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3-2019

## Parent Perceptions of Their Child's Coach: Coaching Knowledge, Behavior, and Interpersonal Relationships

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# Parent perceptions of their child's coach: Coaching knowledge, behavior, and interpersonal relationships

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## ABSTRACT

*The two most significant agents for youth athletes are coaches and parents<sup>1</sup>. Even though the parent-child and coach-athlete relationship has been well explored, the relationship between parents and coaches has remained largely unexamined in the literature. Therefore, the current project surveyed 251 parents of children involved in the USTA 10 & Under tennis program concerning parent perceptions of their coach and the coach-parent relationship. Overall, parents rated their relationship with their coach as positive and communicated with them frequently on several aspects of the tennis environment and their child's development. Additionally, parents saw their child's coach as knowledgeable and positive. Even though these coaches were highly effective, attention should be paid to ensuring communication between parents starts early to prevent further issues and ensure parents are well-informed on how they can best support their child's development.*

**Keywords:** *Parents, Coaches, Tennis, Youth Sport*

Recent literature has shown that the two significant agents that are the most important for athletes in childhood and adolescence are coaches and parents.<sup>1</sup> With the importance of these relationships in mind, researchers have investigated both the coach-athlete relationship<sup>2-3</sup> and the parent-athlete relationship.<sup>4-5</sup> Surprisingly, the relationship between parents and coaches has remained largely unexamined. This third component of the coach-parent-athlete triad can have several consequences for both coaches (e.g., withdrawal from coaching) and athletes (e.g., decreased sport development and enjoyment),<sup>6</sup> and needs to be better understood for the benefit all parties involved.

One of the sole lines of research that has investigated the coach-parent relationship has asked parents to rank coach behaviors in terms of personal importance. Stewart<sup>7-8</sup> found that

parents wanted coaches who were fair and honest in working with their athletes, focused on ensuring enjoyment for their children, and emphasized sportsmanship above winning. Further, parents perceived coaches playing experience and commitment to winning less important than other aspects (e.g., enjoyment).

Even though the parents' perceptions of their child's coaches have been largely unexplored, one study has looked at expert coaches' views of parents' involvement in tennis. Gould, Pierce, Wright, Lauer, and Nalepa found that 10 & Under tennis (10U) coaches perceived parents as challenging when parents did not understand or fully "buy-into" the modified format, focused only on immediate results instead of long-term development, put unneeded pressure on youth to succeed, and were overinvolved in their child's tennis.<sup>9</sup> These groups suggested that coaches use a variety of methods to encourage high level communication,

create an optimal environment that includes parent education, and have general positive coaching attitudes that include using a task-oriented motivation climate.

The USTA created the 10U tennis program to be more developmentally appropriate with smaller courts and rackets, lowered nets, and bigger, lighter tennis balls<sup>10</sup> to allow youth to experience greater levels of success. However, as the format may differ from parents' expectations, it presents a context in which conflict may exist (especially if communication is lacking).<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the possibility of conflict exists due to the relatively recent modifications to sport, the 10U program is an ideal program to study parent perceptions of their child's coach.

Gould and colleagues provided an initial attempt at understanding coaches' perceptions of parents, but parent perceptions of coaches also need to be investigated to truly understand this relationship. Therefore, due to the relatively unexplored relationship between parents and coaches, the current research project had three purposes. Specifically, the researchers wanted to investigate parent perceptions in three key areas: (1) the parent-coach relationship including how frequent and in what manner they communicated; (2) how well coaches addressed various topics especially relevant to 10U tennis; and (3) coach's behaviors and coach knowledge in terms of various aspects of the tennis environment.

## METHOD

### Participants

The sample contained 251 adults (male  $n = 71$ , female  $n = 178$ , no gender listed  $n = 2$ ) who had children who were involved in the USTA 10U program. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 66 ( $M = 43.04$ ), and a majority of participants were married ( $n = 218$ ). Nearly one fourth of parents had some experience playing tennis competitively ( $n = 64$ , 25%) with the most common highest level of participation being high school ( $n = 28$ , 44%) and college ( $n = 17$ , 27%). Parents had between 1 and 6 children, and on average had just under 2 children ( $n = 1.60$ ). For participants who had multiple children, parents were asked to focus on their child who was most actively involved in the 10U program. These children were on average just over 9 years old ( $M = 9.06$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ) with more male athletes ( $n = 140$ , 56%) than female athletes ( $n = 111$ , 44%). These youth athletes were also active in other sports ( $M = 1.87$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ) and other non-sport extra-curricular activities ( $M = 1.26$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ).

### Measures

Demographics. Participants answered questions concerning themselves (i.e., age, gender, past tennis experience) as well as

about their child who was most actively involved in the 10U tennis program (i.e., age, gender, other activities).

Parent perceptions of 10U Coaches. Parents were asked their perceptions of their child's coach regarding a number of different topics. Specifically, parents rated relationship quality with their child's coach (1 = extremely satisfied; 4 = disappointed), how frequently they interacted with their child's coach (1 = not at all; 5 = almost every day), how frequently coaches engaged in a variety of common behaviors (1 = never; 7 = always), and coach's knowledge (1 = poor; 4 = expert) on various Likert-type scales. In addition, parents were asked to indicate yes or no if their child's coach had shared certain information concerning 10U tennis.

## PROCEDURES AND DATA COLLECTION

Researchers created the survey in conjunction with the USTA, which was approved by the IRB at their institution as well as by the USTA. Following approval, the USTA sent email invitations to previously populated email lists with reminders sent twice more at approximately two week intervals afterward. The survey took 30 minutes to complete and participants were informed their participation was voluntary and anonymous. The survey was piloted by the research team and any questions that were ambiguous or hard to understand were eliminated.

### Analysis

As the primary purpose of the study was to investigate the parent perspectives of the USTA U10 tennis coaches, a majority of results presented are descriptive in nature. Additionally, certain aspects may differ between fathers and mothers, and therefore, when necessary, comparisons were made between mothers and fathers with either an independent samples t-test if only one dependent variable existed or a MANOVA if multiple dependent variables existed.

## RESULTS

Parent perceptions of 10U Coaches. Parents rated their relationship with their child's coach as highly positive ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = .74$ ), and this relationship did not differ between fathers and mothers,  $t(235) = .24$ ,  $p > .05$ . Additionally, parents indicated that the frequency they contacted the coach varied with some parents indicating less than once a week ( $n = 72$ , 29%), once a week or several times a week ( $n = 143$ , 57%), and almost daily ( $n = 24$ , 10%). When parents did communicate with their child's coach, it was most frequently done so directly ( $n = 212$ , 84%), but communication also happened via email ( $n = 93$ , 37%) and by phone ( $n = 93$ , 37%).

**Table 1** Parent perceptions of information provided by coach about child’s tennis experience. All questions began “Did/does your child’s coach provide you with information about...”

Question	Yes	No
your child’s tennis experience when you first began?	65%	35%
your child’s tennis experience regularly?	60%	40%
whether your child is developing at the right speed?	57%	43%
how you can help your child outside of lessons?	56%	44%
reasons for the various equipment and court sizes?	56%	44%
transitions to different court sizes and balls?	45%	55%
ideal frequency of play and practice?	54%	46%
the process pathway of progressing from red to orange to green balls and associated levels of play?	53%	47%
long term player development?	43%	57%
the upcoming season in a parents session?	28%	72%

Note: As respondents did not have to answer each question, response numbers for each question varied from 217-225.

Parents were also asked to indicate whether their child’s coach explained various aspects of the tennis environment during their child’s sport involvement (for complete results see *Table 1*). More than half of the parents indicated they received information about the tennis experience when their child started as well as at regular intervals afterward. Additionally, more than half of parents indicated that their child’s coach informed them of their child’s development speed, where they can find help outside of lessons, the ideal frequency of practice and play, the equipment and court size, and the pathway to each different U10 developmental level. Interestingly, less than half of the parents indicated their child’s coach informed them about long term athlete development, and less than a third of the parents indicated their child’s coach had a parent session at the beginning of the season.

Parents primarily found positive coaching behaviors were happening frequently and negative behaviors were occurring less frequently (see *Table 2* for mean and standard deviation). The most frequent behaviors parents cited were coaches being positive and upbeat with their child and using appropriate equipment and balls for the child’s level of development. Additionally, parents perceived that coaches established a climate that was warm and caring, focused on individual improvement, exciting, and challenging. In addition, parents thought coaches were knowledgeable in a variety of domains (see *Table 3* for mean and standard deviations) with parents

**Table 2** Parental perceptions of how frequently coaches engage in certain behaviors.

	Mean	SD
Be positive and upbeat when working with your child	6.06	1.33
Use the appropriate equipment and balls for your child’s level of development	6.00	1.39
Create a warm and caring inviting climate	5.73	1.53
Focus on child’s self improvements versus competing or beating others	5.66	1.57
Create an exciting climate	5.67	1.49
Challenge your child	5.58	1.60
Maximize activity during lessons by having the kids work together and minimize waiting in line	5.40	1.61
Spend too much time talking to the kids without them being active	1.96	1.30
Use big words/talk in a way your child could not understand	1.80	1.30

Note: Likert scale was 1 (never) to 7 (always)

rating tennis technique, teaching children how to score and play, motivating their child, and understanding children high. The lowest rating, which was still above the midpoint, was helping the child grow as a whole person instead of just as a tennis player.

## DISCUSSION

The primary purposes of the study were to better understand the perceptions of parents of their child’s coach in the 10U tennis program. Overall, parents, regardless of gender, rated their relationship with their coach as positive. Over two-thirds of parents communicated with their coach at least weekly, and on most aspects, parents felt they were well-informed on several aspects of the tennis environment. Even though a majority of parents felt well-informed on most topics, communication could still be increased between parents and coaches. In fact, most parents felt that they were not well informed by their coach about long-term athlete development. Communication could also be improved as many parents felt more information from a coach concerning their child’s developmental speed, aspects parents can help with outside of lessons, ideal balance of practice and play, and the pathway of progressing through the stages of 10U tennis would be beneficial. As Gould and colleagues suggested,<sup>9</sup> high level communication between parents and coaches is paramount to ensuring the most positive environment for parents, coaches,

**Table 3** Parent perceptions of coaching knowledge.

	M	SD
Tennis technique	3.36	.77
Teaching your child how to score and play	3.06	.95
Providing and motivating your child	2.96	.93
Understanding children	2.96	.89
Helping your child grow as a whole person	2.76	.96

Note: Likert scale was 1 (poor) to 4 (expert)

and players. One thing that may help solve this gap in communication could be a pre-season coaches' meeting with parents as less than 25% of parents indicated a coach held a parent session. As coaches are extremely busy with a variety of tasks, this avenue may be most effective from a time perspective and aid in solving problems that may arise throughout the season.

Parents also perceived a high quality youth environment for their child's participation. In fact, parents believed coaches were upbeat and positive and established a climate that was caring, exciting and challenging. These results are encouraging as Stewart<sup>6-7</sup> found that a number of parents wanted coaches to structure a climate where athletes experienced enjoyment and several of

the suggestions from high level 10U coaches involved creating a high level task-based environment that included promoting play opportunities.<sup>8</sup> These parent observations seem to be matching the desires of the 10U program where child-appropriate, active learning is emphasized. Finally, parents not only perceived their child's coach as competent in both tennis technique and skills, but also in motivating their child, understanding children in general, and helping a child grow as a whole person. These parental perceptions align well as parents have said they prefer coaches who have knowledge of tennis skills and rules as well as the ability to teach well.<sup>7-9</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As coaches and parents are both critical significant social agents during youth,<sup>1</sup> the results of the current study are encouraging. Parents saw their child's coach as knowledgeable, positive, and capable in establishing a climate that is beneficial to youth. Further attention should be paid to ensuring that the communication between coaches and parents starts early to both prevent future issues and to ensure parents have the information available to help their child's development. The study provides a snapshot of the coach-parent relationship in one well-executed program, but to fully understand this relationship more research is needed.

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