



An interview study on the coach-parent relationship in women's artistic gymnastics

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to understand the coach-parent relationship in women's artistic gymnastics. Four semi-structured interviews with one coach and three mothers, of which one was also a coach were conducted. The results of this study show that generally, the overlap between the mothers' and the coaches' assumptions and believes is very close. Parents feel comfortable approaching the coach and discussing their concerns at anytime. Coaches are happy to talk with the parents, hear their concerns and are willing to adjust their coaching methods if they agree with parents and find it useful for their coaching. Coaches and parents believe that good communication between them is very important for success of their child. Child's mental and physical health is prioritized over good achievements in this club. Results of this research show that WAG does not need to be a sport, which should be avoided by parents and athletes due to the reputation of unethical and abusive coaching methods, which exist nowadays.

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1. Introduction

For children to access sport, they need their parents support (Coakley, 2009). According to Nunomura & Santos Oliveira (2013), parents are the ones who introduce children to sport. Child and youth sport would not exist without parents. The involvement of parents and coaches plays a significant role in young athletes' participation in sport and their future career. Parents invest a lot of time and money into their child's sport participation, but sometimes parents are not aware of the coaching methods and coaching style the coach is using during a practice (Smits, Jacobs, & Knoppers, 2016).

Some sports, for example gymnastics, are considered to require a lot of hard practice from a very young age (5 or 6 years). This type of exercise might not only be beneficial for a child's sport career, but also dangerous, and influences the physical and psychological health of a child in a negative way (Wiersma, 2000). This can even lead to early drop out from sport (Gould, 2010). Some parents have their own opinions and concerns regarding different types of practice or coaching methods that they would like to share with a coach. But at the same time, parents often find it hard to communicate with a coach. Some coaches experience that parents are trying to be involved into the training process in a wrong way and for example coach their children on a side without having any knowledge about the sport (Blom, Visek & Harris, 2013). Many parents have their own ideas of how the coach should train their children and they are willing to discuss it with the coach. Some coaches are happy to talk to parents and listen to their opinions and concerns, but some coaches believe that parents have to stay outside the training process and not get involved (Smits et al. 2016).

Furthermore, getting more understanding of parents' perceptions of their child's involvement in sport and finding new ways of improving communication between a coach and parents will contribute to greater development of youth sport. This knowledge will help to create a healthy and positive environment for child's development from medical, social and psychological perspective.

At this moment, several studies have been conducted on the parents-coach-athlete relationship, where the importance of good communication between the coach and parents reflects a positive outcome on child's/youth participation in sport (Smoll, Cumming & Smith, 2011; Barker, McCarthy & Harwood, 2011; Blom et al. 2013). According to Smoll et al. (2011), a positive relationship between a trainer and parents can be achieved only by two-way communication. Therefore, communication between the coach and parents should be built on a dialogue instead of lecturing. It is important for parents to understand and respect the sport, and even to be aware of basic rules, if they are interested in encouraging their child's participation in sport (Smoll et al. 2011).

Even though research has been conducted on the parents-coach relationship, there are still some unanswered questions and limitations in existing literature. Due to a big variety of sports nowadays and specifications of different sports, research results are either very broad

or very specific. The majority of studies use specifically designed interviews for collecting data, which makes it complicated to transfer collected results of the study to another case. Many studies cover parent-coach relationship from one perspective, parents' or a coaches', where it is not known how these perspectives reflect each other. Therefore, this study will take into consideration two perspectives and analyse if the coaches' and parents' perspectives are reflecting each other. Both the access and good communication arguments are crucial for sports where the athletes or participants are very young, like in women's artistic gymnastics (WAG). This study will focus on the coach-parents communication in this sport. Another limitation of previous literature on WAG is that the majority of the studies on parent-coach relationship in the sport have been conducted in Western culture. However, the artistic gymnastics as a sport is dominant in Eastern European countries.

1.1. Purpose and objectives

The main purpose of this study is to understand the coach-parent relationship in women's artistic gymnastics. This study has several objectives:

1. To understand whether parents of athletes perceive the coaching style and methods for their children as appropriate.
2. To identify what role parents have in the coaching process from parents'/coach's perspective.
3. To identify if parents perceive that their concerns are understood and considered by trainers or coaching staff.
4. To identify the trainer's perception of parents' concerns.

To fulfil these objectives, four semi-structured interviews were conducted. One interview was held with a trainer of women's artistic gymnastics. The other three interviews were conducted with parents whose children are trained by this coach, where one of them is a trainer herself. All interviews were made in Sweden. Two interviews were held in Swedish language and in the other two, Russian was used. According to Bryman (2011), semi-structured interviews are the best method for collecting data when a researcher is interested in qualitative and detailed information. In this case it was important to understand not only the coach-parents relationship, but also understand if trainers and parents' perceptions of the coach-parent relationship are related to each other.

The result of this study will give coaches in depth information of how parents perceive their communication with coaches and how coaches perceive their communication with parents. Thus, the information gained in this study could assist in creating a better environment for youth sport. Healthy and transparent partnerships between a coach and parents are a key to success for an athlete in youth sport (Blom et al. 2013).

2. Background

In this section, relevant literature will be examined in order to understand current knowledge about coach-parent relationships. This chapter consists of four parts. In the first part, the literature covering parent, coach and athlete relationships or an “athletic triangle” will be reviewed. In the second part, different responsibilities and obligations that parents and coaches have to be aware of in youth sport will be discussed. As this research is conducted with a gymnastics coach and parents whose children are doing gymnastics, the third part will highlight the specific culture of women’s artistic gymnastics. The final part will shortly describe the main regulations of youth sport in Sweden, which might be different from other countries and hence would help to understand the results of this study.

2.1. Athletic triangle

Youth participation in sport includes three links, an athlete, a trainer and parents. These links have to have effective communication between each other in order to achieve a positive and healthy environment in youth sport. According to Smith, Smoll and Smith (1989), the most vital role in this athletic triangle is played by parents and coaches. Unfortunately, parents often are not aware of the importance of their behavior and tend to behave irresponsibly (Ford, Jubenville & Phillips, 2012). Unthoughtful behavior of parents affects a child’s development negatively (Knight & Holt, 2014). In sport, where young children at the age of 5 or 6 are involved, the dialogue between the coach and parents plays a significant role when the question of specializing in sport comes up for a child (Bodey, Judge & Hoover, 2013). Therefore, it is important for parents to feel comfortable to discuss their child’s development and involvement in sport with a coach. According to Eriksson’s (1993) theory of early specialization, children spend more hours per week with their coach than with their parents. Donnely (1997) believes that in this case, the relationship between parents and the coach should be built on trust. Thus, parents have to rely on coaches’ experience by giving him/her the opportunity and responsibility to develop and improve their child’s skills as needed. At this point, a coach has more responsibilities than just being a trainer for a child; he or she often becomes a coach, psychologist and a friend (McMahon & DinanThompson, 2011). The question is: Do all coaches realize this and do they understand how much responsibility they have? The development of a young athlete in a healthy and positive environment is only possible when parents and coaches have good communication and are able to talk to each other about problems, new development and concerns (Harwood & Knight, 2015). To achieve this, it is important to remember that communication has to be two-sided, where both parents and coaches have the right to speak (Smoll et al. 2011). Barker et al. (2011) believe that organizing educational sessions for parents and coaches in early stage can lead to a healthy communication between them. This kind of session organized by Harwood and Swain (2002) gave positive effect on a coach-parent interaction from coaches’ and parents’ perspective. Blom et al. (2013) introduces another link, a practitioner, to athletic triangle when he talks about children and youth sport. The authors suggested that involvement of practitioners is necessary for helping parents, coach and a child-athlete to understand each other better as well as to establish a healthy environment for a child.

2.2. Responsibilities and obligations

According to the convention on the Rights of the Child – in Swedish “Barnkonventionen”- (UNICEF Sverige, 2009), it is the parents’ and coaches’ responsibilities to provide a healthy environment for children and young athletes in their sport. Unfortunately, common problematic behaviour of parents includes giving instructions to a child during the practice or a competition, protecting their child too much from different risks associated with injury (physical or mental), criticising their child or just not being interested in their sport (Knight & Harwood, 2009). Common problematic behaviour for a coach is child’s emotional and even physical abuse (Smits et al. 2016; Kerr & Stirling, 2012; Stirling, 2011). Parents and coaches are responsible for affecting children’s participation in sport in a positive way. One of the most important obligations for parents, according to Kerr and Stirling (2012), is to protect their children from emotional abuse that might be happening during the practice. Their study showed that many parents of ex-gymnasts experienced guilt for not doing it during their child’s sport career. Parents’ responsibilities are not only to give an emotional and economical support to their child, but also learn to manage their own behaviour during practices and competitions. In addition, learn to interact with other parents and trainers to contribute to a healthy and positive environment for their child’s development (Harwood & Night, 2015). Another way of producing a positive environment is by making parents’ involvement in sport more enjoyable, which can be achieved by improving communication between a coach and a parent (Barker et al. 2011). According to Smoll et al. (2011), for parents to like the sport more, trainers of young athletes have obligation to provide parents with necessary information about the sport in order to make them more involved. Coaches can do it by organising meetings, where a group of parents can gather. But it is also important for a coach to find time for coach-parent discussion about child’s development individually (Smoll et al. 2011).

According to Blom et al. (2013), many coaches start to work directly after they finish their sport’s career without having any knowledge about working with children and not taking into consideration the social and psychological aspects of a child’s development. Some coaches use unethical and abusive methods on purpose, as they believe this is the only way to grow champions (Smits et al., 2016), and some coaches just do not realize the damage they cause to child’s development. Coaches have to learn not only to communicate with children, but also learn to listen to parents (Smits et al., 2016).

2.3. Women’s Artistic Gymnastics (WAG)

Several studies have been conducted with focus on “parents and sport”. However, the majority of the studies have been dedicated to parent’s or coaches’ experiences separately. Meanwhile this study will take into consideration both parents’ and trainer’s viewpoint of one case in gymnastics culture.

A new style of WAG was introduced by Soviet Union’s sporting system at the end of the 1960s, where a feminine and graceful style of performing was replaced with an acrobatic style. It contained very difficult and risky circus elements, ability to jump high, as well as athletes were expected to be very flexible and strong (Barker-Ruchti, 2009). Nowadays, WAG is a sport that requires a lot of intense practice from very young age, 5 or 6 years. To become

an elite gymnast, children have to practice 4-6 hours per day, 6 times a week (David, 2005). Literature describes that many gymnasts experience abuse, over training, strict weight-control diets, and overuse injuries (Pinheiro et al. 2014). However, even in these cases they still continue to practice and compete (David, 2005; Barker-Ruchti, 2009; Stier, 2012). These factors often are detriment to physical and psychosocial health (Pinheiro et al. 2014; Pimenta, Resende & Malcolm, 2014; Wiersma, 2000). For example, many gymnasts explained that they have missed their childhood (Pinheiro et al. 2014), they barely have time to spend with their friends or just relax at home in front of the TV (Davis, 2005). According to Kerr and Barker-Ruchti's (2015) research, parents and families of elite gymnasts in Australia accept strict standards and are being "pushed" by trainers, as they understand that this is the only way to achieve success. Parents of elite gymnasts in Australia rarely question or even talk to coaches and prefer to solve problems at home to avoid problems with a coach (Kerr & Barker-Ruchti, 2015), even though they have concerns regarding the pain and injuries their daughters experience during the practice (Harwood et al. 2015). Donnelly (1997) describes that coaches of elite athletes often focus on perfection of athletes' bodies instead of remembering that they work with human beings. Pinheiro et al. (2014) believes that children should quit gymnastics to avoid the violence and abuse they experience during the training, but coaches and gymnasts tend to accept and adapt to these regulations, and believe it is part of the culture (Barker-Ruchti, 2008).

On the other hand, in some clubs, where families are paying for all the WAG training and competition expenses themselves, clubs and coaches treat gymnasts in a different way. Staff and managers treat them as customers, as it is important to retain clients (Kerr & Barker-Ruchti, 2015). According to Kerr & Barker-Ruchti research in New Zealand, club staff is showing more respect and try to please athletes and their families compared to a study in Australia, where athletes and families are trying to please the coach.

2.4. Youth sport in Sweden

There is not much literature on WAG in Sweden, which limited the choice of literature for this chapter.

Generally the way sport clubs are organized in Sweden might be different from other countries. First of all, it is important to mention that a club, which is a part of Swedish sport federation "Riksidrottsförbundet" (RF), is a non-profitable organization (Riksidrottsförbundet. n.d.). Each organization gets financial support from RF every year, but the support the club gets is very little to be able to pay a normal salary for a professional coach and other expenses (Stier, 2012). Each organization has to have members who would form a presidium, organize meetings and do a lot of administration work (Riksidrottsförbundet. n.d.). Because the club hardly has enough income to pay their coaches, many job fall on to parent's shoulders. Parents' voluntary work in Sweden gives parents a lot of votes and power, where actually they can decide who is going to be a coach in the club (Stier, 2012). This results in a situation where many coaches in Sweden are quite powerless in the clubs comparing to parents. The club's financial situation creates that parents not only support children and youth participation

emotionally, but also economically, where they have to fund costumes, practices and competitions (Stier, 2012).

RF describes that youth sport organization has a big responsibility in providing good conditions for each athlete, where everyone should be welcome to participate and competition results should not form the main focus (Riksidrottsförbundet. n.d.). According to guideline for Swedish sport, “Idrotten Vill”, trainers working with children have to have knowledge not only about the sport specifics, but also the basic principles of child’s physical, psychological and social development (Riksidrottsförbundet, n.d.). Gymnastics is the sport, which, even in Sweden, is advised to be started from early age, though it is important for athletes to enjoy the process (Riksidrottsförbundet. n.d.). All trainings and competitions for children and youth athletes have to be ruled by the convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF Sverige, 2009), which states that

- Every child has to be treated equally
- All the decisions have to be done for child’s best
- Every child has rights to develop
- Every child has rights to say what they think and be respected for this.

Interestingly that according to Redelius (2012) research in Sweden, only 20% of coaches were aware of these regulations, only 7% have read “Idrotten Vill” guidelines, and 55% didn’t even know what it is. Even later study of Eliasson (2015) in Sweden showed similar results, where neither trainer nor athletes were aware of these regulations introduced by Swedish sport organisation. According to the sport organization these regulations have to be followed in all sports and even in gymnastics (Stier, 2012). It is also stated by the Swedish Gymnastics Federation that this sport has to develop a child in a positive way from physical, social, psychological and cultural perspectives (Stier, 2012).

3. Method

This qualitative research has a case-study design. All data was collected at one point in time and from one case (Bryman, 2011). This case included one trainer, two parents of gymnasts and one parent, who is a WAG coach as well. The main focus of this study was the depth of the context and not the quantity of respondents.

3.1. Sample, criteria, recruitment and ethics

To fulfil the objectives of this study, the sample had to include a coach and his or her athletes' parents. In this case, it was important to interview not just any parents, but parents whose children are trained by the main interviewed coach, to be able to reflect on different perspectives of the case. Subjects had to be parents of youth athletes aged between 6 and 18. Through a personal connection, one WAG trainer was recruited. In the next step, all parents of the children trained by the coach, were contacted by the coach and asked if they would be interested and are available to take part in this study. Both the contacted coach and three parents were happy to take part in the study, where one of the parents was a coach as well. Ethical approval was gained from all participants before the interview started. All respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and were promised their confidentiality, it was explained that they could quit an interview at any time if they wish. Participation in the interview was voluntary at the agreed time and place. (Appendix 3). Each respondent was given a pseudonym.

3.2. Final sample

The final sample included four persons, one coach and three mothers, where one of the mothers is also a coach. The mother-coach – Sabina - is in her middle age and is not the main coach, she works as a coach only once a week. The fact that Sabina is mother, who is also the coach did not affect the results of this study. At the time of the interview, the main coach- Sara - was 29 years old and had been teaching gymnastics for 10 years, though this is not a full-time job. Sara together with her family moved to Sweden from Estonia at the age of 12. She took many Swedish Championship gold medals during her gymnastics career and has represented Sweden on many international competitions including World and European championships. The interviewed mothers – Sabina, Anna and Lina, had daughters competing in WAG in Sweden. Lina's daughter was 18 years old, Anna's and Sabina's daughters were 13 years old. Anna emigrated from Russia when her daughter was 5 years old (her daughter started gymnastics in Russia at age of 4 years), the other two mothers are Swedish, where Sabina has been a WAG coach in this club for many years. The club is divided into two parts: Artistic gymnastics and athletic gymnastics. The club has 14 active artistic gymnastics' coaches and about 50 athletes in the age from five years to 19 years old. The organisation provides athletes with opportunity to practice and compete on different levels, where the girls of interviewed mothers compete on the highest level in Sweden and abroad. They practiced six to seven times a week.

3.4. Data production

Two interview schedules were used for this study. One schedule was used for interviewing the coach, another one was used for interviewing two mothers and a combined schedule was used for interviewing the mother who is a coach as well. Both interview schedules were developed in English first, then the parent schedule was translated into Swedish and the coach schedule was translated into Russian and Swedish language. Both schedules included four subtitles: background, perceptions, coaching practice and parental voice. Each part had between four and six questions included. An example of question to parents from “perception” section is “Do you feel that your child enjoys gymnastics training/competing?” An example of question to the coach from “coaching practice” session is “What methods do you use to get gymnasts to perform better? Do you need to discipline?” Both schedules are enclosed in the end of this document (Appendix 1 and 2).

Interview questions were tested on an uninvolved trainer and a parent before the interviews were done for this study. Few adjustments were made. All interviews took between 20 and 40 minutes and all of them were audio-recorded with given permission from the respondents. Three of interviews were conducted face to face and one of them was a skype-interview. Semi-structured interview as a method for this study was regarded as the best method, as it allows for detailed information collection regarding topics of interest (Bryman, 2011). The interviews with Sara and Anna were done in Russian language, because it is a native language of the interviewer and participants. The other two interviews were held in Swedish language.

3.4. Analysis

As a first step, the Swedish interview recordings were transcribed. The Russian interviews were not fully transcribed due to missing Cyrillic alphabet on the computer. But they were listened multiple times and relevant information was written down on the computer. All four interviews were printed out before analysis begun.

The content analysis procedure proposed by Granskär and Höglund-Nielsen (2012) was adopted. Four objectives of the study were split into five different themes, where the first theme, coaching style and methods, reflected the first objective; the second and third themes reflected the second objective, parents role from parents’/coach’s perspective; fourth theme, parent’s concerns are listened to or not, reflected the third objective; and the fifth theme, trainer’s perception of parents concerns, reflected the fourth objective of this study (see Table 1.). Thereafter, all relevant information to the specific theme was marked with a coloured pen, where one colour belonged to one theme. Afterwards, all marked information on the paper was sorted into different categories. For example the first theme included two sub-themes: coaching methods and coaching style. In this theme, information was coded in to six categories. For example the code “face expression” related to information from interviews when parents described methods they saw the coach used for discipline, and expressed themselves in a way like “she can roll eyes...” or “look disappointed...” Another category was for example “Strong coaching style”, “Caring coaching style”, “Physical action as method”, “Talking as method”. In the similar way, all other four themes were split in categories and

analysed (Granskär, M. & Höglund-Nielsen, 2012). In the table, themes and categories of content analyse are presented (see Table 1).

Table 1. Objectives, themes and categories

Objective	Theme	Sub-theme	Categories
First objective	Coaching style and methods	Coaching style	Strong style
			Caring style
			Other (respect, role-model)
		Coaching methods	Physical action
			Face expression
			Talking
Second objective	Parents' role from parents perspective		Physical support
			Emotional support
			Help outside
	Parents' role from coach perspective		Physical support
			Emotional support
Third objective	Parents' concerns		Can you talk to the coach
			When can you talk to the coach
			How do the coach reacts
Fourth objective	Trainer's perception of parents' concerns		Do you want parents talk
			Acknowledge or not
			Time for parents

Note. The first theme reflects first objective, second and third theme reflect second objective, fourth theme reflect third objective and fifth theme reflects fourth objective of this study.

4. Results and discussion

The following section includes the results and discussion of the research findings. They are presented in four parts, with each part including the result followed by discussion. The first part includes results and discussion of the first objective, which was to understand whether parents of athletes perceive the coaching style and discipline methods for their children as appropriate. The second part will reflect results and discussion of second objective, which was to identify what role do parents play in coaching process from parents'/coach's perspective. The third part will consist of results and discussion of third and fourth objective regarding parents' experience of their concerns and trainer's perception of parents concerns. In the end of the third part all the results are summarized. And the final part includes discussion of methodology, faced difficulties during the research and further research recommendations.

4.1. Coaching style and methods

This part is presented in three sections. The first section reflects the first sub-theme (coaching style) of the content analyse, the second one reflects coaching methods, and the last section includes discussion of the results of the first objective regarding parents' acceptance of coaching style and methods of the main coach.

The interviewees of this study said that they are happy with the coaching style and discipline methods the main coach is using in the club. Anna, Sabina and Lina explained that they are satisfied because they see that their children like it. Lina, the mother of the 18 year-old gymnast, explained: "Because my daughter thinks it is good, I have no problems with it". Anna said: "...I think that for my daughter if the trainer would be stricter, she would lose her confidence."

The coaching style of the coach is described as authoritarian, strict, tough, but soft, attentive and supportive at the same time. For example, Lina said: "The coach has an authoritarian style, but can back out if it is necessary and give support... the other coach could not do it." The mother explained that the club's previous coach had a very authoritarian coaching style and many parents in the club did not approve her style of work. These concerns were voiced to the staff and the coach was fired.

Anna, whose daughter started gymnastics in Russia described the coaching style like this:

Compared to Russia it is much softer, but still some requirements exist...it is soft and tough at the same time. I think it is correct. It is much better because tougher style would scare my daughter and prevent her from going for practice

This mother also described the coaching saying that her daughter respects the coach and always wants to please her. The mothers feel that the coach is good at creating a positive environment for their children and knows when and how to give positive feedback, when to be strict and when to show some support.

Lina, Anna and Sabina described different methods that they have seen Sara use for discipline. First, all of them have mentioned that they have never seen the coach hitting their children, which they would not approve of. Lina said: “You should never hit anyone! If I would see anyone hitting my daughter, they would be in trouble.” The methods parents have described are mostly connected with the coach changing her facial expression and her way of speaking to athletes. Sabina described her method like this: “She can speak louder; she can roll eyes or express herself in a certain way ...”. Parents described that the coach is explaining to athletes what is allowed and what is not, she tells them about the expectations she has from them. Anna said that the coach has a method that works with children in the way that they remember and follow the instructions not only during the practice, but also outside: “My daughter is fixing her hair for practice, is not chewing a chewing gum and even thinks about what she eats, even though she is very slim.”

This kind of description of the trainer’s coaching style and methods is not common in WAG. Many parents experience that the coaching style and methods are inappropriate for their children (Pinheiro et al. 2014; Smits et al. 2016). The reason parents in this club are satisfied could be explained by the style the Sara has chosen to have. She described in the interview that her style has changed from being tough to the style she has now. She explained that she understood that yelling at the students does not give positive result. She believes it is much better to talk and explain to them what was wrong and how you can improve it. Sara emphasised that it is very important for her that her athletes are not afraid of her. She said: “I believe it is bad when they are afraid to ask something. It is much better if they ask questions when they don’t understand something.”

In this study we can see that parents are happy with the style, because the coach is aware of her style, methods and consequences. Sara described her methods of coaching in a similar way to parents: “...I don’t hit my students. Sometimes I raise my voice if needed... Often I remind them why they are here.” Often parents’ and coach’s perspectives of the coaching style are very different from each other (Kerr & Stirling, 2012). For example, the study of Kerr and Stirling (2012) showed that many parents see the negative sides of coaching style, but they accept it due to believe that this strict way is the only way to Olympics. According to Smits et al. (2016), some parents are not allowed to watch the practice and athletes prefer not to communicate the methods the coach is using to parents to avoid conflicts between parents and a coach. As mentioned earlier, many coaches do not realize the amount of responsibilities that lie on their shoulders for creating positive and healthy environment for athletes, and they do not realize the methods that they use might damage the child both psychologically and socially (Pinheiro et al. 2014). This study’s coach emphasized that she believes that the most important factor for her is that athletes are “mentally healthy and happy with their life”. This also reflects the fact that Sara is taking into consideration RF’s guidelines and recommendation for youth sport, within which the healthy development of the child should be prioritized (Riksidrottsförbundet, n.d.). This type of thinking is totally opposite from many other coaches, where they do not treat children as human beings and are regularly abusing them (David, 2005).

Sara mentioned that at the moment, she is working with herself and tries to find balance between positive feedback, critique and instructions, and to be able to balance her hard and caring coaching style. This is exactly what parents have mentioned and believe is important for the coach to have balanced style. They explained that the main coach has “tough and supportive coaching style” at the same time. Coaching methods and style Sara has chosen affects children’s development in a positive way, where she keeps friendly relationships and gives positive feedback to athletes (Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001). Mothers described that the coach is often using the speech variation as a method, where she explains mistakes to children and discusses or shows how you can improve it, instead of yelling at them. Sara knows how to listen not only to her athletes, but also to their parents, which is an important key factor for a successful coaching according to Smits et al. (2016).

As mentioned earlier, the club staff had to fire one of the coaches whose coaching methods were not accepted by the parents. This shows how big the influence and power of parents in this club compared to the trainers’ powers. This kind of power, which families have, is very common in Sweden due to the voluntary sport system (Riksidrottsförbundet, n.d.). This type of system makes coaches very powerless where they must please the parents to be able to stay and work in the club. To be able to keep your position as a coach in Sweden or in the club, where parents have the power, it is important for a coach to understand and adapt to the culture of the club, which often reflects the culture of the nation. Not in every club or a country where parents will have such power. For example in some countries, coaches are the ones who decide everything and athletes have to adapt and accept that style if they want to stay in the club or join a certain team (Kerr & Stirling, 2012).

4.2. Parent’s role in coaching process from parent’s and coach’s perspective

This chapter reflects the second objective of this study and is divided into three parts. In the first part, parents’ perceptions of their role in the coaching process are presented. In the second part, the coach’ perspective is focused on. Finally, in the third part, the results are discussed.

The mothers described their role from three viewpoints: physical support, emotional support and help outside gymnastics. By physical support, they referred to that as a parent, they have to make sure that children are eating and sleeping properly. It is the parents’ responsibility to make sure that they have food on the table upon arrival from the training, and drive them home from or to the practice after dropping them off when the child is unable to get to the training ground on their own. Emotional support was described as support when children are sad or have pain somewhere, and to compliment and encourage their children. In terms of emotional support, the parents agreed that it is their duty to support children in times of sadness and compliment them on their achievements. This type of support, Anna described in the following way: “I cannot abuse her verbally even if she is not on the first place. I always say to her that she is anyway the best!”

When the parents talk about their role outside gymnastics, Sabina said that it is important: "... for parents to trust and rely on their child's coach and totally maintain their active and caring roles as a parent to the child in everything else outside gymnastics." The mothers believed that they should not be involved in matters, where they do not have enough knowledge. Instead, the mothers acknowledged that they accept that they should do things they are good at. Lina described that there are plenty of jobs parents could help with in the club, if they want to be involved, but they should not become a coach to their children without having any knowledge about WAG. She explained that she is used to helping the club with administration job, because she has enough experience in it. She mentioned that some parents are more involved than her and they have their own concerns about coaching process:

I see other parents who are more engaged and always think that "...my daughter has to have new routines..." or "...it has to be like this and like that..." and they stand on the side of the carpet and talk to their children. I don't think it is right, I believe you should trust the coach you have and that she can do her job properly. And remain a parent in everything else, but not gymnastics.

Anna agreed and mentioned that parents must help children with everything else outside gymnastics for example doing homework.

Sara and Sabina perceived the role of parents in coaching the similar way parents described it. Sara believed that parents have to support their children emotionally: "...cook food, drive to practices and give money for the competition". Sara described that there have been parents in the club that did not provide this, and hence, this was the reason children quit gymnastics. She also believed that it is very important for parents to stay parents and not become trainers for their children:

Some parents cross this border and behave like a coach. This is very bad for a child. I had some examples of this kind of parenting, in the end children experienced that their parents always feel disappointed with them when they perform below their parent's expectations as a result they quit gymnastics quite early.

In this study, the way parents perceive their role and coaches perceive parent's role in gymnastics is very similar and overlapping with each other. The overall concept from both sides is that parents should provide food, funds, emotional support and coaches should provide high standard training to the young athletes. Though Lina described that in the club there are parents, which do coach their children and stand beside the carpet. The reason for this type of behavior could be the lack of trust between the coach and parents (Donnelly, 1997). According to Donnelly (1997), trust between the coach and parents is an important factor for creating a healthy and positive environment for an athlete. Kerr & Stirling (2012) research described that many parents trusted their children coaches' due to not having any knowledge and experience about high performance sport themselves. The issue of building trust is debated but no consensus has been reached. Parents can trust the coach only if they are convinced that the coach is experienced and hence knows how to do his job properly. This can be achieved through the communication between parents, the coach and club staff. For

example, Blom et al. (2013) proposes to organize meetings for parents, where the coach or the club staff could present the coach and introduce achievements, goals and coaching methods. Another moment is to have a dialogue with parents individually (Smoll et al. 2011), where the development of their child, tasks and goals will be discussed. This type of information and communication affects parents' trust in a positive way (Smits et al. 2016).

Interestingly that in this study, both coaches and parents said that parents should trust the coach and not get involved in the coaching process. In fact, Kerr & Stirling (2012) believe that parents' involvement in the coaching experience is necessary to be able protect the child from abusive methods of the coach, hence the involvement has to be balanced. For parents it is important to be aware of certain regulations and guidance on the coach behavior (Kerr & Stirling, 2012) to recognize if their child's development is in danger. If so, they have to learn how to make sure that their concerns are heard and taken into consideration (Smits et al. 2016). Parents should also learn to behave in certain situations, practices and competitions to benefit their child's emotional stability and avoid child's punishment for misbehavior (Harwood et al. 2015).

4.3. Parents' concerns and trainer's perception of parents' concerns

This part covers objectives three and four of the research, the discussion of this topic and summarizing of all results. The third objective of this research was to identify if parents experience that their concerns are understood and considered by trainers or coaching staff and the fourth objective was to identify the trainer's perception of parents concerns. The results according to the objectives will be presented, which will be followed by discussion and summarizing of results.

This study shows that parents experience that the coach is listening to their concerns and they can see that Sara understands them, takes into consideration and applies them in the practice if necessary. The types of discussions parents have had with the coach include injuries and relationships in the club between the athletes. Anna and Sabina had to talk to the coach about the injuries their daughters have had, both of them experienced that the trainer took it into consideration. They discussed how they can handle the injury in a best way and if is it possible to adapt the practice to it. Anna explained that the coach helped them to find a right doctor to deal with the injury.

Lina talked about the situation of her daughter experiencing problems with other girls in the club. On the question if she felt that her concerns where acknowledged, she answered in the following way:

Yes, I think so, though it is not so easy. You should not expect that it would be solved during the week or from one time to the other. Actually this problem with girls in the club is nothing trainers or the club can solve, but you can tell them that they are not allowed to behave in such a way that others or their colleague might get hurt in anyway ...and that is what they (the coach) did.

The mothers felt that they can talk to Sara about their concerns at any time. Lina said that she really feels that the coaches always find time to talk to the parents if it is necessary. Anna mentioned that for her, it is important to talk to the coach as soon as possible to avoid misunderstandings in the future. On the question of how did the coach feel and respond about her concerns she answered: “With understanding. I have never felt any negative attitude or something like this.”

This study so far has described parents’ positive experience in relationship with the coach. In the next part the coach’s experience of parents concerns will be presented.

The results of this study show that Sara and Sabina are happy to talk to the parents and find it useful for their coaching, though sometimes they disagree with parents’ opinions.

Sabina described that it is very important to have good communication with parents because many athletes spend a lot of time at the practice. On the question if coaches find parents’ comments or concerns useful or not, both coaches answered that it depends on the situation. As a coach, they argued, you have to listen to all concerns and then you have to decide which information is useful for your coaching and which is not. Sara explained:

The times when parents are right, it is important to listen to them and change something in your coaching. It is easy to miss some small things during coaching, or maybe it is something you don’t know about the child’s life outside that can be a reason they react on different things. They might have had a bad day in school, and maybe that day they just needed to hear something positive.

Both trainers believe that it is important to listen to parent’s points of view, even if sometimes it is hard, because some parents are stressing too much. Sabina said:

Some parents come with very good tips and thoughts. Sometimes parents panic about their child not being good enough... then I don’t listen... or I listen, but it is not possible to apply it in the practice...

Sara agreed that sometimes she agrees with parents and sometimes not, she said:

Sometimes I agree, sometimes I do not. When I don’t agree I find it hard. I always try to think again and re-think that maybe they are right if they say something to me.

Coaches believe that parents feel comfortable approaching them at any time. Sara describes that parents have their concerns pretty often, but even though she prefers to “talk through the situation directly to avoid the problems and misunderstandings in the future”, she said:

Sometimes children perceive a situation in another way. I had a situation when one girl was always looking at another group on the same floor during practice. And I said to her that I would send her to that group (it was younger children in that group). Then she said to her mother that I said to her that she couldn’t practice anymore in the club...

Even though Sara is happy to talk to parents and feels that parents feel comfortable approaching her anytime, she finds it sometimes hard to find time. Often parents come in the evening to the club when she is already on the way home. But they found the solution accepted by all, which is communicating via e-mail. Sabina, who is teaching only once a week, said that she believes that parents feel that they can approach her anytime even if she is not so often at the club.

The situation how coaches treat and care about their relationships with gymnasts and their families is similar to the situation described in New Zealand (Kerr & Barker-Ruchti, 2015). Kerr and Barker-Ruchti (2015) describe that in this country, coaches and clubs try to please the families. The difference is that in New Zealand a club's main income comes from the families, so they try to please the customers to provide themselves with stable financial situation. The situation in Sweden is different, where clubs in Sweden are non-profitable organizations, so gymnasts are paying very little for practices (Riksidrottsförbundet, n.d.). The way coaches are treating parents in Sweden does not depend on financial benefit. The way coaches are aiming for good communication with parents and gives positive environment for athletes depends on internal norms and ethic principles of the coach. Sara said:

Some parents feel that I do not give enough attention to their child. But they say it to me. I think majority of them are not afraid to ask. But this is my style; I don't want them to be afraid.

When Lina was talking about the coach, who was fired because of her coaching style was not accepted in the club, she mentioned that “the coach had other priorities, for her the result was the most important”. Smits et al. (2016) describes that the abusive type of coaching is common for coaches who prioritise the winning in front of other type of mastery. The reaction parents got on this type of coaching style could be explained by regulations of “Idrotten Vill”, where it is written that the results should not to be prioritised in youth sport (Riksidrottsförbundet, n.d.). This type of thinking has been accepted by Swedish society for many years, where other cultures might have different understanding of youth sport.

Parents in this study are encouraged by the coach and staff to feel comfortable to talk and voice their concerns and opinion. This is similar to the results of Stier's (2012) report on Swedish gymnastics, who found that the majority of coaches are willing to hear concerns and are used to talking to parents regularly. In contrast, results of Smits et al. (2016) in Holland showed that parents were not allowed to voice their concerns or critique towards the coach. A study by Stirling and Kerr (2012) also observed that parents kept “the silence code” and did not voice their concerns even when they saw the coach emotionally abusing children, which is very common in gymnastics' culture.

It is interesting to note that no interviewed mother mentioned that her daughter would complain about the coach or something that happened during the practice. The study of Smits et al. (2016) and Stirling (2011) showed that in WAG, it is common to keep silence, not only in front of a coach, if you have pain or are tired, but also at home. According to them, this

type of behavior becomes a norm for athletes to avoid conflict between parents and coaches. The situation in this club is different, where Sara takes care of athletes and probably athletes are just happy with her style and methods. As mentioned earlier, parents in Sweden are having quite a big power and are not experiencing fear from coming into conflict with a coach (Riksidrottsförbundet, n. d.). Especially in this club, coaches are happy to discuss any concerns with parents and gymnasts have no reason for keeping silence in case of disappointment.

To summarize all results, it is important to outline that all four objectives of this study were accomplished. Both parents and coaches participating in this research perceived the relationship between the coach and parents as an important part of athlete's development, where one of the main goals of the coaches is to provide athletes with healthy and positive environment. Generally parents' and coaches' perception of parents' and coaches' roles in sport is overlapping with each other. Parents feel comfortable approaching the main coach and coaches are happy to talk to parents about their concerns.

4.4. Methodology discussion

This study has a number of limitations. First, it is important to note that this study's results are based only on four interviews with two parents, one mother coach and one coach. To generalize the results more respondents, coaches and clubs should be included in the research. The difficulties during the interviews were detected due to that Swedish language is not a native language for the interviewer. Interviewing in a native language could provide more relaxed atmosphere during the interviews, which could provide additional information relevant to this study. The good thing is that two of the interviews were done in native language, which is half of the interviews. Another difficulty was faced during the interview with the mother-coach due to her statement in the beginning of interview that she does not have so much time. This put some pressure and stress on the interviewer, where again some detailed information could have been gained without the time limitation. It is also important to note that translating the schedules and interviews could add another level of interpretation to the study.

Secondly, although semi-structured interviews as a method are a generative method for this study, the interviewing person can still affect unconsciously the answers of respondents (Bryman, 2011). It would be helpful and useful to include observations as a method to this study. Parents described the coach's style as "strict" and "tough", but it is hard to understand what is "strict" and "tough" for them comparing to other "tough" and "strict" methods described in previous researches. Observations could have helped to understand what these coaching styles actually entail. Moreover, the results of this study are based on interviews with three mothers, where the results might have been different if fathers would be interviewed instead.

It is important to note that the results of this study showed positive relationships between coaches and parents, where the coach prioritized a healthy development of the child rather than exceptional results. The results of the study might be different and more similar to other

studies, if a club that focuses on results had been chosen (Kerr & Barker-Ruchti, 2015; Stirling, 2011; Smits et al. 2016). Further research should include coaches with different priorities and athletes with different achievements to understand if the only way to success is an abusive and tough coaching style or not.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand the coach-parent relationship in women's artistic gymnastics. The results show that parents perceive the coaching style and methods their daughters experience as appropriate. They are happy with the style and coaching methods because their children are happy with it. Parents feel comfortable approaching the coach and discussing their concerns at anytime. Coaches are happy to talk with the parents, hear their concerns and are willing to adjust their coaching methods if they agree with parents and find it useful for their coaching. Generally, the overlap between mothers' and coaches' assumptions and beliefs is very close in this study. Coaches and parents believe that good communication between them is very important for success of their child. Child's mental and physical health is prioritized over good achievements in this club. It is important to note that this is only one example from one club in Sweden, where surely there are different type of coaches, who use different styles and methods, which parents are not happy and do not experience positive relationship with their coach. Results of this research show that WAG does not need to be a sport, which should be avoided by parents and athletes due to the reputation of unethical and abusive coaching methods, which exist nowadays (Smits et al. 2016; Kerr & Stirling, 2015; Stier, 2012; Pinheiro et al. 2014). This study is a good example of two-sided communication where parents and coaches feel comfortable talking to each other and finding together the best solution and direction for the child, which is one of the main factors for creating healthy, positive environment for a child and for developing youth sport.

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Appendix 1. Face to face interview questions to parents

Background

1. How old is your child/children who is a participant of gymnastics?
2. How many times per week does your child go for gymnastics training?
3. How many coaches are involved in your child's gymnastics program?
4. Has your child ever competed in gymnastics? If so, to what level?
5. Why did you choose gymnastics for your child?

Perceptions

1. Do you feel that your child enjoys gymnastics training/competition?
2. Has your child ever voiced any concerns to you about gymnastics training/competing/coach?
3. If so, what were they?
4. How long do you think your child will last in the sport of gymnastics?

Coaching Practice

1. Can you describe what sort of coaching methods the coaches in your gymnastics club use?
2. What do you like and dislike about her coaching style?
3. Are you happy with the style of coaching being used at your gymnastics club? Explain
4. If your child is not doing what is expected at training, are you happy for the gymnastics coach to discipline him or her? If so, what ways would you like to see your child being disciplined by the coach?
5. What ways have you seen your child disciplined by the coach?
6. Were you happy with these disciplinary methods by the coach?

Parental Voice

1. What role do you believe parents have in gymnastics?
2. Do you feel you can talk to your coach at any time?
3. If you were not happy, did you discuss your thoughts/concerns with the coach?
4. Do you feel that you can voice your concerns at any time?
5. If you did voice your concerns, how did the coach react to it?

6. Do you feel that they acknowledge your voice/concerns and do you feel that it is then transferred into their coaching practice?

Appendix 2. Face to face interview questions to the coach

Background

1. How old are you now and where do you come from?
2. Tell me a little bit about your career in gymnastics (how many years have you competed, when did you start, and when will you stop).
3. How did you move into coaching? Do you have any coaching education?
4. How many years have you been teaching gymnastics? Is it your full time job?
5. Have you been teaching gymnastics outside Sweden?

Perceptions

1. Do you feel that your students enjoy gymnastics?
2. Do you feel that their parents enjoy that they are doing gymnastics?
3. How long do you think your students will continue with gymnastics?

Coaching Practice

1. Can you describe what sort of coaching style you are using when you teach?
2. Has this type of coaching changed over time? How?
3. Are you happy with the style of coaching you are using? Explain
4. What methods do you use to get your gymnasts to perform better? Do you need to discipline?
5. What methods do you use to discipline your students?
6. Would you use the same methods in your country? If no, why?

Parental Voice

1. What role do you believe parents have in gymnastics?
2. Do you feel that parents are happy with your coaching style?
3. Do you feel that parents often have some concerns about your coaching style?
4. How do you feel when parents are approaching you? Do you think they feel that they can approach you anytime?
5. Do you feel that parents feel comfortable approaching you if they have any concerns?
6. Do you find parents comments useful for your coaching practice?

Appendix 3. Agreement for participation in the study



Du är inbjuden att ta del i en undersökning som heter: **Parent's' role in sport: An interview study on the coach-parent relationship.**

Undersökningens syfte är att identifiera om föräldrar tycker att träningsprocessen i gymnastik är godtagbar ur deras perspektiv för deras barn och om föräldrarna känner sig bekväma med att prata med tränaren i fall de har egna åsikter. Tränarens och föräldrarnas perspektiv ska undersökas. Resultatet av undersökningen kommer att hjälpa andra tränare att få bättre förståelse om hur föräldrarna ser på sin roll i idrotten.

Ditt deltagande i undersökningen kommer att innebära en intervju, där du kommer att svara på frågorna som är relaterade till din erfarenhet av gymnastikträningsprocess. Intervjun kommer att ske på plats och tid som vi kommer att komma överens om. Planerad tid för intervjun är upp till 1 timme. Deltagandet i undersökningen är frivilligt.

Du kan avbryta intervjun när som helst om du kommer att känna dig obekväma. All information kommer att användas konfidentiellt och bara i undersökningssyfte. För att säkerställa din anonymitet kommer du att få en pseudonym. Intervjun kommer att spelas in och transkriberas om du tillåter det.

Undersökningen är genomförd av

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Jag godkänner mitt deltagande i undersökningen

Namn

Underskrift

Datum