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Translating research to practice: Understanding and mitigating parental influence on youth sport specialization

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The purpose of this review of literature was to examine the recent findings regarding the role that parental pressure and influence plays in the sport specialization process and to make literature based, practical recommendations to young athletes, parents, and trainers and coaches. Findings revealed that parents had significant influence on young athletes and many engaged in actions such as hiring sport specific coaches and trainers in hopes of increasing their child's chances of playing at higher levels, furthermore specialization at a young age can increase likelihood of fatigue, burnout, and sport based repetitive injuries. As a result of the findings, we make the following recommendations: 1) Coaches and administrators should educate parents and guardians of realistic likelihood of their young athlete's ascension to the highest levels of sport 2) Physicians and trainers should counsel on the repetitive injury risks of sport specialization and carefully and systematically monitor athletes who are highly specialized 3) Coaches and administrators should be properly educated and when possible credentialed through licensing bodies in order to make them aware of the inherent risks and potential negatives associated with youth sport specialization.

Keywords: Youth sport, sport specialization, burnout, parental involvement

Introduction

Sport specialization in youth athletes has been associated with increased likelihood of overuse injuries, lowered levels of enjoyment, and burnout (Bell, Post, Biese, Bay & Valovich, 2018; DiFiori *et al.*, 2014; Jayanthi, Pinkham, Dugas, Patrick & LaBella, 2012; Malina, 2010) ^[1, 2, 5, 7]. Sport specialization is defined as intensive training focused on one sport (Jayanthi, Pinkham, Dugas, Patrick & LaBella, 2012) ^[5]. Data suggests that early sport specialization puts young athletes at risk for mental issues and also discourages free play and development (LaPrade *et al.*, 2016) ^[6]. These risks are assumed while the effects of sport specialization on desired athletic success remain largely unknown (Jayanthi, Pinkham, Dugas, Patrick & LaBella, 2013; LaPrade *et al.*, 2016) ^[6]. As sport participation and sport specialization in the U.S. grows, understanding causes and patterns of injury while working to prevent those injuries has become more important. With this in mind, Padaki, Ahmad, Hodgins, Kovacevic, Lynch, and Popkin (2017) ^[11] sought to answer the question: What is the role that parental influence plays in the sport specialization of youth athletes?

Research Approach

Padaki *et al.* (2017) ^[11] employed a two-part survey created by an interdisciplinary team of surgeons, coaches, parents, athletic trainers, and sport academy instructors. The survey was administered to 211 parents of youth sports athletes being treated at the Columbia University Medical Center and received a 95.3% response rate. Parents were asked to answer demographic questions regarding their own sex, athlete's sex, athlete's age, overuse injury history, surgical history, athlete's favorite sport, and levels of specialization. Section two focused on parental influence on specialization with questions regarding parent's aspirations for highest level of play, enjoyment of child, resource commitment, and direct parental pressure. Questions were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale and Chi-square tests were employed to measure frequency of responses between cohorts of variables such as specialization levels, injury history, and levels of training.

Research Findings

Padaki *et al.* (2017) [11] found that the proposed hypothesis of parents generating both direct and indirect pressures on specialized athletes is accurate. Of the 201 responses, 72% of parents stated their children had experienced a sports-related injury. 37% of athletes with an injury history had engaged in elite level coaching instruction, while only 7.1% of those without injury had had engaged in the same level of instruction. 27.9% of parents had hired a personal trainer for their children while 77.1% had not. Parents who had hired a personal trainer aspired for their children to play at the collegiate or professional level at a rate of 74.5%, while 49.3% of parents with no personal trainer had the same aspirations. Finally, parents of highly and moderately specialized athletes were more likely to directly influence the specialization of their child.

Application of findings to practice

This study reveals novel insight into pressures that are placed on children to specialize in a single sport. Significant external influences are placed on specialized athletes directly from parents or coaches. Much of this pressure centers around the idea that specialized youth athletes will gain the knowledge and skills necessary in order to reach the collegiate or professional sports ranks. However, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (2018) [9] reports that a minute percentage of high school athletes move on to the intercollegiate level of play. The NCAA reports that only 2.7% of high school football players go on to compete at the NCAA Division I level; only 0.7% of male high school volleyball players move on to Division I, and only 1% of male high school basketball players continue their careers at the highest level of the NCAA.

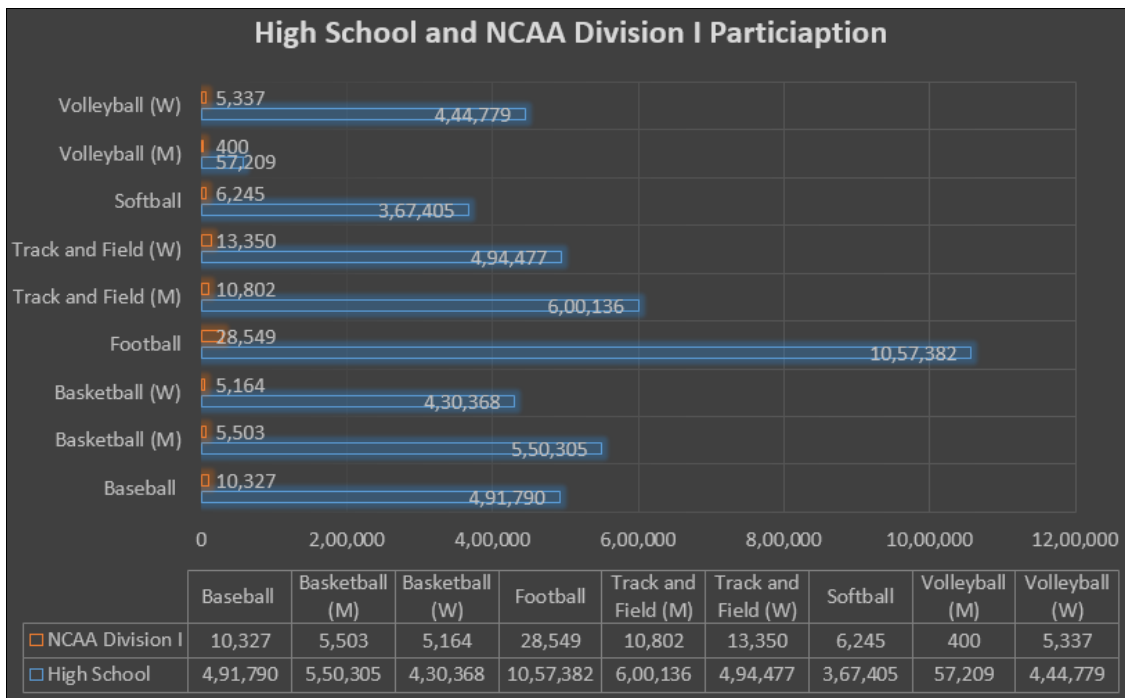


Fig 1: Comparison of High School and NCAA Division I Participation

When moving from the major college to the professional ranks, the numbers become even more dismal. Only 0.9% of NCAA women’s basketball players move on to the professional leagues; 1.6% of football players move into the NFL or similar leagues; only 1.2% of collegiate men’s basketball players go on to play professionally. While this study finds that aspirations of high level athletic success may drive parents to encourage sport specialization, the numbers from other sources show those aspirations to be delusional in the vast majority of cases. Coaches, teachers, and administrators should work together to help parents and young athletes develop realistic goals and expectations. Presenting parents with reality may encourage them to adjust behaviors forged by unrealistic and unlikely expectations of future, pinnacle level athletic success.

Also revealed in this study is the increased risk of injury that comes with hiring personal trainers and coaches. Athletes that are specialized and training with personal training and coaches are more likely to develop issues such as stress fractures, tendinitis, and ACL tears (Myer *et al.*, 2016) [8]. Parents must be mindful of the influence that they have over young athletes regarding sport specialization and also

understand the increased risks of significant physical injury that are associated with specialization, particularly at a young age. Physicians and other health care professionals should do what they can in order to educate parents and youth athletes on the inherent risks of sport specialization so that parents and athletes can make informed decisions. Employing collaborative communication skills (Ha & Longnecker, 2010) [4] can allow health care professionals to efficiently and effectively communicate concerns and recommendations to parents and young athletes who may be considering or already employing sport specific, high-level trainers. Additionally, if after a thorough discussion of the risks a parent still chooses to enroll their children in specialized training, those children should be carefully monitored for early indicators of overuse injuries or declines in performance due to overtraining (Myer *et al.*, 2016) [8].

Finally, administrators, coaches, and trainers should be properly educated and trained to deal with the issue of parental pressure to specialize. The National Council for Accreditation of Coaching Education (2011) [10] reports that less than 5% of youth sport coaches engage in any relevant training prior to coaching a youth sport. Training and

educational modules which inform coaches and trainers on the prevalence and dangers of sport specialization can help them to identify potentially dangerous situations as well as feel empowered by knowledge to speak with parents regarding their concerns. By requiring coaching education and training programs, youth sport administrators can gain the necessary knowledge and skills to manage their programs, coaches, and parental stakeholders in ways that diminish burnout and attrition rates and reduce risk of injury.

Conclusion

In the last decade, a significant amount of effort has been devoted to analyzing the growing phenomenon of youth sports specialization in an attempt to understand the causes and effects of this trend. Padaki *et al.* (2017) ^[11] find that parents can apply a significant amount of direct and indirect pressure on youth athletes to specialize. As a result of this finding, it is recommended that healthcare professionals, parents, young athletes, and youth sport administrators work together in order to maximize education and understanding regarding the true risks and potential benefits of youth sport specialization. However, while research findings and national bodies such as the NCAA and NCACE continue to advocate for diversity of training and sports participation, the message is not being received or appreciated in large numbers of parents and youth sport trainers. All stakeholders must work together in order to mitigate the risks and maximize the potential good of youth sport participation and development.

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