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Article in *Leisure Studies* · April 2006

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The Good Father: Parental Expectations and Youth Sports

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(Received March 2005; revised October 2005; accepted November 2005)

ABSTRACT *Family life and expectations for parents have changed dramatically over the past two generations. In the United States these changes have been fuelled by a combination of factors, including a conservative emphasis on traditional family values and fathers as heads of households, a neo-liberal emphasis on individualism and the need for fathers to take responsibility for the development of their children, a liberal feminist emphasis on gender equity in family life, and progressive ideas about the meaning of gender and sexuality. As a result of these factors mothers and fathers today are held responsible for the whereabouts and actions of their children 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This standard, never before used in any society as a baseline measure for good parenting, serves as a foundation for linking the character and achievements of children to the moral worth of parents. Because sports are activities in which a child's success is visible and objectively measurable, and because fathers are more likely than mothers to have or claim expertise in sports, the development of athletic skills among children is often monitored by fathers who act as coaches, managers, agents, mentors, and advocates for their child athletes. Therefore, the involvement of fathers in youth sports is grounded in complex cultural changes and it has implications for families and father-child relationships. These implications are discussed in light of new expectations that connect the moral worth of parents to the success of their children.*

KEYWORDS: *fatherhood, family dynamics, sports, culture, child athletes*

Introduction

When I was successful in youth sports, people told my father that he was lucky to have a child like me. When my children were successful, people would tell me that I must be proud of them and their achievements. Today, when sons *and* daughters excel in sports, their success is directly attributed to parents, especially fathers. In fact, fathers of age group champions are now interviewed and questioned by others seeking the secrets to their success in 'creating' athletic prodigies.

These generational shifts in popular perceptions of a father's role in the sport participation of his children, sons and daughters, are part of general cultural

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changes related to family, gender, and sports, especially in the United States. Fathers who don't actively advocate the interests of their children are seen by many people today as not meeting standards for good parenting. In many communities fathers are expected to actively promote their children's success. In the case of youth sports this means that fathers are expected to support and guide children as they learn to play sports. Not surprisingly, some fathers take this expectation seriously and serve as teachers, coaches, managers, agents, mentors, and advocates for their child athletes.¹

Fatherhood and the involvement of fathers in family life have not been given much attention by social scientists. Research does exist (LaRossa, 1988, 1997; Aldous *et al.*, 1998; Deinhart, 1998; Lamb, 2004; Marsiglio *et al.*, 2005), but it tells us much less than we should know about the concrete, practical implications of recent cultural changes in the meaning of fatherhood. I have found that youth sports provide a window for viewing and studying these implications in the everyday lives of fathers and families. But as I look through this window I confess that, like my colleagues in sociology and the sociology of sport, I have ignored fatherhood and fathers in my 35 years of studying sports in society. It was only when Tess Kay, the editor of this issue of *Leisure Studies*, called attention to this oversight that I focused on this topic.

Because I approach fatherhood through the window of youth sports I will begin with background on the growth of youth sports in wealthy, post-industrial societies, primarily the United States. Then I will discuss the connections between this growth and changing definitions of 'the good father'. Finally, I will attempt to theorize these changes drawing on the ideas of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and suggesting that parental commitment to their children's sport participation is grounded in an emerging family habitus centred in the middle- and upper-middle class of post-industrial societies.

The Growth of Youth Sports

Since the 1950s, the leisure activities and sport participation of young people has increasingly occurred in organized programmes supervised by adults (Adler & Adler, 1998). This growth is the result of a combination of the following cultural and structural factors related to family, parenting, and childhood in many post-industrial societies:

1. An increase in the number of single parent families and families with both parents working outside the home.
2. An emerging neo-liberal view that parents are solely responsible for controlling and socializing their children and that child development is shaped by parenting strategies.
3. A longstanding cultural belief that sport participation automatically involves positive character-building experiences.
4. A media-inspired belief among many parents that the world outside the home is a dangerous place for children.
5. A general fear that children, especially boys, are bound to get into trouble if they are not controlled and properly socialized by adults.

6. The increased visibility of high-performance sports represented as important cultural events and athletes represented as cultural heroes.

Taken together, these six factors, among others, have created a context in which parents actively seek adult-supervised activities for their children.² In this context, organized youth sports are seen by many parents as high priority activities because they occur under the control of adult coaches and teach important cultural lessons related to competition and working with others to achieve goals in rule-governed situations.

Additionally, youth sports are attractive because they have predictable schedules, provide parents with measurable indicators of their children's accomplishments, and enable children to gain status among peers and in the larger community. From a parent's point of view, organized youth sports keep their children off the street, out of trouble, and involved in a character-building activity that is enjoyable and valued in society. In short, when children play sports, mothers and fathers feel that they are meeting their responsibilities as parents. For many fathers, organized sports also provide a setting in which they feel comfortable and competent as a parent. Their knowledge of sports and their past experiences serve as a basis for fathering and participating in child rearing in ways that are consistent with traditional ideas about masculinity and widely approved in society.

Fathers and Fatherhood in Contemporary Society

For most of the 20th century good fathers were good breadwinners. Although interpreted differently across cultures and social classes, this definition of fatherhood served in the US and other industrialized societies to focus the attention of many fathers on work to the point that they spent little time on the quality of family relationships. As this occurred, fathers were gradually marginalized from family life. In the United States in particular, this led many families to be characterized by father-child and husband-wife alienation (Griswold, 1993). Correspondingly, the power of fathers in the domestic sphere became increasingly tenuous and dependent on a combination of their income and an ideology of male supremacy.

Despite romanticized, post World War II, depictions of families with breadwinning fathers and stay-at-home mothers, the social and economic realities of family life in the latter third of the 20th century led an increasing number of women to seek full time employment. As more mothers assumed part of the breadwinner role in many families, the foundation of fathers' power and authority eroded further. The pace and depth of erosion was accelerated after the mid-1960s as the ideological premises of the women's movement were accepted by many people. The feminisms that grew with the women's movement directly challenged the ideology of male supremacy and further undermined the traditional cultural foundation of fathers' power and authority.

These changes left fatherhood in a social and cultural limbo and forced people to confront a longstanding dilemma that first emerged when changes in the organization of work created a clear split between the private and public spheres of everyday life. After this split, the private sphere of family and home came to be

organized around the values and experiences of women, whereas the public sphere of work and politics was organized around the values and experiences of men. Under these conditions meaningful fatherhood depended on dealing with the dilemma of how to simultaneously domesticate masculinity and masculinize domesticity (Gavanoas, 2003).

According to feminists and other progressives, the strategy for resolving this dilemma required that fathers become co-parents, do their share of housework, and accept a definition of masculinity based on a commitment to gender equity and radical changes in gender relations. According to conservatives and neo-liberals the dilemma could be resolved only if fathers asserted themselves as heads of their families and adopted a directive, hands-on style of leadership based on a commitment to traditional family values and individual responsibility.

In the face of these ideologically contradictory resolutions many men felt confused, threatened, or trapped. The strategy offered by feminists and other progressives required radical changes that made many men uncomfortable, if not desperately and aggressively defensive. The strategy offered by conservatives and neo-liberals was consistent with traditional and idealized conceptions of manhood and the family, but many men felt that it was out of touch with the realities of everyday life and the experiences of their wives and children. And both strategies required commitments inconsistent with jobs that provided little or no flex-time and had no father-friendly benefits (LaRossa, 1997). Therefore, fathers faced a difficult challenge: negotiate your job and/or career so that you can choose between entering and learning to participate in a feminized domestic sphere, or taking charge of the family and assertively change the domestic sphere to reflect an ideology supportive of hegemonic masculinity.

Of course, this explanation of fatherhood is oversimplified and it gives less credit to fathers than they deserve. The challenge described above did not catch most men by surprise. They already knew that it was difficult to negotiate the demands of work and family so that expectations could be met in each sphere. However, the stark contrast between the resolutions offered by feminists/progressives on the one hand and conservatives/neo-liberals on the other hand forced many men to revisit this challenge and consider the ideological approach that might best resolve the fatherhood dilemma and guide their involvement in the family.

There is little research that helps us understand the diverse strategies employed by fathers as they have coped with the dilemma in family settings. We do know, however, that discourses describing a 'new fatherhood profile' now pervade some post-industrial cultures, and that many fathers perform household and childrearing tasks that their fathers never did. But at the same time we also know that the actual time that fathers spend with their children has increased only slightly over the past three decades (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). This means that there is a need to understand more fully the structural and cultural constraints faced by fathers articulating a rhetoric of new fatherhood on the one hand but not making significant changes when it comes to spending time with their children.

In light of this background information, an analysis of the involvement of fathers in youth sports provides useful information about the dynamics of fathering in the context of the 21st century.

Fathers and Youth Sports

Sports in general and youth sports in particular have since the 1950s provided fathers with a context in which they can be involved with their children without challenging dominant gender ideology. In fact, youth sports are unique in this respect because most activities related to the domestic sphere in post-industrial societies lack institutionalized support for the involvement of fathers. For example, the everyday operation of schools and churches has come to depend largely on the involvement and labour of women. And child care, when available, has been organized by women in response to the needs of mothers. In each of these feminized contexts many fathers continue to feel out of place even though there has been an emerging cultural consensus that they should be there. Not so with youth sports, a context that has been organized and controlled by men in ways that reaffirm traditional gender ideology at the same time that they meet expectations for father involvement.

In an insightful discussion of the politics of fatherhood in the United States Anna Gavanas (2003) notes that sports, as largely homosocial arenas, serve as convenient sites for men to negotiate masculinity and be involved as fathers without being forced to make a choice between domesticating masculinity or masculinizing domesticity. She explains this in the following terms:

...by transposing the cultivation of masculinity and male parenting into sport arenas and framing fathering practices in terms of coaching and team sport, [men]...can differentiate between fatherhood and motherhood, and simultaneously make fathering seem manly, heroic and appealing. (Gavanas, 2003: p. 8)

Although this statement is accurate, especially in connection with the US-based Fatherhood Responsibility Movement that Gavanas was studying, it is an incomplete description of the way men have either resolved or skirted around the fatherhood dilemma described above.

In some cases, it is very clear that the men serving as coaches, league administrators, and officials in youth sports are committed to traditional gender ideology and use it on the playing field to help boys understand what it means to be a man. These are the men who chastise boys by referring to them as 'girls' or 'ladies' when they play poorly or incorrectly. Similarly, there are fathers who coach teams or simply encourage their son's involvement in sports with an eye toward making their boys into men tough enough and competitive enough to succeed in a 'man's world'. Even some fathers who coach girls' teams, and encourage their daughters to play sports, are strongly committed to traditional gender ideology and use their expertise with sports to reaffirm male superiority and teach girls that they are ladies as well as athletes.

Research by Janet Chafetz and Joseph Kotarba (1995) shows that mothers also reproduce traditional gender ideology and essentialize gender differences as they provide labour that makes youth sports possible. The upper-middle class little league mothers observed in their study engaged in many gender-specific tasks that facilitated enjoyable sport experiences for their sons and husbands. The mothers laundered uniforms, bought and cooked meals, served as chauffeurs and social directors, and organized their daughters as cheerleaders (Chafetz & Kotarba, 1995; Thompson, 1999). At the same time, fathers consulted with coaches, scouted

opponents, provided strategic advice to their sons, assessed the quality of playing fields and umpires, and critiqued the games that were played. In the end both mothers and fathers claimed moral worth as parents because each of them, in their highly gendered roles, enabled their sons to experience success in sports.

After studying youth sports for 35 years, mostly from the perspectives of the children who play them, I know that parental involvement in general and the involvement of fathers in particular may also be guided by progressive ideas about gender and fatherhood. Some fathers make concerted efforts to choose or organize for their children sports programmes that emphasize gender equity, cooperation, and the pleasure of movement in the place of male-centred, competitive, and performance-oriented ethos. These fathers integrate youth sport participation into family life in ways that clearly involve co-parenting, sharing household chores, and gender equity. But we know nothing about the conditions under which this occurs or the dynamics of how it occurs over time.

Other fathers use youth sports and a wide range of away-from-the-home recreational activities as experiences that they can enjoy as they spend 'quality parenting time' with their children. This often occurs at the same time that these fathers expect their wives to take care of in-and-around-the-home aspects of childrearing. As a result, this form of father involvement enables men to meet general expectations for spending time with their children while avoiding a choice between the feminist/progressive and the conservative/neo-liberal resolutions of the fatherhood dilemma. It appears that these fathers add masculinized activities to the periphery of the domestic sphere, thereby avoiding the task of actually changing the culture and dynamics of lived everyday family life. This is the strategy used by fathers who buy moto-cross bikes, snowmobiles, ski boats, kayaks, camping gear, rock climbing equipment, and other recreational toys that can be enjoyed with children (see http://fatherhood.about.com/od/sportsandrecreation/index_r.htm). In these activities fathers are the teachers of instrumental skills outside the home, a role that involves a form of parenting without accepting the changes called for by feminists/progressives or altering everyday family life as called for by conservatives/neo-liberals.

Finally, in cases when a child is an exceptional athlete it often is the father who makes important decisions about training and competition. He may not drive his son or daughter to practice or launder their sports clothes, but he selects the coach, the club, or the team on which his child will train and compete. He also supervises the selection of equipment and plans strategies for upcoming matches or games. And he often pays most of the bills related to training – sometimes amounting to \$10,000–\$40,000 annually. To the extent that his child is successful, he is defined as a good father.

With youth sports offering fathers a wide range of parenting opportunities it is not surprising that many fathers feel comfortable using them as sites to be involved with their children. This is one of the reasons why fathers and mothers are willing to invest so many family resources into organized sports participation for their children. Even as youth sports programmes have increasingly become privatized and expensive, parents have been willing to alter family budgets to support participation. For example, when my students and I interviewed the parents of elite youth ice hockey players who had travelled from near and far to play in a highly

publicized tournament, we found that parents routinely spent between \$5000 and \$20,000 per year to support their sons' participation in hockey alone.³ Although they realized that such expenditures were excessive they explained that the benefits for their sons were worth the money and the time that the family spent travelling to and attending hockey games.

The general issue of parental commitment to youth sports has been the focus of limited research. Although data are scarce, it is possible to use them to develop hypotheses related to contemporary parenting and fatherhood.

Parental Commitment to Youth Sports

Parental commitment is a key factor in the sport participation of children because participation usually depends on parental expenditures of money, time, and energy (Chafetz & Kotarba, 1995; Hellstedt, 1995; Duncan, 1997). Prior to the 1980s in the United States, for example, the majority of youth sport programmes were publicly funded and neighbourhood-based, so children could manage their participation without extensive parental commitment and involvement. Fees in these programmes were minimal. Parental participation usually was limited to volunteer coaching and minor forms of administrative support. However, as youth sport programmes have become increasingly privatized, regionally located, expensive, performance-oriented, and highly structured in terms of participation schedules, children have become more and more dependent on their parents to make participation possible. At the same time, many parents have come to see participation in sports, especially performance-oriented, competitive sports, as an important part of their children's overall socialization.

Research on youth sports gives us a glimpse into the origins and dynamics of parental commitment to the sport participation of children. Most researchers have raised social psychological questions and focused on how young people are socialized into sport participation and how parental support and beliefs are associated with the enjoyment, enthusiasm, self-esteem, beliefs, goal orientations, achievement, and continued participation of children (Power & Woogler, 1994; Averill & Power, 1995; Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Brustad, 1996; Kimiecik *et al.*, 1996; Hoyle & Leff, 1997). There have also been studies highlighting the outcomes that parents believe or hope to be associated with their children's sport participation (Jambor & Weekes, 1995; Horn *et al.*, 1999). However, none of these studies helps us understand the social and cultural context in which parents make commitments to the sport participation of their children.

When Richard Dukes and I (Dukes & Coakley, 2002) studied parental commitment among the upper-middle class white parents of swimmers in USA Swimming's competitive developmental programmes we were amazed at what parents did to support the sport participation of one or more of their children.⁴ Parents explained their commitment in terms of the benefits they expected their children to gain from participation. But our data did not explain why, at this point in time in US culture, parents felt so totally responsible for the development of excellence among their sons and daughters.

Our explanation highlighted the prevalence of the conservative and neo-liberal view that parents must be accountable for the behaviour and whereabouts of their

children 24 hours a day and seven days a week. In line with this view, if a child fails in some visible, measurable way, parents are believed to be responsible for the failure. If a child succeeds, parents are deemed to be meeting expectations. If the child is a prodigy, parents are held in such high esteem that they are interviewed and even consulted by others interested in perfecting their own parenting. To the extent that parents internalize these expectations they blame themselves when their children do not meet or surpass relatively high developmental expectations; at the same time, when development surpasses expectations, parents often feel that they deserve special credit.

Under these conditions, the achievements of children in an activity as visible and highly publicized as sports come to symbolize proof of one's moral worth as a parent. Talented child athletes, therefore, become valuable moral capital in neighbourhoods, communities, and the subcultures associated with high-performance youth sport programmes. This leads many parents to feel obligated to 'invest' in their child's sport participation. Not to make this investment would be taken by many people as a sign of a parent's moral failure. Of course, this also means that single parents, low income parents, and others who lack resources to support participation are, by definition, failures as parents.

It is not surprising that in the United States, where competition and individualism are highly valued, some people become competitive when claiming moral worth as parents. They look for ways to document progressive skill development as their children play sports. Percentile ranks become important, as does moving up to higher levels of competition in a sport; in fact, many sport programmes are deliberately organized to make achievement explicit and visible. When children receive trophies and other external rewards, such as upward mobility from the 'silver' to 'gold' level in a programme or receiving belts of different colours in the martial arts, these are used and often displayed as concrete proof of parental moral worth. This is often made clear as parents describe the sport events in which the awards were earned by (them and) their talented children.

As Dukes and I tried to theorize the connections between parental commitment, parental moral worth, and youth sports we suggested that children's sport participation, at least in upper-middle class families in the United States, occurs in connection with a particular family habitus that began to emerge during the 1980s. Our use of family habitus involves an extension and application of Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1978, 1984, 1985; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). According to Bourdieu habitus is an open, but relatively durable, system of dispositions, perceptions, tastes, preferences, and activities learned through socialization processes and regularly expressed by people as they make lifestyle choices and take action under particular social and material conditions.

As we use it, family habitus refers to a historically and socially situated system of dispositions and the family activities associated with them. It encompasses a combination of a belief system and lifestyle that is influenced by material conditions and historical practices that currently constitute family life in US culture. This concept is useful because it enables us to simultaneously consider cultural and structural factors as we try to understand the choices made within families.

Among the families we studied it seemed that family habitus involved a belief system and lifestyle that encompassed identifiable dispositions and practices

related to social class, family life, parenting, child development, and sport participation. Family habitus incorporated developmental goals and identified the types of activities believed to be helpful in reaching these goals. By implication, family habitus subsumes activities that parents think will best facilitate the development of their children while also conforming to the current, widespread belief that parents are directly responsible and even legally accountable for the behaviours and achievements/failures of their children. As such, it entails the interrelated notions that child development is important, that development ultimately depends on the actions of parents, and that the type of development most valued among many middle- and upper-middle income parents is achieved best through participation in adult-supervised, rationally organized programmes in which skills are built and manifested visibly and progressively through regular performances. Parents also see these programmes as sites where their children can gain or sustain social capital in the form of peer acceptance and cultural capital in the form of knowledge about how to succeed in organized, competitive reward structures in school and work.

Family habitus among middle and upper-middle class households is also associated with norms that prescribe individualism and personal responsibility (Bellah *et al.*, 1985). In a society where individualism and personal responsibility are so highly valued, parental support and love can be ‘...narrowed to a reward for doing well. [Under this condition] moral standards give way to the aesthetic tastes and technical skills of the achievement-oriented middle class. “Being good” becomes a matter of *being good at things...*’ (Bellah *et al.*, 1985: p. 60; italics in original). Organized, competitive, performance-based sports are among those ‘things’ because they are highly visible and involve progressive skill development that enables parents to assess their children’s achievement relative to age peers. These two factors have led organized youth sports to become a high priority activity in the culture at large.

Do issues related to fatherhood contribute to the commitments that parents must make to support the participation of their children in youth sports? My guess is that these issues are very important. As fathers seek to become increasingly involved in their children’s lives, youth sports provide parenting contexts that privilege men at the same time that they enable fathers to nurture relationships with sons and daughters and claim that they are sharing childrearing responsibilities with their wives, former wives, or partners. But the absence of research on this topic means that much of what is contained in this paper is best described as informed speculation. Hopefully, it will encourage future research on the dynamics of fatherhood today.

Notes

1. Research shows that fathers spend more time with sons than daughters (Yeung *et al.*, 1999; Lundberg & Rose, 2002), and fathers are likely more often involved directly with their sons’ sport participation than their daughters’ participation. However, men, including many fathers, play an active role in the sport participation of girls/daughters. I have no data on changes over time, but it is clear that fathers spend more time with their daughters in sports today because there are more sport opportunities available to girls. Fathers coach girls’ youth team sports more often than do mothers, even though there have been significant increases in the number and proportion of women/mothers who coach teams and serve as administrators in leagues (fixtures).

- But the local and fragmented organization of youth sports in the United States makes it difficult to obtain reliable data on these issues. However, as I speak about fathers in this paper, my comments apply to their relationships with sons *and* daughters.
2. In many cases, fathers and mothers provide some or all of the (volunteer) labour needed to initiate and/or maintain the organized youth sports programmes in which one or more of their children participate (see Chafetz & Kotarba, 1995; Thompson, 1999).
 3. These were informal interviews conducted every February from 1998 through 2004 as part of a course project. As parents sat in the stands, sociology of sport course students introduced themselves and asked if they could talk with them about the ways they integrated their son's hockey participation into their family lives. One of the last questions asked was how much money they estimated spending each year to support their son's participation in hockey. Their sons were unique in that they played on teams that travelled to tournaments regularly in addition to playing local games and being on the ice for practices and open hockey time. An estimated 300 interviews were done during the six years, and financial estimates were received from over half of the parents interviewed.
 4. Data in this study were collected in 1996 in a questionnaire mailed to a random sample of 1100 households with USA Swimming membership. A total of 767 questionnaires were usable, and data on parents and family life were analysed using structural equation modelling.

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