Maximizing Positive Youth Development through Sport: The Relative Role of Social Support from Caring Adults in a Sport-Based Youth Development Program

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Background

The positive youth development (PYD) paradigm suggests youth experience healthy developmental trajectories when their personal assets are aligned with ecological assets in their environment (Benson, 2003). Sport based youth development (SBYD) programs focus on promoting PYD outcomes through sport that youth then apply to other, non-sport domains (Petitpas et al., 2005). In PYD and SBYD program contexts, social factors are considered crucial to facilitating positive developmental trajectories (Holt, 2008; Lerner, 2004). Particularly, SBYD literature has emphasized social support from caring adults, which develops social identities tied to the program and promotes PYD outcomes (Holt, 2008).

However, while there has been a growing body of literature on the influence of caring adults within SBYD programs, few studies have considered the relative impact of this domain. Social support comes from diverse sources (e.g., parents and peers), and while the support of adults in SBYD settings may be important for all youth, the magnitude of this importance may be influenced by perceived support from other domains. For example, the relative importance of social support from adults in SBYD settings may vary depending on the social support received from family members or peers. Thus, this study sought to examine the relative role of social support from program leaders in a SBYD program, and its influence on key PYD outcomes.

Methods

Data were collected from a SBYD program that promotes PYD and physical health through running. Scales related to perceived social support from program leaders, family and peers (Canty-Mitchell & Zimet, 2000), social identity related to the program (Camerson, 2004), good health practices (Oman et al., 2010), civic beliefs and values (Syvertsen, et al., 2015) and self-worth (Harter, 1985) were used. Surveys were collected from participants at the end of the 2018 program year (n=193). The PROCESS macro, which assesses moderated mediation effects (Hayes, 2013) was employed.

Results and Conclusion

The overall research models suggested social support from program leaders is positively associated with PYD outcomes, which were mediated by social identity to the program. Moreover, social support from family and peers significantly moderated the mediation effect in developing social identity (p < .05 and < .1, respectively). Specifically, the lower perceived social support from family and peers, the greater the conditional effects of social support from program leaders on building social identity and acquiring PYD outcomes. Collectively, these findings indicate the perceived social support from program leaders is positively associated with program-based social identity, and the influence of this support and identity on PYD outcomes is especially important for participants with lower perceived support in other domains (i.e., family and peers). Findings provide practical insight on how caring adults may be allocated and utilized within SBYD settings, as community-based youth sport programs often struggle to recruit and retain caring adults (Busser & Carruthers, 2010). Specifically, by effectively and efficiently placing program leaders, SBYD programs can maximize their limited human resources and effects on PYD outcomes. Results also highlight key theoretical implications related to the multidimensional influence of social support on the PYD process.