

The Influence of Education, Gender, and Age on Parental Expectations of
Student-Athletes' Performance

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Abstract

Sports are crucial in many high school students' lives. More than half of high school students in America played a high school sport (U.S. News & World Report, 2011). The purpose of this research was to analyze parental expectations for high school student-athletes as they correspond with the parental demographics. The two expectation types examined were expectations for athletic performance and expectations for values and skills parents wanted student-athletes to take away from their sport. 34 parents at a mid-sized suburban high school and 47 of their children took part in answering an online questionnaire about their sport-related expectations. The questionnaire asked parent participants to contribute their sport-based expectations, and it asked the student participants to anticipate their parents' sport-related expectations. The sport-related expectations were divided into two categories: achievement expectations and value/skill development expectations. For the athletic achievement expectations, older and highly educated parents tended to be less concerned with their children's high school athletic performance than younger, less educated parents. Female parents appeared less likely to value student athletic achievement than male parents. Yet, parents' demographics did not influence value/skill development expectations. Surprisingly, almost 50 percent of high school student-athletes stated that they did not know their parents' expectations for their athletic performance. Future research could explore how certain parent expectations affect student athletic performance and why many students are unaware to parents' expectations.

Introduction

The Importance of Sport

High school athletics is a critical aspect of many students' scholastics experience and often influences these students later in life. Almost 7.8 million American high school students play sports (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2014). Students of various backgrounds play sports for many reasons, including getting more involved in campus-life and for the love of the sport (Women's Sports Foundation, 2008).

In high school, even non-athletes may be affected by sports. Non-athletes often know peers who play sports or witness sports on television or social media (Beck & Bosshart, 2003).

Further, studies in sports psychology have implications beyond sports. Student-athletes often learn skills that they can apply to other areas in daily life.

As sport is a prominent factor in students' lives, it is important to recognize and understand what drives student-athletes to perform. Parent expectations are one of the primary influences on student athletic performance (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). These parental expectations are driven by factors like the parents' own experiences in sport and involvement in their child's sport as well as their income and education levels (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004).

Literature Review

A large body of recent sports psychology research explores the important relationships between student-athletes and their parents. Recurring trends appear in the scholarship, such as the consistent finding that parental values shape student-athletes' enthusiasm for a sport. Scholarship from Côté (1999); Dixon, Warner, and Bruening (2008); and Fredricks and Eccles (2004) indicated that parental behavior and expectations demonstrate to their children how much

they value sports. Those indicators impact how students view sports. Further, scholarship by researchers LaVoi and Stellino (2008) offer insight into how parental behavior and expectations influence a student's emotional outlook on his or her sport.

Researcher Côté examined the family's role in the development of talent in sports (Côté, 1999). This study found that expectations and values set by parents of committed athletes specifically focused on the importance of achievement, hard work, success, and persistence (Côté, 1999). Côté also found that children who performed well in school athletics often had parents who expected high levels of sport performance from the student, but did not force their views on their offspring (Côté, 1999).

In the same study, Côté discusses the influence of parental income on student athletic performance. High family income was linked to higher athlete motivation and involvement in sport (Côté, 1999). This demonstrates that socioeconomic class plays a role in shaping student-athlete engagement with sports.

Like Côté's research, a study by Dixon, Warner, and Bruening (2008) demonstrates parents' large impact on student-athletes. They examined the long-term effects of early parental socialization on physical activity and sport behaviors (Dixon, Warner, & Bruening, 2008). In this context, Dixon, Warner, and Bruening (2008) define socialization as "an interactive social process whereby individuals are exposed to noticeable expectations and norms within a particular social setting." This study found that because of the exposure to expectations, the children learn to behave in agreement to those expectations.

A majority of Dixon, Warner, and Bruening's research responds to a model called the Expectancy-Value model, created by sports psychologist Eccles (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). This

influential model is often referenced within the sports psychology field because it clarifies the different factors that play into a child's performance and outlooks in sports, including parents. The model shows that parental values and expectations impact a child's choice of activities and the child's continuation with those activities. The model also shows that parents tend to place emphasis on activities they value, and children are influenced by what their parents value and deem successful (Dixon, Warner, & Bruening, 2008). Therefore, a child is likely choose and continue with activities their parents value. The model's conclusions agrees with what Dixon, Warner, and Bruening found in their research about parental socialization in sport.

Moreover, Dixon et. al (2008) found that a key factor of their participants' families was that parents of their participants played sports, regularly attended the sports games, frequently drove and transported the student-athletes to practice, encouraged participation without pressure, and emphasized sport through childhood. These behaviors demonstrate the parents' value of the sports to their children.

Dixon et. al's findings coincide with another one of Eccles' works in sport psychology, "Parental Influences on Youth Involvement in Sports." Fredricks and Eccles (2004) found that parents took on various roles of being the chauffeur, spectator, and financier of their children's sports. The research maintains that the main influences on a child's enthusiasm for athletics are the parent's expectations and actions that show their value of sport.

In this study, Fredricks and Eccles responded to researchers who argued for further examination of parent socialization of sports participation. This study emphasizes that parent characteristics, like education and family income, along with parents' expectations for their student's athletes success can influence their children's outcomes in sport like their beliefs,

values, goals, and performance (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). Fredricks and Eccles are some of the few researchers that link parental education level to child outcomes. This study shows how complex the influences of parents onto children in sports can be; many factors play into it. In analyzing one factor, researchers must always be aware of the impacts of the others.

Researchers LaVoi and Stellino (2008) investigate two of parent's child-specific behaviors that were appeared in Eccles' Expectancy-Value model: encouragement of specific activities and the use of emotional tone through interactions with the child. In 2008, LaVoi and Stellino examined "The Relation Between Perceived Parent-Created Sport Climate and Competitive Male Youth Hockey Players' Good and Poor Sport Behaviors." LaVoi and Stellino found that "when athletes perceive both parents as being moderately involved, giving positive responses to good performance, encouraging mastery of skills, defining success multidimensionally including enjoyment, and emphasizing that mistakes are part of learning in combination while not placing pressure on children to win or improve and not creating fear about losing or not outperforming other children, the student-athlete will act more graciously towards their teammates" (Lavoi, N. M., & Stellino, M. B., 2008). While other studies looked at parental influences on student-athlete continuation of sport, this research looked at parental influences on student-athletes' emotional experiences. This study is important because it demonstrates the extent to which parents impact student-athletes. Not only do parents influence enthusiasm for sport but their attitudes as well.

This research indicates the importance of parental influence in regards to student athletic performance. It also clearly emphasizes the role of parental expectations in promoting student-athlete participation in sport. However, little research examines the parental

expectations. It is important to examine what parental expectations for their student-athletes are and the types of expectations that exist. Furthermore, more research is needed that analyzes parental characteristics besides income and socioeconomic class. In sports psychology, further research is necessary that characterizes parents' expectations for their children in sports and how parental demographics, such as education level, age, and gender, shape them.

Research Question and Goal

This research seeks to characterize the demographics of parents of high school student-athletes. These demographics include age, gender, and education level. In addition, this research seeks to understand what values parents of student-athletes expect their children to derive from sports and what achievement level parents of student athletes expect their children to attain. Then, the study will explore how demographics influence both sets of expectations.

Unlike prior research, this original research will clearly define the expectations parents have for their children in sports. Past researchers noted parents' influence, but never specified what parents wanted. Researcher Eccles (2002) determined that parental expectations were the primary source of influence from parent to child, overcoming role modeling and other influences. Because expectations shape parental involvement, it is important to understand them. In other words, do the parental demographic factors, parental age, gender, and education level, influence parents' expectations of their children's athletic values and level of achievement?

Methods

Before conducting this original research, it was important to gain a full perspective of the existing literature in the field. Databases, including Ebscohost and Google Scholar, provided

ample studies within sports psychology. Once collected, commonalities and differences were noted between the studies to assess the preexisting conversation.

Surveys were used in this study to generate a large pool of responses to analyze. Surveys were an efficient way to collect data that could present trends as opposed to individual interviews. The student-athlete surveys and parent surveys were created using Google Forms. Both the purpose of the research and the survey were reviewed by Psychology Professor Dr. Melinda Blackman of California Fullerton State University and Associate Professor Dr. Stacy Warner of the Department of Kinesiology at East Carolina University.

It was important to accurately assess parent demographics because they are an important factor of the study, so the questionnaire specifically asked about them. The student-athlete questionnaire asked about the student's age, gender, and grade. Then it asked for their mother and father's highest level of education. The parent survey asked the participants directly about their age range, highest education level, and gender.

Additionally, the survey-takers were asked about their education level because it a surrogate for socio-economic class of the parents. Survey participants were not expected to answer direct questions regarding socioeconomics, even with anonymity, so education level was used instead.

This research targeted students-athletes and the parents of those children. The questionnaire consent form was administered to each of the teams and their coaches with the links to each survey attached. To analyze the data, the focus was placed on identifying the general trends between specific parent demographics: parent age, parent education level, and parent gender. Because each demographic would not have completely equal numbers (e.g. there

were more female respondents than male respondents), the percentage of the demographic's specific category answers were taken from the total category's responses.

Before the survey was sent out to the potential survey-takers, it was reviewed by an Institutional Review Board. After receiving parent consent and student-athlete assent, the participants could begin taking the survey. The consent described the lengths to which the information was kept private. All questions were optional and anonymous. The surveys were designed to be completed in five to 10 minutes to encourage high rates of completion among students and parents.

To match each of the parent and survey responses, randomized three letter combinations were assigned to the student-athlete and parent. It was also important that the results of the survey were anonymous, to ensure personal bias wouldn't influence the results.

The questionnaire was administered in a mid-sized suburban high school within a primarily upper middle class community. This research study assessed five sports teams: boys tennis, stunt team (mostly comprised of females), swim, wrestling (mostly comprised of males), and boys golf. With this diverse set of teams, the results were expected to be representative of high school athletes generally. In addition to these five teams, small numbers of athletes from other high school sports teams and their parents were also included, such as cross country, tennis, and basketball. At the end of the survey administration period, the sample size was comprised of 47 students and 34 parents, making 81 total participants in the study.

Within the parental-based study, expectations were separated into two categories: expectations for athletic achievement and expectations regarding skill/learning development. To target the athletic achievement expectations, the questionnaire asked, "What are your

expectations for your child/children's final level/proficiency in his/her/their sport?" Athletic achievement was ranked into three levels: Junior Varsity, Varsity, and College level. To target the value-based expectations, the questionnaire asked, "Please select your THREE main expectations you had/have for your child take away/achieve in their high school sport." An example of the expectations parent participants could have chosen from the questionnaire is "Increased learning of how to follow directions and listen to his/her instructors."

To assess the student-athletes' understanding of their parents' expectations regarding athletic achievement, the questionnaire asked, "What are your parent(s)' expectations for your final team level/proficiency in your sport?" To assess the student-athletes' understanding of their parents' expectations regarding values, the questionnaire asked, "What do you think your parents' THREE main expectations are/were for you to take away/achieve in your high school sport?"

The questionnaire asked these questions considering previous research that noted how non-specific terms could not accurately measure parental expectations and involvement (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). These expectation questions were made with specific wording and terminology to avoid vague data.

Results

Results From Questionnaires to Parents of Student-Athletes

A varied group of parents responded to the questionnaire. In regards to age, 50 percent of respondents were 51-60 years old and 44 percent were 41-50 years old. The least represented age groups were 31-40 year olds and 60+ year olds, with both groups making up three percent of the data respectively. In regards to gender, 62 percent of the respondents were female and 38

percent were male. In regards to education, a wide range of levels were met; 15 percent had a Doctoral/professional degree, eight percent had a Master's degree, 39 percent had a bachelor's degree, 12 percent had an Associate's degree, nine percent went to some college but had no degree, six percent had a high school diploma or equivalent, and three percent had less than a high school diploma.

Expectations for student-athlete sports performance.

Parental age.

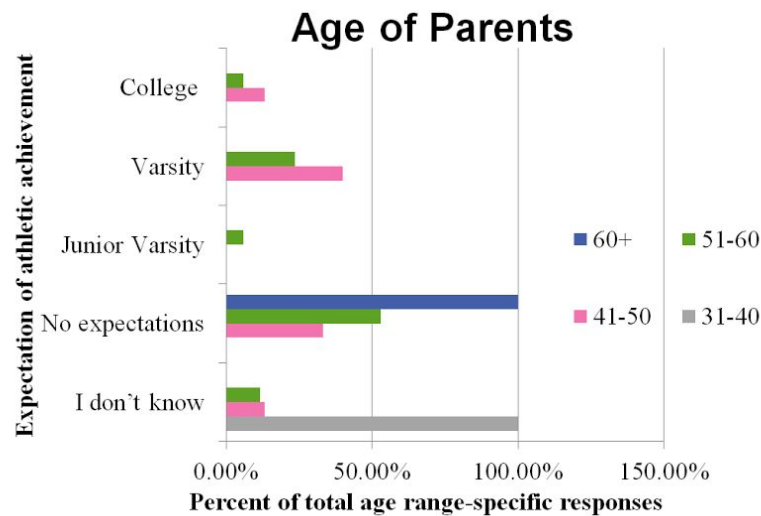


Figure 1. Parental age correlated with parental expectations of athletic achievement, as defined by team sport.

In the questionnaire, parents were asked, “What are your parent(s)’ expectations for your final team level/proficiency in your sport?” to address performance/achievement expectations expectation. Proficiency of sport was ranked into three levels: Junior Varsity, Varsity, and College level. As Figure 1 shows, Of 31-40 year olds, 100 percent selected “I don’t know.” Of 41-50 year olds, 0 percent selected “Junior Varsity,” 40 percent selected “Varsity,” 13 percent selected “College,” 13 percent selected “I don’t know,” and 33 percent selected “No

expectations.” Of 51-60 year olds, six percent selected “Junior Varsity,” 25 percent selected “Varsity,” six percent selected “College,” 12 percent selected “I don’t know,” and 53 percent selected “No expectations.” Of 51-60 year olds, 100 percent selected “No expectations.” Of participants in the 60+ age range, 100 percent selected “No expectations.”

Results indicate that parents 60+ years of age were more likely to have no expectations for their student's athletic achievement than other age ranges. This contrasted with parents in the 51-60 and 41-50 age ranges who showed a greater tendency to want their children to perform at the the varsity or college level. Young parents (31-40 years old) were less certain on how they wanted their children to perform than other age groups.

Parental gender.

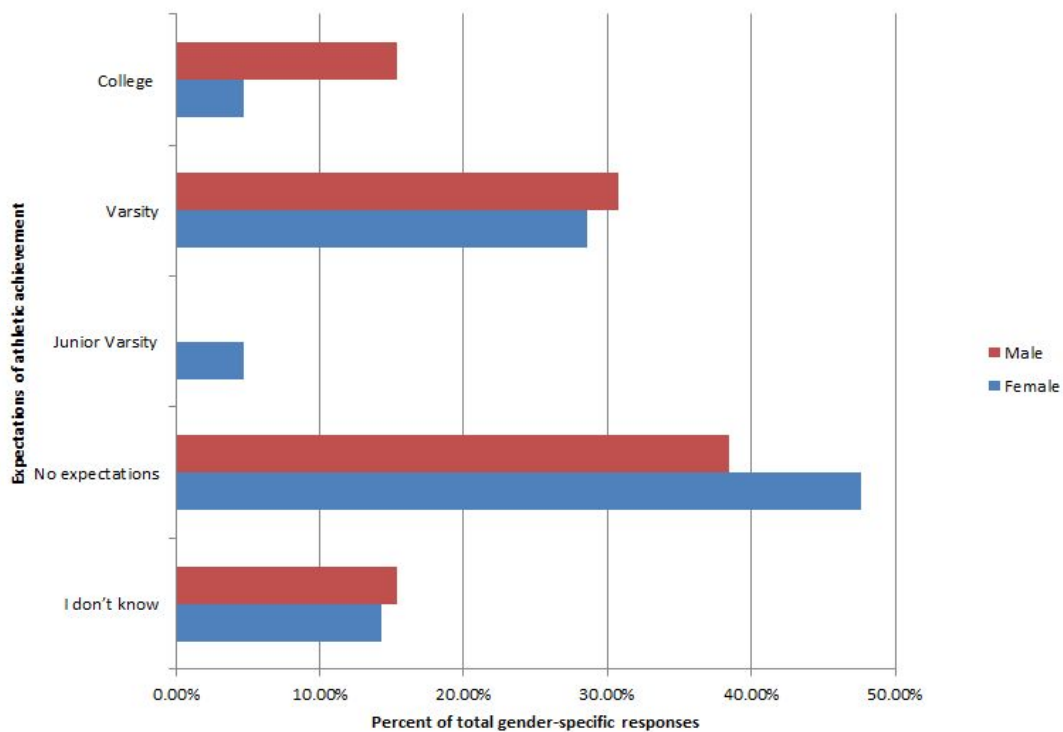


Figure 2. Parental gender correlated with parental expectations of athletic achievement, as defined by team sport.

In the questionnaire, parents were asked, “What are your parent(s)’ expectations for your final team level/proficiency in your sport?”. They selected a team level they expected their children to reach. Results from Figure 2 indicate that 14 percent of females and 15 percent of males selected “I don’t know.” 48 percent of females and 39 percent of males selected “No expectations.” Five percent of females and 0 percent of males selected “Junior Varsity.” 29 percent of females and 30 percent of males selected “Varsity.” Five percent of females and 15 percent of males selected “College.”

Male parents had higher expectations of student athletic achievement than female parents, and female parents were more likely to not have any expectations for their children’s achievement level.

Parental education level.

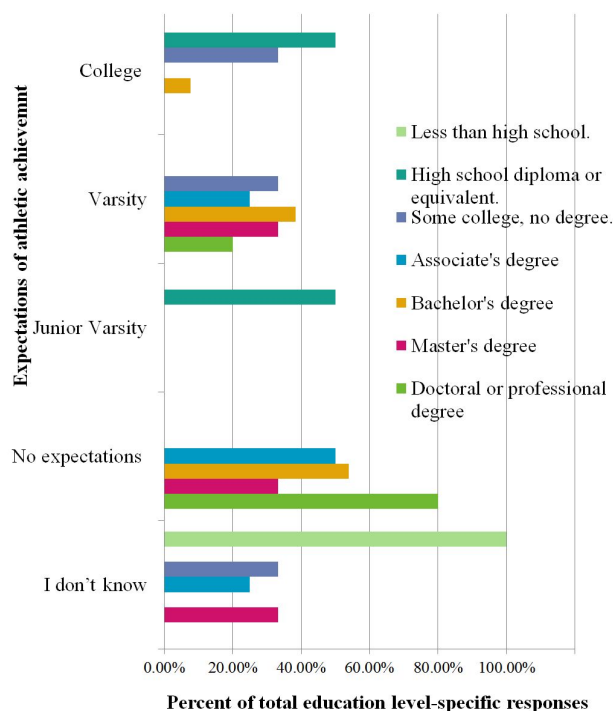


Figure 3. Parental education level correlated with parental expectations of athletic achievement, as defined by team sport.

As Figure 3 illustrates, parents with a Doctoral/professional degree, 0 percent selected “Junior Varsity,” 20 percent selected “Varsity,” 0 percent selected “College,” 0 percent selected “I don’t know,” and 80 percent selected “No expectations.” Of parents with a Master’s degree, 0 percent selected “Junior Varsity,” 33 percent selected “Varsity,” 0 percent selected “College,” 33 percent selected “I don’t know,” and 33 percent selected “No expectations.” Of parents with a Bachelor’s degree, 0 percent selected “Junior Varsity,” 39 percent selected “Varsity,” 8 percent selected “College,” 0 percent selected “I don’t know,” and 54 percent selected “No expectations.” Of parents with an Associate’s degree, 0 percent selected “Junior Varsity,” 25 percent selected “Varsity,” 0 percent selected “College,” 25 percent selected “I don’t know,” 50 percent selected “No expectations.” Of parents that went to some college but have no college degree, 0 percent selected “Junior Varsity,” 33 percent selected “Varsity,” 33 percent selected “College,” 33 percent selected “I don’t know,” and 0 percent selected “No expectations.” Of parents with a high school diploma or equivalent, 50 percent selected “Junior Varsity,” 0 percent selected “Varsity,” 50 percent selected “College,” 0 percent selected “I don’t know,” and 0 percent selected “No expectations.” Of parents with less than a high school degree, 100 percent selected “I don’t know.”

Lower parent education levels (less than high school; high school diploma/equivalent; some college, no degree; associate’s degree) picked all expectation options equally with a slight inclination towards selecting ‘no expectations.’ The intermediate parent education level (bachelor’s degree) appears equally inclined to have no expectations for their children in sport or to expect the varsity team level. All parents with a doctoral/professional degree selected ‘no expectations,’ demonstrating a less concerned approach to athletic achievement.

Expectations for student-athlete values to be gained from sport participation.

Regardless of parental demographics, the top four expectations selected in value-based expectations were “Increased learning of skills like discipline, goal-setting, hard work, teamwork,” “Increased involvement in school,” “Overall health of student,” and “To have fun.”

Results From Student-Athletes Questionnaire

In the questionnaire that student-athletes took, the respondents were also diverse. With regard to gender, 66 percent were female and 34 percent of respondents male. In regards to grade level, 53 percent were eleventh graders, 19 percent were tenth graders, 17 percent were ninth graders, and 11 percent were seniors.

Knowledge of Expectations for student-athlete sports performance.

The key finding that the study presented from the student-athlete survey was that many student were unaware of their parent expectations for them. When asked, “What are your parent(s)’ expectations for your final team level/proficiency in your sport?” 46 percent of students selected “I don’t know,” 35 percent selected “Varsity,” nine percent selected “Junior Varsity,” and 11 percent selected “College.” It is important to note that the majority of the students in the sample selected “I don’t know.”

Knowledge of Expectations for student-athlete values to be gained from sport participation.

When asked, “What do you think your parents' THREE main expectations are/were for you to take away/achieve in your high school sport?” the student-athlete survey generally presented the same results as the parent questionnaire did. The top chosen results again were “Increased learning of skills like discipline, goal-setting, hard work, teamwork,” “Increased

involvement in school,” “Overall health of student,” and “To have fun.” However, another highly chosen expectation that students thought their parents had was “College recognition of well-roundedness.”

Discussion

Key Findings

This study assesses features of sports psychology not well represented in current literature: the characteristics of parents of student-athletes and their expectations. As prior research has demonstrated, parents play a significant role in student athletic performance and enjoyment of sport (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). Moreover, models within sports psychology have found that many factors contribute to child-athlete beliefs, values, goals, and performance (Eccles, J. S. & Wigfield, A., 2002), as this original research shows. Results from the research described herein demonstrate that parental age, gender, and education level did influence parent expectations for student-athletes' achievement. The study also shows that the parental demographics did not influence expectations of values parents hoped their children would take away from the sport.

Parents of student-athletes.

Expectations for student-athlete sports performance.

Parental age.

Of the research analyzed and referenced before this study was conducted, little was found on how parental age could influence the shaping of parental expectations for sport performance.

These data show that older parents, ages 60 and older, had no expectations for their student's athletic achievement, while young parents, ages 31-40, did not know how they wanted

their children to perform.

Young parents' lack of certainty about their achievement expectations for their children can be attributed to their lack of experience with students' progression and continuation in sport during high school compared to older parents. Because they are younger parents, they are not as exposed to seeing their children progress and advance in sports.

On the other hand, older parents may be influenced by their time away from high school, allowing them to place less value on achievement and more on well-being in regard to sports.

Eccles (2002) demonstrated in her Expectancy-Value model that parental and family characteristics did influence parental expectations and children's outcomes in sport. However, there is an absence of research done in the sports psychology field on how age relates to sports involvement and parental expectations that this original research fills in.

Furthermore, because these trends appeared in the age subgroups that were underrepresented (31-40 and 60+) in the survey participants, more research needs to be conducted to find more definitive results.

Parental gender.

The parental demographics of gender produced the most apparent trends in the results. Interestingly, none of the male participants selected "Junior Varsity," for their athletic achievement expectation. Five percent of female participants selected "Junior Varsity," however. Also, female participants were less likely to expect "Varsity" or "College" levels for their children than male participants. For college-level achievement expectations, the results are substantially different for both genders, with males selecting "College" much more than females. With a larger sample size in future studies, researchers can track if this trend continues and if

female parents continue to have a less rigorous expectations than male participants.

One possible cause of the differences that arose in gender is gender stereotyping in sports. In 1993, two researchers found that parents were more likely to encourage participation in sports for their sons than their daughters (Brustad, 1993; Greendorfer, 1993). Moreover, because of the different attitudes towards genders in sports, parents' expectations for each gender changed as well (Eccles & Harold, 1990). Brustad's and Greendorf's studies were relevant during the 1990's, a time period that the parent participants of the survey grew up in and lived through. Therefore, parent participants may have been influenced by previous gender stereotyping to have different expectations. Male participants in this study might have more rigorous expectations than females in this study because males might have been encouraged more often to participate in sports than females when they were growing up.

Parental education level.

Lower parent education levels (less than high school; high school diploma/equivalent; some college, no degree; associate's degree) picked all expectation options equally with a slight inclination towards selecting "no expectations." The intermediate parent education level (bachelor's degree) appears equally inclined to have no expectations for their children in sport or to expect the varsity team level. All parents with a doctoral/professional degree selected "no expectations," demonstrating a less concerned approach to athletic achievement.

Interestingly, highly educated parents did not have higher achievement expectations for their children in sport compared to less educated parents. Because highly educated parents went through extensive training, it would be expected that they have high expectations for their children in all areas. Surprisingly, they did not. This may be due to higher educated parents

placing more value on academics than sports. Therefore, they might not expect their student-athletes to excel in sports, but rather in academics. As researcher Eccles (2002) showed, parents' beliefs and behaviors are shaped by their demographic factors, like education level. However, this needs to be researched with a larger sample size to generate more conclusive and definitive data.

Expectations for student-athlete development of values to be gained from sport participation.

Intriguingly, parental demographics did not correlate with trends in parental expectations of values their children should gain from sport participation.

The reason for this interesting discrepancy may be the type of expectation. While achievement based parental expectations may be influenced more directly by income level, value placed on sports, and/or stereotypes, expectations on values taken away from sport may be more universal. For example, the expectation that a student-athlete will have "Increased learning of skills like discipline, goal-setting, hard work, teamwork" can be associated more with positive psychological impacts and well-being of the student-athlete than reaching varsity level. Regardless of parental characteristics, most parents want their children to leave their sports with the same skills, as shown in the data.

Student-athletes.

A key finding when analyzing students' knowledge of parental achievement expectations was that 46 percent of student were unaware of them. This unfamiliarity may be due to parents assuming their children already know their expectations. It may also be due to a lack of time to discuss parents' expectations.

Parents and student-athletes may simply find it unnecessary to discuss each other's expectations for the student-athlete in sports. This coincides with researchers' findings that parents' influence decreases as children grow up (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). Student-athletes spend more time around peers and coaches as they age (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). In the future, it is important to emphasize continued communication throughout adolescence.

Limitations

Because the method of experiment was surveys, the study relied on self-proclaimed data from the respondents. This element of the study was a drawback. Fredricks and Eccles (2004) found that self-reporting questionnaire can lead to discrepancies among data due to differences in perception and objectivity. When conducting surveys, researchers must account for reporting biases.

Moreover, it is clear that the trends in these data encourage future studies on this topic with a larger sample size and inclusion of additional demographic factors such as ethnicity to discover more definitive results. In future studies, it is important to gain more participants from underrepresented categories in this study like parent participants aged 31-40 and 60+. The questionnaire was administered in a mid-sized suburban high school within a primarily upper middle class community. Because of the small sample size, the trends that appeared may be subject to fluctuations in data, thus developing less definitive results. As research continues on this topic, large sample sizes can more accurately depict trends relating to parental demographic and expectations. Because of the small amount of respondents from this group, the results may not be as definitive and representative.

Implications and Further Studies

Future research should target a broader cross section of high school and communities, as this study only analyzed data from one school in a single community. Moreover, this study can be used to assist student-athletes who stop after one or two years played in sport and programs that encourage sport-playing longevity.

In extensions of this study, it is important to include questions related to further expectations, such as parent expectations for the student-athlete's individual race/competitions or setting personal records.

Also, future research can analyze different factors involved with parents' influences on student-athletes. Some may include particular sport perceptions, regions the parents live in, and parental enthusiasm towards sport. Those different factors can be analyzed on how they complement the parental demographics in the influence of parental sports expectations.

Conclusion

Parental demographics correlated with trends in parental expectations of athletic achievement. Older and better educated parents tended to be less concerned with their children's high school athletic performance than their younger and less educated counterparts. Further, female parents appeared less likely to value student athletic performance than male parents. Yet, parental demographics did not correlate with parental expectations of values parents wanted their children to gain from sport participation. This research is applicable in other areas of sports psychology like motivation, progress, goal-setting, and facing challenge. Moreover, the results can guide further research on how student athletes interpret parent expectations and how student-athletes understand parental cues and behaviors. These results can offer insight to

parent-child relationships in the context of sports and how each party responds to the other.

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