

Parents' Own Experience of Verbal Abuse Is Associated with their Acceptance of Abuse towards Children from Youth Sports Coaches

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Verbal or physical abuse from coaches has negative effects on young athletes, and the parents of athletes also have an influence on the sports environment. It is therefore important to understand parents' attitudes towards abuse against their children from the coaches. This study aimed to elucidate the characteristics of parents who accept the infliction of verbal or physical abuse on their children from coaches of youth sports teams. A cross-sectional study using self-report questionnaires was conducted with parents of young athletes ($n = 6,493$). Multivariate logistic regression models were used to assess the factors associated with parents' acceptability of verbal or physical abuse against their children. The proportion of parents who were accepting of verbal or physical abuse was 21.5%. Acceptability of verbal or physical abuse was significantly associated with male (odds ratio: 1.67, 95% confidence interval: 1.43-1.95), younger age (1.24, 1.09-1.41), lower educational attainment (1.32, 1.17-1.50), smoking habits (1.42, 1.23-1.63), experience of playing on a team with high levels of competition during their junior or high school days (1.31, 1.15-1.50), and experience of verbal and physical abuse by their own former coaches (3.59, 3.03-4.26 and 1.17, 1.02-1.35). About 58% and 28% of parents had experienced verbal and physical abuse from their own former coaches, and parents who had experienced verbal abuse themselves were most likely to be accepting of verbal or physical abuse towards their children. Educating parents is considered to be important for preventing and eradicating abuse against young athletes.

Keywords: coach; parent; physical abuse; verbal abuse; young athlete

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Introduction

Sports activities provide numerous benefits to children and adolescents, such as good physical and mental health, psychological and social development, and acquisition of lifelong physical activity habits (Telama et al. 1997; Janssen and Leblanc 2010; Eime et al. 2013). However, despite the positive outcomes associated with sport participation, the sports environment is not always a safe place for children and adolescents (Stafford et al. 2013). More concretely, verbal or physical abuse is one of the negative aspects of sport involvement (Vertommen et al. 2016). Generally, abuse constitutes intimidating behaviours against someone

vulnerable, and abuse from coaches is a focal point of abuse in sport because the coach-athlete relationship is an asymmetrical power relationship (Swigonski et al. 2014; Vertommen et al. 2016). This abuse has adverse effects on athletes' physical and psychological health, causing performance decrements, sport dropout, and psychosomatic disorders (Mountjoy et al. 2016). The eradication of abuse is a crucial issue in sports (Stafford et al. 2013).

Some researchers have reported on the existence of verbal or physical abuse against athletes from coaches (Kerr and Stirling 2012; Stafford et al. 2013, 2015; Swigonski et al. 2014; Vertommen et al. 2017; Yabe et al. 2018, 2019; Hagiwara et al. 2019). One previous study showed that

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14.8% of young athletes had experienced verbal abuse and 6.4% had been physically abused by coaches in the preceding year (Yabe et al. 2019). Although most of these studies have addressed athletes' perceptions of their experiences of abuse (Stafford et al. 2013, 2015; Swigonski et al. 2014; Vertommen et al. 2017), only a few have examined the perceptions of coaches (Yabe et al. 2018; Hagiwara et al. 2019) or parents (Kerr and Stirling 2012). The previous reports of coaches' perceptions of abuse assessed the characteristics of coaches who inflicted abuse and showed that abusive coaches tended to have experienced such abuse from their former coaches, which suggests that young athletes who experience such abuse could become abusive coaches in the future (Yabe et al. 2018; Hagiwara et al. 2019). Further, parents also have an influence on young athletes (Ommundsen et al. 2006) and shape the sports environment for them positively or negatively (Chan et al. 2012). Kerr and Stirling (2012) reported parents' reflections on their children's experiences of abuse from coaches using inter-

views of 16 parents of retired elite athletes and showed the process of acceptance of abuse from coaches. However, to the best of our knowledge, there have been no reports about parents' attitudes towards the abuse. Parents' acceptance of abuse by coaches can contribute to the perpetuation of abuse (Kerr and Stirling 2012) and complicate efforts to protect their children from such abuse. To prevent and eradicate abuse against young athletes, it is important to gain an understanding of parents' attitudes towards abuse from coaches. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to elucidate the characteristics of parents who were acceptive of verbal or physical abuse against their children from coaches of various youth sports teams.

Methods

Participants

A comprehensive cross-sectional study was conducted with parents whose children were members of the Miyagi Amateur Sports Association to elucidate their opinions concerning sports activities,

Table 1. Participants' baseline characteristics.

Variables	Categories	n (%)
Sex*	Female	4,931 (75.9)
	Male	1,552 (23.9)
Age (years)*	< 40	2,711 (41.8)
	≥ 40	3,754 (57.8)
Educational attainment*	College or higher	3,246 (50.0)
	High school or less	3,227 (49.7)
Working status*	Unemployed	1,212 (18.7)
	Employed	5,267 (81.1)
Smoking habits*	Non-smoker	4,793 (73.8)
	Smoker	1,660 (25.6)
Number of years that their children had been playing the present sports (years)*	< 1	809 (12.5)
	1 to < 3	2,718 (41.9)
	3 to < 5	1,752 (27.0)
	≥ 5	1,139 (17.5)
Satisfaction with their children's attitude towards sports activities*	Satisfied	5,611 (86.4)
	Unsatisfied	866 (13.3)
Experience playing the same sports as their children*	Absence	4,575 (70.5)
	Presence	1,900 (29.3)
Experience playing on a team with high levels of competition during their junior or senior high school days	Absence	3,991 (61.5)
	Presence	2,502 (38.5)
Experience of verbal abuse by their own former coaches*	Absence	2,548 (39.2)
	Presence	3,756 (57.8)
Experience of physical abuse by their own former coaches*	Absence	4,485 (69.1)
	Presence	1,821 (28.0)

*Because each item has a limited number of respondents, the actual number is not necessary in accordance with the total.

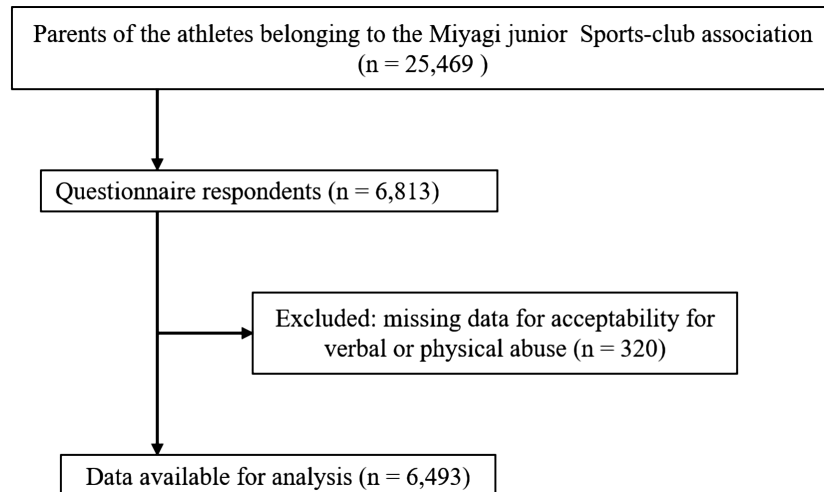


Fig. 1. Flow chart of this study.

their children, and coaches. This private sports association included various sports teams such as soccer, baseball, basketball, judo, and tennis with 25,469 school-aged athletes (6-15 years). A self-report questionnaire and an informed consent form were mailed to all parents whose children were registered as members of the Association in October 2014 ($n = 25,469$). Among those, 6,813 parents provided written informed consent and completed questionnaires by December 2014 (response rate was 26.8%). Participants' baseline characteristics are shown in Table 1. Parents with missing data for acceptability for verbal or physical abuse were excluded ($n = 320$), and a final sample of 6,493 parents was included in this study (Fig. 1). The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee for Research of Human Subjects at the Tohoku University Graduate School of Medicine (approval number: 2013-1-564).

Measures

Regarding abuse, parents' own experiences of verbal and physical abuse by their former coaches were assessed by the following questions: 'Were you yelled at by your former coaches?' and 'Were you hit or kicked by your former coaches?' The response options were 'yes,' 'no,' and 'I do not remember.' Subsequently, acceptability of verbal or physical abuse was assessed by the following question: 'Do you think that these behaviours are necessary to improve the abilities of young athletes?' The response options were 'yes,' 'no,' and 'I do not know.' These responses were categorised into two groups according to the presence of acceptability of verbal or physical abuse (absence: 'no' or 'I do not know'; presence: 'yes'). Sex, age, educational attainment, working status, smoking habits, the number of years that their children had been playing the present sports, satisfaction with their children's attitude towards sports activities, experience playing the same sports as their children, and experience playing in teams with high levels of competition during their junior or senior high school days were assessed by a self-report questionnaire. Educational attainment included junior high school, senior high school, technical school, junior college, 4-year college, and graduate school. Satisfaction with their children's attitude towards sports activities was assessed using the following question: 'How satisfied are you with your child's attitude towards sports activities?' The response options were 'very satisfied,' 'satisfied,' 'unsatisfied,' and 'very unsatisfied.' 'Team competition level' during their junior or

high school days included all of the progressive levels from recreation, local competition, prefectural competition, Tohoku district competition, to national competition. Regarding these levels of competition, all athletes participate in local competitions and the winners can advance to the higher competitions.

The following continuous variables were divided into categories based on their distribution: age was categorised into two groups (< 40 and ≥ 40 years old), because approximately 95% of the participants were in their 30s and 40s; the number of years that their children had been playing the present sports was categorised into four groups (< 1 , $1 < 3$, $3 < 5$, and ≥ 5). The following categorical variables were divided into two groups according to their distribution: educational attainment (college or higher, and high school or less); satisfaction with their children's attitude towards sports activities (satisfied: 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied'; unsatisfied: 'unsatisfied' or 'very unsatisfied'); experience playing on a team with high levels of competition during their junior or senior high school days (absence: 'recreation' or local 'competition' during both junior and senior high school days; presence: 'prefectural competition' or higher during either junior or senior high school days); experiences of verbal and physical abuse by their former coaches (absence: 'no' or 'I do not remember'; presence: 'yes').

Statistical analyses

Categorical variables are presented as numbers and percentages (%). Multivariate logistic regression models were used to calculate odds ratios (ORs) and 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) for acceptability of verbal or physical abuse. Variables considered in the model were sex (male, female, or unknown), age (< 40 , ≥ 40 years, or unknown), educational attainment (college or higher, high school or less, or unknown), working status (unemployed, employed, or unknown), smoking habits (non-smoker, smoker, or unknown), years that their children had been playing the present sports (< 1 , $1 < 3$, $3 < 5$, ≥ 5 years, or unknown), satisfaction with their children's attitudes towards sports activities (satisfied, unsatisfied, or unknown), experience playing the same sports as their children currently play (absence, presence, or unknown), experience playing in the team with high levels of competition during their junior or senior high school days (absence or presence), experience of verbal abuse by their own former coaches (absence, presence, or unknown), and experience of

physical abuse by their former coaches (absence, presence or unknown). All statistical analyses were performed with SPSS version 24.0 (SPSS Japan Inc., Tokyo, Japan). A *p* value of < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

The proportion of parents who accepted verbal or physical abuse was 21.5% (presence: 'yes' *n* = 1,399; absence: 'no' *n* = 1,797, 'I do not know' *n* = 3,297). Table 2 shows the associations between acceptability of verbal or physical abuse and other variables. Sex, age, educational attainment, and smoking habits were significantly associated with acceptability of verbal or physical abuse. Using 'female,' '≥ 40,' 'college or higher,' and 'non-smoker' as a

reference, the adjusted ORs (95% CI) were 1.67 (1.43-1.95) for 'male,' 1.24 (1.09-1.41) for '< 40,' 1.32 (1.17-1.50) for 'high school or less,' and 1.42 (1.23-1.63) for 'smoker.' Further, experience playing in a team with high levels of competition during their junior or senior high school days, experience of verbal abuse by their former coaches, and experience of physical abuse by their former coaches were also associated with the acceptability of verbal or physical abuse. Using 'absence' as a reference, the adjusted ORs (95% CI) for 'presence' were 1.31 (1.15-1.50), 3.59 (3.03-4.26), and 1.17 (1.02-1.35), respectively.

Table 2. Odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals for acceptability of verbal or physical abuse from the coaches according to the study variables.

Variables	Categories	Acceptability of abuse		Adjusted OR (95% CI)	p value
		n	Presence, n (%)		
Total		6,493	1,399 (21.5)		
Sex	Female	4,931	876 (17.8)	1.00	
	Male	1,552	520 (33.5)	1.67 (1.43-1.95)	< 0.001
Age (years)	≥ 40	3,754	735 (19.6)	1.00	
	< 40	2,711	659 (24.3)	1.24 (1.09-1.41)	0.001
Educational attainment	College or higher	3,246	606 (18.7)	1.00	
	High school or less	3,227	785 (24.3)	1.32 (1.17-1.50)	< 0.001
Working status	Unemployed	1,212	199 (16.4)	1.00	
	Employed	5,267	1,196 (22.7)	1.04 (0.87-1.24)	n.s.
Smoking habits	Non-smoker	4,793	881 (18.4)	1.00	
	Smoker	1,660	508 (30.6)	1.42 (1.23-1.63)	< 0.001
Number of years that their children had been playing the present sports (years)	< 1	809	171 (21.1)	1.00	
	1 to < 3	2,718	574 (21.1)	0.97 (0.79-1.19)	n.s.
	3 to < 5	1,752	382 (21.8)	1.02 (0.82-1.26)	n.s.
	≥ 5	1,139	257 (22.6)	1.01 (0.80-1.27)	n.s.
Satisfaction with their children's attitude towards sports activities	Satisfied	5,611	1,176 (21.0)	1.00	
	Unsatisfied	866	223 (25.8)	1.15 (0.97-1.37)	n.s.
Experience playing the same sports as their children	Absence	4,575	863 (18.9)	1.00	
	Presence	1,900	531 (27.9)	1.02 (0.88-1.17)	n.s.
Experience playing on a team with high levels of competition during their junior or senior high school days	Absence	3,991	687 (17.2)	1.00	
	Presence	2,502	712 (28.5)	1.31 (1.15-1.50)	< 0.001
Experience of verbal abuse by their own former coaches	Absence	2,548	228 (8.9)	1.00	
	Presence	3,756	1,148 (30.6)	3.59 (3.03-4.26)	< 0.001
Experience of physical abuse by their own former coaches	Absence	4,485	766 (17.1)	1.00	
	Presence	1,821	611 (33.6)	1.17 (1.02-1.35)	0.031

OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval; n.s., not significant.

Discussion

The present study revealed the characteristics of parents most frequently associated with acceptance of verbal or physical abuse against young athletes. These characteristics were being male, of a younger age, having a lower educational attainment, having smoking habits, having experience playing on a team with high levels of competition during their junior or senior high school days, having experienced verbal abuse by their own former coaches, and having experienced physical abuse by their own former coaches.

The present study showed the perspectives of parents of young athletes, and 21.5% of parents reported acceptance of verbal or physical abuse against their children from coaches. The coaches who use abuse insist that their intentions are to 'toughen up' athletes in order to achieve better performance (Kerr and Stirling 2012; Swigonski et al. 2014). Some parents may approve of such coaches' controlling styles and accept verbal or physical abuse against their children from their coaches. As far as we know, there have been no prior reports showing the characteristics of parents who accept verbal or physical abuse against their children by their children's coaches. Generally, men are considered to be more likely to engage in aggressive behaviours than women (Archer 2004). Further, lack of experience and psychological maturity, as often seen in young parents, have been associated with child maltreatment (Uslu et al. 2010), and smokers tend to have lower self-directedness than non-smokers (Etter 2010). These characteristics can be associated with the acceptance of verbal or physical abuse from coaches. In addition, parents with lower educational attainment were more likely to accept verbal or physical abuse, perhaps owing to the possibility that parents with advanced education could have had longer sports careers and experienced various coaching styles in sports, and therefore do not tend to accept verbal or physical abuse from coaches against their children. When considering the parents' sports experiences during their younger days, the experience of high levels of sports competition was associated with acceptance of these forms of abuse. Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008) reported that young athletes who dropped out of sports were more likely to have parents who had been high-level athletes in their youth. Such parents were considered to place pressure on their children and contribute to their dropping out. These parents may strive for better results and approve of a controlling style of coaching that uses verbal or physical abuse. Experience of verbal or physical abuse by parents' former coaches was also associated with acceptance of these forms of abuse to their children. These results were similar to those of a former report that showed that coaches who had experienced these forms of abuse by their former coaches subsequently tended to use such abuse. They also considered such abuse to be a way to improve the abilities of young athletes (Yabe et al. 2018). Parents who had experienced abuse might

adapt to it, lessen the negative connotations surrounding it, and approve of its usage. Further, the effect on acceptance of abuse was strongest in 'experience of verbal abuse by parents' former coaches.' On the other hand, the effect of 'experience of physical abuse' was much lower than 'experience of verbal abuse.' This result might indicate that some parents considered physical abuse against their children from their coaches less acceptable than verbal abuse. Approximately 58% (3,756/6,493) and 28% (1,821/6,493) of parents had experienced verbal and physical abuse from their own former coaches, respectively, even though this study included some parents who had no sports experience. Verbal and physical abuse were common coaching methods for the parents in their younger days. Surprisingly, only 27.7% (1,797/6,493) of parents answered negatively to the question of acceptability of verbal or physical abuse against young athletes by their coaches clearly even though their children belonged to that team. Kerr and Stirling (2012) reported that parents who were socialised to the culture of elite sports could become silent bystanders to the abuse against their children, which was similar to the parents of young athletes belonging to general sports teams in this study. Many parents had experienced such abuse and the results of this study indicated that such experiences made them adapt to the culture of sports wherein abuse seems to be condoned. Parents play a role in creating a safe sports environment (Chan et al. 2012) and educating them is considered to be important to prevent and eradicate abuse against young athletes.

Our study had several limitations. First, this study used self-report questionnaires answered by participating parents. The test-retest reliability of the questionnaire was not confirmed. Further, the recognition of abuse may be different among parents and between children and their parents, therefore; verbal and physical abuse should be defined more clearly in future studies. Second, the response rate was not high, which was assumed to be due to the research method of mailing the questionnaires and informed consent forms to the participants. The respondents might have had higher awareness of these forms of abuse compared to non-respondents, which lowered the proportion of parents who accept the abuse. Third, parents' responses regarding their experiences may have been affected by recall biases, limiting the validity of our findings. Finally, we did not separately assess the acceptability of the abuse in terms of 'verbal' and 'physical' abuse, which may have affected the responses pertaining to the acceptability of the abuse. The difference between verbal and physical abuse should be assessed in future studies.

In conclusion, parents who had experienced verbal abuse from coaches themselves were most likely to be accepting of verbal or physical abuse towards their children.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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