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Exploring Contemporary Issues in Canadian Youth Hockey: Experiences and Perspectives of Peewee Players and Elite Hockey Insiders

Project Summary

Hockey has a profound impact on the values, attitudes, and behaviours of Canadians (Earle, 2002; Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Nixon, 1976). Youth hockey in Canada has been the target of much recent criticism, with attention being called to an increasingly aggressive and violent atmosphere (e.g., Ackery, et al., 2012; Loughhead & Leith, 2001; Therien, 2012). This research project aimed to gain greater understanding of two contemporary issues commonly associated with this aggression and violence: youth hockey parents, and the presence of body checking in the youth game. Interviews were conducted with forty peewee players (i.e., 11-12 years of age) over the course of a competitive season and ten elite hockey insiders (i.e., those with professional, major junior, or university level experience as either a player, coach, parent of elite player, official, or national media personality). Results indicate that elite insiders described concerning parent involvement including modelling poor and aggressive behaviour, having unrealistic expectations, putting pressure on their children to perform, over-stepping the boundaries of the coach, and living vicariously through their children. However, peewee players reported being generally satisfied with their parents' level and type of involvement. Both elite insiders and peewee players discussed the regular occurrence of negative parent behaviours at games (i.e., yelling at players and officials), and the negative impact of these behaviours. Further, peewee players reported enjoying the presence of body checking in their game, despite discussing feelings of both fear and safety on the ice, with the feelings of fear often attributed to size differences between players. Conflicting findings, recommendations and future directions are discussed.

Research Methods

Study 1

Participants included ten (8 male, 2 female) elite Canadian hockey insiders age 22-54, all of who emerged from the Canadian youth hockey system. Each participant was a current or former elite player, coach, official, parent of an elite player, or national hockey media personality. "Elite" was operationally defined as having experience at the professional (National Hockey League), major junior (Canadian Hockey League), or university level (National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I; USA, Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS); Canada); many participants had multiple roles (i.e., player, coach, parent). Each participant engaged in a 30-60 minute in-depth, semi-structured telephone interview focused on their perspectives of parent involvement in Canadian youth hockey. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using previously established guidelines (e.g., Tesch, 1990).

Study 2

Participants included 40 youth hockey players from nine competitive teams in three different hockey leagues in Southern Ontario, Canada. Participants were recruited from minor peewee (i.e., 11 years old; 11 players) and peewee teams (i.e., 12 years old; 29 players), with a mean age of 11.73 years. The competitive levels of teams ranged from BB to AAA (the highest competitive level). Each player participated in two 15-45 minute in-depth, semi-structured interviews; one at the beginning of the season, and one following the conclusion of

the season. Interview questions focused on their parents' involvement in their hockey and behaviours at their hockey games, as well as their perceptions of body checking. Data were analyzed in the same way as discussed for Study 1.

Research Results

Peewee players reported generally positive parent involvement however, the elite insiders highlighted several issues that necessitate further attention, including parents having unrealistic expectations, putting pressure on their children to perform, over-stepping the role of the coach, and living vicariously through their children. Both peewee players and elite insiders reported that although cheering and positive comments are often heard at youth hockey games, negative parent spectator behaviours are commonplace. Peewee players suggested negative comments came primarily from the "other team's parents," with officials and physical players often being the target of these negative comments. Some participants spoke of being distracted, frustrated, and angered by negative parent comments during games, suggesting that negative comments hold more weight and are more likely to be heard, internalized, and remembered by youth players. With regard to body checking, many peewee players reported liking the presence of body checking in their game, however increased injuries and rough play since its introduction were discussed at length, as well as players feeling both fear and safety on the ice, with players most often attributing their feelings of fear to size differences. Players also reported that body checking was rarely taught as a specific skill; it was either included as part of other drills, or not taught at all. Results should be interpreted with caution in that the perspectives of other parties were not taken into consideration, and social presentation bias (Nederhof, 1985) may have influenced responses.

Policy Implications

With over 570,000 youth involved in hockey in Canada, a safe and enjoyable environment is of critical importance. The extensive discussion of negative parent behaviours at Canadian youth hockey games by both elite hockey insiders and peewee players points to the need for effective parent education programs, with a particular focus on appropriate parent behaviour at games. While there has been extensive growth in such programs in recent years, it is essential that these programs are grounded in evidence-based research, and undergo rigorous evaluation to assure their effectiveness. Elite insiders suggested parent education programs be developed by a diverse team of experts, and be made standardized, while being audited/monitored. Further, they suggested programs focus on encouraging parents to have realistic expectations, keeping a healthy distance from their children's hockey, and demonstrating respect and caring at games. Further exploration of an anonymous reporting system may also be valuable in alerting league officials to particularly problematic parent issues, eventually contributing to a more positive parent culture in Canadian youth hockey. Findings also point to the importance of a clear and strict national policy on discipline.

Recommendations for policy regarding body checking among young players continue to be challenging, given conflicting and contradictory findings within and between research studies. Most participants in this study expressed enjoying the presence of body checking in their game and feeling safe on the ice, yet many also reported experiencing fear. Given that peewee players often discussed fear in the context of size differences, findings suggest that matched physical size rather than matched chronological age may be a better framework for the inclusion of body checking. Findings also highlight the importance of mandatory inclusion of an effective body checking curriculum for young players, given that many participants spoke of limited to no opportunity to correctly learn the skill of body checking.

Next Steps

This study has advanced our understanding of parent involvement, and the presence of body checking in youth hockey by taking into consideration perspectives of the youth players themselves, and allowing their collective voices to inform policy decisions. Future research should continue to examine player perspectives, and consider a large-scale case-study approach including players, parents and coaches, as well as observational data from games. Moreover, the longitudinal approach of the current study could be expanded to include more time points throughout the season, if only to validate the consistency of the responses given in the present study.

Researchers should also continue to examine minor hockey players' perceptions of body checking to further determine why players report seeing so much rough play and injury due to body checking, but also report enjoying it, and oftentimes, feeling safe on the ice. Researchers should also continue to examine the roles of parents, coaches, and officials in body checking.

Finally, future researchers may investigate gender differences in perceptions of parent involvement and body checking in Canadian youth hockey. Given that the present study had primarily male participants (i.e., 34 males, 6 females), it was difficult to discern any differences in perceptions between males and females, and future researchers should attempt to examine these lines of inquiry.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

- Hockey Canada
- BC Hockey
- Hockey Alberta
- Saskatchewan Hockey Association
- Hockey Manitoba
- Hockey Northwestern Ontario
- Ontario Hockey Federation
- Ottawa District Hockey Association
- Hockey Québec
- Hockey New Brunswick
- Hockey PEI
- Hockey Nova Scotia
- Hockey Newfoundland and Labrador
- Hockey North