Title: Perspectives of Parents and Volunteers of Special Needs Children in Youth Sport Programs: Striking Down Barriers

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Introduction: The term developmental disabilities refer to a group of conditions that result from impairments in learning, language, behavior or physical areas. It is reported that about one in six US children have at least one or more of these developmental disabilities or delays (CDC, 2017). Sports provide the opportunity for children to improve cognitively, physically, and socially (Russell et al., 2000). Rosenbaum and Gorter (2011) explain how to alter the mentality around childhood disability from using the word “fix” to six new, more positive “f-words” to focus on instead: function, fitness, family, friends, fun, and future. Sports programs are a great setting that could be utilized to benefit each of these areas. The volunteers/coaches of these leagues play a significant role in these programs (Shields & Synnot, 2016). The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between volunteer/coach training (as well as their experiences and expectations) and family experiences and expectations in sport leagues specifically targeted to special needs children.

Method: Two different questionnaires (parent, volunteer) were distributed through listservs, facebook groups, and by contacting leagues specifically. 64 parents of children (6-18yrs) with physical (e.g. Cerebral Palsy, epilepsy) and developmental (e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorders, Down Syndrome) special needs enrolled in youth sport programs completed the questionnaire. 99 volunteers (16-55yrs) completed the questionnaire, and of the ones who responded, 29 were students, 33 were employed, and 6 were retired or unemployed. The parent questionnaire included demographic, function and quality of life components as well as open ended questions around motivation to join programs, expectations, challenges, role volunteers/coaches play, and barriers of program involvement for their child and family (Shields & Synnot, 2016). The volunteer questionnaire also included demographic information, motivation to volunteer, volunteer experience, expectations, challenges and training around supporting children enrolled in special needs sports programs (Shields & Synnot, 2016). Themes were coded and analyzed for the open ended responses.

Results: 50% of parents said they expected the program they were involved in to help their child improve physical skills and 30% said for their child to develop socially and that programs would be inclusive. When asked if their expectations were met, 77% said yes and a third of all responses cited volunteers/coaches as being influential. However, many parents discussed times they stopped their child’s participation and the two most cited explanations were logistical reasons or the child lost interest. Additionally though, parents named addressable reasons including the atmosphere being too high of a sensory load, inappropriate skill level, and organization of volunteers/coaching. About 23% of volunteers said they would advise their friend about to begin volunteering with this population to have a positive attitude. A little over a third said to just go for it and try it, and over a quarter said to be patient and to treat everyone “normally”. Approximately 10% of responses acknowledged the challenges of volunteering with children with special needs when giving advice.

Discussion: These results help identify differences in what training parents want volunteers to have and what training volunteers do have and provide the opportunity to close these gaps. Improving things like organizational structure of leagues, accessibility, and ensuring appropriate expectations are all areas that could be incorporated into a training protocol that could be implemented to benefit the children and their families who are involved in these special needs youth sport programs.

References/Citations: