Volunteer Youth Sport Coaches’ Perspectives of Coaching Education/Certification and Parental Codes of Conduct

Lenny D. Wiersma and Clay P. Sherman

The vast majority of youth sport programs in the United States relies primarily on parent volunteers to serve as coaches. Unfortunately, most of these volunteer coaches have not received formal training to prepare them adequately for the role of youth sport coach. To exacerbate the issue, according to the popular media, parents and other adults can commit belligerent and even violent acts around, and often resulting from, poorly managed youth sport events. Although some efforts have been made to standardize curricula, provide training for coaches, and contain or prevent inappropriate parent behaviors, few efforts have been directed at investigating the self-described needs and concerns of the coaches from their perspectives. The purpose of the current study was to investigate the concerns and issues of youth sport coaches related to coaching and parental education. Five focus group interviews with 25 volunteer youth sport coaches were conducted to investigate these issues. Results were organized around four higher order themes that emerged from inductive content analyses: (a) coaching education content areas of need, (b) barriers and problems of offering coaching education, (c) coaching education format recommendations, and (d) efficacy of parental codes of conduct. Results were discussed in terms of the potential impact administrators, coaches, and parents could have in implementing formal coaching education programs and developing their coaching education practices.

Key words: children’s sports, focus groups, qualitative research

Adults, such as parents and coaches, provide the instrumental support crucial for the existence of children’s sport programs. These individuals provide the money, time, transportation, and organization without which few programs would exist for millions of children and adolescents. Additionally, the behaviors and attitudes of parents and coaches have a significant impact on children’s enjoyment (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Wiersma, 2001), motivation (Duda & Hom, 1993), enthusiasm (Power & Woolger, 1994), emotional responses (Brustad, 1992; Ommundsen & Vaglum, 1991), self-concept (Brustad, 1996), and socialization (Harter, 1978; Weiss & Hayashi, 1995), all of which are important predictors of continued sport involvement.

While the benefits of sports for children are well documented, youth sport programs have received considerably negative attention in the popular media. Recent articles include topics such as the escalating expenses of participation (Ferguson, 1999), sexual abuse (Nack & Yaeger, 1999), parental misconduct (Wong, 2001), and adult-initiated violence among parents, coaches, and officials (Nack & Munson, 2000; Thesing, 2000) at children’s sporting events. Popular media are replete with accounts of a youth sport culture characterized by excessive adult involvement, intense pressure, and, in extreme cases, violence. Such isolated yet high-profile cases have led many youth sport administrators to consider regulating adult behavior at children’s sporting events.
The reliance of youth sport programs on the service of parent volunteers compounds the concerns of adult behavior in the youth sport setting. Nonschool-based agencies are the primary provider of sport programs for children (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1996), and include club programs (including national governing bodies, private clubs, or clinics) and community offerings, such as the YMCA, local Boys/Girls Clubs, and city recreation departments. Moreover, the existence of community-based sport programs depends primarily on the leadership of volunteer coaches. Despite good intentions by this population, most of the 2.5–3 million coaches of nonschool-based youth sport teams have no formal training or education in developmentally appropriate coaching practices (Gould, Krane, Giannini, & Hodge, 1990; Weiss & Hayashi, 1996).

Researchers interested in youth sport have examined the effectiveness of coaching education and have consistently found that coaching behaviors influence the quality of youth sport participation for children (e.g., Barnett, Smoll, & Smith, 1992; Smith, Zane, Smoll, & Coppel, 1983; Smoll, Smith, Barnett, & Everett, 1993). Over the past 15 years, Smith, Smoll, and colleagues have consistently demonstrated a more positive sport experience for children as a result of coaching effectiveness training (CET) interventions. As a result of CET, children (generally ages 12 years and younger) have experienced increased self-esteem, enjoyment, and coach and peer attraction, as well as reduced sport performance anxiety.

In addition to CET, several other organizations offer coaching education programs for youth sport coaches (e.g., American Sport Education Program; Martens, 1987). Typically, these educational curricula cover content areas related to most of the following domains provided in the National Standards for Athletic Coaches (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 1995): medical (injury prevention, care, and management); legal (risk management); growth, development, and learning; training, conditioning, and nutrition; social and psychological aspects of coaching; coaching techniques (skills, tactics, and strategies); teaching and administration; and professional preparation and development.

Unfortunately, despite positive results related to coaching education programs and the availability of these programs, most coaches do not receive formal training (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001; Gould et al., 1990). McCallister, Blinde, and Kolenbrander (2000) interviewed volunteer youth sport baseball and softball coaches and reported that the role of youth sport coach carries a “general societal perception that ‘anyone can coach,’” and that the “criteria for selecting coaches often were based on either having a child in the program or simply a willingness to assume the role if no one else was available” (p. 22). Volunteer coaches are quickly faced with aspects of youth sports that they were largely unprepared to handle, such as negative parental involvement (McCallister et al., 2000), as well as developmentally appropriate coaching practices (Libman, 1998). If volunteers are to be prepared for their roles as youth sport coaches, the sponsoring organizations have an obligation to require preparatory training (Libman, 1998).

Consistent with the concerns of coaching education is the much cited but largely anecdotal evidence of overzealous adults, who put excessive pressure on children to succeed, and adult violence by both coaches and parents at sport events. Recent efforts to control parent-spectator behavior at games and practices include requiring parents to attend a “sportsmanship” training session. This initiative, not widespread but highly publicized, has been implemented in such cities as Jupiter/West Palm Beach, FL; Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN; and Wichita, KS. These programs commonly entail either voluntary or mandatory attendance at a 30–60-min session on the importance of ethical parental sporting behavior.

A second recent trend in nonschool-based sport programs is the attempt to control parental behaviors at practices and games by requiring parents and other spectators to adhere to specified codes of conduct. Codes typically include statements regarding the nature and content of verbal comments directed at players, coaches, and officials; banning smoking and drinking at youth sport events; and encouraging fair play and sportsmanship of all involved. After the much publicized death of a parent-coach in Reading, MA, by an outraged parent, the state is in the process of passing a bill that would mandate all players, parents, and coaches to sign a “pledge of nonviolence” prior to involvement in a youth sport league (Bollman, 2000). However, the extent to which parental codes are effective in regulating parental behavior is undetermined, and enforcing the codes is a critical issue for leagues considering their implementation.

The challenge to many community sports and recreation programs has been twofold: (a) offering coaching education or certification to volunteers in such a manner that would maximize the attendance of coaches, and (b) initiating citywide efforts to require parental adherence to sportsmanship contracts and/or behavior codes.

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the concerns and issues youth sport coaches have about coaching and parental education. Specifically, information was sought to provide insight into: (a) the experiences of volunteer youth sport coaches with respect to problems they face, (b) the concerns and issues with providing education and training to volunteer coaches, and (c) topic areas requested by coaches in their preparation to work with children. In addition, the opinions of youth sport coaches were sought on efforts to regulate and control parental behavior at youth sport events.
particularly with the need for and efficacy of required codes of conduct.

Locke (1989) suggested that all research, particularly qualitative research, is biased by researchers’ experiences and assumptions and is value-loaded. He stated, “The more important questions have to do with what role those values and predilections play in gathering and interpreting data” (p. 12). The impetus for the current study was to serve as a needs assessment of local coaching education practices and concerns that would guide the services of a newly initiated university/community youth sports collaboration. Based on our observations that have been validated by considerable literature in youth sport coaching education research (e.g., Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; McCallister et al., 2000; Smoll et al., 1993), we entered the study with the assumptions that: (a) education was lacking in most programs coached by volunteers, (b) volunteers who coached without proper preparation might experience related difficulties, and (c) barriers likely existed for leagues to effectively implement coaching education programs. Our intent, therefore, was to obtain a better understanding of how to minimize the barriers and problems associated with coaching and coaching education and use this information when implementing future education efforts. A directive, focus group approach is a recommended method for a community needs assessment (Krueger & Kasey, 2000).

**Method**

**Participants**

Five focus groups were conducted (consisting of 8, 3, 7, 3, and 4 coaches, respectively). The participants consisted of 25 volunteer youth sport coaches (21 men, 3 women) ranging in age from 33–60 years ($M = 44.39$ years, $SD = 5.59$) from five cities in southern California. The coaches represented 14 male and 11 female teams in basketball, soccer, baseball, softball, and football. The average length of coaching experience for the sample was 6 years ($M = 6.00$ years, $SD = 4.09$), ranging from 1 to 20 years of coaching at the youth sport level. The educational background of the sample included 4 coaches with graduate degrees, 12 with baccalaureate degrees, 2 with an associate degree, and 5 whose highest educational level was high school. Ten of the coaches had no formal training, education, or preparation in coaching young athletes; 9 had attended at least one coaching clinic offered by the recreational league, and 4 were certified/licensed through the sport’s local governing body.

**Focus Group Interview Guide**

The focus group questions were developed according to the guidelines provided by Krueger and Kasey (2000), who identified the qualities of good questions as being conversational, in terms that the participants use and understand, clear and concise, and one-dimensional. The question route was developed in this case to sequence the discussions from general, introductory, nonthreatening observations to more specific, detailed, and informative questions. The list of questions that served as the basis of the five focus groups is included in Table 1.

The questions were developed such that participants were asked to consider their involvement in volunteer coaching in general as opposed to limiting their responses to their current or most recent experiences. The discussions were designed to revolve around the need for and barriers associated with coaching education and on the efficacy and enforcement of parental codes of conduct in

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1. Focus group question guide</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Is coaching certification or education available in your league? Mandated? If so, please describe what is offered.</td>
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<td>2. Do you hold a meeting with parents at the beginning of the season? If so, what do you discuss?</td>
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<td>3. Does your league have a parental code of conduct?</td>
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<td>4. What types of things did you feel unprepared for in your role as a volunteer coach?</td>
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<td>5. Imagine you are a member of a board that is assigned to make decisions regarding the need for education or training of coaches in your league.</td>
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<td>a. What would you recommend to the board regarding the need for such training or education?</td>
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<td>b. What concerns or issues would you have with such education or certification efforts?</td>
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<td>c. What would you propose to rectify those concerns?</td>
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<td>6. Do you believe that coaching certification or education should be mandatory? Why or why not? What would be some things that would entice you to attend coaching education or certification programs? What types of things would you recommend be included in coaching education for youth sport coaches?</td>
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<td>7. Do you think that there is a need for a parental code of conduct? Why or why not? What are some of the behaviors that you believe should be included in a parental code of conduct? How would you recommend that this code of conduct be enforced?</td>
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Youth sport settings. The interview process was semistruc-
tured such that the researchers were free to pursue addi-
tional questions when they arose.

Procedures

Recruitment into the study was limited to volunteer
coaches in Orange County, CA, from nonschool-based
sport programs designed for children ages 7–14 years.
Researchers contacted youth sport administrators and
directors from leagues in five local cities by phone and
explained the purpose of the investigation. The admin-
istrators were asked to provide contact information for
the coaches in their current or most recent sport sea-
son. Researchers then contacted coaches by phone and
sent a follow-up email to interested participants describ-
ing the purpose of the study. Individuals who agreed to
participate were scheduled to meet with other coaches
in the sport they were currently coaching. Although the
participants had coaching experiences in sports other
than their current seasons, grouping them by current
coaching assignment increased homogeneity of the
group, an important prerequisite in focus group re-
search (Krueger & Kasey, 2000; Morgan, 1988).

At the beginning of each focus group, the investi-
gators again described the purpose and rationale of the
study. After completing an informed consent and de-
mographic form, the coaches were instructed to answer
the questions conversationally and encouraged to share
their experiences as they related to or differed from the
other participants. A video recorder (in the corner of
the room) and backup audio tape recorder (at the cen-
ter of the meeting table) were used to document the
participants’ verbal responses; participants were in-
formed of the confidentiality and analytical purpose of
the recordings. In addition, a trained graduate student
attended the sessions and was instructed to take written
notes during the interviews. The focus groups lasted
approximately 1½–2 hr per session. On completing each
focus group, the participants’ responses were tran-
scribed verbatim from the video recordings and read
approximately multiple times by each author to assure accuracy.

Both researchers, who are faculty members and
codirectors of a university-based youth sport center, con-
ducted the focus groups. Both researchers had previous
experience coaching youth sports at the club level and
had conducted past research with youth and adolescents
as the primary focus, yet neither had worked in a voluntary
capacity with the types of leagues recruited for the study.
Our intent was to use the focus groups as part of a needs
assessment to establish future university-community col-
laboration, and we considered the participants the “ex-
erts” on what was needed in youth sports settings. While
we were aware that our backgrounds could have influ-
enced our interpretation of the participants’ responses,
we used crosschecking procedures to maximize trust-
worthiness of our analyses (as described below). Dur-
ing the interviews, we routinely summarized what we
heard the coaches say to determine that our understand-
ing was consistent with their intended responses.

Data Analysis

Inductive content analyses were conducted on the
transcripts from the five focus groups by closely follow-
ing the strategies described by Patton (1990), Krueger
(1998), and Maykut and Morehouse (1994). The analy-

sis was conducted by line numbering the transcripts and
printing them on colored paper (coded by session) so
that individual quotes could be easily traced back to the
original, intact copy. The transcripts were subsequently
cut into individual responses, and each quote was treat-
ed as a raw data unit. Each author performed the
first stage of analysis separately by reading each raw data
unit and writing down a one- or two-word phrase that
captured its meaning and would serve as a meaning unit.
If the quote had multiple meanings, they were identi-
fied separately; thus, one quote could be used to sup-
port more than one meaning unit.

To enhance trustworthiness of the first analysis
stage, the authors then exchanged their completed tran-
scripts and compared their assigned meaning units. If
the meaning units were identical, they were kept for
further inductive analysis; when the units were similar
but not exact, we chose the best descriptor if the termi-
nology, not the meaning, was in question. We resolved
any cases of meaning discrepancy through discourse
and clarification, discussing the response in context of
the nature of the question. Analysis only continued once
both researchers were satisfied that the meaning unit
was in agreement.

We then conducted inductive analyses by grouping
the individual meaning units into lower order themes
according to similar content within each question in
Table 1. In all cases, lower order themes were composed
of at least two meaning units from individual partici-
pants. As a result, several meaning units were not used
in the final analyses. Particular attention was given to
ensure that the lower order themes were distinct from
the others by comparing new themes with those already
formed. After both researchers agreed on the groupings,
a research assistant trained in qualitative methodology
provided an additional level of trustworthiness of our
decisions. The third party reviewed the lower order
themes for accuracy and clarity and provided feedback
on any areas that needed clarification or further ratio-
nale. Adjustments were made until a consensus was
reached among the researchers.

Finally, the lower order themes within each ques-
tion were grouped into second order or higher order
themes, when appropriate. Both authors together conducted this phase again, and the research assistant then reviewed it. As the focus groups progressed, overlapping information among the interview guide was evident; therefore, the decision was made to not limit the analysis by question. While some discussion was limited to a single question, many responses crossed over into multiple questions, so the analysis led to lower and higher order themes that subsumed more than one interview question.

Results

Raw data from five semistructured focus group interviews provided the basis for the following results.

Content analysis resulted in 394 meaning units, which were then synthesized into 27 lower order, and finally 4 higher order themes. The findings are organized around the four higher order themes that best described the views of the sample: (a) coaching education content areas of need, (b) barriers and problems of offering coaching education opportunities, (c) coaching education format recommendations, and (d) efficacy of parental codes of conduct. An overview of the lower and higher order themes is presented in Figure 1.

### Coaching Education Content Areas of Need

Participants were asked to discuss coaching aspects, primarily in their first year of coaching, with which they were unprepared to deal or in which they believed be-

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<th>Lower Order Theme</th>
<th>Higher Order Theme</th>
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<td>Teaching/Communicating With Children</td>
<td>Pedagogical Aspects</td>
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<td>Skill Level Diversity</td>
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<td>Skill Development/Progression</td>
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<td>Making Practices Fun</td>
<td>Psychological Aspects</td>
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<td>Safety/Injury Prevention</td>
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<td>Child Psychology</td>
<td>Management/Leadership Aspects</td>
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<td>Mental Skills</td>
<td>Coaching Education Content Areas of Need</td>
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<td>Coaching Own Child</td>
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<td>Understanding Appropriate Physical Contact Administrative Issues</td>
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<td>Demands on Volunteers</td>
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<td>Transient Nature of Leadership</td>
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<td>Inconsistency of Current Practices</td>
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<td>Concerns with Quality of Education</td>
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<td>Formal vs. Informal Methods</td>
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<td>Mentoring</td>
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<td>Recurring Training</td>
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<td>Round-Table Discussions</td>
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<td>“Hands-On” Workshops</td>
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<td>Age-Specific and Level-Specific Content</td>
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<td>Support for Parental Codes</td>
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**Figure 1.** Lower order and higher order themes emerging from 394 meaning units from five focus groups.
gining coaches ought to be better trained. They were also asked what should be included in coaching education curricula to better help prepare volunteer coaches to work with children. Three general topics areas were discussed: pedagogical, psychological, and management/leadership aspects of volunteer youth sport coaching. These second order themes encompassed 13 lower order themes that reflected areas in which coaches expressed feelings of unpreparedness, stress, frustration, and confusion, and would recommend in most coaching education curricula.

Teaching/Communicating With Children. Most coaches reflecting back to their first year or two of coaching mentioned problems related to teaching and communicating with children. Coaches discussed several problematic aspects in this area, most related to behavior management and practice organization. For example, balancing fun with practice, accommodating short attention spans, dealing with kids who goof around or are rowdy and unruly, and coaching children with special needs all proved to be areas coaches felt they were not prepared to handle. One coach discussed the difficulty of initially managing the behavior of children in groups:

...[chaos] that’s what happened the first day I went to practice—wahooosh [indicating kids were all over the place]. I just remember walking off the field on my first day of practice thinking, “Did I accomplish anything? I didn’t kill any kids, no kids lost.”

Several coaches mentioned the difficulty they experienced communicating with children, specifically, using language and terminology that kids could understand. This was pronounced with coaches’ attempts at using instructions and providing demonstrations. One coach described his frustration in learning how to communicate with children:

When I walked into the court and said, “Set a pick,” you just assume that these kids know what you are talking about. And they don’t. It took me a while to figure out that, hey, you almost gotta go back to the basics. Like when I mean, “Zone,” I say, “Protect the house,” and that stuff. When I say, “Play big,” I mean, “put your hands in the air.”

A couple coaches mentioned that knowing about child development was beneficial. One hypothesized that fellow coaches without children are at a particular disadvantage in this regard.

Skill Level Diversity. Coaches expressed an uncertainty about working with children of various skill levels. One coach was especially uncertain about how to structure a practice so children could learn and develop at their current skill level, stating, “It seems like the team can’t develop faster than the slower players of the group.”

Skill Development/Progression. Coaches discussed their initial difficulties in teaching sport-specific skills appropriately to children. The participants indicated that they would have benefited from learning how to instruct kids using proper progressions, having a collection of basic drills from which they could organize practices, and having instructional resources that included information on skill fundamentals specific to their sports.

Making Practices Fun. Another important area of perceived deficiency related to organizing dynamic and active practices. Specifically, coaches mentioned the need to understand the philosophy of fun, planning and using time effectively, planning effective drills and innovative games, and engaging most of the kids most of the time (e.g., avoiding “dead time”).

Safety/Injury Prevention. Inexperienced and veteran coaches discussed the need for understanding injury prevention and other important safety guidelines. In general, coaches expressed the need for learning proper conditioning techniques and guidelines for implementing an effective and safe stretching program into practices and prior to games.

Child Psychology. Many of the coaches expressed the belief that there was more to coaching than sport-specific knowledge or one’s ability as a skill technician. They recommended that educational emphases and clinics should reflect this. For example, one coach offered, “… at the recreational level, if you know how to treat the kids, and you have a good relationship with the parents, and everybody has fun, then you’ve had a great season. Even if you are 0–10.” Another coach confirmed this point, “The skills part and learning the drills part of coaching—that’s the easy part, and you can pick that up. But it’s the psychology part and the interpersonal stuff and the team stuff—they don’t teach that.” Specifically, coaches were interested in learning how to build children’s and adolescents’ self-esteem, increase their self-confidence, understand where they “are coming from,” and gain techniques for “getting to know your athletes.”

Teamwork/Team Building. Another area with which coaches struggled was getting their players to play as a team and systematically develop a sense of team unity. Coaches had typically struggled with teaching even simple offensive strategies that required spreading the ball around or passing to multiple players. They also offered that learning team building activities or other exercises that would build a sense of unity among players would have been beneficial early in their coaching experiences.

Mental Skills. A few coaches also thought it would be valuable to receive education on the mental aspects of sport and coaching that apply to both coaches and play-
Dealing With Parents. In each of the five focus groups, the first and most fervent area mentioned when asked about areas of difficulty was “parents.” Unequivocally, coaches felt unprepared to deal with parental behaviors and believed that the coaching experience would be significantly improved if they had preparation in this area. Topics that coaches discussed most frequently included parent intensity, emphasis on winning, politics, diplomacy, and lack of game knowledge. For example, most coaches felt the intensity level exhibited by some parents was inappropriate for the level of competition. One coach specifically discussed the variation in parents’ intensity levels. “[It’s] a scatterband with the parents. You have the ones who don’t take their kid to practice, or just drop them off…to having the zealot out there.”

Coaches also mentioned an overemphasis on winning. Several reported that parents (and, at times, other coaches) often failed to understand the mission and philosophy of youth sport. “It is about having fun and [learning] the fundamentals; it is not about win or lose.” One coach specifically discussed the emphasis some parents have on winning, even when their children do not.

It’s funny, the kids, you know, the kids, up until, even still in sixth grade, they really don’t, about 5–10 min after the game, they’re not even thinkin’ about the game anymore [two other coaches agree]. It’s only the parents.

Coaches discussed that dealing with parental politics was a major issue during their early coaching careers. Coaches were unprepared to answer such questions as, “Why isn’t my kid playing more? Playing a certain position? Involved in key plays?” Coaches also discussed parents’ abilities to determine the appropriate time to discuss issues with coaches and a lack of knowledge of game rules and strategies as problematic issues. Coaches mentioned taking measured steps later in their coaching careers to avoid problematic parents. For example, during the draft, some coaches admitted selecting or not selecting certain players because of their parents:

You draft the parents as well as the kids [others laugh]. We all know that. And the better your parents, the better your team is going to be. When I sit there to draft the kid, if I know this kid’s [parents are difficult], you know his parents are whatever, ‘cause I’ve been around for a while, I’ll pass on him.

Overinvolvement/Commitment Issues. Several coaches discussed concerns about children who begin structured sport too early, play several sports that overlap seasons, or participate in multiple leagues (i.e., play on two teams at the same time). “How do you coach kids who are [only at practices, games, or both sporadically] when you know they are playing on other teams [or involved in other sports or activities]?” One coach elaborated:

And the problem that I had, we had nine girls on our team, and we had full practices maybe three times out of the year, because the girls are involved in so many different other activities, soccer, dance, uh softball, you name it, they are involved in it.

Coaching Own Child. Many who had volunteered to coach did so because they had a child who played in the league. While some volunteered out of necessity (“If no one coached, there would be no team”), others did it because it would be a good opportunity to spend time with their children. However, problems surfaced for some who had a difficult time separating their role as a parent from their role as a coach. In addition, some coaches expressed a concern over perceptions of favoritism by other parents when it came to playing time and playing positions, as well as unconsciously taking out frustrations with other players on their own children.

Understanding Appropriate Physical Contact. Some coaches expressed concerns about avoiding sexual abuse allegations when instructing, consoling, or celebrating with children. One provided a specific example of how he was challenged with maintaining the perception that touching children (e.g., hugging, carrying, providing “hands-on” instruction, assessing injury) is an appropriate and desirable coaching behavior.

I’m a nurturing kind of person. And I know that it took me a while to find out, “Okay, where is that line on how close I want to get to the child?” When I coach a team, all the kids become a part of my extended family. It is funny, because you really have to balance that point of how close, within reason, you are going to be.
Barriers and Problems of Offering Coaching Education

Overwhelmingly, coaches felt some sort of training or certification program should be available for coaches in their leagues. Most, however, discussed barriers that made it difficult to offer educational opportunities. The four lower order themes follow.

Demands on Volunteers. Most coaches felt that the time demands already placed on volunteer coaches and the lack of personnel and monetary resources to implement mandatory education programs were prohibitive. According to most, recruiting and retaining coaches was a big challenge; most parents had little time to volunteer, especially if they had multiple children and had to transport their kids to various after-school activities. Many coaches worried that mandatory training would result in a shortage of coaches. A board member and coach from a basketball league described the difficulty in getting volunteer coaches and the anticipated strain that mandating attendance at preseason clinics would put on the league:

The [league] is trying to get more strict on making sure that coaches go to coaches’ clinics, but they haven’t really enforced that policy because it is so hard to find coaches to volunteer. You know, last year I was on the board, and we were scrambling around on the day of try-outs, trying to find coaches.

One coach summed up the dilemma, “Everybody agrees that [coaching education] is important. But it takes time from board members and the coaches. It is enough of a demand getting the coaches to volunteer to coach anyway. So it’s tough.”

Retention was also an important issue the coaches raised. One offered:

You get some coaches [who] love it and stay. And you get coaches who are discouraged by the time element, or whatever. What applies to the kids has to apply to the coaches: If the kids don’t have fun, they won’t stay. I think the coach, it’s the same thing. If they have fun, they’ll be back.

Transient Nature of Leadership. Volunteerism is at the core of coaching positions in most youth sports programs as well as league administrators. As such, a lack of continuity was noted as a barrier to implementing consistent coaching preparation opportunities. As one coach described, “Every year the faces change. And there is very little continuity. And as a result, I don’t think there is a cohesive effort to mentor coaches, to train coaches, to deal with all the things we’ve been talking about.”

Inconsistency of Current Practice. The leagues varied considerably in formal preparation opportunities for volunteer coaches, and coaches expressed a noticeable inconsistency with respect to league practices and the way coaching education was addressed. Expectations ranged from participation in the American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO), which mandated coach licensing at several development levels, to a Little League baseball program, which encouraged but didn’t require a safety workshop for its volunteers. Several described policies that mandated but did not enforce attendance at coaching clinics; as a result, a coach could miss the mandatory training and still be allowed to coach. Many reported participating in sport-specific clinics in which coaches learned drills and basic fundamentals from high school or college coaches as well as former professional players.

Concerns With Quality of Education. The quality and focus of workshops and clinics can be a deterrent for some coaches. Several from leagues with mandatory clinics reported the frustration of repeating clinic material from year to year or clinic facilitators who did not understand (or focus their clinics on) the age group the coach needed to know. One coach offered, “… I know I didn’t get trained diddly in the clinic. It didn’t get to the heart of what I need to know.” A recommended remedy is to develop workshops on meaningful and interesting topics. Another coach discussed the need to choose facilitators who can instruct and model desirable age-group coach attributes.

[Leagues] bring in college coaches and high school coaches who are geared where they have to win. It’s not really the goal of [our league], from my perspective. So I want to teach kids fundamentals. I want to teach kids how to interact with people, be team players… I don’t really see [clinical facilitators] stressing fundamentals, teamwork.

Coaching Education Format Recommendations

Examining the direct quotes from coaches in response to Questions 5 and 6 in Table 1 led to various recommendations regarding coaching education and certification. Coaches also offered rectifications for some of the previously mentioned concerns that could lead to greater acceptance of and involvement in mandatory certification programs. Not surprisingly, rectifications for improving coaches’ attitudes about the value of educational opportunities centered largely on the relevancy of the content at various levels and the format with which the opportunities are offered.

Formal Versus Informal Methods. Coaches mentioned the viability of using sources or education forms other than clinics or workshops to train beginning coaches.
They mentioned informal approaches, including the availability of such resources as books, Web sites, and newsletters that could include coaching tips, drills, and instruction. They believed that leagues (boards) could easily furnish resources or links to resources to help volunteers improve their coaching effectiveness.

**Mentoring.** Several coaches discussed a lack of training or mentorship as a problematic aspect of their first coaching experiences. To a large degree, coaches felt they were on their own when it came to teaching rules and game strategies, organizing effective practices, recruiting others to help, and the like. Some coaches discussed a need for leagues to step up and provide guidance or to pair new coaches with knowledgeable veterans. Some participants mentioned the possibility of veteran coaches stepping in to help other new coaches when they struggle, but according to most who were interviewed this is not typically the case. One coach discussed this lack of structured mentoring as follows: “My first year I was blessed. I just happened to have a parent who coached for 10 years and really knew a lot about baseball. … hopefully you are lucky to get someone to teach you.”

Coaches recommended mentoring relationships in which a veteran coach—with demonstrated experience and expertise—would serve as a resource to a novice coach. As discussed earlier, a possible roadblock to mentorship was the lack of continuity with board members and coaches from year to year. As a result, some coaches felt a mentoring system would be difficult to maintain.

**Recurring Training.** Coaches unanimously felt that a one-time, beginning-of-the-year clinic or workshop format was not adequate. Recommendations included breaking up an all-day clinic into several 90-min to 2-hr workshops or miniclinics, perhaps throughout the season. One coach summarized:

> Education of coaches, one time at the beginning of the year, is not adequate. It has to be… an ongoing kind of thing. If you are going to make that commitment, maybe you’ll show up four times, to go over, one time offense, one time defense, one time teamwork, that sort of thing. [Others shook their heads in agreement].

Another coach reflected that the “beginning of the season was tough, but it got much better. It took the first half of the year to get my oars in the water and figure how to do it.” Multiple opportunities may facilitate this process.

**Roundtable Discussions.** In addition, many participants expressed that they looked for opportunities to get together with other coaches to discuss their coaching behaviors (what tends to work, what has not worked). Clearly, coaches believed they could learn from each other; several discussed a roundtable format in which coaches could gather to discuss a specific topic. For example, a participant offered:

> Even if you had 8 to 10 [coaches], something like this [referring to the focus group], where you could talk about, “Hey, what do you do when you start coaching basketball?” You could have an informal session where coaches share what they do in practice, what they say to parents at the first meeting. That would help.

Such discussions could include the sharing of drills and other technical aspects of the game. One basketball coach reflected, “Maybe coaches getting together and saying, ‘Oh, here’s an offense that will work with third graders,’ or whatever.” Another stated:

> I’m not enticed to attend clinics about basics. The only thing that would entice me is a group of coaches who have the same common coaching level and compare things that have worked… A college coach [as a guest speaker] can’t help you with that.

This format could be beneficial, because the coaches would be more involved with the process.

**Hands-on** Workshops. Several coaches recommended offering practical workshops that allow them to get “hands-on” experience implementing strategies, running drills, and learning the technically appropriate methods of performing skills in the sport. Such sessions could include “live” instruction in which veteran coaches demonstrate actual drills with kids.

**Age-Specific and Level-Specific Content.** Specifically, some coaches mentioned the need to understand different developmental levels (“… understanding what kids’ lives are like at that age”); teaching skills, tactics, or strategies for different ages and skill levels; and building self-esteem and confidence. For example, AYSO has developed and implemented a progressive certification program that provides training specific to the level of children or adolescents (age and skill level) with which the coach will be working. As the coach moves up in level, the training requirements increase. One coach shared that he would benefit most “… if they [offered] a clinic that was division-specific. Coaching 8- and 9-year-olds is going to be completely different than coaching 11- and 12-year-olds.”

**Opinions Regarding the Need for and Regulation of Parental Codes of Conduct**

Coaches were asked if their leagues had a code of conduct to enforce parental behavior at practices and
games. While the terminology differed from “code” to “statement” to “pledge,” most leagues addressed parental expectations in some form. The manner in which these expectations were carried out, however, varied, even within the same league. Some coaches reported policies, such as a newly implemented “Kids Zone” in AYSO, in which parents were required to “sign a form that they will abide by rules and regulations while they are on school grounds.” Most of the coaches described league policies that included issuing a statement within the league handbook that described appropriate and inappropriate behavior but indicated that this statement was not signed by parents. While nearly every coach recognized the need to address parental behavior, opinions varied considerably with respect to the effectiveness and enforcement of required codes of conduct.

**Support for Parental Codes.** Overwhelmingly, the coaches believed that parental behavior was a serious problem at youth sport events and something that needed to be addressed. One veteran Little League coach remarked that “…the potential for somebody to get hurt or killed at a sporting event everywhere in this nation is there at every level.” When queried about why parental behavior has become such a high profile issue, a coach remarked that:

> …there are some coaches and some parents who think that’s their job to get on the officials. ‘That’s my job. That’s what I’m supposed to do.’ It’s almost like that is their mindset. [Other participants laugh.] Their mindset has to be changed. It’s worse; it’s deteriorating, because people, you know, ‘Hey, I’m yelling, it’s not enough, so I have to get even more vocal and obnoxious.’ It becomes a way of life and they get comfortable with it. Then they take it to the next level.

Many coaches indicated that a written, signed code would provide the leagues more leverage to deal with unruly behavior by parents, while others did not think a signed form would make a significant difference. Coaches’ comments supporting a signed code included statements such as, “We don’t have any accountability for the parents right now,” and:

> …if you were to tell parents that their child would not be able to play because of their behavior, they would button their lip. They would do it. But if you don’t have the grounds, something behind it, then what do you do? You are leaning on their common sense, even though you can see they have none.

Coaches likened a signed code to other common parental permission information, such as those required for school events or even background checks for coaches. One coach commented, “Hey, we have to get all the medical information and everything from them anyway. That’s just part of it.”

Some coaches believed that a code could make expectations clear about parental behaviors at practices and games. According to the participants, parents need to be instructed not to yell at referees or other coaches and to refrain from coaching their children from the sideline. For instance, one coach referred to the fact that “…you have to explain about the confusion. It’s either you or us [the coaches], and it can’t be both.” Finally, several coaches set ground rules with parents with respect to discussing issues of playing time and such away from the children. One basketball coach identified two ground rules for parents in this regard:

**Number 1: The 24-hour rule.** If you have a gripe or complaint with something I’m doing, you call me 24 hours afterward. You don’t speak with me before the game, not during the game, not after the game.

**Number 2: Do not speak to me about playing time or with the position you want your kids to play…have the child speak to me.**

Another coach said simply, “If there is anything you [the parent] want to say to me, keep it until after the game and away from the kids.”

**Inadequacy of Code.** Many of the coaches did not believe that a signed code of conduct by parents, or even coaches, would be an effective tool in its own right. One common concern among the coaches was that the parents most likely to exhibit problems would behave in an inappropriate manner whether or not they signed a code. One coach shared this sentiment by saying, “I don’t think a code of conduct is going to do too much, because a parent who is going to be that belligerent and that abusive, they’ll sign it. Then they’ll still be abusive.” Another coach warned that signing a code “…doesn’t mean it’ll do anything. They’ll just gloss over the paper and, ‘If I have to sign it, I’ll sign it.’” One coach simply said, “I don’t think a piece of paper is going to stop somebody from killing somebody.” Importantly, one long-time coach argued that parents:

> …need to do more than just sign it. Must understand it. Live it. Did you really think about that, enough to change? Did you really understand it? The whole thing is, hopefully, this makes you stop and think before you act. That’s the key.
Coaches who believed a minority of youth sport parents caused the majority of the problems—especially the high-profile cases—also questioned the efficacy of signed codes of conduct. A basketball coach offered that:

I think the majority of the parents are good. It's the minority of parents who create the problems, but it's a big issue, 'cause there are a lot of kids around to see it. I think it is going to turn a lot of parents off to have to sign it. There are a lot of good parents out there. It's like the 0–5% of parents [who] are whacko.

Another coach followed up with, “Unfortunately, even though it's the 0–5%, you have to experience that 0–5% to find out who they are.” With such parents, one coach suggested, a visible zero tolerance policy would be more effective than a signed code. Finally, a Pop Warner football coach was against a signed code of conduct, saying that, “Everybody makes mistakes. It's almost an insult for some of these parents [who] are so giving and caring…. Give them all the benefits of the doubt before you start to discipline.” This concern coupled with enforcement problems in the eyes of one coach and former Little League board member, who said:

Here’s the problem I see with that [a code]. I agree that there are parents out there [who] you really need to recalibrate a little bit. Having them sign a form, yeah at first looks real good. But let’s follow a scenario through, okay. Everybody signs it, they come before a board, the board says, “You’re suspended for a day.” You would have to ensure that that is applied unilaterally across the board [italics added to represent participant emphasis]. What could happen is that, “Well, you got me, I was at the Single A game, and you shouldn’t use profanity or smoke on the field. Well, why did you get mad at me and not him?” This concern coupled with enforcement problems in the eyes of one coach and former Little League board member, who said:

Coaches overwhelmingly believed that their own behavior sets the tone for the conduct of the parents and athletes on their team and that coaches should be responsible for acting in a manner consistent with the expected behavior of spectators. The participants believed that coaches set a precedent with their own conduct, such as excessive yelling from the bench and intimidating or screaming at officials. One soccer coach claimed that, “If coaches act appropriately, parents will probably follow,” echoing the opinion of a basketball coach from another session, who indicated, “We have to be a model. Whether you like it or not, you have to. You know, because those kids are going to behave the way you behave.” One Little League coach summed it up succinctly by indicating that the key is “…leading by example. That is the foundation for everything we do in youth sports.”

**Recommended Behaviors for a Parental Code of Conduct.** Coaches were asked to identify the behaviors they believed ought to be regulated by youth sport leagues. The participants in each group concurred that prohibited behaviors should include the use of profanity or derogatory comments toward coaches, officials, or players; smoking in the general area of youth sport events; the use of alcohol or other illegal substances; and general yelling and screaming in a negative manner. The behaviors identified as being encouraged included the use of only positive remarks or cheers from the sideline and the practice of parents being responsible for their behavior and the behavior of their guests.

**Enforcement of Parental Expectations.** Finally, the coaches were asked to recommend how to enforce parental codes of conduct or expectations of parental behaviors. One general suggestion was interleague consistency (i.e., behaviors regulated in soccer, basketball, baseball, etc.) so that “parents can’t go from one place to another. As it is, it’s not like that.” The most commonly recommended methods of enforcement of parental conduct are discussed below.

The coaches largely agreed that board members, individually and as a group, should take an active role in controlling parental behavior. Several recommended having board members regularly visit events to monitor what occurs at both practices and games. Coaches also wanted support from board members when addressing inappropriate parents on their own, such as the basketball coach who stated that it would be easier to confront unruly parents with board support “so the onus wasn’t only on me.” One veteran coach and former board member stated:

I think you could sift most [unruly parents] out by saying, “Come here,” bring ‘em to the side. Sometime you bring them up in a public setting and they get all defensive. Bring ‘em aside [and tell them], “you are going outside the extreme. Don’t go outside the extreme.”

The coaches agreed that penalties imposed by boards could include single game suspensions for a first major offense and permanent suspensions for recurring poor behavior. Regardless of the form of punishment, coaches believed the league needed a policy that could be enforced consistently. As one coach stated:
...if you’re going to do anything, then you have to have the teeth to stand up to what you say you’re going to do. So if you don’t have a provision, then you better put one in, because when you say something, you have to stand by it.

As mentioned earlier, the participants emphasized that coaches could and should regulate parents’ behavior and needed training to resolve a situation before it got out of hand. As opposed to board involvement with every infraction, coaches believed it would be effective to pull the parents aside and address issues as they arose. Coaches also remarked that penalties issued to a coach or team during a game, similar to a yellow/red card in soccer, as a result of unruly parents or spectators would make parents think twice about their behavior. One soccer coach argued, “Realistically, if the parent knows the coach is going to be impacted, which in turn is going to impact the performance [of the team], that is the only real outlet.” A Little League coach offered, “It has to be controlled by your leadership, and your leadership is the manager and coach. Those parents will react to however they demand.” Finally, coaches expressed a clear understanding of how their behavior impacted the environment at youth sport contests. Several expressed their concerns over coaches who, as one softball coach described, signed a (coaching) code of conduct, but “once they’re on that playing field, they forget everything but winning and losing.”

As an alternative to signed code-of-conduct forms, the focus group attendees also discussed the mandatory parental sportsmanship training sessions adopted by recreation programs in some cities. The recommended structure of such training varied among the coaches, ranging from an informal talk with parents just prior to the first game (“You ask all the parents to come over here, and sit and listen to how they will conduct themselves.”) to the mandated viewing of a sportsmanship video or training session. Several coaches recommended that parents view a film of parental behaviors that are not considered appropriate, such as screaming or coaching from the sidelines. One coach recommended distributing a:

…film of irate parents, and just how silly they look. If you could get it on film, put it on a video, and just pass it out and have the parents watch it before their kids play. I think if they actually sat there and saw how they reacted, I think they would be embarrassed.

The only drawback of mandating parental attendance at such sessions, offered some coaches, was that it could exclude children from participating if their parents were unable or unwilling to attend. Several coaches at one focus group agreed with a fellow participant, who stated:

I would just think, the whole idea I got into coaching youth sports is to give them [children] opportunities to develop self-esteem that they don’t get at home or school or what not. And you are going to be excluding kids, ‘cause then you are going to have parents who say, “Well I’m not going to do that.” Well, guess what? Johnny doesn’t get to play. That defeats the whole purpose of youth sports, to me.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to determine the opinions of volunteer youth sport coaches toward coaching preparation and education as well as the regulating parental behaviors at youth sport events. Five focus group sessions resulted in four major themes, namely, the broad areas of recommended coaching education content areas, barriers to offering coaching education, preferred coaching education format recommendations, and opinions regarding the need for and efficacy of parental codes of conduct.

It is inherently difficult to make generalizations in focus group research because of the relatively small sample size and sampling techniques that are dictated by the participants’ willingness to join a focus group. In other words, the coaches who agreed to participate in the focus groups likely had experiences or biases such that they were sufficiently concerned with youth sport coaching issues, especially in the manner in which coaches are prepared.

Another point of caution is that the sample consisted predominantly of male coaches. While a conscious and deliberate effort was made to contact and invite female coaches to participate, only 3 participated in the study. Two primary reasons are likely responsible for this occurrence. Most importantly, by the coaches’ own reports, most of the volunteer coaches in the leagues from which the sample was taken—including softball—were male coaches. Therefore, the ratio of men to women in this study is likely similar to the ratio of male and female coaches within the leagues represented. At the same time, because the coaches in our sample were also parents, perhaps the roles and activities traditionally performed by the mother, including transporting other children to evening activities or practices, precluded more women to commit to an evening focus group session. It is worth noting here, however, that the coaches who were present for the meetings represented 14 male and 11 female teams, respectively; therefore, concerns regarding coaching both boys and girls were addressed despite the lack of female coaches present.
Coaches in the current study overwhelmingly supported coaching education, despite the concern for recruiting and retaining volunteer coaches and the challenges of requiring more time from volunteers. The participants provided several recommendations to rectify the problems associated with mandating attendance at education or certification programs, most of which centered on the format and content of coaching education. The coaches recommended several education content areas they felt were the greatest areas of concern in coaching children. These encompassed three defining themes: pedagogical, psychological, and managerial aspects of coaching. Importantly, these areas generally included the eight domains of standards for athletic coaches (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 1995).

Although several current education programs include training in each of these areas, it is likely that the format of that training is less than ideal. While recognizing the value of formal coaching education (i.e., classes), participants also recommended less formal approaches to preparation, such as mentoring between veteran and novice coaches, roundtable discussions in which coaches have an opportunity to discuss and brainstorm on practices, drills, or approaches that have worked well for them, and the availability of resources on Web sites or in handbooks. Incorporating some of these approaches into formal coaching education programs would likely enhance the interest and utility of the standardized content used in most current programs. While these structural changes (which include both format and content) may provide serious challenges to coaching education bodies, the quality of coaching would improve as a result.

With respect to regulating parental behavior at youth sport events through required codes of conduct, coaches overwhelmingly supported the need to control parental behavior but differed in opinion on the effectiveness of a signed code. While many believed a code would give a league more leverage in educating and/or removing disruptive or unruly parents, many suggested that parents naturally inclined to be aggressive would be so whether or not they signed a written document. The participants cautioned that the code is necessary for only a minority of parents but that minority could potentially present serious problems at practices and games. Furthermore, the coaches were in clear agreement that their behavior was closely related to the behavior of their players and their players’ parents at games, and they believed they needed to model appropriate conduct in all situations. In addition, the coaches made the connection between league board member presence at practices and games and the efficacy of parental codes of conduct.

Empirical research on coaches’ perspectives is sparse, so comparisons to past research are limited. Several comparisons, however, can be made with individual interviews conducted by McCallister et al. (2000), in which coaches reported inconsistent and inadequate training to prepare them for the role of youth sport coach and noted dealing with parents the greatest source of stress in youth sports. Other problematic aspects of volunteer coaching included a perceived emphasis on winning, parental behavior at games, unrealistic perceptions of parents toward their children’s skill levels, and the need to serve in other roles than that of a technical coach (i.e., a surrogate parent, a role model). Coaches in the current investigation reported similar areas of difficulty and unpreparedness, including negative parental behaviors, a lack of mentorship, pedagogical aspects of working with children, and concerns with appropriate and legal boundaries of working with children.

Research Implications, Future Directions, and Programmatic Recommendations

The implications of these findings are far-reaching, especially amid the many current efforts on reforming youth sport programs to maximize their benefits to children. Coaching education that is carefully designed to meet the specific needs of volunteer coaches is likely to improve coach recruitment and retention. Coaches who are educated on developmentally appropriate coaching practices and are clear about their leagues’ and their personal coaching philosophies, will be more adept at providing an environment that encourages children’s enjoyment and continued participation in competitive sports. In addition, coaches prepared to deal with over-involved parents may be more likely to diffuse potentially dangerous situations at sporting events.

One important area of future youth sport programming is related to the lack of consistency within and among leagues in preparing coaches and regulating parental and spectator misconduct. The coaches in the current study reported differing expectations in the format, content, and regulation of coaching preparation, as well as the manner in which parental and spectator behavior was regulated. The National Alliance of Youth Sports has urged all communities to appoint a youth sports supervisor, similar in scope to a school board leader, who would be responsible for overseeing all league policies regarding such issues. The results of the current study reflect the need for more consistency among and between leagues of varying sports to ensure that all coaches and parents involved in youth sports within a single community are uniformly clear on the expectations and practices of that setting, regardless of the sport or level. Additional programmatic recommendations regarding the implementation of coaching and parental education are presented in Table 2.

Future research in this area should encompass parental perceptions of the adequacy of coaching prepa-
ration and the areas parents believe to be the most important for coaches’ training. Because many coaches in the current study quickly pointed out problems associated with parental behavior and involvement, it would be beneficial to investigate the perceptions of youth sport parents and the difficulties accompanying them in their role in youth sports. In addition, league and district administrators’ perspectives may add valuable content toward the feasibility of implementing these recommendations. Another important area of research is to determine the effectiveness of current format requirements compared to less formal methods of preparing coaches, such as through league mentorship opportunities and discussion sessions among veteran and beginning coaches.

In conclusion, volunteer coaches play a vital role in providing a healthy, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate youth sport experience for children. Just as youth sport coaches accept a large responsibility in ensuring such an experience for children, the leagues in which they serve have an equally important responsibility in ensuring that coaches are prepared and able to do so. While any effort to train and educate coaches is commendable, youth sport administrators should structure and offer programs that encompass the concerns, experiences, and recommendations of those they wish to serve.

References


**Table 2. Recommendation for coaching and parental education efforts**

1. Incorporate NASPE’s (National Association for Sport and Physical Education) standards for athletic coaches into content that encompasses issues specific to communities, leagues, sports, etc.
2. Integrate alternate formats (e.g., round tables) into existing formal education programs that empower coaches and encourage them to engage in discussions of approaches that they have taken in past situations.
3. Establish programs within leagues that foster mentoring relationships between novice and competent, experienced coaches.
4. Promote consistency between and among leagues on policies regarding coaching preparation expectations and requirements.
5. Establish consistency between and among leagues of varying sports and levels on policies regarding the acceptable behavior and regulation of parents and other spectators at youth sport events.
6. Increase board member presence at practices and games.
7. Offer frequent educational opportunities throughout the season/year.
8. Develop coaching education content that is consistent with the level, age, and gender of the youth sport participants.
9. Increase community/university collaboration in determining and implementing appropriate programmatic policies.
10. Limit behaviors listed on parental codes of conduct to those that are observable and allow for objective enforcement of those codes.


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