people who are looking at David, who I am bringing in to be one of their top players, as an outsider...they were not quite so open and supportive...they were very competitive and they worried about their child’s spot being taken. (Mother of David, 22, Basketball)

In her first example (refer to *developing communal resources/relationships*), David’s (22, Basketball) mother describes the ability of parents within her sport family to rise above the rivalry as a result of the relationships built as their children grew up together. In her second example (above) she discusses the “rivalry” tension encountered upon entering another sport family. The fact that David had been recruited by the new team as a top player did not circumvent the fact that he was a top player who would ultimately take time away from an already established member of the team. Marcella (22, Rugby) portrayed the rivalry tension through the social and physical delineation between the starting player’s parents and parents of the rest of the team. She further asserted how parental segregation led to team segregation. Kristi’s (20, Basketball) father recalls parents who were unable to watch, and subsequently enjoy, their children’s participation because they were so personally connected to their child’s performance. Parental action in the situations provided by the fathers of Marcella and Kristi exemplifies incompetent behavior. These parents were unable to recognize their actions as inappropriate and detrimental because they were over-identified with their child’s performance. The first example given by David’s mother demonstrates the capacity to transcend deleterious behavior in spite of rivalry, through the development of personal relationships.

The majority of the participants provided examples of the ways in which parental rivalry negatively affected team and player performances. Rachel (22, Softball) recounted a situation where a father came into the locker room and hit a coach for not giving his daughter enough playing time. Despite the fact that the girl was a talented player, she quit the team and refused to return out of embarrassment. An important communicative strategy was the parental ability to compartmentalize emotions and avoid over-identification. Parents' confessed to entertaining irrational and inappropriate thoughts from time to time; those who acknowledged such actions as unacceptable and refrained from acting demonstrated competent emotional boundaries. Based on testimonies of participants involved in this study, incidents similar to the "hitting" scenario above are far from uncommon. From screaming expletives at a young girl, to throwing a garbage can at a hockey bench, to physically dragging a nine-year-old boy off of a baseball field, participants recount story after story of parents who were unable to competently negotiate youth sport participation. Often they were unaware of their behavior as inappropriate. The inability to recognize the inappropriate behavior suggests that parents were over-identified with their child's performance.

SRPCCC assumes that parents will make mistakes and may not always interact appropriately; however, it also assumes that parents have the humility and maturity necessary to learn from their mistakes and communicate with their children about those mistakes in order to maintain a positive relationship. Parents in this study also needed to protect their children from the negative behavior of other parents. Participants who

developed familial relationships with other community members experienced less political friction than those who had minimal personal contact with other members.

### *Delineating Messages of Support/Pressure*

Participants expressed the line separating support and pressure as inherently contextual. Successful delineation of ambiguous messages for both parents and children hinged upon the underlying relationship and the communicative strategies employed therein. The components of this category are divided into the sub categories of *being there*, *avoiding ambiguous messages*, and *exerting pressure*.

*Being there.* When asked how support was provided beyond financial commitment, parents and children listed showing up to practices, events, and games as the most important supportive action. The following examples illustrate how “being there” encompassed much more than simply showing up, it represented supportive measures that reflected knowledge of the child’s desires and passions.

Both of my parents have always been really really supportive of everything I have done. Through my whole life, even if I haven’t done well in the sport, if I was happy, then my parents were happy. Both of them just wanted me to have fun. (Kristi, 20, Basketball)

“I try to be totally supportive and not critical because she is way more critical of herself...and if I try to say something critical then it transfers to our relationship and it’s not the topic anymore...I just stay away from that.” (Father of Kristi, 20, Basketball)

“I was involved taking him to and from each practice, helped coach his teams, and talked to him about how he did, including things he did well and things he could improve on.” (Father of Heinrich, 20, Baseball)

As an athlete you need to be open to constructive critique or you are not going to get better. Sometimes [dad] will say 'what about this play' and I will say 'from my point of view, it couldn't be done' stuff like that...I love hearing his critique, it makes me a better player. (Heinrich, 20, Baseball)

In the first situation, Kristi's father defines his supporting role as not supplying critique. His statement refers to a previous offering of critique which transferred to the relationship in a negative way and his realization to stay away from critique of performance as Kristi was already quite critical of herself. Kristi's father demonstrates competency through the recognition that critique was not appropriate for their situation and shows how he achieved competency after first making a mistake. Kristi confirms his competency by talking about how lucky she was to have parents who truly privileged her enjoyment of participation above the outcome of her performance. In contrast, for Heinrich and his father supportive messages also included some form of critique. For other participants, unsolicited critique provoked defensiveness and negatively impacted the parent-child relationship. Heinrich asserted that being open to constructive critique is a necessary component to progress as an athlete. While that may be true, not all athletes welcomed critique from their parents as measures of support.

For all participants, supportive actions included the commitments made by parents (e.g. providing transportation, financial contributions). However, the most important aspect of support was being there. Not just in the physical sense, but being there for the child with unconditional and unflinching love so that the child understood the parent-child relationship as impervious to physical performance. For parents who did not have the ability to physically attend events as frequently as others, being there was

achieved through the routine acknowledgement of the importance placed on participation by the child. Support was achieved through sharing the experience.

*Avoiding ambiguous messages.* Ambiguous messages were described as supportive measures that also carried a pressure to succeed. A child's need to please a parent often complicated the interpretation of parental messages. The following examples reflect the underlying tension between messages of support/pressure.

“I had to be careful as a coach/parent to not show favoritism but I think I expected more of my boys and they knew that.” (Father of Brian, 21, Soccer)

“Being her coach allowed for more than usual involvement on my part and a need to please on hers. I would think any supporting action from me could have a pressure to succeed function.” (Father of Kristi, 20, Basketball)

“I just knew that my mother loved watching me play, my dad too, so I felt like that's what I wanted to do and needed to do.” (Jack, 25, Hockey)

The father's of Brian and Kristi introduce the support/pressure tension as a result of ambiguity. The tension lies between parental intent of the delivered message and the actual impact/interpretation of the message by the child. Kristi's father articulates how the need to please can transfer to inherent pressure. Jack further explicates the tension by describing how his parents' enjoyment of his participation was internalized into what he felt he wanted/needed to do. The following example illustrates how messages were misinterpreted even when parents were focused on their communication.

“He was just trying to give me advice but I guess he was living vicariously through me and he thought it could make a difference and in reality that’s not how it works.” (Steve, 21, Baseball)

“I think my wife would tell you that even though I could have, I did not live vicariously through him. Deep down I knew his personality was not like that so it was more important to me that he be happy.” (Father of Steve, 21, Baseball)

Steve’s father acknowledges that his son’s passion for playing baseball did not match his potential and states that his son’s happiness was more important than pushing him to achieve something that he did not want to do. However, Steve’s understanding of his father’s passion for baseball beyond his own participation impeded his ability to appropriately interpret his father’s intent. Even though Steve’s father spoke candidly about negotiating his understanding of his son’s actions privately, Steve projected intent into his father’s message based on his inherent need to please. He knew how much his father loved baseball and how much enjoyment it brought him to watch Steve play. Although Steve felt comfortable and supported in his decision to not pursue to highest level of competition, he was unable to divorce himself from the fact that, in a way, he was not able to fulfill a dream of his father’s. The tension between doing what he knew what was best for him and feeling like he let his father down (even though he did not), made it difficult for Steve to receive messages as they were intended.

Supportive messages became ambiguous when sports held family interest beyond the child’s participation. In addition, messages from parents who were uninterested in sports in general but were passionately involved with their child’s sport(s) were also

potentially loaded. Parents who fell into this category employed competency by recognizing how their own passion encumbered appropriate message transmission. While shared passion for sports often strengthened the parent-child relationship, these examples support the need for meta-communications in order to clarify sport related messages and prevent parental passion from unintentionally exerting pressure.

*Exerting pressure.* Interactions and messages exerting pressure were often realized by parents in retrospect. Losing focus and inadequate clarification of ambiguous messages frequently resulted in unintended pressure.

“Sometimes I felt like I wasn’t trying hard enough because of some of the stuff [parents] said...and really, I was trying my hardest,” (Jack, 25, Hockey)

“We told both boys at times that they weren’t doing as much as they could to be the best they could be. Maybe they were and we just added needless pressure.” (Mother of Jack, 25, Hockey)

I felt a little bit of a tear between my mom and dad because my dad wanted me to keep playing and my mom was like ‘do what makes you happy.’ It was hard because I wanted to do the right thing and do what they wanted but they both wanted different things... (Cheryl, 21, Lacrosse)

I felt she showed enough maturity to make her own decisions, but was secretly disappointed. It took me a while to see I had become guilty of losing focus about why I, and she, loved youth sports in the first place and had focused on where sports might get her rather than the important qualities one can learn from sports. (Father of Cheryl, 21, Lacrosse)

Jack’s interpretation of his parents’ messages identifies how his inherent need to please functioned as parental pressure. In spite of feeling that he was doing his best, he understood his parents’ messages as evidence that he was not. On the other side, Jack’s

mother believed she was simply pushing him to be better, intending her message to function as supportive pushing; however, that was not how the message was interpreted by Jack. Several other participants described the message of not trying hard enough as the worst message one can hear. The disconnection stemmed from losing focus of the delineation between parental and child desire. In Jack's case, he ended up thinking he wasn't good enough to pursue a higher level of competition and basically stopped trying.

Cheryl articulates her internalization of parental desires by equating what she *should* do with what her parents wanted. In her case, that tension was complicated by the differing desires. In the end, she was able to make the decision that was best for her in spite of eliciting some disappointment from her father. Importantly, her father was able to recognize that he had lost focus and was able to competently re-appropriate her love for sports and the positive influence of her participation on their relationship as the highest priority.

Ironically, avoiding exerting pressure puts pressure on parents to carefully examine their messages and actions as potentially carrying loaded meanings. Parents and children described situations of parental mishaps. Competent strategies included the parental ability to recognize and address mistakes. Even though Cheryl once had to stop in the middle of a game to tell her father to stop yelling at her, she asserted that "he meant well and was probably re-living his past." She was able to forgive and move past his behavior because of their relational foundation. That moment of interaction exemplified parent and child competency. First, Cheryl was able to verbalize and address her father's actions as inappropriate. She laments that other players on her team were not as fortunate

and suffered parental misconduct in silence which ultimately damaged the parent-child relationship. Second, when Cheryl addressed her father, he was able to recognize his actions as inappropriate and despite the embarrassment he may have had at the time, he took the opportunity to learn from the situation.

The ability to appropriately delineate messages of support/pressure ultimately relied on competent parental communication. Successful strategies utilized by participants included: instilling the message that a positive and meaningful parent-child relationship was more important than any sport related performance or opportunity, fostering open communication that enabled children to have their own dreams even if they challenged the parental dream, and recognizing that parental passion and interest can also trigger a need to please.

#### *Learning/Teaching Life Lessons*

Learning life lessons was considered the most valuable aspect of sport participation. Participants described life lessons as valuable skills such as learning how to interact with others, building confidence, negotiating conflict with teammates and coaches, and the ability to win and lose with class. Many of these lessons were learned/taught during parent-child interactions. This category is divided into the two sub-categories *accounting for morality* and *fostering communicative competence*.

*Accounting for morality.* Life lessons were often learned in settings where another person or situation was evaluated as either appropriate or inappropriate. Parents used such situations as pedagogical tools to instruct on moral issues. Morality in these terms

was defined as treating other human beings with respect. The following examples demonstrate how moral issues were addressed in daily interactions.

“Occasionally a coach didn’t exhibit good sportsmanship and we got a chance to talk to our kids about why we thought bad sportsmanship didn’t go along with our value system, so it was a really good learning experience.” (Father of Thomas, 20, Football)

...even to this day my dad always comments when we are watching TV when someone falls and gets helped up or some display of sportsmanship after a game he will always comment how you can tell that is a classy guy or a classy team. (Cheryl, 21, Lacrosse)

“I explained to her that even though a referee was supposed to be fair, that he was a human being and maybe his emotions got the best of him and unfortunately he called a bad game, but it is not the end of the world.” (Father of Gabrielle, 18, Softball)

There are many instances of immoral behavior that occur regularly from youth to professional sport participation. Immoral behavior is discussed in this study as a lack of respect and decency for others involved in participation. The participants in this study used those moments to account for moral behavior. When situations are left unaddressed some kids get the idea that it is okay to act disrespectfully because of superior skills or status. Recently, ex-professional basketball player Charles Barkley stated on live television that he is “not a role model” and shouldn’t be held to any kind of standard. This kind of behavior from professional athletes supports accepting immoral displays of disrespect for the game and other athletes because of athletic talent. Cheryl (21, Lacrosse) discussed how her father always made a point to account for morality when watching professional sports. Thomas’ father also described accounting for the morality of the

coaches and other players that his son was in contact with. Gabrielle's (18, Softball) father goes further to prepare his daughter for the fact that sports participation is not always fair and in those instances she should remember that referees' are human beings too and when they make mistakes, it is not the end of the world and they should still be treated with respect.

Accounting for morality manifested as an interactive process between parents and children that facilitated the transmission of important morals and values and increased communicative competence. Sport participation, like life, is not always fair. Due to its emotional and political nature, sport participation offered participants a pragmatic approach to understanding and competently negotiating the world. Parents took advantage of moral and immoral actions as pedagogical moments.

*Fostering communicative competence.* Communicative competence was cultivated when parents led by example and gave their children the communicative tools to effectively handle themselves in interactions.

...it was a learning experience. At first my husband and I didn't handle it correctly and we really had to step back and think about how to have Mia learn to deal with people who might not treat her fairly. At first we intervened way too much and as it went along we stepped back and tried to help her figure out how to interact with this person and make the situation acceptable for her. (Mother of Mia, 21, Gymnastics)

I was raised, not as boastful or ego driven. Be within yourself; expect to do great...that kind of thing. That's how I saw my parents...it was the way they modeled their lives. If you score 30 points you should expect it...you don't scream and holler to everyone that you are the greatest. (Ben, 27, Baseball)

...there is this one league in my town where it is totally normal for parents to get in fist fights in the stands...and then the game would stop and the players would get involved. My dad would grab me and we would walk away and I would be furious with him, you know, my friends are going to hate me. I didn't understand

you know, you conduct yourself with class on and off the field and that's how you live your life. (David, 21, Basketball)

Communicative competence was described as a learning process. Some parents entered into youth sport participation with more communicative competency than others. Many parents discussed being confronted with situations that they did not know how to handle and progressed on a trial and error basis. It was overwhelmingly prevalent that children acquired communicative competency both directly and indirectly from their parents. Both David and Ben describe how their fathers physically showed them 'how to live' by modeling the appropriate actions. While David was not a fighter per se, he felt that he was letting his teammates down by not joining in the fight. He was overcome by the emotional nature of the situation. He did not necessarily understand the actions of the crowd as inappropriate because that behavior was expected in his neighborhood. Ben speaks of the importance of humility and respect as conveyed by his parents. Their verbal communications were reinforced by their actions—the way they lived their lives.

The strongest messages from parents stemmed from daily interactions that provided a practical model for how to live. The actions were complemented by teaching moments, such as pointing out positive behavior on sport related television or helping a child to thrive in a world that is not always fair. Steve (20, Baseball) spoke firmly about the wisdom he achieved from dealing with parental politics. "It was important for me to learn that even when you have the talent and work hard, things do not necessarily work out...there are external factors at work. And that's life."

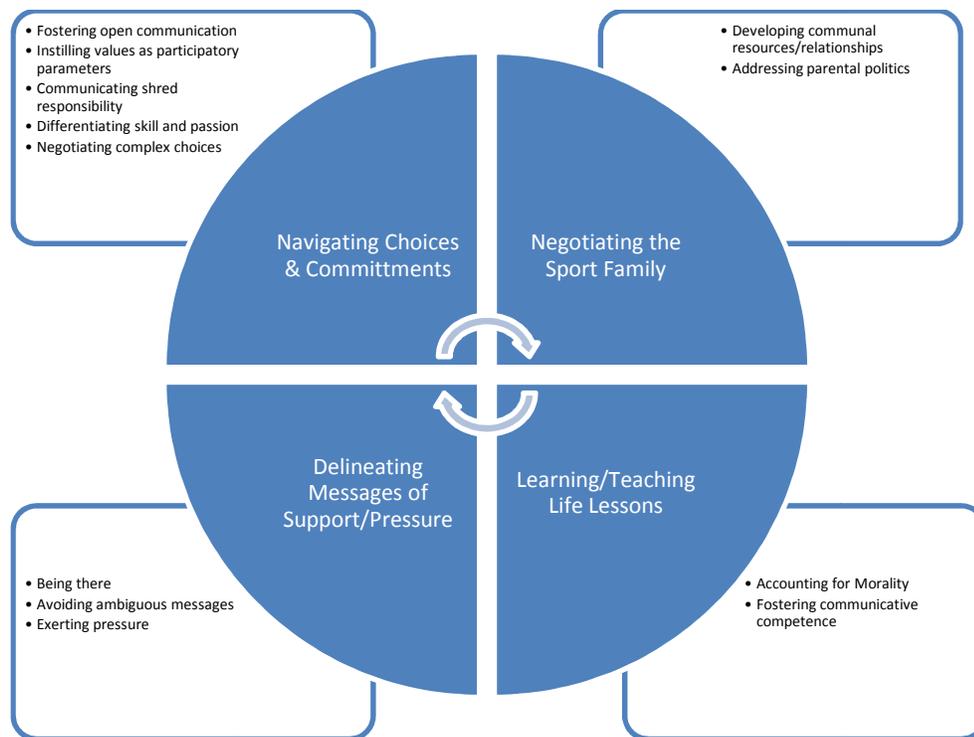
In addition to modeling moral behavior, stepping back and allowing children to interact with others on their own behalf was a necessary step in *fostering communicative competence*. Mia's (21, Gymnastics) mother affirms the importance of giving her daughter the tools to negotiate situations on her own. She reflects that she and her husband made mistakes and intervened too much at first and then realized the importance of helping Mia to deal with conflict. She also discussed the tension involved with stepping back. It was easy to jump in and take care of things, but it wasn't helping Mia achieve autonomy or competence.

*Learning/teaching life lessons* was something that evolved throughout the process of sport participation; it was not arbitrarily acquired as a result of participation. Parents played an imperative role in their children's successful acquisition of communicative competence. Parental willingness to understand their child's youth sport participation as learning process for both parents and children facilitated the development of SRPCCC.

#### *Analysis Summary*

The categorical analysis describes the process of SRPCCC (see Figure 1) as employing a series of competent communicative strategies that facilitate, strengthen, and maintain the sport related parent-child relationship. Each categorical process represents sport related situations that require communicative skills or strategies to facilitate competent communication and successful negotiation of the youth sport process. Although the categories and sub-categories have been presented in a linear fashion, the process of SRPCCC does not necessarily happen step by step in a linear process. However, *building a relational foundation* does represent the preliminary and

foundational component to successfully developing sport related parent-child communication competence. Throughout the positive and negative experiences, the wins and losses, and the opportunities and disappointments, the one aspect of sport participation that held the most meaning for the participants in this study was the benefit of improving and strengthening the parent-child relationship; the time spent together and the memories shared. Whether times were good or bad, the quality of the underlying relationship served as the grounding rod to calibrate the process of youth sport participation. In order to articulate the findings of this study as they pertain to the research objectives, the research questions are re-visited.



**Figure 1 Model of Sport Related Parent-Child Communication Competency**

The center circle, depicted by the circular arrows, represents *building a relational foundation* which serves as both the core category and the lens through which parent and child make sense of youth sports participation. As parent and child engage the various processes, the lens/core evolves and subsequently influences parent-child communication and the process of participation.

*Sport related parent-child communication competency*, depicted by the white spaces between processes, represents the vehicle that guides the successful negotiation of the youth sports process.

The categorical analysis provides a conceptual framework for SRPCCC. Although the theoretical categories were presented in a linear fashion, the process is not linear. However, *building a relational foundation* does represent the foundational component of the process. From this point the categorical processes are invoked by context and situation. For example, *navigating choices and commitments* and *negotiating the sport family* may be repeated numerous times depending on the opportunities presented to the child athlete. Additionally, *learning/teaching life lessons* is discussed as a recurring process throughout participation.

## Research Questions

The answers to all three research questions begin with the first thematic category, *building a relational foundation*. The parent-child relationship represents the heart and soul of this analysis. Parents in this study who successfully built a solid relational foundation with their child were careful to continuously keep sport participation in the appropriate perspective and privilege the parent-child relationship as the most important aspect. There are numerous stories in the media detailing the negative effects that youth sport participation can have on the parent-child relationship. This paper presents several stories of parents who have successfully negotiated the youth sport process without damaging the parent-child relationship, often in spite of dealing with difficult situations. Competent communication strategies, including carefully and continually discussing participation goals and desires for both parent and child, assisted parents throughout the process. Parental messages accompanying youth sport participation were often hard to decipher due to the emotional involvement of participants. Parents who elicited and engaged their child's emotions and feelings were better able to facilitate the sport related relationship. The key to SRPCCC was cultivating open and honest communication throughout the process. One parent articulated the necessary competency, "Having the child tell you what *they want*, not what *they think you want to hear*. That is the biggest challenge; keeping the communication open and listening (italics reflect participant emphasis)."

Open communication within the parent-child relationship facilitated youth sport participation and encouraged SRPCCC. Competent communication strategies, such as learning how and when certain topics should or should not be discussed, were developed as parents nurtured their children's desires and created opportunities for children to observe and utilize those strategies. Messages of support/pressure, parent/child sports dreams, and messages of morality were all negotiated within the context of the parent-child relationship. The sport related parent-child relationship served as a lens through which parents and children understood and attributed meaning to youth sport participation. In other words, relational aspects (time spent, moments shared, lessons learned) represented the main focus of experience as opposed to sport aspects (wins/losses, scholarships, material benefits).

The first research question asked how parental messages of support/pressure are defined within the context of youth sports and how those definitions differed in parent and child perceptions. The narratives revealed that messages of support/pressure were inherently ambiguous within the context of youth sports. Depending on the context of the situation, tone and delivery of the message, and emotional state of the athlete and parent(s), simple messages that are perceived as support can exert pressure. In addition, it is important for parents to recognize how children perceive parental/familial connections to sport. For example, is there a long tradition of familial sport participation? Does the salience of that tradition inherently exert pressure on the children of the family? Does overt parental enthusiasm inadvertently affect a child's ability to distinguish her/his own desires? This is not to say that parents should be less enthusiastic about their own desires

and family traditions. It does, however draw attention to the importance of communicatively separating familial tradition and parental sport enthusiasm from child expectations and desires. Additionally, child recognition of parental time and financial commitment complicates message transmission. In his study of parental influence on youth sport involvement, Turman (2007) suggested that despite direct parental statements supporting child desires in contrast to their own, it may be difficult for children to disregard parental investments (p. 170). The current study supports that children not only recognize parental time and financial commitment but parental enjoyment of sport beyond their own participation. These findings reiterate the importance of continual communication regarding choices involving participation.

The successful delineation of ambiguous messages in this study ultimately relied on competent communicative strategies employed by the parent such as creating a space for children to realize and communicate their personal desires as independent from parental desires, whether or not they happened to be the same. To do this, parents must first understand their personal impetus for their child's participation. Kidman et al. (1999) found that "most parents do not understand or are unaware of their motivations for their children to participate" (p. 55). Parents in this study who were unable to effectively separate differing desires were also unable to relay intended messages. For example, one participant allowed her father's former participation in track/field to influence her own participation. As he encouraged/supported her in this realm because he believed that she enjoyed such participation, she interpreted the messages largely as pressure to pursue participation beyond her own desire which resulted in strained communication.

Messages alone carried less meaning than the actions and communications surrounding them. Children were highly sensitive of their parents' emotional connection to their participation. David (22, Basketball) explicates the core of this competency, "Parent's don't understand that all you have to do is give kids confidence to try something on their own and [show them] win or lose, succeed or fail, everything is going to be okay afterwards." Competent communication in this respect includes pure unconditional, no-strings-attached, support. Children needed to believe that their sport performance did not impact the relationship. Children who are unable to distinguish parental love from performance can internalize winning as the only way to connect. For instance, both Steve (20, Baseball) and his father recalled a time when a twelve-year-old player on the opposing team smashed his trophy on the ground while stating, "My mother does not allow second place trophies in our house." Parents who are overtly competitive and consequently show more affection after wins or exemplary performances are unconsciously telling their children that the parent-child relationship is influenced by athletic performance. In this situation, to combat the loss, the child seeks affection by performing his mother's message that winning is of utmost importance. Children need to know that they have parental love regardless of performance; a parent in the stands screaming at the referee and the coach or hanging their head when a mistake is made is sending a very strong and negative message.

For the participants in this study, messages of support were defined within the parent- child relationship. Some children asked parents to critique their performance as a measure of support. In these cases, critique was perceived as appropriate method of

support. Unsolicited critique, however, was not welcome and often had negative effects on communication and the relationship. Participants knew when they had performed poorly; it was often addressed by the coach or other teammates either on the court or following the game. When participants walked off the field/court after a poor performance, they needed their parents to, first, show unconditional support to re-enforce the message that no matter what happened, everything was going to be okay. This is not to say that parental utilization of competent communication strategies following a poor performance or loss will automatically change the demeanor of the child, however SRPCCC strategies will assist the parent in keeping the loss/performance as a sport issue, not a parent-child issue. Once the sting of the loss/poor performance subsided, children often wanted to talk. Participants did enjoy talking with their parents about their performance, even when it was sub-par. However, performance critique was most appropriate when initiated by the child. Throughout the process of participation, parents became better at assessing how to negotiate communication following performance.

In this study, parents demonstrated SRPCCC by successfully negotiating ambiguous messages through word-deed consistency (Knafo & Schwartz, 2003). All participants agreed that the clearest measure of support was *being there*. Being there meant being there for the child unconditionally, regardless of performance. It also meant asserting what the child needed following poor performances and responding appropriately. Critique was appropriate when initiated by the child. Unsolicited critique had a negative impact on the parent-child relationship. Competent communication

surrounding messages of support/pressure helped children to perceive the message as the parent intended and improved relational communication.

The second research question asks how the sport dream of the parent and/or child influences relational communication. Before answering this question it is important to define the sport dream and how it was discussed by participants in this study. The sport dream primarily encompassed childhood fantasies of playing professional sports or attending a dream school for collegiate participation. Participants varied in ways of projecting their individual dreams. One participant kept a baseball card of his favorite player in his hat at all times to keep the dream close. Other participants spoke of papering their rooms with posters of favored professional and collegiate players and teams and emulating respected players. Importantly, the majority of athlete participants articulated the sport dream as a childhood fantasy. For most of the participants, the dream was stronger during childhood where the fantasy was potentially within reach; however as sport participation progressed and athletes began to accurately assess their talent, the dream transformed into more appropriate and attainable goals. Even for the participants whose talents suggested the fantasy as realistically achievable, the dream changed to temporal goals as steps to achieving the dream (e.g. increasing travel and competition, national opportunities, recruiting methods). The transference of the dream to goals was discussed as a fluid process for athletes that involved both skill and passion; some possessed the skill but not the passion and others, the passion without the skill. In both cases participants were able to accurately assess both their skill and passion early on. The

dream to goal transference became complicated by parents who had difficulty releasing the fantasy.

The negotiation process between parent and child regarding the sport dream often involved multiple interactions and strained communication, especially when the parent was reluctant to let go of the dream. One athlete cited the biggest challenge for a parent and child as “understanding each other’s goals.” In order to understand each other’s goals, parents first had to implement communicative strategies that allowed children to “tell parents what they wanted, not what the parents wanted to hear.” However, even when children were able to articulate their goals some parents had difficulty supporting those goals when they differed from their own. Parents in this study used several effective strategies to open communication such as talking about goals over a period of time and recognizing behaviors that either supported or negated verbal messages from children. There were several examples detailed in the analysis that involved complex situations where parent and child goals differed. In each situation, children were able to voice their goal as independent from the parental goal. Parents who encouraged their children early on to voice their opinion and make decisions were preparing their children to competently navigate their own participation. Following this strategy, children were able to competently negotiate difficult decisions in spite of their youth. Many of the participants demonstrated SRPCCC by their ability to communicate their goals. Two participants had the talent and opportunity to pursue a single sport to a college scholarship; however both were more interested in having more of a “normal” high school experience. Both athletes recognized that their parents wanted them to pursue the

single sport opportunity but were able to follow their goals instead. The athletes' parents demonstrated SRPCCC by raising their children to know what they wanted and to have the communicational competence to voice their goals and follow them. Despite the fact that these parents were able to negotiate these difficult situations, it is important to highlight the difficulty that parents' articulated in letting go of the dream and the role of the child athlete in the negotiation process. The fathers' of the athletes above both stated that they did not understand or agree with why their children chose not to pursue the dream. The athletes discussed the conversations in which they had to negotiate the dream with their parents in order to achieve support for their goals. These conversations were extremely difficult for all involved and did temporarily strain the relationship. However, the negotiation process ultimately strengthened the relationship when parents were able to privilege and support the child's goals. There were no instances in this study where a participant felt significant regret for altering the dream toward more attainable goals.

Parents employed SRPCCC by not allowing their own goals to alter the child's goals. When parent and child goals diverged, parents understood the importance of allowing the child's goals to supersede their own. Several parents emphasized the fact that despite child talent and parental desire, it is ultimately the child's life and, no matter their age, they should have some say, especially with weighty commitments. Although the difficulty of negotiating competing goals often strained the parent-child relationship at the time, it did so in a positive manner and ultimately strengthened the relationship, communication, and social skills. Shared commitments and responsibility, parental and child goals, parental ability to accurately differentiate child skill and passion, and

availability of resources contribute to the complexity of negotiating the sport dream; however effectively managing the tensions involving differing goals and allocating resources has positive and constructive implications both for improving communicative competency and strengthening the parent-child relationship. The tensions resulting from negotiating difficult situations have retrospectively been positively evaluated by both parents and children in this study. These findings are supported by prior research reporting that positive patterns of communication surrounding conflict can strengthen the parent-child relationship (Laursen & Collins, 1994, 2004).

The third question asks about the messages of morality embedded in the youth sport experience. The data suggests that there are more messages of immoral nature operating in the youth sport experience than moral<sup>2</sup> messages. In this study, it became clear that the moral messages and lessons were driven by the parent-child relationship. Children were most receptive to moral messages when those messages were re-enforced in daily interactions with parents. Because all of the athlete participants have coached youth sports, they were asked during the closing portion of the interview what they perceived to be the biggest challenge in youth sports. The overwhelming response was discipline. It is difficult to even begin to endeavor in sport related instruction when coaches must constantly halt instruction to deal with disciplinary issues such as waiting one's turn, keeping hands to one's self, and refraining from hitting, kicking and pushing.

Throughout the course of this study, participants shared many stories of coaches who spoke inappropriately to children, parents fighting in the stands and yelling at

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<sup>2</sup> The moral versus immoral debate within this study speaks to morality in the terms of respect, honor, conduct, fair play, etc...as opposed to more religious implications.

coaches and players, and children who were encouraged to play dirty to win. All of the parents spoke about using these instances and examples from sport related media to teach their children how to conduct themselves on and off the playing field. As unsportsmanlike conduct on the part of professional and collegiate athletes continues to be excused by society at large (Doty, 2006), it is imperative that parents take every opportunity to ingrain their children with the basic ideals of respect, integrity and teamwork. Youth sports programs are primarily run by volunteer coaches and youth referees who may not always make the right call or know how to expertly coach a team. Kristi's (20, Basketball) father spoke frankly to his daughter about these issues by reminding her that referees are only human and they make mistakes but still deserve to be treated with respect. Many of the popular press articles, including the example from New Jersey in the introduction of this piece, account for the immoral and inappropriate behavior of parents who are upset with coach's decisions, referee's calls, and children's performance. Each of these actions send one very loud and clear message, "Winning is of utmost importance, no matter what." Unfortunately, when winning is privileged above all, moral and ethical conduct is the first to dissipate and when that happens, we all lose.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to carefully examine the messages constituting the youth sport environment in order to explicate both the role and the process of sport related parent-child communication, and make the results available to parents and youth sport communities and organizations in an effort to improve parent-child communication and youth sports participation. In this study, the data revealed *sport related parent-child*

*communication competency* as the vehicle that facilitated the process of youth sport participation. More importantly, the parent-child relationship functioned as a lens through which both parent and child understood and attributed meaning to the youth sport experience. Gaining sport related parent-child communication competency was as much of a process as the participation itself; parents and children continually negotiated and developed competent communicative strategies in and through their sport related interactions and experiences. Because of the major commitments that often accompany participation, it behooves parents to engage children on a regular basis to discuss sport related goals and desires in order to make the most appropriate, enjoyable, and beneficial decisions for all involved.

Based on the data provided, there appears to be a lack of responsibility on youth sport communities and parents in general to confront inappropriate behavior and work together to maintain and enforce a positive environment during youth sport events. It was also evident that parents tend to become emotionally involved and sometimes do not recognize when they are out of line. Future research would benefit from exploring these issues further.

Overall, participation in youth sports offers an excellent opportunity for parents and children to strengthen and clarify their communicative efforts through the multitude of sport related scenarios that present throughout participation. In addition, parents who account for moral conduct in their child's youth sport environment assist in the transmission of intended values, facilitate sport instruction, and increase communicative competence for both parent and child.

As stated in the introduction, this study was structured to answer the call of Kassing et al. (2004) to pursue sport related topics in communication research. This study supports the claim that sport provides not only a valid area of communication research but, perhaps warrants its own nuanced division of relational communication. Messages and communicative acts that occur in sport related relationships represent a vast and relatively unexplored area for communication scholars.

#### Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While the results of this study provide insight into sport related parent-child relationship there are several limitations. First, this study was conducted with college-age athletes who recalled their youth participation in retrospect. Future endeavors would benefit from speaking with parents and children who are currently participating in youth sports. Second, this study was conducted at a private university. Clearly not all children who participate in youth sports are privy to the resources of the majority of participants in this study. Finally, this study asserts the parent-child relationship as foundational to youth sports participation. It also privileges co-participation and quasi-equality in decision making. Not all children who participate in youth sports have parental figures to engage in the communicative scenarios detailed here. Additionally, not all cultures would be receptive to the suggested power structure. Future research should look at sports programs across the socio-economic and cultural context to further understanding of youth sport related communication.

## Practical Applications

The third objective of this research project was to make results available to parents and youth sport programs. In an effort to gain practical experience with the phenomena studied, I procured an intern position with a youth sport camp. Based on my experience with the camp and the results of this study, I have formatted relevant applications into two practical resources made specifically for the use of this particular youth program. First I will provide a brief description of the camp and its goals and my role as an intern, followed by the application materials. The first application is a tutorial meant to be incorporated into staff training to assist camp staff in their interactions with both campers and parents. The second is information to be distributed to parents in a pamphlet.

For the purpose of this discussion I will refer to the camp as ASC (athletic summer camp). The following excerpt is taken from the current brochure and summarizes the camp's objectives; details have been altered slightly to conceal identifying information:

Located on a University campus, ASC utilizes the same facilities as varsity athletes. Campers ages 5-11 will learn fundamental sport skills and techniques and participate in daily strength and conditioning exercises. Each day campers will develop endurance, confidence, sportsmanship and athletic skills; all of which are critical to their fundamental sports development. The goal of ASC is to develop and educate campers on the components of a healthy, active lifestyle. Now in its 12<sup>th</sup> successful year, ASC stresses teamwork, respect, sportsmanship

and a positive attitude throughout all activities, promoting a healthy, active lifestyle for all campers (ASC Brochure, 2009).

The main reason I chose and was excited about using this camp for observation is because it exposes children to a wide variety of sport related activities, structured and unstructured, and is committed to developing fundamental social and physical skills. Campers' transition through different activities each day learning the basic rules and skills of sport related activities including but not limited to: basketball, soccer, rugby, croquet, badminton, volleyball, floor hockey, kickball, martial arts, dance, and lacrosse. In addition, campers also participate in open swimming, open recreation, and games such as capture the flag that are less structured and offer spaces for campers to be creative and make up their own games.

As an intern I spent over 400 hours assisting the camp director with day to day operations including but not limited to: staff hiring and training, camper schedules, maintaining policy and procedure, camper discipline, parental issues and concerns, creating lesson plans, staff issues and concerns, coaching and event organization.

### *Staff Training*

A vital component of a successful youth sports program is the appropriate training of the staff. Maintaining parental satisfaction facilitates nearly every aspect of camp life for administrators, staff, and campers. Many of the issues that parents voiced during the summer of my observations revolved around a lack of communication. The following presentation has been oriented to address those issues and will be executed by myself during staff training this summer. I first present an introduction to parent-child

communication and its relevance to the staff. Next I present a series of questions. After each question I will facilitate a discussion with the intention of producing a co-constructed protocol for addressing each issue.

One of the key components to your success here at ASC is your relationship with your campers and their parents. Overall, parents want to feel assured that you are taking an appropriate interest in their child and that they can trust your role as coach and supervisor. The upcoming summer will be long and trying at times however your ultimate success will rely on several key components that I have outline below. I would like to go over each component one at a time and discuss your thoughts and previous experiences relating to each. I would also like to compile a list of your suggestions on how to incorporate these components in the daily routine.

1. Despite the fact that ASC is a sports camp, there will be children here, for a variety of reasons, who are not necessarily excited about sports. How can we improve their experience without detracting from those who are sport focused?
2. One of the major critiques that parents had regarding last summer was that staff failed to appropriately engage with their child. First, how can we effectively engage parents during pre/post camp to combat this assumption of disengagement? Second, despite the large numbers and weekly turnover, how can we more effectively develop meaningful relationships with our campers which will ultimately increase parental satisfaction?
3. Discipline issues and lost personal items often impeded sport instruction, transitions/timeliness, and fun in addition to upsetting parents. How can we more

constructively address and enforce these issues in order to make camp a better experience for staff and campers?

4. Parents and children LOVE the evaluations; however they were a continual staff issue last summer. How can we re-structure this effort to the benefit of all involved?

### *Parental Pamphlet*

The following information will be provided both as a physical and electronic resource for parents of ASC campers. I will also be giving a short talk during parent orientation that summarizes the issues detailed below.

Welcome to ASC! We are excited to engage your child(ren) in a variety of sport related activities to provide basic foundational instruction and promote respectful conduct and sportsmanship. To ensure your child has the best possible experience we ask for your attention to the following:

1. **Talk to your child about the benefits of ASC.** While ASC is a sports camp, we understand that your child may not be “in” to sports at the time of participation. If the choice to enroll your child in camp was more of a parental decision, it is important to speak with your child about why you think ASC will be beneficial to him/her. Whether the reasons are fitness, socialization, or the availability of diverse activities, your child will have a better experience if you talk about why you want him/her here and discuss the benefits in terms she/he can relate to.
2. **Prepare your child for sport related activity.** In order to maximize participation and experience, it is important your child arrive at ASC with the appropriate

attire: shorts, shirts, and tennis shoes. Crocs and other sandal type shoes do not provide sufficient ankle support for sport related activity. It is also important to mentally prepare your child. Remember, ASC can be scary for campers and they may not want to admit it. It can be difficult to try new things in front of peers. Many times campers are afraid to “mess up” and therefore refrain from trying. Talk to your child about the value of trying and learning new things. Tell them about the first time you tried something new. Or get a head start on playing catch or shooting hoops to assuage the nerves. The most important message to convey to your child during youth sport participation, especially at this level, is that you support their effort no matter the outcome. In other words, make sure your child understands that your affection is not directly tied to their performance. The inherent need to please can place unintentional and unnecessary pressure on your child and impede participation and enjoyment. Also, ASC is a sport camp and our daily routine is heavily activity oriented. When children refuse to participate, it presents a problem for both staff and the other campers. Staff will not force your child to participate; however, activities are undermined when multiple children insist on sitting out. Please speak with your child about the daily schedule so they are prepared for a full day of physical activity. Again, re-iterate the importance of participating and being a “good sport” even if your child does not like specific activities.

3. **Discuss sportsmanship, teamwork, and respect at home.** These three concepts encompass vital components of sport participation and are often more difficult for

youngsters to internalize. Because ASC is a fundamental skills camp, learning and participation, not winning, should be emphasized. Research strongly supports that the number one reason why 70% of children will quit youth sports by age 13 is the over-emphasis on winning. When winning is emphasized before basic skills are acquired, children are less inclined to participate for fear of failure. We saw a lot of this (participation refusal based on fear) last summer. Additionally, discussing other forms of sportsmanship and teamwork such as: not always needing to be first in line, keeping one's hands to one's self, refraining from treating others who may not be good at sports poorly, and sharing and respecting equipment and space are fruitful topics that increase social skills and enhance ASC experience.

4. **Get excited about ASC.** The more you talk to your child about the benefits of ASC and their personal interest in sport related activity, the better experience they will have. The ride to and from camp can be a special time for you and your child to talk about their experience at ASC in relation to school, professional sporting events, and other related contexts. There are many benefits that accompany sports participation whether or not your child decides to pursue sport participation beyond ASC. Use the experience to enhance your relationship with your child. Get excited/nervous with her/him. Recent research reveals many positive effects of sport participation on the parent-child relationship such as increased quality time and communication.

5. **Get to know your coach.** Coach's are available during drop off and pick up time. Talk to your child's coach about your child. Is he/she particularly excited/nervous about a sport or camp in general? Are there particular topics that can put your child at ease when he/she is feeling scared? Any personal information/insight you can provide the coach will enhance your child's experience.

The information provided in this pamphlet was based on a research study regarding sport related parent-child communication. If you would like more information, please contact [myandall@du.edu](mailto:myandall@du.edu) for a copy of the study results.

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## Appendix A

### *Preliminary Protocol*

1. Did you participate in sports prior to college?
2. How many years did you participate?
3. What was the level of competition (competitive or recreational, elite/travel/summer leagues, depth of participation/involvement)?
4. Would you agree to a 1 hour interview to discuss your youth sport experience?
5. Do you think one of your parents would be willing to complete a questionnaire on having a child participating in youth sports?
6. Would you agree to be recorded during the interview with the agreement that your identity would remain anonymous?

## Appendix B

### *Athlete Interview Protocol (initial sample)*

#### *Warm-up*

1. What sport(s) do you play?
2. How did you become involved in your sport(s)?
3. Tell me about the first experience you remember involving sports.

#### *Main*

1. Tell me about your parents' messages or actions that you experienced as support or pressure when you played your sport. How did you respond?
2. What was your involvement in decisions regarding your youth sport selection and participation?
3. Tell me about a time when you quit or wanted to quit.
4. On a scale of 1-10, how much pressure to perform well did you feel from your parents?
5. Do you feel that your youth sport experience prepared you for your adult life? How or why?
6. Did you have a sport dream? What was it? What is an example of something you did to express that dream? How has that dream changed?
7. Did your parents have a sport dream for you? What was it? What is an example of something they did to express that dream? How has that dream changed?
8. Give me an example of how your sport dream affected your relationship with your parents? How did you respond?

9. Give me an example of how your parent's sport dream for you affected your relationship with them? How did you respond?
10. Describe how sportsmanship or unsportsmanlike conduct was communicated in your youth sport experience.
11. Tell me about a time when you were encouraged to take an action you felt was inappropriate.
12. Give me an example of a time another parent acted inappropriately at a game or practice. How did the child of that parent react?

*Close*

1. What was your best sport experience involving your parents? Worst?
2. If you could change anything about your youth sport experience, what would it be?
3. What advice would you give young athletes today?
4. What advice would you give to parents of young athletes today?
5. What did I not ask that you feel is important?

*Parent Questionnaire Protocol (initial sample)*

1. What is your first memory of your son/daughter's sport experience?
2. What messages or actions did you use to provide support?
3. Describe a situation when you felt your messages or actions exerted parental pressure.
4. Did you have a sport dream involving your child? In what ways did you communicate that dream? How did it affect your relationship?

5. Did your child have a sport dream? In what ways did he/she communicate that dream? How did it affect your relationship?
6. Describe how sportsmanship or unsportsmanlike conduct was communicated in your child's youth sport experience. In what way did your messages and/or behavior support or ignore qualities of sportsmanship?
7. In retrospect, is there anything you would change about your child's sport experience? Tell me about it.
8. Is there anything you would change about your involvement in your child's sport experience? Tell me about it.
9. What advice would you give young athletes today?

## Appendix C

### *Athlete Protocol (theoretical sample)*

1. Describe how choices and commitments regarding your youth sport participation were discussed and decided upon? What was the process?
2. In regards to parental critique of your performance, under what circumstances was it acceptable or unacceptable?
3. Describe how the community surrounding your sport participation (other parents, stand/crowd atmosphere, coach) affected your performance and overall experience.
4. What is/are the most important lessons you have derived from your youth sport experience?
5. Describe your best memory from your youth sport experience.

### *Parent Protocol (theoretical sample)*

1. Describe how choices and commitments regarding your child's youth sport participation were discussed and decided upon? What was the process?
2. In regards to your critique of your child's performance, under what circumstances did you find it appropriate or inappropriate?
3. As a "parent in the stands" how did you perceive other parents and the community surrounding your child's youth sport participation? Describe how the community surrounding your child's youth sport participation (other parents, stand/crowd atmosphere, coach) affected the youth sport environment, the children's performance, and their/your overall experience.

4. What do you see as the biggest communicational challenge for parents and children in youth sports?
5. What have you come away with from your child's youth sport experience?