



## **Practice Update: Virtual Spaces and Emotional Places: Parent Spectator Behaviors & Sport Social Work Practice Implications**

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*The COVID-19 pandemic warranted modifications to spectating experiences of parents whose children participated in youth sports. Arguably, this time period is the first where parent attendance (physical presence) was (a) prohibited due to the shutdown of sports activities (b) required modifications such as mask wearing and social distancing in accordance with local regulations and/or (c) parents were forced to watch their children virtually, rather than out of convenience. Parent participants had varied lived spectating experiences tied to a plethora of emotions, ranging from detachment to gratitude. Within this practice note, the author discusses both an exploratory research study and practice implications for sport social workers seeking to better understand how parenting within the youth sport environment was influenced by the pandemic. Provided is a practice guide, rooted in family systems theory to help sport social workers evaluate spectating experiences and their influence upon the family system. This tool can be used both within and outside the context of the pandemic.*

*Keywords: spectator behavior, sport social work practice, family dynamics in sport, parent behaviors*

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted significant changes to youth sports settings and inspired a new platform for research in the sport social work domain. Sport social work is a burgeoning area of social work practice and research focused upon the unique needs of athletes and those engaged in the sport system (Dean & Rowan, 2014; Gill, 2008; Lawson & Anderson-Butcher, 2000, Moore & Gummelt, 2018). Furthermore, the aim of such efforts is to promote health and well-being through activities such as direct practice, community organizing, advocacy, policy development, and research, all of which are among the core competences of the social work profession (Moore & Gummelt, 2018). The emergence of sport social work has sparked scholarship in several areas from those within the social work such as youth development (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2011, 2016), athlete transitions across the life span (Kidd

et al., 2018), and interventions in sport-based settings (Moore & Gummelt, 2018). More recently, authors have focused upon spectator behaviors (Reynolds, 2020; Reynolds, 2021) and suggested therapists delve into these behaviors to explore broader family dynamics (Jeanfreau et al., 2020). Because of health concerns and restrictions to spectator attendance, COVID-19 caused parents consider other forms of engagement to promote the continuity of youth sports and parent spectating. This practice note provides a tool for sport social work practitioners to use in therapeutic settings, and validates how assessing spectator behaviors provide insight into broader family dynamics.

## **Research Background**

In sport social work practice, practitioners should expect to interface and work collaboratively with various stakeholders and this includes parents of youth sport athletes (Moore & Gummelt, 2018). Within this capacity, they serve four key functions, which are to assess, engage, plan, and use appropriate interventions informed by evidence. Research on spectating interactions is plentiful (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008; Omli & Lavoie, 2009, 2012; Reynolds, 2020, 2021), yet existing studies on virtual spectating is limited to the experiences of pubgoers and soccer fans in England and exterior to the COVID-19 pandemic. (Weed, 2007, 2008, 2020). Practice guidance with respect to the implications of spectator behaviors is limited (Jeanfreau et al. 2020).

The escalation of the global COVID-19 pandemic disrupted youth sports activities, a mainstay of American culture for approximately millions of children. Youth sports were shut down to protect youth and vulnerable adults from contracting the virus. Long term interruptions, it was estimated would exacerbate current youth sport dropout rates by 30% (Aspen Institute, 2020). This was coupled with staggering, pre-pandemic dropout rates of 70% by the age of twelve and increased disparities for low income and minority youth (Aspen Institute, 2015, 2019). Youth sport venue managers were challenged to navigate fluid federal, local, and state regulations (i.e., mask wearing and distancing) and the desires of parents to be physically present at their child's events (Kelly et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2020). As a result of shut downs, youth participants lost on average 6.5 hours of sports participation per week (Solomon, 2020). In some states, sports were canceled entirely, whereas in other states and regions, sport leaders and coaches offered virtual spectating opportunities to parents and family members to meet social distancing requirements. Parents also missed out on spectator interactions, which represent a source of cultural continuity and stability for families (Dixon, 2014).

Allowing parents of youth athletes and their spectating family members to safely engage in sport-based activities also meant a transition to virtual spectating platforms. This created an unfamiliar and at times, unsettling experience for parents and caregivers exacerbated by uncertainties of the pandemic. Consequently, this new spectating platform offered an opportunity to examine the psychosocial aspects of spectating differently, largely due to circumstances not seen for multiple generations (pandemic) in the United States. In these instances, youth sports spectating came through live streaming services and other online platforms.

## **Relevant Practice Literature**

Jeanfreau et al. (2020) recommended therapists take a more active role in assessing family spectating behaviors in the sport environment. While the true scope and frequency of inappropriate

spectator behaviors is unknown and hard to measure (Block & Lesneskie, 2018), these types of actions which stem from disagreements with coaches, referees, and other spectators are common and influencing the desire of young people to participate in sports activities. These actions are comparable to road rage, short emotional outbursts lasting only a few minutes, then subsiding (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008). These spectator actions leave the athlete in a vulnerable position, especially when the athlete is participating in games on the field, responding to the immediate guidance of their coach, and simultaneously receiving instructions from or witnessing inappropriate behaviors of their parents or other spectators (Omli & Lavoie, 2009, 2012). Parental actions too are believed to be drivers of youth quitting sports activities, mitigating an avenue for positive youth development experiences (Aspen Institute, 2015, 2019). Given the risk factors associated with spectator actions both within and outside the COVID-19 pandemic, sport social workers have an important opportunity to explore these dynamics with families. Areas of exploration as recommended by Jeanfreau et al. (2020):

- Time and financial commitments to youth sports
- Level of family involvement
- Evaluating both the positive and challenging aspects of sports participation for both children and adults
- Motivations behind sports participation
- Family sacrifices made to participate in sports
- Experiences associated with performance expectations and pressure

### **Theoretical Framework**

Given the youth sports activities involve multiple interactions between various stakeholders, family systems theory is an appropriate framework to evaluate spectator behaviors and understand interactions within the sport system (Reynolds, 2021; Stainback & Lamarche, 1998; Zimmerman & Protinsky, 1993). Important assessment areas include an individual's functioning within their family system and factors such as emotional demands, role definitions and expectations, boundary issues, culture, and belief systems emerging as a result of participation in sports (Dorsch et al., 2020; Hellstedt, 2005; Watson, 2012). Important to evaluate are boundaries and stressors (Bremer, 2012). Boundaries are shaped by the family's level of involvement in sport, represented at extremes either by disengagement or enmeshment (Hellstedt, 1987, 2005). Disengaged families are represented by parents who do not support sport participation and have limited attendance at games or practices as spectators. In contrast, enmeshed families are heavily involved and attached to the sport experience. Parent spectating is also an important component of involvement altered by sport the pandemic, and research on virtual spectating is limited. Weed (2008) found sport spectators value the ability to gather, watch, and engage with virtual sporting events in close proximity.

Youth sport spectating is an emotional experience for parents. Parents may encounter joy and rewards from watching their children learn new skills or enjoy the sport environment. However, recent study by Legg & Rose (2021) found parents often experience more negative, rather than positive emotions as spectators. Observational studies have noted parent aggression and anger exhibited in this context (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008), linked parent behaviors in the sports setting to broader parenting practices (Trussell & Shaw, 2012), measuring the frequency parent spectating behaviors (Omli & LaVoi, 2009; Reynolds, 2020, 2021), and developing

educational initiatives and interventions to address spectating behaviors (Dorsch et al., 2019; Reynolds, 2021). This is also timely, given the fluidity and long-term changes to the sport environment as a result of the pandemic (Kelly et al., 2020). Changes to spectator interactions cannot be ignored, given their central role to family experiences in the sport setting.

While the overall prevalence during the pandemic is unknown, virtual spectating was an avenue for parents to view their child's participation in sports. Participants within our sample reported using apps such as Facebook Live, GameChanger, or YouTube to view games. Some used these applications as a result of efforts initiated by sports organizations (or schools). At times, parents are required to subscribe to a smartphone-based application or use a streaming service. GameChanger, one of the applications cited by participants in the study, has been around since 2010 and is a free used in several youth sports to keep score, run analytics, and allow participants to follow games either in real time or through video. In 2017, the ten millionth game was broadcasted and in 2018, GameChanger announced an official partnership with the National Federation of High School Sports after being acquired by Dick's Sporting Goods in 2016 (Sanderson & Baerg, 2020). Conversely, informal broadcasts took place when a parent used their personal cell phone in an on-demand capacity. In such cases, the user activated applications such as Facebook live to stream games and view the happenings of the event in real time.

## Research Methods

Two main questions guided this research study:

- What were lived experiences of parents who participated in virtual spectating?
- What are some practice implications for social workers in therapeutic settings?

This exploratory and qualitative study was approved by the author's institutional review board. To best capture the experiences of parents during the pandemic, the research team developed a secure online Qualtrics survey, hosted by the author's sponsoring institution. Participant recruitment occurred through posting information a link to the study through the sponsoring institution's internal communications page and through social media for a two-week period in March 2021. To further preserve confidentiality, no identifiers, such as emails or participant names were collected and participants signed an electronic consent to participate in advance of answering questions. The Qualtrics survey asked parents about how they observed their child's sporting events during COVID-19: (a) in-person, (b) virtually, or (c) unable to observe. Then, among parents who reported virtual spectating, were asked to explore the psychosocial experiences associated with this activity. Response length was not character restricted within the Qualtrics software. Participants were asked to answer an open-ended prompt modeled after Omli and Lavoie's (2012) study about parental anger. The open-ended prompt read:

The past year and the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges for families whose children participate in sports. One of the most notable challenges is the inability for parents to attend events in person. Instead, many parents had to watch their children virtually through various streaming platforms. Recall your experience as a spectator over the past year (even if it was a one-time occurrence). Describe your experience with as much detail as possible. Feel free to include any thoughts regarding what you liked or disliked about the experience.

## Approach to Data Analysis

Because the topic of virtual spectating is novel, researchers employed an exploratory design and used grounded theory procedures in data analysis. A grounded theory procedure (Oktay, 2012; Oliver, 2012; Pulla 2016), charges researchers to formulate a theory “grounded in data” (Creswell, 2003), to guide data analysis. Grounded theory is different than typical theories in the social sciences and does not seek to establish causal relationships between variables (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Grounded theory procedures are ideal for analyzing responses when there are thirty or more participants (Oktay, 2012; Oliver, 2012; Pulla, 2016) and limited research precedent for the topic (Creswell, 2003). Additionally, the research team employed triangulation “to ensure greater veracity of interpretations than would have been possible if a single investigator had developed the theory alone” (Omli and Lavoie 2012, p.14). To establish greater trustworthiness of the findings, researchers engaged an additional individual with experience in qualitative methodology to review the themes.

## Results

The study sample involved 112 participants who identified as parents of youth sports athletes. The median age of parent participants was 43.1 years (SD=6.56). The mean age of their child was 13.10 (SD=3.03). The participant sample was predominantly female (81%). Indiana was the state of residence for more than half of the participants (57%) and the second most represented state was Louisiana (17%). In total, 85% of participants identified as White or Caucasian. In total, participants from 18 states responded to the survey. Our sample revealed important spectating experiences impacted by three circumstances:

- **Youth Sports Did Not Resume:** In some areas of the country, there were complete shut downs of youth sports activities and this was consistent across 4% of our sample.
- **Youth Sports Participation With Modifications:** Within our sample, about 2/3 of parents reported being able to attend youth sporting events in person, but with social distancing and masking protocols in place.
- **Youth Sports Viewed Through Virtual Platforms:** About 1/3 of our sample reported participating in some form of virtual spectating over the past year. Due to venue restrictions or limits placed on the number of spectators able to attend events, these individuals reported participating in virtual spectating at least once over the past year.

The open-ended question, which the research team developed allowed for thick description of emotional experiences within the setting of youth sports (Gray, 2004; Omli & LaVoi, 2012).

## Important Findings

Thirty-four (30% of participants) parents shared their experiences related to virtual spectating. The spectating experiences and perceptions of changes/modifications to these parent spectating experiences evoked many emotions and emergence of subthemes related to:

- The role youth sports play in shaping parent-child interactions
- Equating physical presence at events with involvement
- Modified perceptions of identity and role as a parent in the sport context
- Convenience from virtual experiences and increased ability to manage family responsibilities exterior to sports activities
- Feelings of detachment and removal from communal bonds prompted by sports spectating
- Feelings of gratitude prompted by the continuation of sports
- Concerns about how the parent-child role would change as a result of spectating experiences
- Frustration when technology interfered with or interrupted viewing

These findings building upon the assessment framework provided by Jeanfreau et al. (2020) in light of both virtual spectating experiences and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Some suggested questions can include, but are not limited to:

- Tell me about some of your family sports experiences of the pandemic? Did you experience any differences? How were they different?
- What were the emotions associated with spectating? Enjoyment? Feelings of Detachment? Gratitude?
- What were some of the positive aspects of changes in sports participation? How, if at all, was this experience challenging for individual members of the family?
- What types of interactions did you have with other spectators? Were you able to build new or maintain old relationships with other families?
- How, if at all, did the pandemic modify your spectating role? Were all members of the family allowed to attend or did you have to negotiate new roles when limits were placed on spectating?
- What were their experiences as a result of not having sports activities available or only available virtually?
- Do you anticipate spectating roles will change in the future? If so, how do you plan to adapt to these changes? What will be challenging for you?

## Conclusion

The referenced study captured the in-person and virtual spectating experiences of parents during the COVID-pandemic and here, the author provides assessment guidance to explore the impact of spectator experiences in therapeutic settings. Over 95% of percent of participants reported their children were able to participate in sports and there were minimal long-term shutdowns. The majority of our study participants were able to attend their child's sporting events with modifications and approximately one-third of participants reported spectating virtually in the past year. The study also revealed a plethora of emotional experiences associated with spectating that were both positive and negative, regardless of spectating modality.

The study is not without limitations. These include a small sample size, a recruitment strategy limited to social media and a university communications portal, and a predominantly White response pool. The aforementioned study provides an impetus for sport-based social workers to ask new questions about the role of sports in families, especially since virtual and

modified spectating modalities revealed both strong connections to the activities and emotions associated with this time period. Consistent with family systems theory (Bremer, 2012; Watson, 2012), it is important to note that during this time, the family system experienced much disruption, often for reasons beyond the immediate control of the family. The ability to be present and spectate at youth sporting events proved to be a source of both disappointment and gratitude, especially as youth sports continued in uncertain times. Future research and practice notes can diversify sport social work practitioner guidance by further delving into spectator experiences. Important to explore is the relationship between spectating behaviors and other demographic factors, such as geographic location, local sports culture, and race. This practice note provides a preliminary evidence-based framework for sport social workers and a new lens for sport social workers to examine family behaviors in a timely context. This is important to consider, also given the uncertainty of an ongoing pandemic which has at the publication of this article lasted almost two years.

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