

Teens in sports expect parents to be involved

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Most young adolescents want their parents to encourage and attend their sports activities over having uninvolved parents, according to a recent study of 15-year-olds.

So-called “helicopter parents” – or “curling parents” in the Scandinavian idiom – have been harshly criticized in recent years. The Norwegian metaphor for overparenting evokes the image of the frantic sweeping of ice ahead of the curling stone to clear its path. Parents who facilitate all their children’s activities, who drive them to and fro and show up for everything their kids do create dependent, helpless youths, or at least so goes the claim.

Should parents perhaps care a little less and let teens get themselves to their extracurricular activities? Should teenagers get used to playing football matches without parents present to watch?

Not at all, reveals a study on parents’ role in sports carried out by the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences (NIH) and the Norwegian social research institute NOVA.

"Young people clearly prefer to have involved parents, but they also define some clear limits on how their parents should get involved in their sports activities," says NIH professor and sociologist Åse Strandbu.

Strandbu, together with Kari Stefansen and Ingrid Smette from NOVA, interviewed young people and their parents about the ideal role of parents.

Clear ideals for parent roles

The researchers interviewed 97 young people from four middle school classes in a medium- sized Norwegian city. The youth were involved in various organized sports, although some were not currently active in sports.

"The most surprising thing for me was that the youngsters were so insightful about the parents’ role," Strandbu said. "They aren’t afraid to admit that they like having their parents be actively involved in their sports activities."

Want parents to watch them play

Teens really appreciate parents coming to their sporting events – and not only parents who played sports as kids, but also more sports-resistant parents.

They like parents to come “if not every time, then at least more than just the occasional time. They think it’s much better to have enthusiastic parents than uninterested parents,” Strandbu says.

One teen participant describes how important he feels it is for parents to be involved:

“It means everything, in fact, when parents are involved in the sport you do and encourage you and are there

for you.”

The researcher probes further and asks why parent involvement is so critical.

“Having the support... [and] having parents who think what you do is cool. And then driving us around and supporting different things at the start, we couldn’t do it without all that,” he says.

Teen participants also reported that they like to see their parents getting to know other parents. At the same time, the youngsters don’t want parents to be overly involved in their sports – or to interfere in the teens’ social relationships.

Like to be pushed – a little bit

Active youth prefer parental encouragement to indifference, although they think it should be up to them whether they want to participate in sports activities in their spare time.

“They also say that parents can push them a bit, but not too much. And they think it’s okay for parents to encourage them to continue if they have spells when they’re considering quitting,” Strandbu says.

She believes we may tend to underestimate how important parent opinion is for 15-year-olds.

But all the groups agreed that it’s important for young people to make the final decision when they want to stop playing sports.

Because, in the view of another youth participant, “we’re old enough to know what we want.”

Conflict between school and sports

Young people also think it is perfectly appropriate for parents to put their foot down if sports activities negatively impact schoolwork.

But it has to be done right, they say. One teen reported that she was doing both handball and dance one day a week for awhile and then she wanted to ramp up her dancing to twice a week.

“My Dad said that if he noticed I wasn’t doing homework or got a poor grade on a test or something, I’d have to stop. Because [those activities] shouldn’t happen at the expense of my schoolwork,” she says.

Young people find this to be a fair way for parents to exercise their role.

Parenting roles have changed

Strandbu, Stefansen and Smette also interviewed the teens’ parents, and found that the parenting role is more demanding than it used to be.

“Parents of kids involved in sports nowadays are much more engaged than their own parents were when they were young. Now parental involvement is related to ideas around taking a “cultivational approach” to childrearing,” she says.

This approach corresponds with the new ideal for parenting – that parents should be deeply involved with their children and facilitate their development in many arenas, says Strandbu.

She refers to researchers like Annette Lareau who have studied parenting ideals in the middle class, where

the intense involvement by parents is a core element. This parenting ideal is especially pronounced in middle-class England and the United States.

Strandbu believes this ideal applies across a broader range of social strata in Norway.

Social observation opportunity

Sporting events provide an arena where parents can observe how their child deals with adversity and cooperates with others.

"In organized sports like ball games, you'll see how they cope when a referee makes a bad call, and you can help them through the hard times that life dishes out," Strandbu says.

Parents have few other opportunities to observe their children this way when they get to this age.

Strandbu believes the interviews also provide insight into how sports offer an important social avenue to integrate into the local community, both for children and parents.

Both parents and young people agree that the social networking provided by sports is the most important.

"It prevents isolation, and parents especially see team sports as a helpful means to avoid their children spending too much time alone and playing computer games," she says.

It's an informal way for the whole family to meet peers and neighbours.

"But sports can also be exclusionary because it's often difficult to get into many sports when you're 13 or 14 years old," says Strandbu.

The interviews with parents and adolescents are part of the research project KNOWMO – Knowledge in motion across contexts of learning. The project is funded by The Research Council of Norway, which also involved researchers from the University of Oslo and the University College of Southeast Norway. Quotations are taken from one of the project's publications.

[Read the Norwegian version of this article at forskning.no.](#) [5]

 [Study finds that teens think it's okay for parents to put their foot down if sports activities affect their schoolwork. \(Photo: Photo: Berit Roald, NTB scanpix\)](#) [6]
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[Å. Strandbu et al: Young people`s experiences of parental involvement in youth sport. Sport, education and society. 4 May 2017. doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2017.1323200](#) [8]
[J. Stefansen et al: Understanding the increase in parents` involvement in organized youth sports. Sport, education and Society. 18 February 2017. doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2016.1150834](#) [9]

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