

Whose game are we playing? Children's perspectives on organised team sports in New Zealand.

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Abstract

Background

The childhood years are highlighted as a crucial time when ongoing participation in physical activity can be nurtured and maintained. The nurturing of a child's proclivity to participate in organised sport normally falls into the domain of adults and both parents and coaches have been identified as key influences in children's enjoyment of sport. However, some negative perceptions exist about the role played by both parents and coaches, and concerns are commonly expressed in the media about excessive parental and coach touchline behaviour.

Objectives

Although children's perspectives are increasingly being acknowledged as legitimate and valuable, it would appear from the social science literature that young children are still marginalised as active participants in areas of health-related research. The primary objective of this study was to give voice to children's views of sport, and in particular to examine how adult behaviours affected children's enjoyment of sport.

Methods

A cross-sectional study that utilised eight focus group interviews with a total of 32 children (aged 6 to 11 years) in the Greater Auckland area of New Zealand. This paper presents a Foucauldian discourse analysis of children's views relating to their sporting experiences.

Results

The dominance of a sport as competition discourse would appear to serve the needs more of coaches and parents than the needs of children. Coaches who appear to be firmly positioned within a competitive discourse use their power to support coaching practices that clash with the guidelines and resources provided for them by their sporting bodies.

Conclusion

A discursive analysis shows that many children may be exposed to discursive practices that are not conducive to a child-centred sporting environment. There is pressure on children, through disciplinary measures, to conform to the normative behaviours associated with a dominant competitive discourse in sport.

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