

A Rationale for Encouraging Mothers to Coach Youth Sport

In harmony with the objectives of the Women in Coaching Program of the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC), the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching* frequently focuses on the many challenges facing women who choose coaching as their profession, with high performance sport our primary emphasis. The added challenges that environment poses for women coaches who are mothers have been carefully documented. Practical, affordable strategies to recruit and retain such women have been developed in a consultative process.

Given its impact on our youth, community coaching is at least as important, but curiously, while women in this sphere are generally better represented than their high performance counterparts, the numbers are still relatively small. Certainly the CAC has undertaken initiatives to train and support women, mostly mothers, who express an interest in community coaching. Does this matter, and if the answer is yes, how can it be done successfully?

In this issue of the *Journal*, Professors Nicole LaVoi and Sarah Leberman of the University of Minnesota in the United States and Massey University in New Zealand respectively, build a strong case for the 'yes' side and support their argument with a set of strategies that are straightforward, sensible, and come from the women themselves. —*Sheila Robertson*, Journal Editor

The views expressed in the articles of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching are those of the authors and do not reflect the policies of the Coaching Association of Canada.

Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching Online

April 2015, Vol. 15, No. 1

A Rationale for Encouraging Mothers to Coach Youth Sport

By Nicole M. LaVoi and Sarah Leberman

In February 2015, Sport & Society, a program of the Aspen Institute, released the *Project Play* report, a project designed to give all youngsters the opportunity to become active through sports. One strategy outlined in *Project Play*, which will increase the likelihood of positive youth development to occur in and through sport, is training coaches on how to work with youngsters in a developmentally appropriate way.

The notion of universalized coach education and training is not new, but it is especially salient as it pertains to volunteer youth coaches, many of whom are parents. In the parent role, parents intuitively, by learning or by trial and error, learn that children develop differently and meeting a child where s/he is at developmentally is important for health, growth, and maturation. Unfortunately, in many youth sport contexts, a developmental approach to coaching that seems logical in a parenting context is not the norm. Many children are treated like "mini pros" and care, developmental concerns, and mastery take second place to outperforming others and winning. The non-developmental "win at all costs" pervasive approach to coaching children is even more perplexing due to the fact nearly all youth sport coaches are parents — most of whom are fathers.

Based on the data, a majority (~+80-85%) of volunteer youth sport coaches are male. This is not to solely place blame for a “win at all costs” approach on fathers, but to highlight a well-known fact that diverse perspectives in any context is beneficial, more productive, and effective. The lack of gender balance in the youth coaching ranks is problematic in many ways. For one, it sends the wrong message to children and youth about power, gender, and leadership and reinforces the notion that sport is male-dominated, male-run, and male-centred. For children, who are impressionable, seeing mostly men in positions of power in a context that matters a great deal to them, does little to challenge and change the status quo. A lack of women coaches also means girls have few, if any, active female role models, therefore making it less likely that girls will view coaching as a viable and available career pathway.

Given that the declining numbers of women collegiate coaches in the United States — in what some scholars are calling “The War on Women Coaches” — is occurring despite a record number of female sport participants, ensuring that more youth sport coaches are female is a worthy endeavour. Gender balance in paid or volunteer coaching positions communicates equal value, worth, and competence of both men and women in the workplace, community, and society. Lastly, women coaches bring a diverse (Note: We did not say unique or inherently different) set of perspectives to the sport context.

Women (many of whom have played sport) with children who played (or still currently play) sport are a readily available and knowledgeable, yet largely untapped, group of potential coaches. Mother-athletes have a vast amount of sport and child-centered knowledge that can be transferrable, yet many mothers fail to think about their skill set as applicable to coaching or fail to perceive themselves as fit to coach. It is well known that much of the existing research suggests women do not become involved in coaching due in part to a *perceived* lack of knowledge, skills, and confidence. Such skills, which are arguably required of every mother, such as planning, management, communication, organization, teaching, scheduling, and interpersonal and relational expertise are all aspects of parenting that easily transfer to coaching.

Most of the existing research on mother-coaches pertains to women who coach at the elite level. For elite coaches, researchers have outlined work-family conflict and balance frameworks and have illuminated how both the individual choice of women along with structural barriers, in combination, influence one’s coaching trajectory and experience. The small body of work on youth sport mother-coaches states that when mothers do enter coaching, they are typically “Stoppers”, meaning they coach for one to two years and then stop. Another key finding outlines the role of the “Team Mother” who provides logistical support, including transportation, supplying snacks, managing schedules, and signing up children in comparison to the more valued and important “Coach Dad”, roles which mirror and reinforce the gendered division of labour present in many households.

When we interviewed former collegiate female athletes and current mothers about their perceptions of balancing the mother-coach-worker roles, they all were articulate about how they balanced this role trifecta. The women talked about how they wanted to be “good mothers”, which meant they allowed children to make choices and learn from their mistakes, tried to be positive role models, and demonstrated to their children that women can successfully manage multiple roles by adopting a balanced “divide and conquer” approach to household labour. Some women talked about how obtaining a low-stress, flexible, accommodating job helped them manage multiple roles and achieve balance, but recognized this was not possible for everyone. However, any stress generated by the addition of a coaching role was tempered by the positive experiences the mother-coaches described. For all the mother-coaches in our research, coaching overwhelmingly enriched their lives as it facilitated positive family interactions and relationship building and quality time with their



children, enhanced their ability to know their child's friends, and provided a place to teach life skills and lessons. Understanding mothers' experiences will assist in creating a youth sport environment that is more inclusive and welcoming of women, particularly mothers, into leadership and coaching roles.

Strategies to Engage Mothers to Coach Youth Sport

There are many strategies that can be employed to increase the number of women coaches in youth sport. We asked women who coach and women who didn't their thoughts on how to increase the number of women coaches in youth sport. A summary of their suggestions follows:

1. **Ask and invite women to coach.** Research indicates people are four times more likely to volunteer if they are asked than when they are not. One mother explained: "You know, I think the big thing, if we could just get it to occur to ask more mothers to coach, it would be like, "Oh, I could do that!" Because there's all these teams that don't have a coach. Who's going to coach? Who's going to coach? I would guess that nine times out of 10 it's the dad who steps up. And those are your opportunities and how you capitalize on those I don't know unless you have somebody who actually calls the mothers and invites them to coach."
 - A. **Involve and invite mothers into coaching at outset.** "I think if mothers start coaching when their kids are young, they get more confident in being able to coach. So encouraging them to start when the kids are young, it can continue as a mother-child activity, just like any community program."
 - B. **Involve and invite girls into coaching early.** Capitalize on a girl's love of the game and as a way to stay involved. "You know, just encouraging them and I think, too, female athletes have a lot of self-confidence and if you play on that and encourage that, you know they know they can do it, I think that they need to be given the opportunities and shown the path."
2. **Include mentorship.** Create a buddy-system and pair up new coaches with a more experienced female mentor or group of mentors. One mother suggested: "Have them pair up with those people that have kind of done it for a year to kind of get the feel." Another suggested starting as an assistant coach or a team volunteer to get the hang of it and learn.
3. **Include a co-coaching option.** This allows a flexible arrangement that accommodates women who are juggling multiple roles. One mother stated: "What would make it easier is just that if it was more of a shared responsibility. I think the more coaches you have or at least, assistant coaches, and things like that, you can spread out the responsibility of practices and make things easier."
4. **Offer women-only coaching clinics and training sessions.** When an individual is part of the minority, s/he often feels intimidated, insecure, and scrutinized. One mother said: "Maybe get some women to run clinics, because again just seeing other women doing it can make you feel more confident." Another said: "Especially for soccer they'll say 'okay, we're having a coaches clinic' and if I was interested in coaching soccer, it might be a little intimidating because I would be walking into a room with, you know, 30 men, and maybe being the only women there."
5. **Appeal to altruism.** Coaching is a meaningful way to give back to your child, family, and community. Coaching at the youth level is volunteerism, the same as charitable committee work, community organizing, or serving in the church. Many women are charitable with their time and value volunteerism that benefits the greater good. One mother said: "The potential of it, the potential to make an impact is a benefit. When you start with the younger levels within community-level



coaching, it's a good way to become involved and give something back. And it makes you obviously feel more like a part of the community, which I think is very beneficial."

6. **Point out the possibility for a better relationship with your child.** Sport provides a different context to get to know and understand your child. "It really gave [my daughter] and I something. I mean, we have a bond through soccer just on a different level, I think, because I coached her and have been able to talk to her you know as coach to player." Another mother said: "It's a good way to connect with children and a lot of times you're on a different tour with different ages kids, and your relationships put you on a different plane, and this is something where you share an equal passion."
7. **Create Awareness about Personal Benefits.** Many mothers felt good about their impact and relationship with their child, but felt coaching also helped them grow and benefit. "This is really fun, exercise is not always work, and keeping a healthy aspect in life makes me feel good, too."
8. **Make Apparent Mother Skills Translate.** Skills needed to successfully parent are very similar to coaching skills. One mother pointed out she found it impossible to pull her roles apart: "I'm a mother while I coach, and I use mother charm."
9. **Impart the impact of being a role model.** Many mothers felt strongly about being a positive role model for their, and other, children. "For the kids, coaching really creates awareness that women can be in positions of authority and be successful. It's probably a nice thing to see a mother in a leadership position," one mother said. Another added: "I think it's important to them because they see me as more than just their mother. For me personally [since I quit my career to stay at home], it is important to me that my children understand that I am well-educated, I am intelligent, I am hard-working."

Conclusion

In order for the potential of youth sport to be realized for all children, women must be seen in equal numbers in all youth sport roles, including the coach. A number of strategies suggested by mother-coaches at the youth sport level are intended to help stakeholders develop best practices and/or policies that may help recruit more mother-coaches and lead to more gender balance in positions of power in youth sport.

About the Authors:

Nicole M. LaVoi, PhD, is the Associate Director of the Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport, at the University of Minnesota, USA. www.tuckercenter.org

Sarah Leberman, PhD, is a Professor of Leadership and Head of School of Management at Massey University in New Zealand and was a visiting Fulbright Scholar in the Tucker Center in 2007.

References available upon request.