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# When Enough is Enough: The Impact of Parental Involvement in Children's Participation in Organized Sports

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When Enough is Enough:  
The Impact of Parental Involvement in Children's Participation in Organized Sports

by  
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of the requirements for the degree of  
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Abstract

In the United States, organized sports for children and youth play a key role in our country's culture. Child participation in organized youth sports begins as young as the age of 5 and continues on to 18 years of age. Youth participation in athletics is premised upon the socially accepted notion that participation in competitive sports builds character, which in turn helps children learn valuable life lessons. However, recent studies have shown that youth athletics provides an environment for adults to become overly emotionally invested in their children's athletic endeavors. This thesis examines varying levels of parental involvement in their children's athletic participation and whether there is a corresponding effect of the athlete's enjoyment of their sport and longevity of their careers.

### Introduction and Background

In the United States, child and youth participation in organized youth sports leagues play a key role in our country's culture. Seefeldt and Ewing state that organized youth sports are one of the most culturally pervasive "extra-curricular" activities for the youth of America (1997). Youth participation in athletics is premised upon the socially accepted notion that participation in competitive sports builds character, which in turn helps children to transition into adulthood (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997). However, recent literature has brought to light negative issues, such as parents of participating youth modeling inappropriate behaviors related to youth athletics (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003).

Childhood participation in organized youth sports begins as young as the age of 5 and continues on to 18 years of age. This thesis will be focusing on the athletic participation of young people ranging from 10-18. Starting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, organized sports for youth were historically founded by youth organizations as a way to keep boys out of trouble. Most of these organized sports opportunities for children and youth came from organizations like the YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Club, and Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997).

In 1954, youth sports leagues organized by unassociated adults, rather than by youth organizations, began to emerge. These organized leagues included extracurricular-interscholastic athletic activities, community organized and supported teams (e.g., Little League Baseball, Pop Warner Football), and recreational sport programs facilitated by recreational departments (Duda & Ntoumanis, 2005). In subsequent years, the involvement of children and youth has increased. Since the passage of Title IX in 1972, organized sports have evolved to include girls. It is estimated that 62% of high school students participated on at least one school or non-school

sport team in 2007 (MacDonald, Côté, Eys, & Deakin, 2011). While participation in extracurricular athletics has increased in the United States, we should recognize the reality of unequal playing opportunities for youth based upon their social classes and gender (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997 and Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003).

According to quantitative research, reasons for participation in sport vary among different age groups (Allender, Cowburn, & Foster, 2006). Allende et al. (2006) and MacDonald et al. (2011) found that young children, ages 5-10 years of age, tend to participate in organized sports because they found it to be enjoyable while youth, ages 10-18 years of age, chose to compete in athletics because of physical competence and social acceptance, as well as enjoyment. This same study also found that mothers of younger children were less likely to allow them to participate in sports when the environments were perceived as unsafe (Allender et al., 2006).

Typically, parents who push their children in athletics are former or current athletes themselves. These parents are their children's first coaches, and they become highly devoted to their children's athletic success (Wuerth et al., 2004). While parental support is crucial to a young athlete's success, there is a fine line between being a supportive parent versus being an overbearing parent. Children with overinvolved parents do not report feeling a lack of support, but instead feel pressured to be successful. Overinvolved parents are parents that tend to be more emotionally invested in their children's athletic participation than their children are. These types of parents also tend to be the ones picking the sports their children participate in. Youth under this athletic pressure experience lower self-esteem, feelings of distress and guilt, and often burnout (Wuerth et al., 2004).

Children who begin participating in sports at a young age are more likely to continue on if they have positive athletic experiences. But young athletes tend to drop out of participating in

competitive sports when they begin to feel inadequate, are no longer having fun, or because sport participation takes up too much time (Linder, 2002). As parents begin to notice the athletic ability of young athletes, statistics show that parents tend to encourage these athletes to begin focusing on only one sport. However, the consequences for young people concentrating on only one sport have not always been positive. Athletes ages 12-16 who participated in multiple sports report stronger links to their sport, family, and community, whereas one-sport athletes report having higher rates of diverse peer groups but also had higher rates of physical and emotional exhaustion (MacDonald et al., 2011).

Increasingly, children and youth choose to become one-sport athletes based on several factors. When parents see athletic potential in a young athlete, they tend to support this notion of early specialization in one sport based upon the assumption that early specialization with practices focused on one sport is superior to involvement in a range of athletic activities (Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009). The reasoning behind specialization in sport is the idea that by focusing on childhood development and mastery in one focused sport, young athletes will have a better chance of performing at the elite level as adults. Parents are also often the primary agents for children becoming involved in athletics and are motivators when it comes to pushing children to the “elite” level (Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004). Parents with high expectations for their children tend to invest more money, time, and emotional support for their children as they (the children) become more athletically successful. For this study, athletic success will be defined as athletes who have careers that reach the collegiate level.

Given the great number of youth participating in competitive sports, it is important to question whether children and youth with parents involved in their athletic participation experience any adverse psychological affects while competing in organized sports. As a future

educator, I value the importance of helping parents learn how to be emotionally supportive and encouraging of their young athletes without being overbearing and pressuring them to win. As a former Division I athlete, I have witnessed my fair share of overbearing parents who were living vicariously through their children. Fortunately, I grew up with parents who did not push me to be an athlete, but when I did choose to pursue athletics, they fully supported my athletic endeavors.

Because of my personal experiences in the community around me, I believe it is important to talk about the expectations we are putting on our young athletes, and to understand what these expectations do to young children. Through analyzing relevant literature and writing an autoethnography, I hypothesize that I will find that athletes who have overly involved parents tend to lose enjoyment in participating in sports and that these athletes end up not wanting to play sports; they burn out. While these youth might experience initial success, I think that in the long run I will find that athletes who experience pressure from their parents undergo more stress and are less likely to enjoy their sport and to have long-term athletic careers.

### Methodology

In order to analyze the literature that has been gathered on the topic of parental involvement in children's athletic, I have written an autoethnography. An autoethnography involves the author's self-reflection through exploration of the author's personal experiences that are then connected to research and literature. This type of reflexive writing allows for the author to write using his or her own thoughts, feelings, observations, and stories as a means to understand the social context that is being discussed. Autoethnographies also allow readers to clearly understand the thoughts and emotions of the author.

### Autoethnography

For me, participating in organized sports began much later in life in comparison to many children in my community. I grew up in a white, middle class suburb where our city had sports leagues for children as young as five years of age, but I did not start playing sports at the age of five. My family was not in the same social class in comparison to our neighbors; according to the federal government, my family was classified as a low-income family. This, however, was not the reason why I did not begin youth sports at such a young age. There are two factors as to why I did not join youth sports leagues when I was five years old; first, my mom who was born and raised in Japan and was not aware of the cultural normalcy of putting young children in sports leagues. Second, my dad had been an athlete himself and did not want to force my brother and I into playing a sport; he wanted the desire and motivation to come from us.

In fourth grade, I finally decided that I wanted to play an organized sport. So, I joined our community's youth basketball league. After observing my participation on a team, my parents decided that being on a sports team was important because it could help build interpersonal skills that would aid my brother and I in the future. Because I enjoyed playing basketball so much, and my parents' newly found value in organized youth sports, I ended up joining a youth soccer league in fifth grade. After playing both basketball and soccer, I realized that my favorite part about both of these sports was the running that was involved. So, in sixth grade, I joined a local youth track club. On my first day of practice, I met a bubbly blonde girl named Kirsten<sup>1</sup>. She was quite talkative and made quite the first impression. Within the first few minutes of meeting her, Kirsten informed me that she would much rather be at cheer practice but since football season

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<sup>1</sup> Name has been changed

was long over, her dad, Glen<sup>1</sup>, was making her do track. Kirsten also told me that her dad thought cheerleading was dumb because it was a girly activity that wasn't even a real sport.

On that first day of practice, Kirsten and I ended up being put into the same running group and that day we had an 800-meter time trial. During the 800, my parents cheered encouragingly from the stands; they had stayed to watch practice to show support and interest in what I was doing. While running that 800, a dad stood on the infield screaming at an athlete who was running to "try harder". Going into the last 200 meters, I realized that the man on the infield was Kirsten's dad. I ended up winning the time trial and Kirsten came in second. To us, the result did not matter because we were just running that event to see if it was something that we would want to focus on. However, Glen was very clearly upset with Kirsten's performance. As soon as we finished running our 800-meter trial, Glen came over and began bombarding Kirsten with questions; "why didn't you pick up the pace after 600 meters, you looked like you weren't even trying, why didn't you try harder," it went on and on. Never in my life had I felt so uncomfortable in the presence of an adult.

Once track season was in full swing, Kirsten and I constantly ran workouts together and raced against each other. My parents wanted me to do my best in each race. If that meant beating Kirsten, they were fine with that, but they never encouraged me to target her or to view her as threatening competition. On the other hand, Glen continually talked to Kirsten about different racing strategy that would increase her chances of beating me. Many of the conversations took place within earshot of my parents and I. Although Glen took Kirsten's participation in track very seriously, Kirsten never took her own running seriously. She was always off doing cartwheels or frolicking on the infield instead of paying attention. Kirsten's careless attitude

about track often irritated me; I was there because I loved the sport and in my opinion she was wasting everyone else's time.

Halfway through our first track season, Kirsten's mom started bringing her to practice. Kirsten's brother, Ethan<sup>1</sup>, had started playing baseball; so, Glen began going to Ethan's practices instead of Kirsten's. I found it strange that after being so involved in Kirsten's running, Glen would pick Ethan's practices over Kirsten's. In comparison to Kirsten's parents, my dad always took me to practice and stayed to watch because he had competed in track in high school and college and he enjoyed being around the sport. Regardless of the reasoning behind Glen's actions, once Kirsten's mom began bringing her to practices, Kirsten seemed much more relaxed and happy.

Going into cross-country in seventh grade, I juggled playing soccer and running long distance; both sports were in season at the same time. There were some Saturday mornings when I had to run a race early in the morning and then rush to a soccer game afterwards. It was tiring, but I was having fun and I loved participating in both sports. In contrast, because of strong encouragement from Glen, Kirsten decided to forgo cheerleading that fall and focused only on running cross-country in order to be more successful. Although she continued to improve and to experience athletic success, Kirsten still did not take her running seriously. It often seemed like all of her motivation came from Glen. At practice, I continually heard Kirsten complaining about how she hated running and wished that she had chosen to cheerlead that fall.

By the end of cross-country and the beginning of outdoor track season, I began to realize that I was better at running long distance than any other sport that I had participated in.

Additionally, I was much smaller physically than other girls my age; this gave them athletic

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<sup>1</sup> Name has been changed

advantages in team sports but in distance running, I was able to stand my ground. Although I truly enjoyed playing basketball and soccer, my dad voiced his concerns about my physical safety while participating in athletic practices and competitions. He told me that he was worried about my long-term success in sports and the impact my physical size might have on my playing time. After much thought, I decided to quit soccer and basketball and to only focus on distance running.

Transitioning from being multi-sport focused to one-sport focused came naturally to me. Although I missed being on a team at times, I loved running and I enjoyed having the ability to focus solely on my development as a runner. In eighth grade, my parents and I decided to leave the track club team that I had been a part of in order to join a different club that had better coaches and athletes. When Glen heard that I was switching club teams, he decided that Kirsten would be switching as well. When I asked Kirsten how she felt about switching clubs, she told me that it had been her dad's decision, not hers. Switching track clubs proved to be beneficial for both Kirsten and I; we had more talented teammates and we got fitter and faster.

During our outdoor track season of eighth grade, Glen began to question the workouts that our coaches were giving Kirsten. He accused the coaches of making the workouts too hard and that Kirsten was not racing as fast because of the workouts. So, Glen began picking which days Kirsten would be attending practice and which ones he would be prescribing workouts. Kirsten's running did not improve with this change in coaching and she seemed even more stressed and less engaged in her running. Like Glen, I began to notice that the workouts were very challenging and that my body was not recovering. But before my parents and I blamed the coaches, we decided to ask them what their rationale was behind the workouts they were having us run.

The conversation with my coaches about training helped me learn that the coaches were simply choosing to focus on our championship races. My coaches also suggested that I get my ferritin levels checked to make sure that my body was recovering properly. After getting my blood tested, I discovered that my ferritin levels were very low. This explained my fatigue and inability to recover quickly; ferritin is what your body uses to store iron in your body and it is key in the body's recovery process whilst training. Discovering that I had low ferritin saved my running career; I began taking liquid iron twice a day and I began to feel energized again.

Kirsten and I went our separate ways in high school and although we went to different high schools, we still contacted each other once in a while. My freshman year, I made the varsity cross country team and was a top runner. Kirsten also made the varsity cross country team at her school, but regretted focusing on running alone because the cheer coach had reached out to her about joining the cheer team. However, Kirsten told me that she was feeling more pressure than ever from her dad to be the best on her team and to win races. On top of this pressure, Glen did not like the head cross country coach and had continued coaching Kirsten outside of her practices. This awkward tension between the coach and Glen continued until the beginning of the outdoor track season our sophomore year. Kirsten's head coach finally discovered that Kirsten had been running additional workouts with her dad and he (the head coach) was not pleased. The head coach contacted Glen and informed him that if this additional coaching continued, Kirsten would not be allowed to be a member of the high school cross-country and track teams.

Due to the fact that he was a very stubborn man, Glen did not want to relinquish his control of Kirsten's running career. He was very invested in her athletic performance and wanted her to run in college. At a meet soon after his meeting with the head coach, Glen told my dad that it was important for him to be involved in Kirsten's athletic development because he did not

have the opportunity to participate in athletics while in college and therefore he wanted to do everything possible to help Kirsten become a collegiate athlete. Because of Glen's deep investment in Kirsten's running, he decided that she would no longer compete for her high school and that he would become her sole coach.

Kirsten finished out her sophomore year competing in different invitational and open track meets. I saw her at a few races and she expressed how much she missed the social aspect of being on a team. She also told me that even though she was still running faster than other athletes, she no longer wanted to run. Hearing Kirsten finally voice her feelings about running was saddening. As someone who loved the sport, it was difficult for me to understand how Kirsten was feeling, but I also did not agree with how controlling her dad was being. Although Kirsten no longer wanted to run, I was still very dedicated to the sport. Other than a few small bumps, I continued to improve and enjoyed the process of training. At the end of her sophomore year, Kirsten finally told her dad that she no longer wanted to run. I am not sure why, but Glen actually listened to her. Kirsten's running career ended and the fall of her junior year, she joined the varsity cheer leading team.

I continued to participate in cross-country and track for the rest of high school. During my senior year, different colleges began contacting me about running in college. Because I still loved running, I was thrilled at the idea of being able to continue my running career for four more years. Ultimately, I decided to attend Portland State University because of their Division I cross-country and track program. When Kirsten started her freshman year at Oregon State University, she decided that she wanted to try college running. So, she reached out to the head coach at Oregon State University, and because of how incredibly naturally talented Kirsten was,

she was allowed to join the cross country and track team. However, after one year of running, Kirsten quit the team.

### Overview of Literature & Analysis of Autoethnography

#### The Origin

When discussing youth participation in athletics, it is important to understand how organized sports leagues were originally started and how they have changed. Seefeldt and Ewing (1997) provide an overview of youth sports in America. The first step this article takes is to define six different categories of youth sports programs: agency-sponsored programs, national youth service organizations, club sports, recreation programs, intramural programs, and interscholastic programs (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997). Four of these defined sport programs are community-based and two of them are facilitated within the school system.

#### Economic Status

When discussing youth participation in organized sports, it is important to address the fact that there are fees that families must pay in order for their children to participate in athletics. In addition to these organizational fees, the proper gear must be purchased in order for children to play their sports safely. A study recently found that young athletes with parents from higher socio-economic classes encouraged their children's participation in organized athletics more than parents from lower socio-economic classes (Santos, Esculcas, & Mota, 2004). Researchers also noted that the level of mothers' education had a related impact on their children's participation in organized sports (Santos et al., 2004). In addition to parental encouragement of participation in athletics, this study also found that children from low-income families had less access to classes and programs that related to organized athletic teams (Santos et al., 2004).

My family's geographical location impacted how we participated in organized youth sports. In the community where we lived, it was normal for youth to participate in organized athletics. In addition to this socially accepted norm, my parents also believed that by participating in athletics, my brother and I would build valuable life skills. This social value of youth sports leagues and the life skills that result from participating in athletics reflects Seefeldt and Ewing's (1997) research that found that youth participation in athletics in America has been justified by the socially normed idea that through participating in competitive sports, children build character and life skills that will in turn help children transition into adulthood.

It is also important to acknowledge the fact that I did not grow up in a middle class family; according to the federal government my family was a low-income family. Research conducted by Santos, Esculcas, and Mota (2004) found that parents from higher social classes tend to encourage their children to participate in organized sports while parents from lower social classes often do not. While this research is probably accurate, it is important to note that there are those parents who, like my parents, make sacrifices in order to give their children various extracurricular opportunities.

### Gender

It is difficult to ignore the various advantages and disadvantages that exist culturally owing to gender. In the United States, the post-World War II era brought in a much stricter gender division of labor in work and family life (Messner, 2011). This had a direct impact on youth sports. The separation of boys and girls in competitive sports helped form the idea that girls are weak and must participate in "girly" sports like dance, ice-skating, ballet, and gymnastics (Messner, 2011). Recent times have shown a dramatic increase in female participation in sports, but national youth sport surveys show that girls still have a higher "never

participated” rate than boys-21% to boys’ 13% (Messner & Musto, 2014). It is also important to consider parental involvement and encouragement of their children’s participation in sports according to their gender.

Once I joined the track team and met Kirsten, I struggled with understanding how a parent could be so hard on their child and why a parent would be so invested in their child’s extra curricular activities. Glen’s opinion that cheerleading is a girly activity that should not be considered a sport demonstrates the cultural stereotypes that have been put on gender and athletics. The separation between boyish and girly sports originates from the notion that females are weak and therefore must participate in girly sports like dance, figure skating, ballet, etc. (Messner, 2011).

### One-Sport Focus

MacDonald et al. (2011) provided analysis and comparison of one-sport athletes to multiple sport athletes. These findings clearly showed that multiple sport athletes reported to have less stress and more enjoyment while participating in organized sports. Multiple sport athletes also experienced healthy emotional and physical support from their parents and coaches. One-sport athletes reported to have higher levels of diversity in peer groups (MacDonald et al, 2011). However, results from this particular study showed one-sport athletes feeling more pressure from their parents to perform successfully at a high level (MacDonald et al., 2011). This pressure is then translated into stress and lack of pleasure and enjoyment when participating in their sports. These results show the wide range of positive and negative experiences based on involvement in athletics.

When Kirsten decided to participate in only cross-country and to not cheerlead, she made the decision because her dad wanted her to focus on becoming a better runner. This choice to

become one-sport focused models the study finding that athletes often become one-sport focused and are pressured more by their parents to be athletically successful (MacDonald et al., 2011).

When I was playing soccer and running cross-country, I experienced more physical demands, but I felt positive emotions from participating in multiple sports because multiple sport athletes reportedly experience less stress and more enjoyment whilst participating in organized sports (MacDonald et al., 2011). Both Kirsten and I became one-sport focused relatively early in our lives. Côté et al.'s study (2009) states that by the age of 13 young athletes should be allowed to begin focusing on a favorite sport and by 16 athletes should be fully invested in specialized training in one focused sport. Although I was not quite 13 and I was no-where near close to being 16, I was self-motivated and wanted to be fully invested in distance running. Because of my investment and commitment distance running, my parents allowed me to become one-sport focused.

The increased pressure to perform well and stress that Kirsten felt once she was in high school is probably because when one-sport athletes are competing at a high level, they often experience more pressure to perform (MacDonald et al., 2011). Although I was also a one-sport athlete, I did not experience this type of pressure to be successful because both of my parents did not have any personal desires and goals that were linked to my athletic performance.

### Parental Involvement

The more organized youth sports become in America, the more competitive they become. The desire from athletes, parents, and coaches to be on a winning team becomes the main focus of athletic participation. Because so many young children are put into athletics by their parents, this desire to be the best often stems from parental desire for their children to be successful. Côté et al. (2009) compares and contrasts action-theory and cognitive theories. Action-theory

focuses on the individual, the task, and the environment while accounting for the cognitive and affective and social aspects of participation in athletics (Côté et al., 2009). In comparison, cognitive theories are more focused on the ways in which one approaches processing information. According to this article, deliberate practice is an activity that requires effort, generates no immediate results, and is solely motivated by the ultimate goal of improving athletic performance (Côté et al., 2009). Based upon research, this article claims that in early years athletes should be encouraged to participate in multiple sports; by the age of 13 they should be allowed to begin to focus on their favorite sport or to continue at a recreational level (versus a competitive one), and by 16 athletes should be at a point where they can fully invest in specialized training in one focused sport (Côté et al., 2009).

The aggressive style of cheering displayed by Glen and his investment in her athletic performance is a reflection of fathers' tendency to give specific sport related advice and to push their children harder athletically (Wuerth et al., 2004). Directly after our 800-meter time trial, Glen gave Kirsten quite a bit of advice on how she could have performed better, and none of the feedback was actually positive or helpful. According to Côté, Lidor, and Hackfort (2009) and cognitive theory, deliberate practice of a sport often does not generate immediate results and success is found by being motivated by the ultimate goal of improving athletic performance. Glen's negative reaction to Kirsten's first ever trial 800-meter run showed that he did not understand that it is rare for anyone to experience immediate results in athletics; especially if the individual, like Kirsten, is not motivated to improve at what they are doing athletically. Glen's strong desire for Kirsten to be successful in her running was most likely motivated by the fact that he was the reason Kirsten was participating in track and therefore wanted her to be the best

simply because he was very emotionally entangled in her athletic participation (Côté et al., 2009).

Parents are the ones guiding and direct young athletes towards a successful athletic career. However, parental judgment is often clouded by personal motivation and desires which get projected onto children. Wuerth et al. (2004) make the point that often times the parents who are overbearing and demanding of their children are ones who are active athletes. Through research, this article discovered a tendency for mothers to see themselves as the parent who provides positive support and involvement in their children's athletic sport activities. Fathers tend to give specific sport related advice and to push their children harder athletically (Wuerth et al., 2004). A significant finding from this study is that parental behavior patterns are more based upon their young athletes' age rather than their career status. Wuerth et al. (2004) also found that young athletes perform best when experiencing the freedom to work directly and only with coaches. This style of athletic development has been shown to be the least stressful for young athletes.

When Kirsten's mom began bringing her to practice, Kirsten's attitude at practice seemed to shift in a positive direction. The study by Wuerth et al. (2004) discovered that mothers tend to feel the need to be the parent who provides positive support and involvement in their children's athletic participation. Perhaps this is why Kirsten's mom presence at practice seemed to cause Kirsten to be more relaxed and happy. It is also important to note that Glen's choice to attend Ethan's practices over Kirsten's is probably because parents who are overbearing and demanding of their children's athletic performances are also active athletes in the same sport (Wuerth et al. 2004).

Research conducted by Wuerth et al. (2004) also found that young athletes perform best when they have the freedom to work directly and only with their coaches. This is why I continually improved throughout my running career. My parents were fully supportive and gave me advice, but they also respected my coaches and the work that they were doing. On the other hand, Kirsten's running performance was inconsistent and the incongruence in the coaching that she was receiving caused confusion and stress in her life. Kirsten felt this way and was not performing well because athletes who have both their coaches and parents coaching them at the same time tend to experience more stress and less success in athletic performance (Wuerth et al., 2004). Kirsten's age is also probably a factor behind her dad's ever increasing expectations of her athletic performance. Parental behavior patterns are often based upon their children's age, and since Kristen was nearing college, her dad was beginning to think about her future (Wuerth et al., 2004).

### Dropouts

While there are many different organized sports programs in which children and youth can become involved, young athletes are also faced with barriers to participation. Often when young participants in athletics drop out of participating in athletics, this fact is overlooked (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997). Athletes often discontinue their participation in organized sports because of financial constraints (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1997 and Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003) or because they lose interest or desire to continue participating in athletics (Linder, 2002). Linder (2002) found that female athletes were more likely to feel as though they were not good enough, had more pressure to perform well, and needed more time to study. Through analysis of information gathered from this particular study, results showed athletes who tend to quit competitive athletics had been participating in just one focused sport for a considerable length of

time before quitting (Linder, 2002). However, athletes who participated in two or three sports were found to drop participation in one competitive sport, but continued to participate in the other sports they had been playing.

Although Kirsten did technically quit running twice, the last and final time she quit was permanent mostly because she felt she wanted to do other activities with her time. Perhaps this is because Kirsten had been focused on one sport for such a long time. On the other hand, because of the balance that I found throughout my childhood when it came to participation in athletics, I was able to experience long term enjoyment and success when I finally became a one-sport athlete.

### Conclusion

In America, we greatly value athletic performance. We champion those who are athletically gifted and we want our children to grow up to be athletically successful. Through my autoethnography, I found that support from parents is almost always needed. But there is a fine line between being supportive and being overbearing. As a future educator, I strongly value the involvement of parents in their children's lives. I believe that having caring parents is one of the most important support systems that a child can have. However, research and my own life have shown that this parental support can go too far.

Parents only want the very best for their children. This is something that carries over into the athletic world. Through my relationship with Kirsten and her dad, Glen, I saw a caring relationship that stole the joy from a child's athletic endeavors. The stress that Glen caused in Kirsten's life arguably ended her running career. Kirsten was one of the most athletically gifted runners that I have ever known. But because of her dad's intensity, she was held back from truly becoming the runner that she could have been. Although Kirsten did run for one year in college,

she lacked the self-motivation and dedication to compete all four years in college. Perhaps she would have learned to love running enough to stick with it throughout college if the motivation for running had always come from Kirsten.

Through the literature that was used for this thesis and from my autoethnography, I believe that varying levels of a parent's involvement in their child's athletic participation has a strong impact on their athletic performance and the longevity of the athlete's career. When comparing my running career to Kirsten's, one can see that we both became one-sport focused very young and we both went on to compete at the collegiate level. The only real difference between us was our parents' styles of being involved in our athletic participation. A parent who is too demanding of their child, who expects their child to win all competitions, and forces their child to be one-sport focused because they see potential will most likely cause their child to fail athletically. In addition to a parent's expectations, the gender of the child, and the socioeconomic status of the family must be taken into consideration. All of these varying factors have an impact on a child's long-term happiness and success in organized sports.

A child with parent(s) who do not live vicariously through their athletic success will most likely experience a longer and happier athletic career. Throughout my athletic career, I experienced constant support and acceptance from my parents regardless of my athletic success. I also gained the skills to work hard, to be a team player, and to overcome challenges while participating in organized youth sports. If a parent can be supportive without becoming overly emotionally invested in their child's athletic success, I think that every child will have a positive experience in athletics regardless of whether they are winners or whether they go on to be collegiate athletes.

### Bibliography

Allender, S., Cowburn, G., & Foster, C. (2006). Understanding participation in sport and physical activity among children and adults: a review of qualitative studies. *Health education research, 21*(6), 826-835.

In this article, the authors conduct qualitative research in order to better understand why children and adult participate in sports and physical activity. The authors agree that physical activity offers significant amounts of positive improvement in health as well as overall general quality of life. These authors state the differences between why children and youth begin and maintain participation in sports. They also discuss barriers that athletes face in participation in athletics.

Côté, J. E. A. N., Lidor, R., & Hackfort, D. (2009). ISSP position stand: To sample or to specialize? Seven postulates about youth sport activities that lead to continued participation and elite performance. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 7*(1), 7-17.

Hailing from Canada, Israel, and Qatar, these authors offer insight into whether young athletes should participate in multiple sports versus focusing on only one sport. Their comprehensive approach allows readers to explore seven different pathways of development in sport that athletes may take. These seven postulates are drawn from different empirical sources and the authors caution that continued research is necessary in regards to this topic.

Duda, J. L., & Ntoumanis, N. (2005). After-school sport for children: Implications of a task-involving motivational climate. *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, after-school and community programs, 311-330.*

Gordon-Larsen, P., McMurray, R. G., & Popkin, B. M. (2000). Determinants of adolescent physical activity and inactivity patterns. *Pediatrics, 105*(6), e83-e83.

This article focuses on determining the environmental and sociodemographic determinants of physical activity and inactivity patterns in US youth. These authors determined through a study that high-income families have higher levels of vigorous physical activity and involvement in sports and decreased levels of inactivity.

Hansen, D. M., Larson, R. W., & Dworkin, J. B. (2003). What adolescents learn in organized youth activities: A survey of self - reported developmental experiences. *Journal of research on adolescence, 13*(1), 25-55.

Through the Youth Experiences Survey in which high school students participated in, these authors found that youth reported higher rates of learning experiences in youth activities. Sport involvement is frequently identified as relating to identity work and emotional development. Based on the survey conducted, sports activities were the only setting in which youth reported higher rates of negative experiences based off of negative peer interaction and inappropriate adult behavior.

Lindner, J. B. K. J. (2002). Withdrawal from competitive youth sport: A retrospective ten-year study. *Journal of Sport Behavior, 25*, 2.

Based on a sport participation profile completed by Grade 10 students as well as Grade 7-8 students, this article provides perspective into the extent, context, and timing of youth withdrawal from competitive sports. Through this survey, significant differences were found in the withdrawal of youth based on reasons such as program types, grade levels, and gender.

MacDonald, D. J., Côté, J., Eys, M., & Deakin, J. (2011). The role of enjoyment and motivational climate in relation to the personal development of team sport athletes. *Sport Psychologist*, 25(1), 32.

Messner, M. (2011). Gender ideologies, youth sports, and the production of soft essentialism. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 28(2), 151-170.

Hailing from the University of Southern California, Messner challenges the dominant ideology of the mid-Twentieth Century that women should participate in delicate activities while men are built for “rougher” activities. In this article, the author discusses the transition in sport from “hard essentialism” to “soft essentialism”. An argument that states that youth sports have become important grounds for the construction of soft essentialist narratives which allow the feminist language of choice for girls participating in athletics. Messner also writes that through involvement in sports, boys are being taught to view girls and women as equals

Messner, M. A., & Musto, M. (2014). Where are the Kids?. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 31(1), 102-122.

This article recognizes the importance of sports in the lives of children. Messner and Musto state that although there is high involvement in childhood athletics, there are less systematic studies done by sport sociologists on children. Not only does kid involvement in athletics get ignored by the media, but support of parents and their role is often overlooked. These authors also discuss childhood dropouts and factors behind the decision to no longer participate in athletics after being involved for extended periods of time.

Santos, M. P., Esculcas, C., & Mota, J. (2004). The relationship between socioeconomic status and adolescents' organized and nonorganized physical activities. *Pediatric Exercise Science, 16*(3), 210-218.

This paper explains the findings of a study that was conducted to find whether parents' socioeconomic status has an impact on children's access to organized and non-organized activities. By collecting data from 594 different adolescents, these researchers concluded that more often than not, mothers' levels of education had a related impact on their children's participation in athletic activities and that socioeconomic status plays a influential role in children's participation in organized sports.

Seefeldt, V. D., & Ewing, M. E. (1997). Youth Sports in America: An Overview. *President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Research Digest*.

Seefeld and Ewing provide background and an overview of organized sports in the United States. They point out that significant difference in gender among participants, barriers to participation, and benefits of sports participation have been documented through surveys. These authors point out that while youth participation in sports has many benefits, there are also negative consequences if participation has a negative impact on the athletes. Seefeld and Ewing also propose ways to enhance youth sports by meeting the needs of all youth regardless of gender, age, or ethnicity.

Wuerth, S., Lee, M. J., & Alfermann, D. (2004). Parental involvement and athletes' career in youth sport. *Psychology of sport and Exercise, 5*(1), 21-33.

This paper discusses a study that was conducted in order to examine the involvement of parental involvement in youth sport participation across different career phases and transitions. The study found that parents view their method of support differently based

upon their gender. It also found a correlation between athletes with successful careers and higher amounts of parental involvement.