

PARENTS WANT KIDS TO SUCCEED IN SPORTS, AND COMMUNICATION IS KEY

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YOUNG REVIEWERS:



JOSEPHINE

AGE: 8



SAHEJ

AGE: 14



SHAUN

AGE: 13

Parents of young athletes want their children to develop physically, grow as people, build relationships, and enjoy playing sports. Parents' goals also change over time, based on how much their children like sports, how well they do, and the sports setting. In short, research shows that parents' goals for their children change as the children themselves change. However, parents may not be the best at guessing what their children's goals are. In fact, researchers have learned that parents often do not cheer for the things their children actually want. So, it is important that, as children grow up and have new goals (for example, "I used to just want to have fun with my friends, but now I really want to win!"), they communicate often with their parents about what they want to accomplish in sports. This will help parents support them and cheer for them while they pursue their goals!

YOUTH SPORTS PARENTS

Lots of children play sports in America, and you might be one of them. Maybe you played in the past and do not anymore. Think back to when you first started playing a sport. Who got you involved? For most children, it was probably a parent [1]. Parents are often very involved in their children's sports. They normally sign them up for sports and make sure they get to and from their practices and games. They also stay to watch. Most parents praise, instruct, and offer feedback on their children's sports performance because they want to see them do well [2]. Sometimes it can be frustrating for parents because they do not understand what their children's sports goals are and they may set different goals than their children. Researchers have started to explore why parents communicate the way they do on the sidelines of their children's sports, and how communication from parents might affect children while they are playing [3]. Remember, youth sports are about the youth. A parent's role is to make sure children have fun and achieve their goals!

Researchers have tried to understand parents' communication by looking at the multiple goals that parents have for their children in sports. Parents try to balance multiple goals while their children participate [4], and maybe you have experienced some or all of these goals. First, **outcome goals** are things your parent wants you to accomplish. Outcome goals can include wanting you to play better (by shouting tips and instructions) or trying to help you feel confident (by shouting support and encouragement). **Identity goals** are a second type of goals. Your parents want you to look like you are doing well when you are playing, so sometimes they might say things to make you look successful (by shouting that you are running the wrong way or telling you to pass the ball to the open player). They also want to look good as parents, so they often try to be respectful or sound smart when they are cheering for you and your teammates. **Relational goals** are the third type of goals. Sports are a great place to make friends and meet new people—for both you and your parents. So, at your practices and games, parents often try to communicate in ways that create friendships with your coaches and teammates, and with other parents [5].

The words parents use to achieve these three goals are the main things you hear while you are practicing or playing. Parents can shout at you as you play, and what your parents say and how they say it can have a big impact on your experience, as well as the experiences of your teammates, other parents, officials, and coaches. So, it is very important to tell your parents what you want to get out of sports! They might think you have different goals than you do, so tell them what you want them to say or not to say. As researchers have learned more about the connection between goals and communication, they have tried to help parents communicate in ways their children like. In this study, we tried to learn more about the

OUTCOME GOALS

Goals in which parents strive to manage the outcomes they or their children will experience in sports.

IDENTITY GOALS

Goals in which parents strive to manage others' impressions of them and/or their children in sports.

RELATIONAL GOALS

Goals in which parents strive to reflect and promote the type of relationship they have, or wish to have, with their children in sports.

goals parents have for their children in sports, and how those goals shape their communication.

OUR RESEARCH

To learn how parents communicate with their children in sports, we performed a **case study** of four parents who had children participating in sports for the first time. In case study research, we want to learn a lot about a few people rather than a little bit about many people [5]. The parents we studied were between 30 and 43 years old. Three of the children were 5 years old and one was six at the beginning of the study. For all of them, it was their first season of sports! We chose parents of athletes at the beginning of their athletic careers because we wanted to know how the parents would adjust to their new roles in youth sports. We studied the parents for 15 months. We recorded interviews with the parents, in which we included questions like “Tell me about your decision to have Alex play sports this season,” and “What did you hope he would learn by playing sports?” We had parents write in diaries about their experiences, thoughts, and emotions during their children’s practices and games. Finally, we recorded the words parents said on the sidelines at their children’s sports, to learn about their communication styles.

After collecting this information, we studied it carefully. We typed the interviews onto a computer and then read the interviews and diaries to see what parents hoped their children would get from sports, what the parents themselves wanted the children to get, and how parents felt when their children were practicing and competing. When we listened to the recordings of the parents on the sidelines, we sorted their behaviors into categories based on whether the parents were telling their children they were doing well, coaching from the sidelines, being negative or rude, or some combination of those things. Finally, we looked at the written words and the recorded words to see if parents’ goals matched how they communicated on the sidelines.

WHAT WE LEARNED

We found 43 individual goals that parents had for their children in sports, which we separated into the outcome, identity, and relational categories. Most goals were outcome related, followed by identity and relational goals (Figure 1A). Within each of these categories there were subtypes of goals. We found four types of outcome goals:

- Avoid bad sports outcomes
- Get better as an athlete
- Grow as a person
- Enjoy sports

CASE STUDY

A type of research in which the focus is on a particular person, group, or situation over a period of time.

Figure 1

(A) We studied parents' responses to our interview questions. We determined the percentages of outcome, identity, and relational goals they held for their children in sports. (B) We studied parents' verbal sideline behaviors by recording them at their children's practices and competitions. We determined that the percentages of parents' instruction, praise, and feedback were high, whereas the percentages of parents' neutral, negative, and derogatory behavior were low.

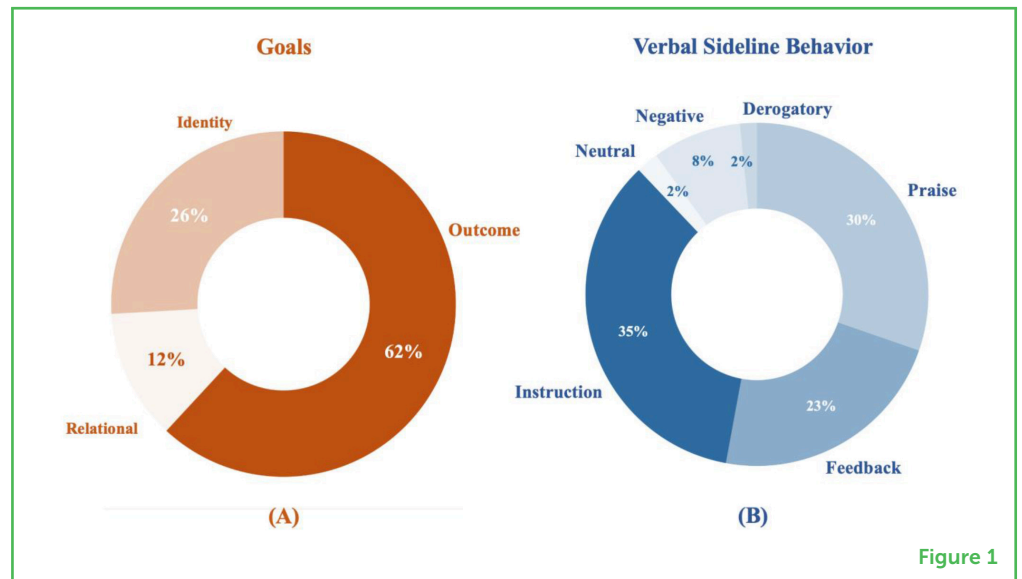


Figure 1

We found two types of identity goals:

- Look like a good parent
- Make child look good to others

We found two types of relational goals:

- Make family relationships better
- Become friends with others

Most of these goals were shared by multiple parents, but each parent was also different in how important the goals were and how much the goals shaped their communication.

By analyzing parents' verbal sideline behavior (Figure 1B), we found that parents' goals often conflicted with each other. For example, parents' outcome goals often shaped their communication on the sidelines but, fortunately, their identity goals seemed to limit negative and rude comments. This conflict helped parents speak in ways that made them and their children look and feel better. For example, parents often said things like "You are going in the wrong direction!" but they chose to say it quietly, so coaches, parents, and their children could not hear. This illustrates one of the conflicts parents had—even though they wanted their children to do well, they also wanted their children to have fun and be viewed positively by others. Parents often try to communicate in ways that allow their children to enjoy playing sports—but not always! We learned that sometimes parents wait to make negative or rude comments until they are not around other people (like on the car ride home or at the dinner table). This taught us that parents struggle with balancing the goals they have for their

children's participation in sports and this conflict can show up in the ways they talk to their children before, during, and after practices and competitions.

We also saw that sometimes parents communicate based on goals that they are not directly thinking about, but that are present in the back of their minds. These goals for their children can include things like playing better than teammates or competitors, or playing well-enough to get a scholarship. We learned that parents sometimes feel badly for having these types of goals, perhaps because they feel guilty for putting pressure on their children. They might also understand that their own goals may be different than their children's goals. We also saw that parents change their goals based on what happens to their children in sports. For example, one parent's goals for their child changed when the parent realized the child was not one of the best players on the team. This parent went from wanting their child to be a great player to wanting the child to grow as a person.

We concluded that parents want their children to have fun and learn lessons in sports, and that they adjust their goals over time based on their children's experiences.

CONCLUSION

The most important thing to learn from our study is that parents want their children to learn various sports and skills and have fun playing. It is important to know that parents adjust their goals over time based on their children's successes and failures and the sports environment. Our overall message for young athletes is that you and your parents should communicate about what you want to accomplish in sports. We encourage you to share your athletic goals with your parents, to help them understand what you want to get out of playing sports [6]. When you do that, your parents can support you in the best way, from helping you have fun with neighborhood friends on a weekend to supporting your dreams to compete as a professional!

ORIGINAL SOURCE ARTICLE

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YOUNG REVIEWERS

JOSEPHINE, AGE: 8

Josephine is a kindergarten student in Utah and likes to play sports when she is not in school. She ski races, mountain climbs, dances, swims, and plays, soccer, basketball, hockey, and flag football. In her spare time she likes to read books to her little brother and travel the world. She has been to 29 American states and 16 countries abroad. At home she is known for her eclectic wardrobe and wry sense of humor. This is her first scientific contribution!





SAHEJ, AGE: 14

Hello All! My name is Sahej! I am a freshman in high school and I am hoping to become an architect when I am older. I enjoy singing, dancing, swimming, and playing golf. I love to explore new things and hobbies. In school, my favorite subject is math and I love joining clubs in which I can take part of a leadership role or have the chance to speak in front of a large audience.



SHAUN, AGE: 13

I have played many sports for a long period of my life and I still do. I like to play video games, hang out with friends, and draw. A lot of my achievements in life is because of my parents pushing me to achieve great things. I also play the piano and a saxophone.

AUTHORS



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Amand L. Hardiman, M.Ed. is a fourth-year doctoral student in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies and is a research assistant in the Families in Sport Lab at Utah State University. Amand's research targets sports belonging through the intersectionality of student-athlete identity (e.g., race, class, gender, and family), organizational culture, and leadership development. Before pursuing his doctoral studies, Amand obtained his B.S. in sport management and M.Ed. in higher education administration, both at the University of Missouri-Columbia.