
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring Lived Experience of Abusive Behavior among Youth Hockey Coaches

Matt LoGuercio, MS, MPM

Ascend Mindset & Performance, 48 Old Colony Road, Monroe, CT 06468, USA

Corresponding Author: Matt LoGuercio, MS, MPM, **E-mail:** Mattloguercio@mac.com

| ABSTRACT

This study explores the causes and solutions to youth hockey coaches' abusive behavior, particularly shouting, swearing, and punishing. It draws on extensive literature regarding youth sports, Positive Youth Development, coaching behaviors, emotional abuse, and the culture of hockey. The issue was approached from four perspectives: players, parents, referees, and coaches. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and written questionnaires, then transcribed and coded through numerous readings to determine common themes. Perceived reasons for abusive coaching predominantly included "they coach as they were coached," the "culture of hockey," and "pressure to win," with "ego," "poor communication skills," "lack of maturity," and "substance abuse at the low end of the scale. Proposed solutions focused overwhelmingly on emphasizing Positive Youth Development.

| KEYWORDS

Coaching behavior, abusive coaching, ice hockey, youth sports coaching

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 02 July 2022

PUBLISHED: 07 August 2022

DOI: 10.32996/jspes.2022.2.2.1

1. Introduction

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of players, parents, referees, and coaches on abusive behavior among youth hockey coaches. While previous researchers have examined abusive coaching behaviors (Kavanagh et al., 2017; Kerr et al., 2020; Willson, 2018), there has been a lack of literature addressing such behaviors from the perspective of the different stakeholders involved in youth sports. It was expected that such an inquiry would illuminate how abusive sports behavior is experienced not only by players but also by parents, referees, and coaches themselves. The end goal of this inquiry was to facilitate a better understanding of abusive coaching behavior in youth hockey, which could then be used to design a better coach-training module. After a review of relevant literature, the methodology, results, and discussion of the results are presented.

2. Literature Review

Abusive behavior by youth hockey coaches has to be understood within the larger context that includes the role of youth sports in promoting Positive Youth Development (PYD), the role of coaching in youth sports, the culture of hockey, and how certain coaching methods can result in emotional abuse.

2.1 Positive Youth Development through Sports

Research has shown that participation in sports has substantial benefits for young people. Beyond developing physical fitness, improving health and endurance, and aiding in weight control, youth sports participation has been found to have important psychological benefits. It has been shown to improve mental growth, cognitive function, educational achievement, self-discipline, confidence and self-esteem, and school retention. It also reduces depression and anxiety, tension, and problem behavior, improves better, staying in school, and increases positive adjustment. Children who engage in more intense levels of sports in childhood were found to have lower levels of mental distress in adulthood (Adetunji & Akindutire, 2017; Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2018; Diamond, 2015; Hansen et al., 2003; Holt et al., 2017, Raakman et al., 2010).

It also develops prosocial behavior, including good sportsmanship, cooperative attitudes, leadership and acceptance of leadership roles, teaching values of respect, independence, taking personal responsibility, making good life decisions, maintaining a positive attitude, increased problem-solving skills, and goal setting (Adetunji & Akindutire, 2017; Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2018; Holt et al., 2017; Lefebvre et al., 2016).

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is defined in the literature as the promotion of a range of desirable competencies or outcomes in young people, including developing a general sense of self-worth, having a positive future orientation, becoming a caring and ethical individual, learning how to adapt to different educational and working environments, and building life skills such as teamwork, goal setting, and leadership (Gould & Carson, 2008; Hansen et al. 2003; Preston et al. 2019). Positive Youth Development is thus a broad notion that embraces diverse competencies that can help not only in the sport itself but in a young person's life and future well-being as a whole.

Research into Positive Youth Development through sport consistently identifies coaches as playing an essential role when they are able to create meaningful relationships, develop life skills, foster an ideal learning environment, and satisfy basic emotional needs (Andersson, 2019; Cumming et al., 2006; Felton & Jowett, 2013; Preston et al., 2019; Raakman et al., 2010). Preston et al. (2019) identify four key behaviors towards this end: setting high standards, providing leadership opportunities, being a role model, and communicating with athletes. Coaches have been found to play key roles in young players' emotional and psychological development, and their behavior is critical to the development and transfer of life skills (Newman et al., 2021; Sheridan et al., 2014). Towards this end, coaches should create a positive environment, use positive reinforcement, and frame feedback in a constructive and positive manner (Bebetsos et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2021).

Preston et al.'s (2019) study on facilitating positive youth development in youth hockey underscored the difficulty that coaches face—especially in elite youth sports—in balancing PYD- and performance-related objectives. Towards that end, they argued that the professionalized culture of youth hockey requires a shift toward holistic player development.

Camiré (2014) found that coaches who stated they deliberately promoted Positive Youth Development were also highly experienced and trained, and this was not true of coaches who reported far fewer developmental strategies. The question then arises as to how more coaches can gain the pedagogical tools necessary to facilitate Positive Youth Development.

2.2 Coaching

As Carlsson & Lundqvist (2016) pointed out, coaches' behaviors can affect athletes positively or negatively. Coaches exert influence through the manner in which they perform their roles of instruction and assessment: their leadership styles, affective responses, and pre-performance behaviors (Keegan et al., 2009).

Numerous models have been developed to break down and analyze coaching styles, with a particular focus on youth sports (Baker et al., 2000; Côté et al., 1999; Felton & Jowett, 2013; Koh & Wang, 2015; Smith et al., 1977). These involve various scales and measurements, but a simple overview is presented by Cogburn et al. (2017) using a pair of axes: Firm <—> Unstructured on one, and Critical <—> Positive on the other. Their recommendation of the Firm-Positive combination (with "firm" meaning highly structured with clear expectations and "positive" suggesting that the coach is kind and emotionally supportive) is echoed by Ferguson et al. (2018), who talk about the coaching styles of Mentor, Educator, Confidant, and Motivator.

Olympiou et al.'s (2008) study contrasted a positive, task-involving coach climate (i.e., important role, co-operative learning, and effort improvement) with a negative, ego-involving coach climate (punishment for mistakes and intrateam member rivalry). Gould & Carson (2008) identified four sets of factors that were commonly expressed by positive, task-involving coaches.

- While highly motivated to win, these coaches had well-developed coaching philosophies that placed prime importance on developing life skills in their players.
- They had the ability to form strong relationships and connect with their players.
- The coaches reported a variety of well-thought-out strategies for teaching the life skills they deemed important.
- These coaches recognized that environmental factors (e.g., socioeconomic status) and other individuals (e.g., parents) influenced life skills development and took steps to adapt to, deal with, and/or resolve these issues.

In short, positive coaching behavior—leading to Positive Youth Development—involves support, instruction, and guidance, while demonstrating prosocial behaviors that encourage youth to respect opponents and teammates (Kim & Craig, 2020; Sagar & Jowett, 2012).

2.3 Emotional Abuse

On the other end of the spectrum is coaching behavior that, instead of promoting Positive Youth Development, evokes negative emotional and psychological reactions to the extent that it can be considered emotional abuse. Stirling and Kerr's oft-cited study (2008, p. 178) defined emotional abuse as "A pattern of deliberate, non-contact behaviours by a person within a critical relationship role that has the potential to be harmful. Acts of emotional abuse include physical behaviours, verbal behaviours, and acts of denying attention and support." This type of coaching behavior is associated with an ego-involving coach climate (Carlsson & Lundqvist, 2016; Gearity & Murray, 2011; Olympiou et al., 2008).

While the sexual abuse of athletes has been prominent in the news, it is the emotional abuse of athletes that is the form of abuse most frequently reported (Kerr et al., 2020). Coaches' abusive verbal behaviors—yelling and shouting at an athlete or group of athletes, belittling, name-calling, degrading comments, and humiliation—are quite common in sports and constitute emotional abuse (Alexander et al., 2011; Sagar & Jowett, 2012; Schinnerer, 2016; Stafford et al., 2013; Swigonski et al., 2014; Walters et al., 2012; Yabe et al., 2018). Raakman et al. (2010) list "yelling/swearing at players" as number one in the category of direct psychological abuse inflicted by coaches on players.

Such a negative climate induces anger, distractions, team divisions, and demotivation (Carlsson & Lundqvist, 2016). It also fosters sport-performance anxiety in which players negatively appraise themselves and what they are doing in the sport, leading to the athlete feeling unprepared or ill-equipped to handle the demands of the game and fearful of the consequences a negative performance could mean (Baker et al., 2000; Sagar & Jowett, 2012). This increased level of anxiety leads to negative effects on performance.

Not only does verbal abuse from a coach create an intimidating environment, but it also legitimizes such behavior in the eyes of athletes, making it seem okay and acceptable behavior towards their peers (Alexander et al., 2011; Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2020). Name-calling, shaming, screaming, swearing, and punishing serve to normalize interpersonal aggression and unhealthy competitive attitudes (Kim & Craig, 2020).

The impacts of this behavior on youth athletes include feeling stupid, feeling worthless; feeling upset; lacking self-confidence; feeling angry, feeling depressed, feeling humiliated; feeling fearful; and feeling hurt (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kerr et al., 2020). Exposure to verbal aggression has detrimental effects on both the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels, including decreased self-esteem, increased likelihood of becoming involved in delinquency, developing interpersonal problems, and resorting to physical aggression (Kassing & Infante 1999; Sagar & Jowett, 201). These can have long-term effects impact into adulthood, including difficulty forming new relationships, a propensity for engaging in abusive relationships, depression, maladaptive eating behavior, anxiety, social withdrawal, and psychosomatic disorders (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kassing & Infante 1999; Kerr et al., 2020; Yabe et al., 2019).

2.4 Punishment

Sagar & Jowett (2012) identified punishment, along with various forms of verbal abuse, as contributing to a destructive and ineffective coach-athlete partnership, pointing out that youth athletes are particularly vulnerable to coaches' threats and punishments. Punishing behavior is categorized by Cogburn et al. (2017) as being associated with the "Firm-Critical" coaching style in their model, stating that "The Firm-Critical coach is punitive when players do not perform well and is often observed as verbally demeaning, and prone to forcing players to perform difficult physical tasks as punishment for mistakes" (Cogburn et al., 2017, 450).

Flett et al. (2013) found that less effective coaches use harsher punishment strategies and present them in more demeaning ways. Stirling and Kerr (2008) found that some youth athletes felt that emotionally abusive behaviors by their coaches were used as a means of punishment for inadequate performance. In Andersson's (2019) study, referees emphasized that abusive and punitive actions by coaches—gesticulating displeasure, shouting and swearing, continually addressing mistakes, and publicly harassing them—create a hostile environment for the players.

Research has shown that punitive behavior by coaches is actually more likely to cause resentment from athletes than to improve performance. Punishing sorts of behavior lower players' intrinsic motivation and are negatively associated with need satisfaction by the athletes (Amorose, 2000; Felton & Jowett, 2013). It has also been identified as a factor contributing to children dropping out of sports (Smoll & Smith, 2006). Sagar and Jowett (2012) stress that coaches should ensure the players have the same amount of playing time and treat their players with respect and civility. When their players lose competitions or make mistakes in training, coaches need to be aware that their aggressive behavior can cause damage both to their relationship with their athletes and to the athletes' well-being and long-term psychological adjustment (Sagar & Jowett, 2012).

2.5 The Culture of Hockey

Hockey has been noted as particularly prone to violence, and this has received scholarly attention since the mid-1970s (Bloom & Smith, 1996). Smith's 1979 study found that approval of violence in hockey is widespread and increases with age group. This violence stems from a hockey culture that privileges particular expressions of hegemonic masculinity and marginalizes alternative masculinities considered to be feminine (Allain, 2008; Weinstein et al., 1995). Weinstein et al. (1995) pointed out that players are taught from an early age that their apparent competence—and the success of the team—is linked to aggressive tactics and rule infractions. Increased violence is statistically linked to a higher ranking of one's performance by coaches and teammates.

This culture of violence—or at least aggression—can all too easily carry over into abusive coaching practices. Within this context, Battaglia et al. (2018) studied punishments imposed on young hockey players by coaches, including benching in particular. They found that benching as punishment could be detrimental to the athlete's feeling of self-worth and his relations with the coach and teammates. They point to such punishment as one of the ways in which an athlete may experience harm from a coach.

2.6 Potential Explanations for Abusive Coaching Behavior

A number of explanations for verbal abuse from youth coaches have been proposed. These include the culture of hockey—that this is seen as normal behavior (Kerr et al., 2020; Stafford et al., 2013; Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2020); that such coaches are simply perpetuating how they themselves were coached (Yabe et al., 2018); that such coaches suffer from poor communication abilities (Kassing & Infante, 1999); that it represents egotism and a desire to dominate (Sagar & Jowett, 2012; Stirling & Kerr, 2008); that it is part of a "win at all costs" attitude (Kerr et al., 2020; Kim & Craig, 2020); that it makes the players tough (Schinnerer, 2016; Swigonski et al., 2014; Weinstein et al., 1995; Yabe et al., 2019); and that such coaches are emulating the behavior of professional coaches (Stafford et al., 2013).

SafeSport is a non-profit organization authorized by Congress to promote abuse prevention, education, and accountability in every sport and to end all forms of emotional abuse towards athletes. Every sports program has a SafeSport officer to whom one is supposed to go if one has experienced abuse. However, the PI has personally experienced blowback from coaches when parents complain. This retribution is taken out on the players themselves in the form of less ice time. Thus there is no truly effective mechanism for addressing abusive coaching.

3. Methodology

In order to explore causes and solutions to yelling and swearing by youth-hockey coaches, a pilot project was undertaken with a sample of coaches, referees, parents, and players, employing a qualitative research method with a phenomenological research design. As the current study focused on inquiring about participants' subjective experiences, the qualitative method was found appropriate. Further, the focus on lived experiences made the phenomenological research design more suitable. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with the participants, in which participants were asked a number of predetermined but open-ended questions (Given, 2008) or provided with written questionnaires. Of the coaches, one interview was conducted in person before the pandemic hit, two were interviewed over the phone, and three filled out the questionnaire. All referee interviews were conducted by phone.

One parent interview was conducted by phone. The others filled out the questionnaire. Parents were interviewed as to what they had noticed in regard to their children's behavior on and off the ice, as well as their observations of their children's coach and any actions they may have taken.

After parental informed consent had been provided, players were asked questions by their parents. In all cases, the discussions began with general questions about what got them interested in hockey, what they liked and didn't like about the sport, etc. These warm-up questions then shifted to the topic of verbal abuse by coaches. Parents reported the players' responses via a written questionnaire.

Substantive questions were based on the peer-reviewed literature discussed previously regarding appropriate and inappropriate coaching behavior with a focus on shouting and swearing. These questions aimed to elucidate perceptions of the different participant groups regarding the causes and solutions to verbally abusive behavior.

Different interview protocols were developed for each of the groups. Though there were overlaps in the questions included, there were also some differences or exclusions depending on the relevance of certain questions for each group of participants. Substantive questions regarding abusive coaching were embedded in a larger set of questions designed to put participants at ease.

- a. Players: 10 questions total; two on ice hockey participation and abusive coaching

- b. Coaches: 26 questions total; seven on abusive coaching, five on solutions
- c. Parents: 17 questions total; four on abusive coaching, two on solutions
- d. Referees: 24 questions total, one on abusive coaching, four on solutions

To ensure participant anonymity, each participant was referred to by their group and a number, e.g., Coach 1, Parent 1, Referee 1.

Following Williams et al. (2017), both the interviews and the questionnaires began with simple “boilerplate” questions that were asked to make the interviewee comfortable, e.g., “What was the reason you chose to [coach/play/referee] ice hockey?” “What do you like the most about [coaching/playing/refereeing] ice hockey?”

Following collection, all interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy and thoroughness of data analysis and then transcribed. The interviews all took place between March 2020 through July 2020.

3.1 Population and Participants

The sample consisted of five players, five parents, three referees, and six coaches. All the participants were from the metropolitan New York and New England areas. As particular characteristics required from the different categories of participants were known, a purposive sampling technique was used to identify the participants, and snowball sampling was employed once some participants were identified. Participants were accessed through the personal connections of the researcher and the participants. Specifically, players and parents were recruited from hockey programs where the primary researcher coached or where their children had played. Some participants were recruited when the primary researcher had personal knowledge of the athlete being abused. Coaches were recruited from the organization where the primary researcher was employed at the time of data collection. Referees were recruited from professional contacts obtained from the primary researcher’s position as a coach. The referees included in this study were chosen by their willingness to share their observations.

An invitation to participate was sent to each participant via email. Each of the participants was required to read and sign an informed-consent letter before participating. Youth players were approached by their parents, who gave consent on behalf of their children and who administered the questionnaire and reported their responses. No in-person interviews by the PI were conducted with the players. Parents were assured of total confidence that the information would be used for this research project only, would not be shared beyond the PI, and would be destroyed once collated with other players’ responses.

All the adult participants (coaches, referees, and parents) were college graduates, and some had advanced degrees. Of the six coaches, five were male and one female. Coaches ranged in age from 27 to 60 and had five to 40 years of coaching experience. The range of USA hockey certification was level 1 through level 5, with three level-5 coaches, one level 4, one level 2, and one level-1 coach. One coach also had Hockey Canada Coaching certification at level 2. At the time of data collection, the participants were coaching regionally, locally, and nationally. Three of the coaches worked in full-time coaching positions, while the remaining coaches reported unrelated full-time employment. One coach was conducting private lessons only. The coaches ranged from coaching mites (U8) through juniors (U20), college club hockey, and NCAA Division Three hockey. Each of the coaches had coached youth hockey for a portion of their careers and could relate to the research issues. The coaches’ experience as players ranged from youth hockey, high school hockey, junior hockey, college hockey, and professional hockey.

Each of the three referees had achieved USA Hockey Level 4 certification. One was a 17-year-old high school student, one was 35, and one was 51. They had all officiated mites (U8) through the Junior level (U20). Two had done Division 3 college hockey, and one had done Division 1 college hockey, minor league, and NHL exhibition games. All three played youth hockey up through the Midget (U18) and High School levels. One of the referees was a college freshman in a part-time referee position, while the other two referees were employed in full-time referee positions.

The parents were all from affluent suburbs of New York City. Three of the parents were involved in the finance sector for employment, one parent reported employment in the computer technology field, and the final parent worked in the mental health field. The parents ranged in age from mid-forties to the late fifties. All had sons who played for a coach whom the parents perceived to be abusive and had previously complained about a coach’s behavior. All parents reported a history of playing competitive sports up to and through the college level, though only one of the parents had played hockey at an organized level. The information obtained from the parents included information about abusive coaches their sons or daughters had while playing on a U12, U14, or U15 age team.

The players were from U12, U13, and U14 teams and were chosen because they were known—through reports of either their parents or themselves—to have been abused by coaches.

Demographic information on the study participants is presented in Table 1.

3.2 Positionality

According to Smith and McGannon (2018), it is important that researchers define their positions relative to the research in order to ensure coherence and trustworthiness. The PI is a multi-sport Division-1 collegiate and then semi-pro athlete with over 40 years as a coach at every level of hockey up through college and 20-plus years as a coaching consultant working with youth hockey coaches, teaching them how to communicate, motivate and treat their players. A parent of a child abused by one of his coaches, the PI started noticing and hearing from parents how abusive coaching practices were affecting their child’s enjoyment of the sport. This intimate experience with the topic—as a player, as a coach, and as a parent—made the PI extremely sensitive to all the participants’ journeys in the sport of hockey.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

| Participant | Identity | Age | Gender |
|--------------------|--|------------|---------------|
| Players | | | |
| Player 1 | African American and Caucasian | 14 | M |
| Player 2 | Asian-Pacific Islander, Hispanic & Caucasian | 13 | M |
| Player 3 | White, Jewish | 14 | M |
| Player 4 | White, Christian | 14 | M |
| Player 5 | White, Christian | 13 | M |
| Coaches | | | |
| Coach 1 | White | 60 | M |
| Coach 2 | White | 59 | M |
| Coach 3 | White | 60 | M |
| Coach 4 | White | 37 | M |
| Coach 5 | White | 35 | M |
| Coach 6 | First Nations | 27 | F |
| Referees | | | |
| Referee 1 | White | 51 | M |
| Referee 2 | White | 17 | M |
| Referee 3 | African American | 35 | M |
| Parents | | | |
| Parent 1 | African American and Caucasian | 50 | M |
| Parent 2 | Asian Pacific Islander, Hispanic and Caucasian | 58 | M |
| Parent 3 | White, Jewish | 48 | M |
| Parent 4 | White, Christian | 55 | M |
| Parent 5 | White, Christian | 55 | M |

In order to observe coaching behaviors up close, the PI volunteered to run the scoreboard clock located between the two team’s benches to gain insight into how players were being coached. The majority of the teams were playing at Tier 1 (AAA) and Tier 2 (AA) levels, where the drive to win sometimes outweighs the coaches’ need to develop their players’ skills and love of the game.

The PI maintained the rigor of the data by cultivating interview subjects from referrals, personal contacts, and from observing coaching behavior in rinks that he had coached in, where he was hired as a coaching consultant, or where his son had played youth hockey. To provide transparency related to the findings, the PI has defined his philosophical assumptions and his position and relationships in regard to the study.

3.3 Data Analysis

In keeping with Charmaz (2014), a flexible approach was employed to keep codes simple, precise, and open to re-interpretation as necessary. The analysis began with transcription and repeated readings of the interviews and questionnaires. “In-dwelling” was achieved through reading and re-reading (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The data was repeatedly examined for patterns across responses. Preliminary codes emerged from common phrases (e.g., “the culture of hockey” and “winning at all costs”) to derive commonalities and dominant themes. The one theme that did not emerge in so many words was “Positive Youth Development.” Statements that were placed into this category included the word “positive,” remarks about the coach being a teacher, “developing” the players, “nurturing,” “instilling confidence,” “role model,” and “encouragement and support.” These correlate directly with PYD as defined in the literature. Key themes and their meanings were identified and manually coded (Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2016). Finally, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they addressed the current study’s research question (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Tables 2-4 tabulate the numbers of times each theme received mention within the data and from which population.

4. Results

Because the parents and players were selected for this study because they had reported or mentioned abusive behavior, it follows that all of those two categories of participants reported such behavior in the surveys. Two of five players also reported seeing their coaches physically hit players. The players' responses to abusive behavior included that it made the sport "not fun" (n=3), created fear (n=2), and/or created embarrassment or shame (n=1).

The survey administered to the players by their parents asked two questions regarding abusive coaching behavior:

1. Have you ever seen a teammate being benched/yelled at by a coach after doing something wrong?
2. Have you ever been benched/yelled at by a coach after doing something wrong?

All players answered "yes" to each question, but there is no teasing apart the three different types of abuses listed to determine the extent of each. A similar question was asked of the parents, with a long list of abusive behaviors—cursing, yelling, punishing, benching. Two responded with all of them, and one stated specifically, "The coach would punish my son or his teammates by benching them (in practice and in games for making a mistake), making them do punishment skates."

Only one of the coaches discussed punishment:

"I think every kid remembers the first day they were ever they ever did in the first game they ever didn't play the whole game. And whether that's punishment for something controllable, you know, like, I mean, you're not going to get benched for a whole game for consistent tardiness. But if you're trying, if the coach is trying to enforce a rule or a value then, and it's well communicated why you're sitting, you know, um, then that there could be some value there, I think. But to leave a kid on the bench and not explain to them why they're sitting in or because of, you know, lack of effort or hustle or just not being good...[C]oaches must ensure that athletes adhere to and respect certain team rules and procedures such as arriving on time, dress codes, curfews, paying attention during practice. I always tell parents at the beginning of the year that I believe in equal playing time unless your kid breaks the asshole rule."

The perceived reasons for abusive coaching behavior varied across the other three groups (Table 3). The primary explanation was that these coaches "coach as they were coached," representing an "old school" approach to coaching (n=18). The "culture of hockey" and the "pressure to win" were perceived as the second most important reasons (n=15). "Ego" (including "macho" and "control") followed (n=10, but none from parents). Close to that was "poor communication skills" (n=8). At the low end were "Lack of Maturity" (n=4), "lack of proper training" (n=4), and "Substance Abuse" (n=3).

Regarding whether they had reported abusive coaching to the Safesport office, four of five parents said they had not. Fear of retribution was specifically mentioned by all:

Parent 1: "No fear of retribution and fear he might retaliate against my child or me, and US Hockey said regardless of the evidence, we could not file a claim anonymously."

Parent 2: "Did not report fear of coach retaliating and becoming more abusive. The coach does not seem stable, and I am afraid he might hurt my kid or come after me if we complained and he got fired. It's a crazy world we live in, and a local high school hockey coach who was fired went looking for the parents who complained."

Parent 4: "Fear of retribution, we paid 7,000 dollars if I complain, my kid will get benched and yelled at in practice and less ice time in games."

Parent 5: "Sadly, no, driven by the belief that it wouldn't matter and concern about retribution."

Table 2: Players' Responses

| Players Question | Yes | No | Codes |
|---|------------|-----------|---|
| What are some of the things, if any, that you do not like about ice hockey, e.g., skating drills, losing, conditioning exercises being benched, etc.? | – | – | Not Fun (n=2) Abuse from coach (n=1) Punishment (n=1) Fear of being hurt (n=1) |
| Have you ever seen a teammate being benched/yelled at by a coach after doing something wrong? | 5 | 0 | |
| Have you ever been benched/yelled at by a coach after doing something wrong? | 5 | 0 | |
| Have you ever seen a coach physically hit one of your teammates? | 2 | 3 | |
| How did you handle your coaches, blaming, shaming, name calling, and angry style of coaching? | – | – | Fear (n=2) Not fun (n=1) Embarrassment (n=1) |

Proposed solutions also varied considerably across the three groups (Table 4). The most prominent aspect was a recognition that youth sports should focus on Positive Youth Development—e.g., setting a role model and teaching life skills (n=21)—with coaches prominently emphasizing this point.

The second was the suggestion that some sort of education, training and even certification be required for coaches, just as it already is for teachers (n=10). One parent recommended “Improved instructional clinics and mandated positive coaching alliance courses and certifications, along with continuing education.” Some coaches emphasized that coaches be educated in communication, especially with children, since talking to children is not the same as talking to adults.

Table 3: Perceived Reasons for Yelling and Swearing

| | Coaching as was coached | Culture of Hockey | Pressure to Win | Ego, control | Poor communication skills | Lack of maturity | Lack of training | Substance abuse |
|--------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Parents | 6 | 8 | 5 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| Coaches | 7 | 5 | 7 | 8 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Refs | 5 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 18 | 15 | 15 | 10 | 8 | 4 | 4 | 3 |

Table 4: Perceived Solutions

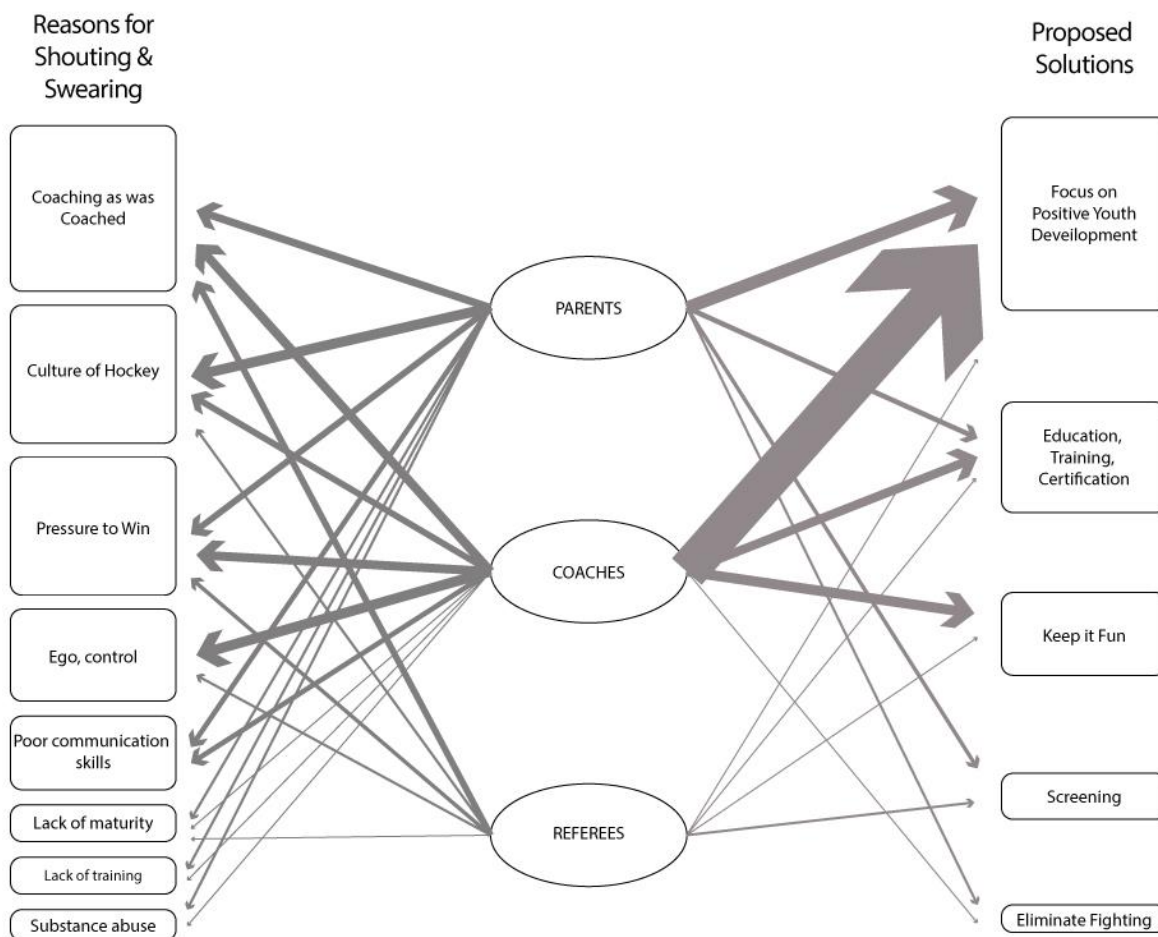
| | PYD | Education, Training, Certification | Keep it Fun | Screening | Eliminate Fighting |
|---------------|-----------|--|-------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Parents | 10 | 4 | 0 | 3 | 2 |
| Coaches | 31 | 7 | 8 | 0 | 1 |
| Refs | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| Totals | 21 | 12 | 9 | 5 | 3 |

Coaches, in particular, were also more prone to emphasize “keeping the game fun” (n=9) as a remedy for the “winning at all costs” attitude and the negatively perceived “culture of hockey.”

The least emphasized across the three groups—and not mentioned by coaches at all—was to put some sort of screening in place (n=5). One parent suggested, “Give tests that will show what their coaching personality is,” and another recommended creating “results charts or surveys as to why players quit because of bad coaching.” A third suggested coach be observed and assessed. And finally, some suggested that fighting be eliminated from youth hockey (n=3).

The results are graphically presented in Figure 1, in which the sizes of the boxes and the arrows reflect the number of responses overall and from each population group.

Figure 1: Schematic Representation of Responses



It is abundantly clear both from the literature and from the data in this study that youth hockey should focus on Positive Youth Development and that abusive behavior by coaches runs contrary to this goal. To ensure that PYD is the dominant theme in youth hockey coaching, the clearest solution proposed is some sort of requisite training and certification for coaches. This is necessary because there is an “old school” of coaching that favors abusive practices, and this approach is perpetuated across generations of coaches. A recommendation is to create a curriculum that will help new coaches unlearn such paradigms and create a more positive atmosphere that promotes Positive Youth Development. More thorough screening of coaches, regular evaluations that enforce tighter standards for behavior, and more stringent requirements to get certification are some of the practical recommendations that can be implemented.

While there are certification levels for youth-hockey coaches, these do not involve teaching about how to coach, including communication skills for working with youths. Referees must work their way up, starting with the youngest children, and are evaluated all season long. Coaches, on the other hand, are never evaluated. Despite their prominent role in youth development, coaches are not put through the same sorts of training and screening required for teachers.

It is also advisable that parents unlearn the old coaching paradigms and learn more about Positive Youth Development. This should become the culture of Youth Hockey, rather than the “win at all costs” mentality that is shared by some coaches and parents. That harsh behavior brings out the best in athletes has been thoroughly debunked. It is important to note that not one of the players mentioned anything about winning when asked about what they liked about hockey.

Fear of retribution on the part of the parents also needs to be addressed. The current SafeSport approach is clearly not working. It is important to end the fear of retribution and to develop a less-threatening way for parents and players to complain about SafeSport violations. Requiring coaches to complete some of the positive coaching alliance courses regarding positive coaching behaviors might obviate much of the abuse, but there may be a need for stiff punishments for those found to be abusive.

5. Conclusion

This small pilot study scratches the surface of the issue of abusive coaching in youth hockey. At the same time, it highlights some of the key issues both in the literature and from four different perspectives: players, parents, coaches, and referees. In order to bring greater depth and breadth to these issues and their potential solutions, further study is needed.

Conflicts of interest: The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Funding: No funding was received for conducting this study.

Publisher’s Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Adetunji, O. J., & Akindutire, I. O. (2017). Benefits of participation in sport to the youth. *Journal of Sports and Physical Education* (4)1, 30–34.
- [2] Alexander, K., Stafford, A., & Lewis, R. (2011). *The experiences of children participating in organized sport in the UK*. The University of Edinburgh/NSPCC Child Protection Research Centre.
http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/findings/experiences_children_sport_wda85008.html
- [3] Allain, K.A. (2008). “Real fast and tough”: The construction of Canadian hockey masculinity. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25, 462–481.
<https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.25.4.462>
- [4] Amorose, A.J. (2000). Intrinsic motivation: Relationships with collegiate athletes’ gender, scholarship status and perceptions of their coaches’ behavior. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 22, 63–84. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.22.1.63>
- [5] Andersson, E. (2019). A referee perspective on the educational practice of competitive youth games: Exploring the pedagogical function of parents, coaches, and referees in grassroots soccer. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 24(6), 615–628.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2019.1652806>
- [6] Appelqvist-Schmidlechner, K., Vaara, J., Häkkinen, A., Vasankari, T., Mäkinen, J., Mäntysaari, M., & Kyröläinen, H. (2018). Relationships between youth sports participation and mental health in young adulthood among Finnish males. *American Journal of Health Promotion* 32(7), 1502–1509. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0890117117746336>
- [7] Baker, J., Côté, J., & Hawes, R. (2000). The relationship between coaching behaviours and sports anxiety in athletes. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, 3(2), 110–119. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1440-2440\(00\)80073-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1440-2440(00)80073-0)
- [8] Battaglia, A., Kerr, G., & Stirling, A. (2018). An outcast from the team: Exploring youth ice hockey goalies’ benching experiences. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 38, 39–46.
- [9] Bloom, G. A. & Smith, M. D. (1996). Hockey violence: A test of cultural spillover theory. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 13, 65–77.
<https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.13.1.65>
- [10] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology: Research Designs: Quantitative, Qualitative, Neuropsychological, and Biological*, 2, 57–71. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- [11] Camiré, M. (2014) Youth Development in North American High School Sport: Review and Recommendations. *Quest*, 66, 495–511.
<https://10.1080/00336297.2014.952448>

- [12] Carlsson, A., & Lundqvist, C. (2016). The Coaching Behavior Scale for Sport (CBS-S): A psychometric evaluation of the Swedish version. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports*, 26 (1), 116-123. DOI: [10.1111/sms.12359](https://doi.org/10.1111/sms.12359)
- [13] Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- [14] Côté, J., Yardley, J., Hay, J., Sedgwick, W., & Baker, J. R. (1999). An exploratory examination of the coaching behavior scale for sport. *AVANTE*, 5, 82-92.
- [15] Cogburn, M., Horton, R., & McNeil, S. (2017). Considering a relationship between dysfunctional coaching styles in youth sports and the development of hazardous attitudes in players. *Journal of Psychology Research*, 7(8), 445-452. <https://doi.org/10.17265/2159-5542/2017.08.004>
- [16] Cumming, S., Smith, R., & Smoll, F. (2006). Athlete-perceived coaching behaviors: Relating two measurement traditions. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 28(2), 205-213. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.28.2.205>
- [17] Diamond, A. B. (2015). The cognitive benefits of exercise in youth. *Current Sports Medicine Reports*, 14(4), 320-326. <https://doi.org/10.1249/JSR.0000000000000169>
- [18] Felton, L., & Jowett, S. (2013). "What do coaches do" and "how do they relate": Their effects on athletes' psychological needs and functioning. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 23, e130-e139. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sms.12029>
- [19] Ferguson, H. L., Swann, C., Liddle, S. K., & Vella, S. A. (2018). Investigating youth sports coaches' perceptions of their role in adolescent mental health. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 31(2), 235-252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2018.1466839>
- [20] Flett, M.R., Gould, D., Griffes, K.R., & Lauer, L. (2013). Tough love for underserved youth: A comparison of more and less effective coaching. *Sport Psychologist*, 27, 325-337. <https://doi.org/10.1123/TSP.27.4.325>
- [21] Gearity, B., & Murray, M. (2011). Athletes' experiences of the psychological effects of poor coaching. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 12(3), 213-221. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2010.11.004>
- [22] Gervis, M., & Dunn, N. (2004). The Emotional Abuse of Elite Child Athletes by their Coaches. *Child Abuse Review*, 13, 215-223. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.843>
- [23] Given, L. (2008). Semi-Structured Interview. *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n420>
- [24] Gould, D. & Carson, S. (2008). Life skills development through sport: current status and future directions. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 1(1), 58-78. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17509840701834573>
- [25] Hansen, D. M., Larson, R. W., & Dworkin, J. B. (2003). What Adolescents Learn in Organized Youth Activities: A Survey of Self- Reported Developmental Experiences. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 13(1), 25-55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1532-7795.1301006>
- [26] Holt, N. L., Neely, K. C., Slater, L. G., Camiré, M., Côté, J., Fraser-Thomas, J., MacDonald, D., Strachan, L., & Katherine A. Tamminen, K. A. (2017). A grounded theory of positive youth development through sport based on results from a qualitative meta-study. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 10(1), 1-49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2016.1180704>
- [27] Kassing, W. W., & Infante, D. A. (1999). Aggressive communication in the coach-athlete relationship. *Communication Research Reports*, 16(2), 110-120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824099909388708>
- [28] Kavanagh, E., Brown, L., & Jones, I. (2017). Elite athletes' experience of coping with emotional abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 29(4), 402-417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2017.1298165>
- [29] 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. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2008.12.003>
- [30] Kerr, G., Willson, E., & Stirling, A. (2020). "It was the worst time in my life": The effects of emotionally abusive coaching on female Canadian National Team athletes. *Women In Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 28(1), 81-89. <https://doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.2019-0054>
- [31] Kim, S., & Craig, W. (2020). Bullying in youth sports environments. In M. W. Bruner, M. A. Eys, & L. J. Martin (Eds.), *The power of groups in youth sport* (257-275). Elsevier Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-816336-8.00015-9>
- [32] Koh, K.T., & Wang, C. K. J. (2015). Gender and type of sport differences in perceived coaching behaviours, achievement goal orientations, and life aspirations of youth Olympic game Singaporean athletes. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 13(2), 91-103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2014.932820>
- [33] Lefebvre, J., Evans, M., Turnnidge, J., Gainforth, H., & Côté, J. (2016). Describing and classifying coach development programmes: A synthesis of empirical research and applied practice. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 11(6), 887-899. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747954116676116>
- [34] Maykut, P., & Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophic and practical guide* (6): Lewes: Falmer Press.
- [35] Newman, T., Black, S., Santos, F., Jefka, B., & Brennan, N. (2021). Coaching the development and transfer of life skills: a scoping review of facilitative coaching practices in youth sports, *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2021.1910977>
- [36] Olympiou, A., Jowett, S., & Duda, D. (2008). The psychological interface between the coach-created motivational climate and the coach-athlete relationship in team sports. *The Sport Psychologist*, 22, 423-438. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.22.4.423>
- [37] Preston, C., Allan, V., & Fraser-Thomas, J. (2019). Facilitating positive youth development in elite youth hockey: Exploring coaches' capabilities, opportunities, and motivations. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 33(3), 302-320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2019.1648327>
- [38] Raakman, E., Dorsch, K., & Rhind, D. (2010). The development of a typology of abusive coaching behaviours within youth sport. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 5(4), 503-515. <https://doi.org/10.1260/1747-9541.5.4.503>
- [39] Riessman, C. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. London: Sage.
- [40] Sagar, S. S., & Jowett, S. (2012). Communicative acts in coach-athlete interactions: When losing competitions and when making mistakes in training. *Western Journal of Communication*, 76(2), 148-174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2011.651256>
- [41] Schinnerer, J. L. (2016). The Consequences of Verbally Abusive Athletic Coaches. PsychCentral, <https://psychcentral.com/lib/the-consequences-of-verbally-abusive-athletic-coaches#1>

- [42] Sheridan, D., Coffee, P., & Lavalley, D. (2014). A systematic review of social support in youth sport. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 7(1), 198–228. <https://10.1080/1750984x.2014.931999>
- [43] Smith, B., & McGannon, K. R. (2018). Developing rigor in qualitative research: Problems and opportunities within sport and exercise psychology. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 11(1), 101–121. <https://10.1080/1750984x.2017.1317357>
- [44] Smith, B. (2016). *Narrative analysis in sport and exercise: How can it be done?* In B. Smith, & A. C. Sparkes (Eds.). *Handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise* (260–273). Routledge.
- [45] Smith, R., Smoll, F., & Hunt, E. (1977). A system for the behavioral assessment of athletic coaches. *American Alliance for Health, Physical Education and Recreation*, 48(2), 401–407. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10671315.1977.10615438>
- [46] 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). John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- [47] Stafford, A., Alexander, K., & Fry, D. (2013). 'There was something that wasn't right because that was the only place I ever got treated like that': Children and young people's experiences of emotional harm in sport. *Childhood* 22(1), 121–137. <https://10.1177/0907568213505625>
- [48] Stirling, A. E., & Kerr, G. A. (2008). Defining and categorizing emotional abuse in sport. *European Journal of Sport Science*, 8(4), 173–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17461390802086281>
- [49] Swigonski, N. L., Enneking, B. A., & Hendrix, K. S. (2014). Bullying behavior by athletic coaches. *Pediatrics* 133(2), e273–e275. <https://10.1542/peds.2013-3146>
- [50] Vveinhardt, J., & Fominiene, V. B. (2020). Bullying trends inside sport: When organized sport does not attract but intimidates. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 2037. <https://10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02037>
- [51] 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, 208–215. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2011.11.008>
- [52] Weinstein, M. D., Smith, M. D., & David L. Wiesenthal. D. L. (1995). Masculinity and Hockey Violence. *Sex Roles*, 33(11/12), 831–847. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01544782>
- [53] Williams, M., Czech, D. R., & Biber, D. D. (2017). The impact of NCAA division I women soccer coaching style on player well-being: A qualitative analysis. *Applied Research in Coaching and Athletics Annual*, 32, 1–12.
- [54] Willson, E. (2018). Effects of emotionally abusive coaching practices on athletes. *Journal of Exercise, Movement, and Sport*, 50(1). Retrieved from <https://www.scapps.org/jems/index.php/1/article/view/1909>.
- [55] Yabe, Y., Hagiwara, Y., Sekiguchi, T., Momma, H., Tsuchiya, M., Kuroki, K., Kanazawa, K., Koide, M., Itaya, N., Yoshida, S., Sogi, Y., Yano, T., Itoi, E., & Nagatomi, R. (2018). The characteristics of coaches that verbally or physically abuse young athletes. *The Tohoku Journal of Experimental Medicine*, 244(4), 297–304. <https://doi.org/10.1620/tjem.244.297>
- [56] Yabe, Y., Hagiwara, Y., Sekiguchi, T., Momma, H., Tsuchiya, M., Kanazawa, K., Koide, M., Itaya, N., Yoshida, S., Sogi, Y., Yano, T., Onoki, T., Itoi, E., & Nagatomi, R. (2019). Parents' own experience of verbal abuse is associated with their acceptance of abuse towards children from youth sports coaches. *The Tohoku Journal of Experimental Medicine*, 249(4), 249–254. <https://doi.org/10.1620/tjem.249.249>