
Coaches and Referees' Perspectives of Sideline Behaviour in Children's Team Sports: A Cross-sectional Study

Simon Walters¹, Philip Schluter^{2, 3, 4}, Daniel Stamp⁵, Rex Thomson⁵, Deborah Payne⁶

1. AUT University, Sports Performance Research Institute, Auckland, New Zealand
2. AUT University, School of Public Health & Psychosocial Studies, Auckland, New Zealand
3. The University of Queensland, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Australia
4. University of Canterbury, School of Public Health, Christchurch, New Zealand
5. Unitec Institute of Technology, Department of Sport, Auckland, New Zealand
6. AUT University, School of Health Care Practices, Auckland, New Zealand

Correspondence with:

Simon Walters

simon.walters@aut.ac.nz

School of Sport and Recreation

AUT University

Private Bag 92006

Auckland 1020

New Zealand

International Journal of Sport Management Recreation & Tourism, Vol.23, p.51-74, 2016

© 2016 I.J.S.Ma.R.T. All rights reserved. ISSN: 1791-874X

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/>

DOI: 10.5199/ijsmart-1791-874X-23c

Coaches and Referees' Perspectives of Sideline Behaviour in Children's Team Sports: A Cross-sectional Study

Abstract

This study arose from media and sporting organisations' concerns in New Zealand about the sideline behaviour of adults at children's team sporting events. The aim of the study was to measure and elicit the perspectives of coaches and referees of adult behaviour at children's games. The descriptive cross-sectional study utilised an electronic survey of coaches and referees of organised children's sport (ages 6-11 years) in a large metropolitan region of New Zealand. The survey contained both closed and open-ended questions drawing upon quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques. The findings indicated significant differences in perception of sideline behaviour between referees and coaches; and between male and female participants. The majority of respondents expressed concern about sideline behaviour. Due to the paucity of research exploring referees' perspectives of organised children's sport, we recommend that future studies of sideline behaviour also consider the value of referees' perspectives. We also suggest that future studies examine the potential influence of gender as a moderator of sideline behaviour.

Keywords: children, sport, sideline behavior, referee, coach

Coaches and Referees' Perspectives of Sideline Behaviour in Children's Team Sports: A Cross-sectional Study

Introduction

Concerns have been expressed in New Zealand about the behaviour of adults at children's sporting events both in the media (for recent examples see Radio New Zealand 2015, and New Zealand Herald, 2013), and in the academic literature (for examples refer to Kidman, McKenzie, & McKenzie, 1999; Walters, Schluter, Oldham, Thomson, & Payne, 2012). These studies mirror concerns expressed internationally, such as in the United States (US) (Blom & Drane, 2008), Canada (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehen, & Wall, 2008), and in Australia (Elliott & Drummond, 2015). Sporting organisations have also attempted to deal with the issue, with varying degrees of success. Possibly the best known of these interventions is the English Football Association (FA) Respect program (English FA, 2016). Other interventions or initiatives designed to raise adult awareness of the implications of their behaviour include the work of the Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA) in the US (Positive Coaching Alliance, 2016); Positive Coaching Scotland, which is based on the work of the PCA (Positive Coaching Scotland, 2016); and in New Zealand the recent Sport New Zealand funded Good Sports programme (Active Auckland Sport and Recreation, 2016).

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship and perspective of coaches in relation to sideline behaviour at children's organised sporting events; for examples see Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi (2006); Jowett and Cramer (2010); and Keegan, Harwood, Spray and Lavalley (2009). Coaches have long been identified as playing an important role in nurturing a child's enjoyment of sport (Smoll & Smith, 2006), and it is therefore important that any study examining sideline behaviour should take into account the perspective of coaches. However, the perspective of referees has been largely ignored. This omission is curious as referees have a unique and privileged role to comment on adult spectator/coach behaviour. The lack of studies that have examined referees' perspectives is perhaps not surprising, as the volunteer role of referee in children's team sports is often shared by coaches and/or parents; it is often not a specialised role. However, as sports organisations commonly express concern about the verbal and sometimes physical abuse that is aimed at referees by coaches, spectators and parents (for an example see English Football Association, 2016), it seems important

that the perspective of volunteer referees should also be considered. Research that has examined the role of referees has tended to focus primarily on adult sport (for examples see Ackery, Tator, & Snider, 2012; Chiafullo, 1998; Rayner, Webb, & Webb, 2016), and/or on the perspectives of athletes, coaches, or parents (Anshel & Delaney, 2001; Rainey, Santilli, & Fallon, 1992). The studies drawing upon referees' perspectives have largely focused on elite or higher level sport as opposed to children's sport (Kaissidis-Rodafinos, Anshel, & Sideridis, 1998; Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Wolfson & Neave, 2007).

Referee perspective is important, as abuse of officials has been identified as a key cause of stress for referees (Kaissidis & Anshel, 1993). The study by Kaissidis and Anshel compared the perspectives of adolescent and adult basketball referees on their perceived sources of acute stress. Among the sources of stress that ranked highest was verbal abuse by coaches with adolescent referees being found to be significantly more susceptible to stress than their adult counterparts.

This study represents one component of a wider study that explored the effects of adult behaviour on children participating in the organised team sports of rugby union, netball, football (soccer), and touch rugby.

Objectives and Hypotheses

The four team sports selected for this study were rugby union, netball, association football, and touch rugby. Rugby union was included as it is commonly portrayed as New Zealand's national sport and major passion (Thomson, 1988), the significance of which has been examined in relation to males' sense of identity (Pringle, 2001). Netball was included as it is New Zealand's most popular team sport for females, and football and touch rugby also have high participation rates for children (Sport New Zealand, 2010). The objective of this study was to measure and elicit the views of both coaches and referees involved in these four sports on the nature and effect of adult sideline behaviour. Specifically, we were interested in testing the effects of gender, role (coach or referee), and sport on:

- 1) the reporting of frequency of perceived inappropriate parental behaviour;
- 2) the reporting of ongoing concerns with parental behaviour.

Open-ended questions were included to elicit more in-depth qualitative data related to the nature of behaviour observed, and provide insight into any concerned participants' perspectives of steps that could be taken to improve behaviour at children's sporting events.

Based on the findings of a previous New Zealand study (Walters et al., 2012), it is hypothesised that a sport of national significance (rugby union) will create a context that elicits greater reported levels of perceived inappropriate sideline behaviour than the other popular team sports. Second, drawing upon a study related to gender stereotyping (Horn, Lox, & Labrador, 2006), with boys being found to be subjected to higher levels of negative criticism than girls due to higher expectations, we hypothesise that there would be lower reported frequencies of inappropriate behaviour for the predominantly female sport of netball, than the other three team sports. Finally, we hypothesise that participants in a referee role would report higher rates of inappropriate behaviour than coaches. Although there is limited evidence of studies that have examined the perspectives of referees involved in children's sport, evidence that does exist suggests that sideline behaviour can be a source of stress (Kaissidis & Anshel, 1993) and drop-out (English FA, 2016) for referees. As a result, it is suggested that referees would demonstrate greater awareness than coaches of inappropriate sideline behaviour.

Methodology

Sample

The target population were coaches and referees of organised children's (ages 6 to 11 years) team sport within one metropolitan region in New Zealand. Team sports included were: rugby union, touch rugby, netball, and soccer. Inclusion criteria included adults aged 16 years and over who had coached or refereed one of the four team sports for children in this age group.

Questionnaire

This study utilised a questionnaire that contained both open-ended and closed questions to measure and elicit referee and coach perspectives of sideline behaviour. To improve response rates, the number of questions was limited to ten, and included eight closed questions and two open questions.

Design

This was a two stage cross-sectional descriptive study. Stage 1 selected sports organisations representative of the four team sports, stage 2 invited all eligible coaches and referees to participate.

Development and design

Preliminary conversations with sports organisations revealed that e-mail addresses were the only contact details a number of these organisations had for their

coaches and referees, which effectively ruled out the use of a postal questionnaire. Therefore, an electronic survey was the most convenient, practical and cost effective method. The instrument utilised an electronic survey software package, SelectSurveyASP Advanced version 8.1.5 (ClassAppsCom ©2004).

A search of the literature revealed no suitable instrument to examine what we were specifically interested in, and we were compelled to develop and pilot our own. As it has been suggested that the length of a questionnaire is inversely proportional to the response rate (Roberts & Taylor, 2002), the questionnaire was designed to be as brief as possible to encourage response rates (Neumann, 2006). As a consequence, the questionnaire was limited to ten questions. The design of the online survey was further informed by recommendations made by Dillman (2000). These recommendations related to: length of questionnaire (as brief as possible); the types of questions included; the language used in question design (simple, short and specific); the clarity of instructions provided for respondents (taking into account a range of respondent computer skills); and restricting use of colour to maintain clarity and readability. The online survey was designed to be one web page only, so respondents could clearly see how long the survey would take to complete without having to progress through multiple screens.

The finalised ten questions were designed to collect data related to participants' gender, age range, role (referee and/or coach), sport(s) involved with, experience (number of years in role), and frequency (how often they performed the role in a season). Four questions related specifically to sideline behaviour:

Have you ever witnessed what you perceive to be inappropriate parental or parent-coach touchline behaviour? (Never, once or twice ever, once or twice a season, several times a season, regularly).

If yes, in what way? (Free format response).

Do you have concerns about parental behaviour at children's sporting events? (Yes / No).

If yes, what steps do you think could be taken to improve sideline behaviour? (Free format response).

Data storage and security

Survey data would be entered by participants directly into a structured query language (SQL) database, via the SelectSurveyASP website. Participants' personal information was limited to age range (16-20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61+ years), gender, role (coach or referee), and sport. The information held on the database was

accessible only to the principal researcher. Multiple submissions by one respondent have been identified as an area of concern for researchers using online surveys (Yun & Trumbo, 2000). As a consequence, the software package utilised retained the IP address of the computer that the user submitted from, thereby preventing users from resubmitting the survey from the same computer. This limits (but does not eliminate) the potential for multiple submissions of the survey by the same user.

Piloting

To enhance the reliability of the online survey, a pilot study was then conducted to test both the survey and the procedures for the main study (Dillman, 2000). An e-mail with the embedded link to the survey was sent out to a convenience sample of ten sports coaches and referees known to the researcher. Feedback from the participants involved in the pilot was extremely positive and only one minor wording change was deemed to be necessary to the overall design of the survey. To further assess the survey's face validity, details on the pilot were sent to a Faculty expert on survey design, who also provided feedback. The feedback was used by the research team to inform minor amendments to the questionnaire. The online survey was also user-tested by the participants to test the robustness of the instrument and the associated procedures: easy access to online survey web link; response time; non-completion of compulsory questions; and multiple submissions of the survey. The data generated by the pilot sample was then tested to ensure the storage of data, data export features, and reporting features of the package were working correctly. The pilot test revealed that the software appeared to be robust and reliable.

Procedure

The first stage of the study utilised a method of purposive sampling to identify four regional sports organisations responsible for the coordination and organisation of the four team sports. Inclusion criterion for sports organisations was that they held contact details of volunteer referees and coaches involved in children's sport. Four regional sports organisations (RSOs) were approached by an initial phone call and follow-up e-mail inviting them to participate. Representatives from all four organisations expressed concern about adult sideline behaviour in their sport and confirmed their interest in participating in the study. Each of the organisations held coach and referee contact information on a database, however, the regional touch rugby organisation only held a limited number of contacts on their database. Subsequently, a charitable sports

trust that coordinated season long competitions for touch rugby and soccer for children was also invited to participate.

For the second stage of the study, e-mail invitations to complete the online survey were distributed by these organisations to coaches and referees (aged 16 years or over) whose e-mail addresses were held on their databases. The e-mail included an invitation to participate, participant information, and an embedded link to the electronic survey (URL).

Completion and submission of the online survey denoted informed consent to participate. An initial follow-up email was sent by each organisation after two weeks and a final reminder that the survey was about to close was sent out after a further two weeks.

Data Analysis

The data was exported from the survey software package into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Quantitative data analysis of the closed questions was descriptive and utilised cross-tabulations between groups of interest. Fisher's exact test was used to determine associations between cross-tabulated categorical variables. These analyses were performed using Stata version 10.0 (StataCorp, College Station, TX, USA) and a level of 5% was used to define statistical significance.

Analysis of the qualitative data was basic qualitative descriptive (Sandelowski, 2000) and a qualitative data analysis software tool, Weft QDA (Fenton, 2006), was utilised to sort the qualitative data into key categories and sub-categories. Data was coded into themes and sub-themes by the primary researcher and regular meetings were held by the research team to review the analysis and confirm the themes. The data was repeatedly read in an attempt to ensure that all themes and sub-themes had been identified.

Ethics

Full ethical clearance for this study was approved by the primary author's institution ethics committee.

Results

Response Rates

A total of 1,180 e-mails were sent to coaches and referees inviting them to complete the online survey. A total of 287 surveys were completed – a response rate of 24.3%. The relatively low response rate and associated implications are discussed in the limitations section. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants, by sport.

Table 1. Potential Participants by Sport.

Sport	Coaches	Referees	Combined ^a	Total
Rugby	330	148	0	478
Soccer	350	150	0	500
Touch	0	0	104	104
Netball	0	0	98	98
Total	680	298	202	1180

^a Three of the organisations held all volunteer contact information together, with no means of differentiating between roles.

Sociodemographics of Participants

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the respondents' age groups and gender. Of the 287 respondents, 67.9% (n=195) were male, 32.0% (n=92) were female. The majority of respondents were aged between 31 and 50 years (85.7%, n=246), with 52.3% (n=150) of the respondents aged between 41 and 50 years. A significant difference was identified in the age distribution by gender (Fishers' exact test, $p=0.01$). There was a relatively even distribution of female respondents between the 31 to 40 years age range (40.2%) and the 41 to 50 years age range (45.6%). However, for males, there was a noticeable increase from the 31-40 years age range bracket (30.2%) to the older 41-50 years age range bracket (55.4%).

Table 2. Respondents by Age Group and Gender.

Age (years)	Female		Male		Total	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	N	(%)
16-20	7	(7.6)	4	(2.0)	11	(3.8)
21-30	4	(4.3)	4	(2.0)	8	(2.8)
31-40	37	(40.2)	59	(30.2)	96	(33.4)
41-50	42	(45.6)	108	(55.4)	150	(52.3)
51-60	2	(2.2)	17	(8.7)	19	(6.6)
61+	0	(0)	3	(1.5)	3	(1.0)
Total	92	(100)	195	(100)	287	(100)

Role Played in Children’s Sport

Of the 287 respondents, 49.5% (n=142) were coaches, 15.3% (n=44) were referees, 29.6% (n=85) performed both roles, and 5.6% (n=16) were not currently coaching or refereeing.

Sport Involvement

Figure 1 graphically depicts an overview of respondents’ specific sport involvement. A number of respondents (n=68) were involved as coaches or referees in more than one sport, which reflects the high commitment of many volunteers involved in the administration of children’s sport. Sports reflected in the ‘other’ category response included: diving (n=1), underwater hockey (n=1), surf lifesaving (n=2), swimming (n=1), athletics (n=2), flippa ball (n=2), and tennis (n=1). While the sport involvement question specifically asked about involvement in team sports only, a small number of respondents (n=5) included individual sports.

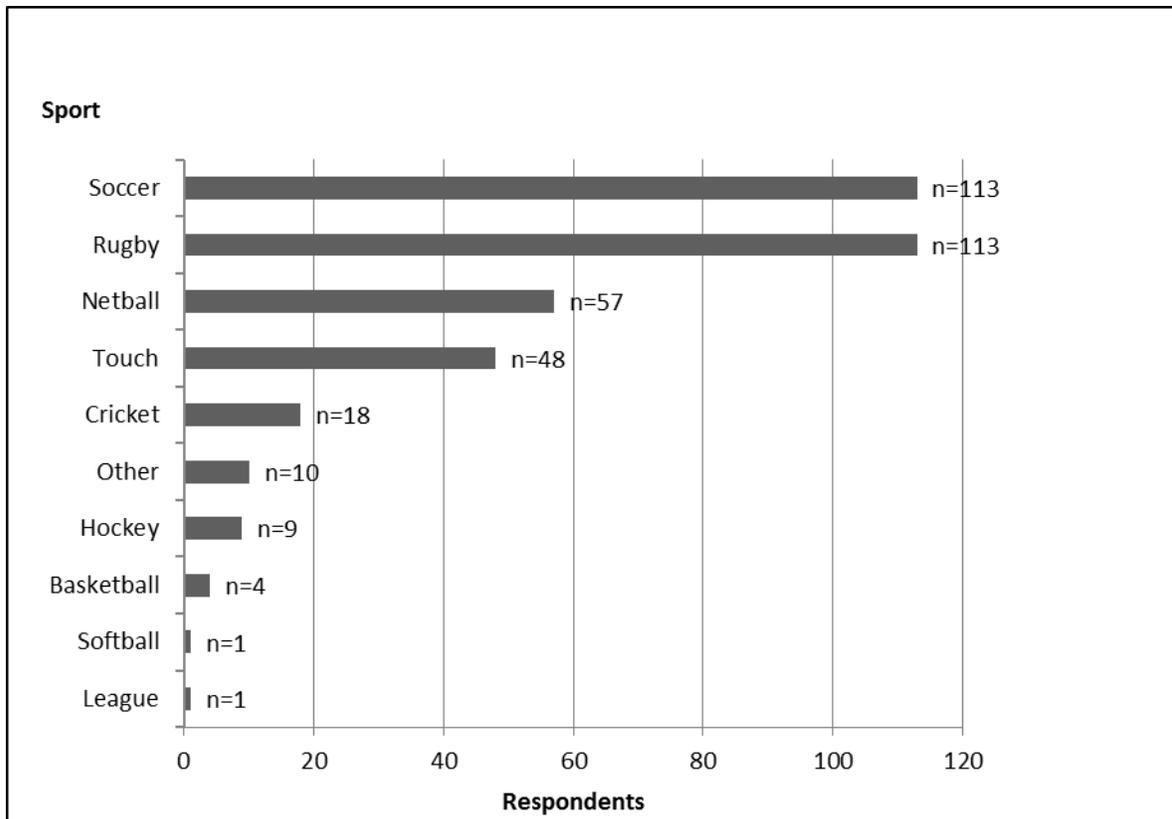


Figure 1. The Sports Respondents Coached or Refereed.

Commitment to Coaching and Refereeing

To establish if the respondents were regularly involved in their sport(s), the number of years they had been involved and the frequency of their coaching/refereeing

was determined (see Table 3). The level of involvement for the majority of respondents was high; with 80.8% (n=232) having coached or refereed for at least two years or more, and 90.9% (n=261) being regularly involved in their sport (most weeks or more).

Table 3. Number of Years and Frequency of Coaching or Refereeing.

	n	(%)
<i>Number of Years Coaching / Refereeing</i>		
0-1	55	(19.2)
2-3	96	(33.4)
4-5	57	(19.9)
6+	79	(27.5)
<i>Coaching / Refereeing frequency</i>		
More than once a week	141	(49.1)
Every or most weeks	120	(41.8)
Sometimes	17	(5.9)
Not very often	9	(3.1)

Frequency of Perceived Inappropriate Parental Behaviour Observed

To establish coaches and referees' perceptions of the frequency of inappropriate behaviours, respondents were asked how regularly they witnessed what they perceived to be 'inappropriate sideline behaviour' at children's sporting events. Of the 287 respondents, 180 (62.7%) stated that they had witnessed inappropriate behaviour at least once or twice a season, with 22 (7.7%) of these respondents regularly witnessing this type of behaviour. However, 107 (37.3%) respondents stated that they had only witnessed inappropriate behaviour once or twice ever, or had never witnessed any inappropriate parental behaviour.

Testing the Effects of Gender, Role, and Sport on Reporting of Frequency of Perceived Inappropriate Parental Behaviour

An overview of the reported frequencies of inappropriate parental behaviour observed, cross-tabulated with respondent gender, role and sport is presented in Table 4. A significant difference was identified in the reporting of the frequency of these behaviours by respondent gender (Fishers' exact test, $p=0.01$). Proportionally more males than females reported witnessing higher frequencies of inappropriate parental behaviour, with 67.7% of males (n=132) reporting they had witnessed these behaviours at least once or twice a season; whereas only 52.2% of female respondents (n=48) reported observations of similar frequencies.

Table 4. Frequency of Inappropriate Parental Behaviour Observed by Respondent Gender, Role, and Sport.

	Regularly observed n (%)	Several times a season n (%)	Once or twice a season n (%)	Once or twice ever n (%)	Never n (%)	Total N
<i>Gender</i>						
Male	14 (7.2)	54 (27.7)	64 (32.8)	25 (12.8)	38 (19.5)	195
Female	8 (8.7)	17 (18.5)	23 (25.0)	27 (29.3)	17 (18.5)	92
<i>Role</i>						
Coach	6 (4.2)	24 (16.9)	48 (33.8)	32 (22.5)	32 (22.5)	142
Referee	6 (13.6)	14 (31.8)	10 (22.7)	5 (11.4)	9 (20.4)	44
Both	10 (11.8)	29 (34.1)	24 (28.2)	12 (14.1)	10 (11.8)	85
None currently	0 (0.0)	4 (25.0)	5 (31.2)	3 (18.7)	4 (25.0)	16
<i>Sport^a</i>						
Netball	3 (7.0)	8 (18.6)	10 (23.2)	12 (27.9)	10 (23.2)	43
Touch	1 (12.5)	3 (37.5)	2 (25.0)	2 (25.0)	0 (0.0)	8
Rugby	6 (8.1)	23 (31.1)	19 (25.7)	9 (12.2)	17 (22.3)	74
Soccer	4 (4.6)	21 (24.4)	26 (30.2)	15 (17.4)	20 (23.2)	86

^a A number of respondents (n=76) coached or refereed more than one sport. The data in this section of the table represents respondents who identified with one sport only.

A further significant difference (Fisher's exact test, $p=0.03$) was identified in the reporting of these behaviours by respondent role. Respondents who identified that they performed the role of referee reported observing higher frequencies of inappropriate behaviours than those respondents who identified as coaches only. Of the respondents who were referees only, 74.1% (n=63) reported observing inappropriate parental behaviour at least once or twice a season, compared to 68.2% (n=30) of those who identified as coaches and referees, and 54.9% (n=78) of respondents who were coaches only. This finding suggested that referees have a different perception of what is considered to be inappropriate parental behaviour. Further analysis revealed no differences in the reporting of the frequency of inappropriate parental behaviour between sports (Fisher's exact test, $p=0.64$).

Nature of Inappropriate Behaviour Observed

Respondents were asked to provide details of any inappropriate behaviour that they witnessed. This question was open-ended and responses were analysed to identify the key and dominant themes. For the 231 (80.5%) respondents to this question, the key themes that emerged were:

- *Abusive behaviour*: 83.5% of these respondents (n=193) referred to incidents of abusive verbal behaviour they had witnessed, 63.2% (n=146) referred to verbal abuse directed at children, and 62.7% (n=145) referred to incidents of verbal abuse aimed at referees.
- *Inappropriate coaching*: 29% (n=67) cited examples specifically related to inappropriate coach behaviour. This included verbal abuse and scolding directed at players, referees and other coaches.
- *Biased refereeing/umpiring*: 15.5% (n=36) felt that a number of referees were biased towards their own teams, and made blatant decisions favouring their team.
- *Physical confrontation*: Ten respondents stated that they had witnessed aggressive physical confrontations involving parents/coaches during children's sports games.

Ongoing Concerns with Parental Behaviour

Respondents were asked if they had concerns about inappropriate parental behaviour at children's sporting events: 60.3% (n=173) of respondents stated that they did have concerns; and 39.7% (n=114) of respondents stated they had no concerns.

Testing the Effects of Gender, Role, and Sport on Reporting of Ongoing Concerns with Parental Behaviour

The reporting of ongoing concerns with parental behaviour cross-tabulated with respondents' gender, role, and sport is presented in Table 5. Analysis revealed no association between either the gender of the respondent and ongoing concerns with parental behaviour (Fisher's exact test, $p=0.90$), or the respondent's sport and reporting of ongoing concerns (Fisher's exact test, $p=0.79$). However, a significant association was identified between reporting of ongoing concerns and respondent's role (Fisher's exact test, $p=0.02$), with 70.6% (n=60) of those who identified as coaches and referees, and 68.2% (n=30) of referees stating they had ongoing concerns with parental behaviour at children's sporting events. In comparison, only 53.5% (n=76) of coaches expressed

similar concerns. Again, these findings suggest that perspectives of inappropriate behaviour differ between coaches and those who have performed the role of referee.

Table 5. Ongoing Concern with Parental Behaviour by Respondent Gender, Role, and Sport.

	Have Concerns		No Concerns		Total N
	n	(%)	n	(%)	
<i>Gender</i>					
Male	117	(60.0)	78	(40.0)	195
Female	56	(60.9)	36	(39.1)	92
<i>Role</i>					
Coach	76	(53.5)	66	(46.5)	142
Referee	30	(68.2)	14	(31.8)	44
Both	60	(70.6)	25	(29.4)	85
None currently	7	(43.7)	9	(56.2)	16
<i>Sport^a</i>					
Netball	24	(55.8)	19	(44.2)	43
Touch	6	(75.0)	2	(25.0)	8
Rugby	45	(60.8)	29	(39.2)	74
Soccer	50	(58.1)	36	(41.9)	86

^a A number of respondents (n=76) coached or refereed more than one sport. The data in this section of the table represents respondents who identified with one sport only.

Steps to Improve Parental Behaviour

Respondents were asked to identify steps that they believed could be taken to improve parental behaviour, with 66.2% (n=190) of respondents answering this open-ended question. The key themes that emerged were:

- *Education:* 42.6% (n=81) of respondents to this question believed that education was the key to improving behaviour. Examples included providing codes of conduct for coaches and parents; and sporting organisations and clubs actively promoting fair play guidelines.
- *Punitive action:* 38.4% (n=73) felt that more punitive steps needed to be taken by sports organisations, including touchline bans for serial offenders. A number of respondents noted, however, that this could result in children being unfairly punished for their parent's behaviour.

- *Sporting organisations to take more responsibility:* 20% (n=38) of respondents believed that their sporting organisations needed to take more responsibility in relation to this issue. Ideas put forward included officials randomly attending games to monitor behaviour, providing more support for clubs, and offering clearer guidelines around codes of conduct. A number of respondents cited the sport of netball as an example of good practice in this regard.
- *Coaches taking responsibility:* 13.6% (n=26) believed that coaches were best placed to enforce parental behaviour guidelines. Recommendations included the conducting of coach-parent meetings at the start of the season where clear guidelines around parental behaviour were to be established.
- *Improving refereeing standards:* 8.9% (n=17) felt that poor refereeing was often the trigger for inappropriate coach and parental behaviour. They believed that better support should be offered for younger referees/umpires in particular, and that existing refereeing/umpiring courses should cover issues such as how to deal with abusive parents.

Discussion

The results of this study did not support our first hypothesis that rugby union, as a sport of national significance, would be represented by greater rates of reported incidents of inappropriate behaviour. Our second hypothesis that lower rates of inappropriate behaviour would be reported for netball was also not supported by the data. No significant differences were identified related to the effects of the sport. However, our final hypothesis that referees would report higher rates of inappropriate behaviour than coaches was supported. Before this finding is discussed, it is important to tease out exactly what our respondents perceived to be 'inappropriate' behaviour. This was important, as what is deemed to be inappropriate behaviour by one person may be perfectly acceptable to another person. Fields, Collins, and Comstock (2007) conducted a review of literature related to violence in sport and found evidence of violence at all levels of sport, from professional level down to children's leagues. Studies that have examined violence in young people's sport have tended to focus on the adolescent athlete. While our current study has a focus on the younger athlete, findings of these adolescent based studies are of interest as they indicate that exposure to violence can become normalised, accepted, and condoned even by youth athletes themselves

(Bredemeier & Shields, 1984; Shields, 1999). Fields et al. (2007, p. 360) noted that violence and aggression in sport at all levels tended to be marginalised and trivialised as a case of “boys will be boys” by the media, public, observers, and participants. A population of interest who emerged in our current study were the relatively large numbers of coaches and referees (n=55, 19.2%) who stated that they had never witnessed inappropriate adult behaviour in children’s sports, and those who stated that they did not have concerns about sideline behaviour (n=114, 39.7%). However, the actual reports of verbal abuse that targeted referees in our current study suggested that for some, this practice was relatively commonplace and normalised.

Coach and referee (Soccer): [People] criticise referees’ decisions openly and offensively, even if it’s one of their mate’s reffing. Abusing the ref in soccer is so accepted that one coach who gave me a gobful [verbal abuse] didn’t even realise he was doing it (“did I say that out loud?”).

It was clear that this respondent’s role as a referee gave him a personal insight into instances of verbal abuse that occurred. He refers to the normalisation of this practice in that it is now “so accepted” that individuals are not aware of their own behaviour and even abuse their own friends. It was interesting to note, however, that from the perspective of a number of respondents, referees brought the verbal criticism upon themselves:

Coach (Soccer): There are often parents remarking about the umpiring and usually it’s only negative when the call goes against their team. However this is not helped when the umpiring is appalling as I have also witnessed. I know we are desperate to get umpires but there must be a better way such as a buddy up system or something until umpires are good enough to go it alone. How can they not though [verbally abuse an umpire] when some umpires are so bad!!

Again, this respondent refers to the normalised practice of abusing referees, but excuses the abusive behaviour if it is perceived to be warranted. Although this respondent has identified this behaviour as being inappropriate, it is seemingly acceptable to abuse referees in children’s sport if the referee is perceived to be making decisions that go against your team.

A surprising secondary finding of interest in this study relates to differences identified between males and females. A significant difference was found in the reporting of the frequency of inappropriate behaviour by gender, with male respondents reporting that they had observed more frequent occurrences of inappropriate behaviour than

females. Although rugby coaches and referees are predominantly male, and netball coaches and referees are predominantly female, no significant difference was found in the frequencies of reported inappropriate behaviour by sport. Therefore, it is the gender differences identified here that are of interest. The presence of a female coach or referee may have an impact on the types of behaviours that are occurring on the sidelines. Although there is no evidence to currently support this hypothesis, this is certainly an area worthy of consideration for future research. A number of studies have suggested that the field of sport is traditionally viewed as a male domain (Stevens, Osborne, & Robbins, 2002), and that males behave more aggressively than females due to the reinforced attitudes and behaviours based on traditional views of masculinity and femininity (Coulomb-Cabagno, Rasclé, & Souchon, 2005). It has been suggested that the presence of women in traditionally male-dominated sports can be perceived as threatening to masculine identity and as such sport can potentially be a site of considerable gender conflict (Meân, 2001). Although not directly related to children's sport, the study by Meân found significant differences in the nature of comments made by male soccer referees when they refereed all-male games as opposed to all-female games. It is possible that the presence of females may act as a mediating factor on aggressive behaviours exhibited by male coaches and spectators at children's sporting events.

A further interesting significant difference emerged in the perception of inappropriate behaviour frequency reported by referees and coaches. In support of our final hypothesis, respondents who performed the role of referee (either solely or in the dual role of coach-referee) reported higher frequencies of inappropriate behaviour. This is perhaps unsurprising as they are also the recipients of verbal abuse (67.7% of all respondents reported witnessing verbal abuse aimed at referees). The abuse of referees has been identified as a source of stress and a cause of burnout for referees in a range of sports (Anshel & Weinberg, 1995; Rainey, 1995). However, there is no evidence in the peer reviewed literature of studies that have studied referees specifically involved with children's sport. The evidence from the findings of this study suggest that the abuse which commonly occurs in adult competitive sport also occurs in children's sport, even for children up to the age of 7 years:

Referee (Touch): The coach became too emotional and forgot that these kids were only about 6 or 7 years old and became quite scared when he began

swearing. He was quite intimidating to a junior referee that was also going through training as well.

Given the relatively high volume of negative comments made by coaches found in a New Zealand observational study (Walters et al., 2012), it is possible that coaches who exhibit these types of behaviour are either unaware, or normalise language that non-coaches are more likely to see as abusive. Studies conducted by Smith and Smoll (1997), and more recently by Millar, Oldham and Donovan (2011) found that coaches had little awareness of the true nature of their own behaviour. This lack of awareness and normalisation of behaviour may explain why coaches reported observing lower levels of inappropriate behaviour.

Evidence also emerges of verbal abuse that is directed at children. Of the respondents who detailed reports of inappropriate behaviour, 63.2% (n=146) referred to verbal abuse that targeted children.

Coach (Rugby): Parents verbally abusing their own child and others on the field. Parents mocking other children in front of another child's parents. Parents arguing amongst themselves.

The most extreme examples of inappropriate behaviour identified related to acts of physical aggression. There were ten accounts of behaviour that related to acts of violence, aggression or physical threats.

Rugby (Coach and referee): I had to separate the coaches who had a stand-off during a J8 game (5-year olds).

Rugby (Coach): [During an 11-year olds rugby game] the referee called the game off about half way through the second half. He had by this stage already warned both the coach and the parents on the touch line to control the vitriol and abusive foul language that was clearly audible around the field and in this case around the local residential area. After asking the coach to leave the area of the rugby fields (which was ignored) he [the coach] and his supporting parents began to edge onto the field at which point, fearing for his physical safety, he [the referee] abandoned the game.

Although the number of respondents who related accounts of extreme behaviour were relatively small (3.5% of all 287 respondents), ten occurrences of physical aggression would suggest that this type of behaviour is not as uncommon as it should be.

The complexity of the problem is probably best summed up by a respondent who did express concerns about ongoing behaviour. When asked what steps could be taken to improve this behaviour:

Referee (Soccer): Get everybody to live in an ideal world! Crikey is there enough room here to describe how to change the world, because it is too easily accepted that referee/coach/player abuse/criticism is ok.

Limitations

Low survey response rates are increasingly becoming an area of concern in social research (de Vaus, 2002) and the low response rate was a limitation of this phase of the wider study. However, it has been noted that the associated impact of differential participation in targeted population studies can be small (Nohr, Frydenberg, Henriksen, & Olsen, 2006). Rothman and Greenland (1998) highlighted the traditional misconception that generalisation from a study sample must depend on that sample being a sub-group representative of the target population. They argued that it is possible for observations to be abstracted, rather than generalised, to a broader domain of experience. Although the response rates were relatively low, we feel it is still possible to abstract the findings from this sample to the target population of referees and coaches involved with children's team sports in New Zealand. While acknowledging that this is a relatively small sample, we feel that these findings and the examples provided by participants may add some further insight into issues related to sideline behaviour.

Online surveys have tended to attract lower response rates than paper versions (Nulty, 2008) and, as such, the 24.3% response rate in this study was not surprising. This phase of the study relied very much on the support of the RSOs responsible for the provision and administration of the four team sports that were the focus of this study and the sample drawn upon was entirely dependent on the electronic details held by these sporting organisations. Referees have been a difficult group to reach in recent New Zealand based research, with referees comprising only 6% of respondents to a survey of volunteers in New Zealand sport (Kazakov & Johnson, 2008). However, a reasonable representation of coaches and referees across the four sports was achieved in our current study (63.2% of respondents were coaches, 44.9% were referees).

Conclusion

The majority of respondents expressed concerns with sideline behaviour. A significant finding was that there was a difference relating to the perception of the nature

and frequency of inappropriate sideline behaviour between male and female respondents. We recommend that future research should consider whether the presence of females acts as a moderator of adult sideline behaviour at children's sporting events.

A further difference was evident between coaches and referees with referees reporting more frequent occurrences of inappropriate behaviour. With differing perceptions about what is perceived as inappropriate, this study also creates space for further debate about whether aggressive sideline behaviour is becoming normalised in children's sport. With previous studies focusing primarily on coaches and with little evidence of studies that have taken into account the perspective of referees involved in children's sport, it is important that future research simultaneously considers the views of both coaches and referees in a range of sports.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Sport New Zealand for their funding of this study. Sport New Zealand had no academic or commercial control of the design and implementation of this study, or of the study's findings.

References

- Ackery, A. D., Tator, C. H. & Snider, C. (2012). Violence in Canadian amateur hockey: The experience of referees in Ontario. *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine*, 22(2), 86-90.
- Aktive Auckland Sport and Recreation. (2016). Good Sports. Retrieved from <http://aktive.org.nz/Aktive-Lab/Good-Sports>
- Anshel, M. H. & Delaney, J. (2001). Sources of acute stress, cognitive appraisals, and coping strategies of male and female child athletes. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 24, 329-333.
- Anshel, M. H. & Weinberg, R. S. (1995). Sources of acute stress in American and Australian basketball referees. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 7, 11-22. doi:10.1080/10413209508406297
- Blom, L. C. & Drane, D. (2008). Parents' sideline comments: Exploring the reality of a growing issue. *Athletic Insight: The Online Journal of Sport Psychology*, 10(3).
- Bredemeier, B. J. & Shields, D. L. (1984). The utility of moral stage analysis in the investigation of athletic aggression. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1, 138-149.
- Chiafullo, C. M. (1998). From personal foul to personal attack: How sports officials are the target of physical abuse from players, coaches and fans alike. Seton Hall

- Journal of Sports and Entertainment Law*, 8, 201-225.
- Coulomb-Cabagno, G., Rasclé, O. & Souchon, N. (2005). Players' sex and male referees' decisions about aggression in French soccer: A preliminary study. *Sex Roles*, 52, 547-553.
- De Vaus, D. (2002). *Surveys in social research* (5th ed.). St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Dillman, D. A. (2000). *Mail and internet surveys: The tailored design method* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Elliott, S.K. & Drummond, M.J. (2015). The (limited) impact of sport policy on parental behaviour in youth sport: a qualitative inquiry in junior Australian football. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 7(4), 519-530. doi:10.1080/19406940.2014.971850
- English Football Association. (2016). Welcome to respect. Retrieved from <http://www.thefa.com/RESPECT>
- Fenton, A. (2006). Weft QDA (Version 1.0). Retrieved from <http://www.pressure.to/qda/>
- Fields, S. K., Collins, C. L. & Comstock, R. D. (2007). Conflict on the courts: A review of sports-related violence literature. *Trauma, Violence and Abuse*, 8, 359-369. doi:10.1177/1524838007307293
- Gould, D., Lauer, L., Rolo, C., Jannes, C. & Pennisi, N. (2006). Understanding the role parents play in tennis success: a national survey of junior tennis coaches. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 40, 632-636. doi:10.1136/bjism.2005.024927
- Holt, N. L., Tamminen, K. A., Black, D. E., Sehn, Z. L. & Wall, M. P. (2008). Parental involvement in competitive youth sport setting. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 9(5), 663-685.
- Horn, T. S., Lox, C. L. & Labrador, F. (2006). The self-fulfilling prophecy theory: When coaches' expectations become reality. In J. Williams (Ed.), *Applied sport psychology: Personal growth to peak performance* (5th ed., pp. 82-108). Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
- Jowett, S. & Cramer, D. (2010). The prediction of young athletes' physical self from perceptions of relationships with parents and coaches. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 11, 140-147. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2009.10.001
- Kaissidis-Rodafinos, A., Anshel, M. H. & Sideridis, G. (1998). Sources, intensity, and responses to stress in Greek and Australian basketball referees. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 29, 303-323.

- Kaissidis, A. & Anshel, M. (1993). Sources and intensity of acute stress in adolescent and adult Australian basketball referees: A preliminary study. *Australian Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, 25(3), 97-103.
- Kazakov, D. & Johnson, M. (2008). Volunteers: The heart of sport (Report No. #3605): Research New Zealand. Retrieved from http://www.sparc.org.nz/Documents/sport%20development/Volunteers_the_Heart_of_Sport.pdf
- Keegan, R. J., Harwood, C. G., Spray, C. M. & Lavalley, D. E. (2009). A qualitative investigation exploring the motivational climate in early career sports participants: Coach, parent and peer influences on sport motivation. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 10, 361-372. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2008.12.003
- Kellett, P. & Shilbury, D. (2007). Umpire participation: Is abuse really the issue?. *Sport Management Review*, 10, 209-229.
- Kidman, L., McKenzie, A. & McKenzie, B. (1999). The nature and target of parents' comments during youth sport competitions. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 22, 54-68.
- Meân, L. J. (2001). Identity and discursive practice: Doing gender on the football pitch. *Discourse and Society*, 12, 789-815. doi:10.1177/0957926501012006004
- Millar, S.-K., Oldham, A. R. H. & Donovan, M. (2011). Coaches' self-awareness of timing, nature and intent of verbal instructions to athletes. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, 6, 503-513. doi:10.1260/1747-9541.6.4.503
- Neumann, W. L. (2006). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- New Zealand Herald. (2013). Sideline champs. Retrieved from http://www.nzherald.co.nz/sideline-champs/news/headlines.cfm?c_id=1503335
- Nohr, E. A., Frydenberg, M., Henriksen, T. B. & Olsen, J. (2006). Does low participation in cohort studies induce bias? *Epidemiology*, 17, 413-418. doi:10.1097/01.ede.0000220549.14177.60
- Nulty, D. D. (2008). The adequacy of response rates to online and paper surveys: What can be done? *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33, 301-314. doi:10.1080/02602930701293231
- Positive Coaching Alliance. (2016). Positive Coaching Alliance. Retrieved from <http://www.positivecoach.org/>
- Positive Coaching Scotland. (2016). Positive Coaching Scotland. Retrieved from <http://www.sportscotland.org.uk/coaching/positive-coaching-scotland/>

- Pringle, R. (2001). Competing discourses: narratives of a fragmented self, manliness and rugby union. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 36, 425-439. doi:10.1177/101269001036004004
- Rainey, D. W. (1995). Sources of stress among baseball and softball umpires. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 7, 1-10. doi:10.1080/10413209508406296
- Rainey, D. W., Santilli, N. R. & Fallon, K. (1992). Development of athletes conceptions of sport officials authority. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 14, 392-404.
- Radio New Zealand. (2015, 19 May). Parent's behaviour at grade game 'unacceptable'. Radio New Zealand News. Retrieved from <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/regional/274044/parent%27s-behaviour-at-grade-game-%27unacceptable%27>
- Rayner, M., Webb, T. & Webb, H. (2016). The occurrence of referee abuse in Rugby Union: Evidence and measures through an online survey. *International Journal of Sport Management, Recreation & Tourism*, 21, 66-81. doi: 10.5199/ijsmart-1791-874X-21d
- Roberts, K. & Taylor, B. (2002). *Nursing research processes: An Australian perspective* (2nd ed.). South Melbourne, Australia: Nelson Thomson Learning.
- Rothman, K. J. & Greenland, S. (1998). Precision and validity in epidemiological studies. In K. J. Rothman & S. Greenland (Eds.), *Modern epidemiology* (2nd ed., pp. 115-134). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott-Raven.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Focus on research methods: Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing and Health*, 23, 334-340. doi:10.1002/1098-240X(200008)
- Shields, E. W. (1999). Intimidation and violence by males in high school athletics. *Adolescence*, 34(135), 503-521.
- Smith, R. E. & Smoll, F. L. (1997). Coaching the coaches: Youth sports as a scientific and applied behavioral setting. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 6, 16-21. doi:10.1111/1467-8721.ep11512606
- Smoll, F. L. & Smith, R. E. (2006). Enhancing coach-athlete relationships: Cognitive-behavioral principles and procedures. In J. Dosil (Ed.), *The sport psychologist's handbook: A guide for sport-specific performance enhancement* (pp. 19-38). Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Sport New Zealand. (2010). SPARC facts 1997-2001. Retrieved from <http://www.srknowledge.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/sparc-facts-1997->

2001.pdf

- Stevens, D. E., Osborne, B. & Robbins, J. (2002). Psychosocial issues and the female athlete. In J. M. Silva III & D. E. Stevens (Eds.), *Psychological foundations of sport* (pp. 411-427). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Thompson, S. (1988). Challenging the hegemony: New Zealand women's opposition to rugby and the reproduction of capitalist patriarchy. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 23, 205-223. doi:10.1177/101269028802300303
- Walters, S. R., Schluter, P. J., Oldham, A. R. H., Thomson, R. W. & Payne, D. (2012). The sideline behaviour of coaches at children's team sports games. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 13(2), 208-215. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2011.11.008
- Wolfson, S., & Neave, N. (2007). Coping under pressure: Cognitive strategies for maintaining confidence among soccer referees. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 30(2), 232-247.
- Yun, G. W., & Trumbo, C. W. (2000). Comparative response to a survey executed by post, mail and web form. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 6(1). doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2000.tb00112.x