

The Ripple Effect

How One Parent’s Behaviour Moves Through Your Whole Team

Episode 3 | Season 4 | *Coaching Research To Results Podcast*

EPISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	The role of parents toward the group dynamics of youth sport teams
Author	Coleman, T., & Eys, M. (2024). The role of parents toward the group dynamics of youth sport teams. <i>Psychology of Sport & Exercise</i> , 74, Article 102676. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102676
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Tags	youth sport, sport parents, group dynamics, team cohesion, motivational climate, parent influence, coach-parent relationships, parent education, team sports, sideline behaviour, parent-coach

THE THREE STICKY IDEAS

These are the labels to remember from this episode. They are designed to stick with you long after the research fades.

The Ripple Effect

Parents are perceived to influence four whole-team features: climate, structure (roles, positions, cliques), closeness, and how teammates work together or clash. One parent’s behaviour, such as paying their child for a hat-trick, can discourage passing and lower morale for every player on the roster.

The Four Paths

Researchers sorted nineteen parent behaviours into four pathways of influence: public behaviours (such as coaching from the stands), through the athlete, through the coach, and through other parents. Mixed messages between coach and parent can leave an athlete caught in the middle.

The Glue Effect

The ripple is not always harmful: parents can strengthen team bonds through social events, welcoming new families, and modelling a positive climate. The authors suggest that parents

who promote mastery values may soften a win-at-all-costs climate, though this remains an untested hypothesis.

TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

Take one or more of these actions into your next coaching session.

To name the pattern early

Name the pattern early and in general terms during your first parent session, such as acknowledging that it is easy to feel everyone is against us and inviting parents to bring concerns to you first. This addresses performance blindness and a conspiracy outlook before they harden into a negative influence on the team.

To use the positive roads on purpose

Give every family one small, real job and schedule at least one team experience this month, such as a pizza after practice or a bowling night. This puts the positive pathways to work on purpose, building the connection that lets parents act as team glue.

RESEARCH REFERENCE

Primary Source: Coleman, T., & Eys, M. (2024). The role of parents toward the group dynamics of youth sport teams. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 74, Article 102676.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102676>

Counterpoint Sources: Tamminen, K. A., McEwen, C. E., Kerr, G., & Donnelly, P. (2020). Examining the impact of the Respect in Sport Parent Program on the psychological experiences of minor hockey athletes. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 38(17), 2035–2045.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02640414.2020.1767839> |

Ross, A. J., Mallett, C. J., & Parkes, J. F. (2015). The influence of parent sport behaviors on children's development: Youth coach and administrator perspectives. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 10(4), 605–621. <https://doi.org/10.1260/1747-9541.10.4.605>

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Share this episode with one coach this week, since that's how research actually travels.

FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

The following is the complete script for this episode of *Coaching Research To Results*.

Cold Open

“That’s between the parent and their kid. It doesn’t affect the rest of the team.” Most of the time coaches make that statement while quietly hoping it’s true. It makes a tough parent conversation feel contained to one family or one issue, even one quiet word after practice, and the rest of the team never has to know. Well, this week’s researchers interviewed parents, coaches, and coach-parents from seven team sports, and heard something very different. One parent’s behaviour can travel through your entire roster. And it doesn’t always travel the way you think it does.

Intro and Show ID

Welcome to Coaching Research To Results. I’m Beth Barz, the Coach Developer. This is 1 paper, 3 ideas, and 2 actions for tomorrow in under 15 minutes. This is the podcast where coaching research gets off the shelf, out of your notes, and into your practice. Let’s go.

The Paper

The paper is called, “The role of parents toward the group dynamics of youth sport teams,” published in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* in 2024. The lead author is Taylor Coleman, working with Mark Eys, both at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario. Sport parent research has mostly looked at how parents affect their own child, or the coach and parent. Eys is known for his work on group dynamics or what we might understand as “the social life of teams” and within that body of research, there was little information on what parents do to the team as a whole. They interviewed thirty-one people across Canada: eleven parents, thirteen coaches, and seven parent-coaches, from seven team sports including hockey, basketball, baseball, soccer, football, volleyball, ringette. Here’s what they found.

Big Idea #1

The big idea is called The Ripple Effect. Coleman and Eys (2024) found that parents were perceived to influence four whole-team features: the climate the team plays in, its structure (roles, positions, cliques), how close the group feels, and how teammates work together or clash. And that effect is on all the children on the team. One parent-coach gave what he called the prime example: “The parents paying their son five bucks if he gets a hat-trick. That means he’s just going to hold onto the puck, not pass it. It really does kill the morale on a team.”

The Ripple Effect is when one parent’s behaviour goes beyond their one child; it travels through the whole team. That five-dollar deal is a private family arrangement, and it dismantles teamwork for all the other players. Think about the last time your team’s mood shifted for no reason beyond what you could see on the playing surface. Was there a parent behind that ripple?

Ideas #2 and #3

Idea two explains how the ripple travels. It’s called The Four Paths. The researchers identified nineteen specific parent behaviours and sorted them into four pathways. Path one, public

behaviours: coaching from the stands, criticizing the coach in front of others, shouting at referees. Path two, through the athlete: rewards for goals, or telling a child their teammate is not good enough. One coach described a player caught in a state of paralysis because the coach said one thing and the parent said the opposite. Path three, through the coach: evaluating your decisions and engaging with you about them, or befriending you in hopes of an advantage. Path four, through other parents: private complaining, sideline chatter, and whole subgroups of parents.

Idea three is a relief, and it's called The Glue Effect. The ripple isn't always harmful. Participants described parents building team bonds like team parties, laser tag, out-of-town tournaments where kids see the adults laughing together, and one parent welcoming new families so that, in the participant's words, it trickles down to the kids. The authors even propose a hypothesis: parents who publicly promote mastery values, which are high effort and a focus on learning (and even failure), may help soften the effects of a win-at-all-costs climate. That hypothesis has not been tested yet, so treat it as a theory only...but feel free to experiment with it!

The Counterpoint

Okay, but it's not quite that simple. If parents can shape the team, you might think a bit of parent education would fix it. Coleman and Eys are careful here. They say there is a clear need for parent programming, but finding the best way has proved challenging. They point out that an evaluation of a Canadian programme, the Respect in Sport Parent Program, did not report changes in parent support or parent pressure (Tamminen et al., 2020), and that some Australian coaches and administrators saw parent education efforts as fruitless (Ross et al., 2015). And remember, this is what thirty-one people perceive, not measured cohesion, and the parent-coach group was all male. So, treat the ripple as a strong lead only.

The Anecdote

A coach I was working with asked a parent to help with team spirit, maybe organize a potluck, something to bring the group closer. She said yes, and then she went ahead and did something else entirely. At the next tournament, her daughter missed an easy shot in overtime and the bench went quiet, the way benches do when everyone's already calculating the loss and counting down until the final buzzer. This mom stood up and cheered anyway, loudly, for the shot itself: the way her daughter used footwork, the read, and the courage to take it. She cheered effort, not the outcome.

Other parents noticed. A few started doing the same, catching themselves mid-groan and clapping for the attempt instead of the result. When the coach told me about it afterward, he said he'd asked her to be the glue through different actions like the potluck. What he got was even better - a whole different climate on that bench and in the stands, one shot at a time.

Two Actions

Action one is based on some suggestions from Lafferty and Triggs (2014) who describe a stage of working with parents focused on behaviour management, and they name two risk patterns. The first is performance blindness, fixating on a final goal such as selection until you lose perspective on your child's actual ability. The second is a conspiracy outlook: poor emotional control combined with blaming officials, teammates, or selectors, until the parent starts to see

the whole system as against them. They note this can turn a parent into what Cope and colleagues (2010) called “the cancer within the team,” a phrase first used about athletes. My suggestion is to name the pattern early and in general terms, in your first parent session, something like: “When things go badly, it’s easy to feel like everyone is against us. Bring it to me first so we can talk about it.”

Action two, use the positive roads on purpose. The study’s participants described parents investing in team experiences, volunteering, and welcoming new families as things that helped teams bond, and listed assigning roles to parents as a coach strategy. This month, give every family one small, real job (snacks, booking a restaurant, travel, welcome buddy, high fives onto or off the playing surface) and schedule one team experience, even a small one: a pizza after practice, a bowling night, a walk to the tournament venue together. Then watch what happens to your parent group’s mood over the following month, and to how your athletes talk about their teammates’ families. In a rink, a gym, or a park, the sharing idea is the same. A favourite Leonard Cohen quote of mine supports this idea, “Humans are lucky to be connected in any way, even by the table between them.” So, whose energy could become your team glue?

Close and Invite

Let’s pull it together at the end here. The big idea is The Ripple Effect. One parent’s behaviour rarely stays with one child; it moves through your team’s climate, roles, closeness, and conflict. Idea two is The Four Paths, public, through athletes, through coaches, and through other parents. Idea three is The Glue Effect, because the same ripple can build a team when parents are invited in on purpose.

Parents are part of your team’s chemistry set, whether you invited them in or not. So, choose the ingredients wisely.