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YOUTH SPORT SPECIALIZATION AND PARENTAL INFLUENCE: A TWO-CITY SURVEY FROM HUNGARY

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Abstract

This study explores the role of parental influence in youth sport selection, motivation, and specialization. Parents of young athletes from two Hungarian county seats were surveyed to identify regional differences. Results indicate that parental influence is generally moderate or low but stronger in families with higher financial investment. Specialization increases in adolescence, while younger participants are more likely to try multiple sports. There is a discrepancy between participants and their parents ' competitive aspirations: participants more often aim for the professional level than parents expect. The findings contribute to developing youth sports talent management and parental education in Hungary.

Keywords: *youth sport, sport specialization, parental influence, enjoyment, injury*

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Youth sports specialization and sport selection have become increasingly important topics in sports science and practical sports pedagogy (CÔTÉ et al., 2009; WIERSMA, 2000). Specializing in a single sport at a young age is often associated with reduced enjoyment, burnout, increased injury risk, and sport migration (PADAKI et al., 2017). International literature highlights parental support, financial and time investment, and parental expectations in shaping the child's sport pathway, commitment, and competitive level (VALLERAND, 2007; GUSTAFSSON et al., 2011). However, it remains unclear to what extent early specialization leads to later sporting success and how parents directly or indirectly influence this process.

Our research was inspired by a joint study at Yale and Columbia University Medical Centers (Padaki et al., 2017), comprehensively assessing parents 'opinions about their children's sports activities. According to the international "early sampling" model (Côté et al., 2009), trying multiple sports is generally more beneficial for long-term development, but early specialization is becoming more common in Hungary. Self-Determination Theory (Deci – Ryan, 1985; Ryan – Deci, 2000) also suggests that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are key to healthy motivation, and parental involvement can support and hinder these needs.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- To what extent and in what ways do parents influence participants' sport selection and specialization?

- How do parental expectations and financial investments relate to the participants' competitive aspirations?
- What is the relationship between age, specialization, and parental influence?
- How do parents perceive participants' enjoyment and injury risk in sports?

HYPOTHESES

- H1: Parental influence is generally moderate or low but stronger in families with greater financial investment.
- H2: The rate of sports specialization increases with age, while early sampling is more common among younger participants.
- H3: Parental expectations are higher in families investing more in sports.
- H4: Most parents perceive high enjoyment but significant injury risk in youth sports.

METHODS

SAMPLE

The study sample included parents (n=316) of youth athletes from two Hungarian county-seat sports centers. Participants were 78.2% boys and 21.8% girls, with the most common sports being basketball (38.7%), football (26.1%), and swimming (11%).

INSTRUMENT

We used a Hungarian adaptation of the validated questionnaire by Padaki et al. (2017), including demographic questions and an 11-item, 5-point Likert scale on parental attitudes and experiences.

PROCEDURE

Data collection occurred in 2025; the two cities 'different sports infrastructures and youth sports traditions provided an ideal setting for exploring regional differences.

ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and correlation analyses were performed using SPSS 21.0.

RESULTS

Table 1 indicates that most of the participants in the sample were boys, reflecting the gender distribution of youth athletes in the cities studied.

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Table 1: Gender distribution of participants

Gender	Percentage (%)
Boys	78.2
Girls	21.8

Source: Own data

Table 2 demonstrates that most participants (77.2%) focus on only one sport, indicating a high level of specialization in the sample.

Table 2: Patterns of sport specialization

Statement about the child	Percentage (%)
Focuses on only one sport	77.2
Plays multiple sports but has a favorite	11.4
Likes all sports equally	10.4

Source: Own data

Table 3 indicates that nearly half of parents report no influence, while about fifth of them reports only a slight influence on participants' sports specialization.

Table 3: Parental influence on specialization

Degree of influence	Percentage (%)
None	49.4
Slight	21.6
Moderate	16.1
Strong	6.1
Very strong	6.8

Source: Own data

Table 4 indicates that participants more often aspire to the professional level than parents expect (40.1% vs. 31.8%).

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Table 4: Highest competitive level desired and expected

Level	Participants' Aspiration (%)	Parental Expectation (%)
Recreational	9.0	5.1
School sport	14.4	19.0
Youth competition	20.5	23.5
National selection	16.0	20.6
Professional	40.1	31.8

Source: Own data

Table 5 indicates that most families spend between 5,000 and 15,000 HUF per month on participants' sport, but one in ten families spends over 20,000 HUF.

Table 5: Monthly family sport expenditure

Monthly Expenditure (HUF)	Percentage (%)
0–5,000	17.3
5,001–10,000	41.9
10,001–15,000	24.9
15,001–30,000	10.2
Over 30,000	5.8

Source: Own data

Table 6 demonstrates that nearly half of parents spend four or more hours per week supporting participants' sports activities.

Table 6: Weekly parental time commitment

Weekly Time Spent (hours)	Percentage (%)
0	13.0
1	8.4
2	14.6
3	18.2
4 or more	45.8

Source: Own data

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Table 7 demonstrates that most of the participants reported either high or very high levels of enjoyment from sport.

Table 7: Perceived enjoyment from sport

Level of Enjoyment	Percentage (%)
None	0.6
Little	3.2
Average	13.1
High	36.2
Very high	46.8

Source: Own data

Table 8 indicates that more than a third of participants have been injured, and about a third require medical attention, with a few needing surgeries.

Table 8: Injury incidence

Injury Experience	Percentage (%)
Has been injured	35.5
Needed medical attention	31.9
Required surgery	3.9

Source: Own data

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that parental influence is generally moderate or low but stronger in families with higher financial investment. Specialization increases with age, while early sampling is more common among younger children, consistent with the international “early sampling” model (CÔTÉ et al., 2009; PADAKI et al., 2017; WIERSMA, 2000). There is a discrepancy between children’s aspirations and parental expectations: children more often aim for a professional level than parents expect. The overall level of enjoyment is high, indicating positive psychological effects. We partially confirmed the hypotheses: parental influence and expectations increase with financial investment, specialization rises with age, and children are more likely to aspire to professional levels than their parents expect.

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