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“The Credit Card or the Taxi”: A Qualitative Investigation of Parent Involvement in Indoor Competition Climbing

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ABSTRACT

Parent involvement provides one lens through which the emotional, physical, and financial effects of youth sports may be understood. To examine parent involvement in the context of an emerging alternative youth sport, four focus groups were conducted with 27 parents of youth athletes involved in indoor competition climbing. Constructed themes, affirmed through a synthesized member-checking process, highlighted characteristics of parent involvement in indoor competition climbing and factors influencing youth and parent exposure to, and ongoing engagement in, the sport. Key findings highlight types of parent involvement (i.e., logistical and financial support, volunteerism, excessive involvement), facilitators of parent involvement (i.e., sense of parent community), and constraints to parent involvement (i.e., financial expense, travel). Future research is suggested to better understand the negotiation of distance constraints, parent education and support programs, and the expression of overparenting behaviors within indoor competition climbing settings.

Introduction

Within youth sport, parent involvement research has examined parents’ investment of money, time, and effort (Wheeler & Green, 2014), factors that influence parents’ experiences during youth sports (i.e., their child’s performance and behavior, interactions between parents, characteristics of the sport context; Knight & Holt, 2013; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008; Thrower, Harwood, & Spray, 2016), the role parents play in providing praise and instruction regarding their child’s athletic performances (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008), how parents socialize their child into a sport (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009), and the positive (i.e., motivation and encouragement) and negative (i.e., criticism and distraction) influences parents may have on their children within sport contexts (Elliott & Drummond, 2017a; Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010). This research has described parent involvement as dynamic and evolving, with parents gaining more experience with their child’s sport (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2015). Although these studies provide evidence for how and why parents are involved in their...
child’s sport, there remains a need to further explore factors that influence parent involvement, parent experiences within unique sport contexts, and effective strategies for supporting and educating parents within sport settings (Holt et al., 2008; Hurtel & Lacassagne, 2011; Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017).

The majority of parent involvement research in youth sport has been conducted within mainstream, traditional sport contexts (e.g., basketball, football, tennis, swimming; Dorsch et al., 2009; Holt et al., 2008), with few studies of parent involvement conducted within emergent, alternative youth sport contexts (e.g., climbing, skateboarding, snowboarding) that may, for example, have less history, formalization, and structure (Kellett & Russell, 2009) than traditional, mainstream youth sports as well as distinct “environmental and cultural aspects” that may influence parent involvement (Knight et al., 2017, p. 95). One such factor is parental lack of familiarity with alternative youth sports. For instance, parents may constrain themselves or their child from being involved in an alternative youth sport because they perceive the sport as likely to produce an injury (Mei-Dan, 2018), when in fact the actual injury rate associated with that sport may be quite low (Schöfl, Hoffmann, & Küpper, 2013; Schöfl, Lutter, Woollings, & Schöfl, 2018). Consequently, a lack of parental prior experience with and information about an alternative youth sport may contribute to avoidance of the sport, or to what Burgess, Knight, and Mellalieu (2016) described as a “trial and error” (p. 95) approach to learning about a sport that is incongruent with ongoing parent involvement. Together, the comparative lack of history, formalization, and structure within alternative youth sport (Kellett & Russell, 2009) as well as parental lack of familiarity with alternative youth sport (Harwood & Knight, 2015; Knight & Holt, 2013), have contributed to a knowledge gap in the parent involvement in sport literature.

**Study purpose**

This study explores parent involvement within a rapidly developing alternative youth sport, indoor competition climbing (ICC). With an average annual growth rate of 7.46% of commercial climbing facilities (Climbing Business Journal, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018), recent inclusion as a “medaled” sport in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games (International Federation of Sport Climbing, 2017), and evidence of climbing as an activity promoting both physical and socioemotional health among young athletes (Garst, Stone, & Gagnon, 2016; Siegel & Fryer, 2017), competition climbing is emerging as a commercially viable and popular youth sport. The sport primarily comprises three subdisciplines: bouldering, lead climbing, and speed climbing (Gagnon, Stone, Garst, & Arthur-Banning, 2016). USA Climbing’s current organizational structure employs few paid staff and relies on engaged volunteers to fill roles such as competition judges and regional coordinators, with many volunteer positions filled by the parents of youth athletes. The rapid growth of ICC and the accompanying increase in parent involvement over the past decade have outpaced our understanding of the sport from the perspective of parents and other stakeholders (Gagnon et al., 2016). Thus, the purpose of this study was to better understand parent involvement in ICC as well as factors that facilitate or constrain parent involvement in an alternative sport setting.
Literature review

This study was guided by a normative (parent involvement; Holt et al., 2008) to non-normative (overparenting; Locke, Campbell, & Kavanagh, 2012) parenting framework, which acknowledged environmental and cultural factors (e.g., constraints; Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993) that might influence how parents were involved in their child’s sport (Knight et al., 2017). These concepts and their relationship to this study are described below.

Parent involvement

Parents can have a lasting impact on their child’s participation in sports over the course of their child’s life, through multiple roles (Côté, 1999; Knight, Dorsch, Osai, Haderlie, & Sellars, 2016) including supporter, provider, funder, coach, and administrator (Knight et al., 2016). In these roles, parents may initiate their child’s sport participation (Wheeler & Green, 2014) and may motivate their child’s sustained involvement (Côté, 1999). Moreover, parents invest substantial financial (Dunn, Dorsch, King, & Rothlisberger, 2016) and emotional (Peter, 2011) resources into their child’s sport-related activities. For instance, Dunn et al. (2016) found parents’ average investment to support their children’s sport participation could be as high as 10% of their overall gross household income.

Parent involvement within sport settings is complex, and the sport literature offers differing conceptualizations of this concept. One of the earliest ways parent involvement was conceived placed involvement on a continuum reflecting underinvolvement, moderate involvement, and overinvolvement (Hellstedt, 1987). This early conceptualization of parent involvement based on primarily quantity has been largely subsumed by a model emphasizing both the level (i.e., an objective assessment of how much time parents invest) and degree of parent involvement (i.e., a subjective perception of parent involvement as “too little, just right, or too much”; Stein, Raedeke, & Glenn, 1999, p. 593). Involvement has also been conceptualized based on the support parents provide to their children. For example, Wolfenden and Holt (2005) identified themes reflective of parent support, including tangible, informational, emotional, and sacrificial support. Tangible support included providing financial support through payment of registration fees and transportation to practices and competitions. Informational support consisted of sport-specific advice coaches and conventional advice from parents. Emotional support included parent support in times of stress. Finally, sacrificial support reflected what players and family members gave up so young athletes could participate in their sport (see also table 2 in Wolfenden & Holt, 2005, p. 114).

The complexity of parent involvement in youth sport was further suggested by Holt et al. (2008), who characterized parent involvement as “dynamic interactions between parents and other parents, game situations, children’s performances, parents’ empathy, and their perceived knowledge and experience” (p. 683). Adding to this complexity is the perspective that involvement can change over time as parents become more engaged in their child’s sport, as suggested by longitudinal studies of parent involvement through the lens of sport socialization (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2015). Sport socialization models suggest parents may function as role models for their child’s involvement in
sport, interpreters of their child’s sport experience, and as providers of the sport experience (Frederick & Eccles, 2004). Informed by the literature on parent involvement in sport, the current study recognized parent involvement might differ based on level and degree (i.e., quality of involvement as well as the amount of parent resources invested in the child’s sport) as well as the role parents played (i.e., transporter, supporter, volunteer, coach, role model, interpreter, and provider) through their involvement in their child’s sport.

**Overparenting**

The term overparenting describes excessively effortful parenting (Locke, Campbell, & Kavanagh, 2012) that, although exhibited with a child’s best interests in mind, may not promote positive outcomes. Segrin, Woszidlo, Givertz, and Montgomery (2013) described overparenting as “the application of developmentally inappropriate levels of parental directiveness, tangible assistance, problem-solving, monitoring, and involvement in the lives of children” (p. 569). Research with adult children suggests overparenting has a negative effect on a child’s well-being, including lower life satisfaction (Schiffrin et al., 2014), increased anxiety, stress, and depression (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011).

Recently, scholars have begun to discuss the importance of better understanding the potential influence of overparenting on youth within the context of school (Hong, Hwang, Kuo, & Hsu, 2015) and out-of-school time settings (Gagnon & Garst, 2019). Although, to the authors’ knowledge, overparenting has not been explicitly addressed within sport research, some youth sport literature has examined characteristics that reflect overparenting behaviors such as excessive parental control (Holt et al., 2008), lack of autonomy-supportive behavior on the part of parents (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009), and excessive forms of directive behaviors (Bois, Lalanne, & Delforge, 2009; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004). With this literature in mind and with information provided by administrators and research team members based on their informal observations of parents at the study site, team members viewed overparenting as a relevant construct for informing how parent involvement may be expressed within the context of ICC.

**Constraints**

Another factor that can influence parent involvement in sport are constraints that inhibit or reduce family involvement. In this way, constraints are viewed as both co-occurring and bidirectional for youth athletes and their parents. Constraints are generally conceptualized as intrapersonal (e.g., fear of ridicule from other climbers), interpersonal (e.g., lack of friends who enjoy climbing), and structural (e.g., distance from a climbing facility) (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991). Constraints are often interrelated (Crawford et al., 1991). For example, a structural constraint (i.e., climbing teams in my area are too elite for my child) can also be an interpersonal constraint (i.e., I feel my child can’t compete at the level of local athletes). Research on constraints within youth sport (alternatively termed challenges, Wiersma & Fifer, 2008; or needs, Thrower
et al., 2016) suggests factors that may inhibit parent and child youth sport involvement include lack of time (Ruseski, Humphreys, Hallman, & Breuer, 2011; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008), lack of financial resources (Thrower et al., 2016), lack of transportation (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008), lack of partners (Casper, Bocarro, Kanters, & Floyd, 2011), lack of parent commitment (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008), limited knowledge (Thrower et al., 2016), and family structure (Ruseski et al., 2011). Additionally, parents can act as interpersonal constraint (Diacin & DeSensi, 2013) when they limit their children’s sport-related activities based on their perception of the sport’s value or lack thereof. Conversely, when parents approve of their child’s sport-related activities and have a positive expectation of the value their child may receive through sport, they may become more likely to support and less likely to constrain their child’s involvement (Diacin & DeSensi, 2013). Finally, parents themselves can be constrained because they lack the “range of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organizational skills” (Harwood & Knight, 2015, p. 32) needed to successfully navigate a youth sport setting.

Recognizing that ICC is an emerging youth sport and little is known about the level of involvement among parents of youth climbers (Garst et al., 2016), the present study addressed this gap by considering the concepts of parent involvement, overparenting, and constraints to better understand features of parent involvement in ICC and factors that constrain or promote parent involvement in ICC. This study acknowledged parent involvement in sport is best studied through emergent, contextualized methodological approaches (Baker & Soden, 1998; Newhouse-Bailey, Dixon, & Warner, 2015) and was patterned after other recent qualitative examinations of parents within the context of youth sport (e.g., Elliott & Drummond, 2017a, 2017b; Holt et al., 2017; Newhouse-Bailey et al., 2015). Specifically, three research questions were explored:

- RQ1: How is parent involvement in ICC expressed by parents?
- RQ2: What factors facilitate parent involvement in ICC?
- RQ3: What factors constrain parent involvement in ICC?

**Method**

**Participants**

In summer 2015, USA Climbing, the national governing body for ICC, collaborated with the research team to better understand parent involvement and experiences within ICC. The research team contacted parents of children participating in the ICC youth national championship event in Atlanta, Ga. via email to seek parents’ participation in a series of focus groups. Of approximately 1,500 youth athletes and an unknown number of parents who transported them to the competition (with many parents transporting multiple athletes), 160 parents expressed initial interest. Using a “first-come, first-served” approach, the available three focus group slots were filled by parents who responded to the email communication. Demand was sufficient to necessitate a fourth focus group, which we viewed as an additional, indirect indicator of involvement (i.e., eagerness to share opinions). Thus, criterion-based purposeful sampling was used to identify parents whose children were (a) competing in the ICC national championship...
event and (b) who were available to participate in a focus group during the scheduled times (Patton, 2002).

Focus groups were scheduled during the ICC national championship event held in the southeastern United States, and parents who expressed an interest received a confirmation email identifying the date and time of their focus group. Due to the brevity of the competition and to avoid disrupting the participant experience, four focus groups were conducted to reach data saturation (i.e., “degree to which new data repeat what is expressed in previous data”; Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1897). Specifically, the structured nature of the focus group as well as the homogeneity of the participants suggested a three to five focus group guideline would be appropriate (Morgan, 1996). Parents were randomly assigned to a focus group based on their availability during the scheduled times.

Of the 40 parents who were selected and received a confirmation email, 27 parents arrived at the assigned time and were involved in one of four focus group discussions. Participation was incentivized through a one-year free membership to USA Climbing. Participants tended to be female (55.6%), white (85.2%), have a college degree (51.9%), and annual household incomes between $125,000 and $149,000 (14.8%) (see Table 1). Additionally, parents tended to have four to six years of experience with USA Climbing (44.4%), and a majority (66.7%) were USA Climbing volunteers.

**Data collection and analysis**

This study was approached from a postpositivist perspective guided by a contextualized, plausible reality (i.e., critical realist ontology and constructivist epistemology; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2016). This “middle ground” between positivism (i.e., reflective of a single reality) and constructivism (i.e., reflective of multiple realities) has been described by Yin (2016) as providing greater adaptability for conducting qualitative research. Informed by postpositivism, the researchers viewed parent involvement in sport through a pragmatic lens (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2016), employing the use of systematic data collection and participant review procedures (Creswell & Miller, 2000), which allowed for participant engagement, solicitation of feedback, and exploration of varied perspectives. Each focus group included 6–10 parents, which Yin (2016) identified as an appropriate number for data saturation (i.e., “degree to which new data repeat what is expressed in previous data”).

**Table 1. Parent descriptives (n = 27).**

| Parent gender | Female = 55.6% (15) | No response = 3.7% (1) |
| Parent race   | White = 85.2% (23)  | Asian Origin = 7.4% (2) |
| Parent income | $50,000-$74,999 = 7.4% (2) $75,000-$99,999 = 11.1% (3) $100,000-$149,999 = 14.8% (4) |
| Parent education | High school = 3.7% (1) | Post-graduate = 40.7% (11) |
| Parent role | Volunteer = 66.7% (18) | Fundraiser = 3.7% (1) |
| Parent roles within USA Climbing | Regional coordinator = 7.4% (2) | Coach = 3.7% (1) |
| Parent experience w/USA Climbing | 1 year = 14.8% (4) | 6 years = 25.9% (7) |
| | 2 years = 7.4% (2) | 7 years = 7.4% (2) |
| | 3 years = 14.8% (4) | 8 years = 3.7% (1) |
| | 4 years = 18.5% (5) | 9 years = 3.7% (1) |
| | 5 years = 0% (0) | 10+ years = 3.7% (1) |
| | 6+ years = 14.8% (4) | 7 years = 7.4% (2) |

B. A. GARST ET AL.
number of focus group participants to facilitate meaningful discussion. Each focus group session lasted for approximately 70 minutes, and refreshments were provided. Focus groups were viewed as appropriate for this study because they allowed for the collection of rich, descriptive data in a social setting relevant to parents’ experiences in their children’s sport and allowed parents to consider their own viewpoints in the context of others’ views (Patton, 2002).

Focus group discussions incorporated a semi-structured script allowing parents to provide feedback about their involvement in ICC as well as factors that facilitated or constrained involvement in ICC. Examples of focus group questions included: “What does parent involvement in the sport look like?” and “What does your involvement require in terms of time, money, resources?” All focus groups were recorded and then transcribed verbatim, and the transcriptions were independently coded by members of the research team using a blended inductive-deductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The inductive analysis allowed for the identification of salient themes while also uncovering subtle details within the data based on the researchers’ interpretations of participants’ responses. In contrast, the deductive analysis allowed the themes to be interpreted though the lens of concepts from the extant literature (e.g., parent involvement, overparenting, and constraints), which served as a reference when coding and/or developing themes (Patton, 2002). This approach mirrored Holt, Kinsley, Tink, and Scherer’s (2011) use of theoretical concepts to inform analysis of parent sport participation data.

The following steps were conducted independently by two coders. First, each transcript was carefully read and re-read. Second, following the readings, data were broken into smaller meaning units (i.e., codes). Third, data were organized into categories that represented relationships across the codes (Patton, 2002). Fourth, the researchers then met to review their coding schemes and to reconcile any differences in coding decisions. Reflective of the postpositivist approach, disagreements in coding across the two coders were explored by returning to the data and identifying which code best described the view expressed by participants. Fifth, codes were organized into subthemes, and representative quotations were identified for each subtheme. Sixth, these subthemes were organized into broader thematic statements, which are described in the results.

**Methodological rigor**

Methodological rigor was addressed several ways. First, two members of the research team spent time within the ICC setting prior to and during data collection, observing climbers, parents, and coaches, generating additional insight regarding the topic and context being studied. Second, paralleling the approach of Holt, Kingsley, Tink, and Scherer (2011), two research team members collaborated closely on the analysis as described above (i.e., investigator triangulation; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Third, member checking was used to solicit participant feedback to the research team’s interpretations. Through member checking, the research team sought to strengthen the “representation” of the findings and interpretations, identified by Thomas (2017) as an appropriate use of member checks. With this process, member checking in the present study was similar to the approach used by Elliott and Drummond (2017a) to co-construct meaning. Thus, the intent of member checking was to affirm the research team’s
interpretations (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016) and to provide participants with the opportunity to generate new insights emerging through the identification of gaps in meaning or interpretation (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Acknowledging Thomas’s (2017) and Smith and McGannon’s (2018) critique that researchers rarely detail their procedures or changes in findings that resulted from member checks, the member check procedures and the changes resulting from member checks in this study are described below.

A structured member checking approach (SMC; Birt et al., 2016) was used in this study. Through the SMC process, participants received a link to an online questionnaire that included a summary and representative quote of each emergent theme (i.e., three tables total, one theme per table) and an opportunity to provide feedback to the themes and interpretations in each table. Questions posed within the SMC included: “Does the information presented in the table adequately reflect your perspective as a parent of a competition climber?” “Would you like to change, remove, or modify anything relating to this theme? If so, please share below.” Focus group participants could share additional feedback using an open-ended response option. Through this process, participants had the opportunity to review the researchers’ interpretations of their focus group responses to reflect on the credibility of the themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The SMC questionnaire was available to the 27 parents who participated in the focus groups for a 3-week period, with 20 parents responding.

For themes one and two, all SMC respondents affirmed the presented findings and interpretations while also offering new reflections on the interpretations. For instance, in response to theme one’s interpretations, one SMC respondent shared, “I cannot over-emphasize the subtheme of community—being a part of something larger than just our family.” As another example, after reviewing theme three’s constraints, one respondent shared, “Distance in cities is a constraint for low-income families.” When SMC respondents’ feedback such as this affirmed existing findings and interpretations, no changes were made to the themes and subthemes. When respondents challenged interpretations, as was the case for theme three, data, codes, and interpretations for the theme were revisited and modifications were made to some interpretations. For instance, in response to a concern from SMC respondents about how parental lack of understanding was framed in theme three, the subtheme “parental lack of understanding of ICC is a major constraint, particularly for parents new to the sport” was modified to “parental lack of awareness or understanding of ICC can constrain involvement.” This broader statement, which was modified to include awareness, was reflective of both the initial data as well as the member check feedback. As the intent of this study was to represent parent involvement within the context of ICC (i.e., “key features of participants’ realities”; Thomas, 2017, p. 30), such modifications were considered both necessary and appropriate.

Results

To address the three research questions, the study findings are divided into the following constructed themes: Theme 1: Characteristics of parent involvement in ICC; Theme 2: Factors prompting parents to engage in ICC; and Theme 3: Constraints influencing youth/parent involvement in ICC. Table 2 provides a summary of themes, subthemes, and representative parent quotes.
**Table 2.** Summary of themes, subthemes, and evidence supporting parent involvement in indoor competition climbing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Representative Quotes as Evidence of Themes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>**Theme 1: Parent involvement in ICC is significant, evolving,</td>
<td>Parents’ primary role involves the provision of logistical and financial</td>
<td>• “I think the sweet spot is when the parent leaves the instruction and the coaching up to the coach … but the parents support the organization and the environment.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>volunteer-driven, and sometimes excessive**</td>
<td>support to their youth climber.</td>
<td>• “We have a joke on our team. That [parents] are the credit card or the taxi.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent involvement evolves over time and often includes some form of</td>
<td>“… the level of involvement for the parent … is based on the kids’ needs</td>
<td>• “… [parent involvement] can change the longer your kid is involved in the process or the program … as your kids progresses the more likely you are to volunteer”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>volunteerism.</td>
<td>based on the team’s needs …”</td>
<td>• “… identifying the ultimate parent … is really impossible because it’s all what people who have the ability, capability, the desire to do … you’re willing to give up seeing [your kids] climb and do scoring and those other things or are you just taking the time off from work and get [your climber] here, and so you know it’s a pretty broad spectrum [of involvement].”</td>
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<td>An “ideal” form of parent volunteer does not exist; parents are</td>
<td>“… they take how their child performs as a reflection of them. And they’re upset, more upset than the child … somehow they are too connected.”</td>
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<td>involved as best they can be given their situations.</td>
<td>• “If you really want to see what the reaction from helicopter parents is, [then] judge. It’s something that’s at a higher level … it does start at regional comps and then the divisional comps … there’s a lot more hovering …”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental excessive and directive behaviors are associated with</td>
<td>• “You know, the whole helicopter thing … here there’s a rule that parents can’t be yelling out anything … so I think the rules sort of fixed that …”</td>
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<tr>
<td>competitiveness while managed through competition structure and rules.</td>
<td>• “Last year we want to a birthday party … and that’s how my kids decided they wanted to do rock climbing.”</td>
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<td>**Theme 2: Parent involvement in ICC is facilitated by a strong sense</td>
<td>Family, friends, and involvement in community-based programs or activities provide youth with initial exposure to ICC.</td>
<td>• “We just started climbing on a rec center wall and the kids there said, ‘you should take them to a climbing gym.’ I didn’t even know there were such things. Went to a climbing gym for the summer and then got invited to USA Climbing.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of community and dissatisfaction with mainstream sports</td>
<td>• “… there is a defined sense of accomplishment that [my son] doesn’t get with other sports …”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ICC involvement catalyzed by youth dissatisfaction with traditional</td>
<td>• “… there’s a new level of excitement for [our daughter,” there’s a new puzzle. With gymnastics … soccer … tennis, it was too monotonous … it was the same thing over and over.”</td>
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<td>team sports as well as those dealing with physical or behavioral needs.</td>
<td>• ”My daughter has [health challenges]. [Climbing] made a difference … made”</td>
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(continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Representative Quotes as Evidence of Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Youth and parents are attracted to ICC because of the strong sense of community within ICC.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• &quot;... in little league if you stood and cheered for the other team in would not be accepted. But in climbing it happens every time.&quot; • &quot;There's a sense of community ... that we didn't see when we went in. And the truth is, it's very ecumenical, it's not just about teams. And once we get to a venue like this, everybody from [a region] is a family. We ride together, we've carpooled together for years, we've watched the little kids grow up. It was an unanticipated benefit, to become part of a large community. Didn't get into it for that, but if you look at the interactions out here, it's very much a part of it, that these are other children that speak a universal language.&quot;</td>
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<td>Theme 3: Family-level financial, distance, and awareness constraints impact parent involvement in ICC</td>
<td>Financial limitations are the most common ICC constraint.</td>
<td>• &quot;... [there are] financial limits ... it's an expensive sport ...&quot; • &quot;You want to see your child participating at the pinnacle of their sport and when ... it's too cost prohibitive for a parent to come, it's just unfortunate.&quot; • &quot;... there's an obvious disadvantage to those kids who don't have most of their family involved. They just don't make it to this stage [of competition] without it ...&quot; • &quot;What is ... prohibitive to ... lower income families is that [ICC] is not connected with schools ... it's more expensive than any other sport at this level.&quot;</td>
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<td>Distance is a barrier.</td>
<td>• &quot;... we're from Northern California ... nationals used to be all over the place and now over what, the last six years I think ... it's been here in Atlanta ... for us that's a long way ... for maybe a new climber that comes and climbs you know, one day. But you know we have families ... that spend almost $8,000 to come here ... a family of four ... it's a big deal to come here every year. Some families can't even do it.&quot; • &quot;I can't afford to go to Colorado or Wisconsin ... when you are looking at hotels for four or five days and eating out for four or five days ...&quot;</td>
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| Parental lack of awareness or understanding of ICC can constrain involvement. | • "I actually didn't even know that climbing was a sport that people competed in." • "... [some] gyms are still developing ... people haven't even heard of climbing ... they are like oh yeah I've heard of one place ..." • "... the first year was pretty much a crap shoot ... I learned a lot all the way ... so the next time it came around I wasn't so ill prepared ..."
**Theme 1: Parent involvement in ICC is significant, evolving, volunteer-driven, and sometimes excessive**

The first theme described parent involvement in ICC. Four subthemes were represented in the findings. First, parents’ primary role involves the provision of logistical and financial support to their youth athletes. This was a highly salient theme within these data, reflecting how parents are critical for providing a variety of tangible supports that allow their athletes to participate in ICC. Other supports were more contextual. For example, one parent shared, “I think the sweet spot is when the parent leaves the instruction and the coaching up to the coach … but the parents support the organization and the environment.” Other supports are tangible. A parent reflected on the nature of these tangible supports: “We have a joke on our team. That [parents] are the credit card or the taxi.” This explication of the roles parents play was common within parents’ descriptions of their involvement.

The second subtheme was that parent involvement evolves over time and often includes some form of volunteerism. From this perspective, parent involvement that begins with supporting one’s child in a sport increases as parents begin to provide support for other members of their child’s team. For example, one parent shared that “the level of involvement for the parent…is based on the kids’ needs [and] based on the team’s needs…” The temporal quality of parent involvement was further noted, with one parent indicating “…[parent involvement] can change the longer your kid is involved in the process or the program…as your kids progresses the more likely you are to volunteer.” This subtheme is supported by the parent descriptives (Table 1), in which parents described a diverse set of volunteer roles (e.g., coach, route setter, and/or regional coordinator) through which they served USA Climbing.

Some parents commented on what the archetype of parent involvement might look like, which led to the next subtheme. An “ideal” form of parent volunteer does not exist; parents are involved as best they can, given their unique situations. Parents acknowledged that involvement was dependent on what they felt they could contribute. For instance, a parent reflected:

…identifying the ultimate parent…is really impossible because it’s all what people who have the ability, capability, the desire to do…you’re willing to give up seeing [your kids] climb and do scoring and those other things or are you just taking the time off from work and get [your climber] here, and so you know it’s a pretty broad spectrum [of involvement].

Furthering the idea that the ideal parent volunteer was hard to define was the parent perspective that “you tend to see the same [volunteer] faces over and over again. And sometimes it gets a little bit, um, annoying…you see the same faces not volunteering.”

The fourth subtheme reflected excessive and overly effortful forms of parent involvement. This subtheme emerged when parents were questioned about whether they had observed overparenting within ICC. Parents described how overparents “…take how their child performs as a reflection of them. And they’re upset, more upset than the child…somehow they are too connected.” Another parent said, “If you really want to see what the reaction from helicopter parents is, [then] judge. It’s something that’s at a higher level… it does start at regional comps and then the divisional comps…there’s a lot more hovering…” The structure and rules associated with ICC limit overparenting
behaviors, as one parent said, “You know, the whole helicopter thing… here there’s a rule that parents can’t be yelling out anything… so I think the rules sort of fixed that…”

**Theme 2: Parent involvement in ICC is facilitated by a strong sense of community and dissatisfaction with mainstream sports**

The second theme described how parents became aware of ICC and what led them to engage in the sport. These factors, often related to what stimulated a young athlete’s interest in the sport, served as precursors of parent involvement. Three subthemes were represented in the findings. The first reflected how family, friends, and involvement in community-based programs or activities provide youth with initial exposure to ICC. For instance, one parent stated, “Last year we went to a birthday party… and that’s how my kids decided they wanted to do rock climbing.” Another parent shared that “we just started climbing on a rec center wall and the kids there said, ‘you should take them to a climbing gym.’ I didn’t even know there were such things.” In some situations, parents described how they were approached by a climbing coach who recognized their child’s climbing potential, suggesting that these engagements with ICC were more likely to occur when an athlete was being actively recruited for a climbing team.

The second subtheme reflected how ICC is often pursued by youth dissatisfied with traditional team sports and/or those dealing with physical or behavioral needs. One parent explained that “… there is a defined sense of accomplishment that [my son] doesn’t get with other sports…” Another parent shared that “…there’s a new level of excitement for [our daughter], there’s a new puzzle. With gymnastics… soccer… tennis, it was too monotonous… it was the same thing over and over.” A parent whose child has special medical needs said, “My daughter has [health challenges]. [Climbing] made a difference… made her much more open and able to deal with her [challenges].”

The third subtheme reflected how youth and parents are attracted to ICC because of the strong sense of community within the group. One parent shared what was unique about the ICC community with the comment, “… in little league if you stood and cheered for the other team in would not be accepted. But in climbing it happens every time.” Another parent reflected:

There’s a sense of community… that we didn’t see when we went in. And the truth is, it’s very ecumenical, it’s not just about teams. And once we get to a venue like this, everybody from [a region] is a family. We ride together, we’ve carpooled together for years, we’ve watched the little kids grow up. It was an unanticipated benefit, to become part of a large community. Didn’t get into it for that, but if you look at the interactions out here, it’s very much a part of it, that these are other children that speak a universal language.

**Theme 3: Family-level financial, distance, and awareness constraints impact parent involvement in ICC**

The third theme described factors that inhibited parent involvement in ICC. As noted earlier, these constraints were family-level constraints viewed as co-occurring between youth athletes and their parents. Five subthemes were represented in the findings. The first described financial constraints as a common constraint to ICC experienced by
parents, with parents noting “... [there are] financial limits... it’s an expensive sport...” This constraint limits an athlete’s social support during a competition, as one parent shared, “You want to see your child participating at the pinnacle of their sport and when... it’s too cost prohibitive for a parent to come, it’s just unfortunate.” It was suggested that not all families bear the financial constraint equally. Another parent noted “... there’s an obvious disadvantage to those kids who don’t have most of their family involved. They just don’t make it to this stage [of competition] without it...” Similarly, a parent expressed, “What is... prohibitive to... lower income families is that [ICC] is not connected with schools... it’s more expensive than any other sport at this level.” Financial constraints associated with ICC often meant that families had to sacrifice or adjust vacations to accommodate competition-related travel. In this way, ICC competitions and training became the family vacation and/or leisure experience.

The second subtheme described distance as a barrier to ICC parent involvement, particularly for families that needed to travel across country to access competition. Some parents noted they “couldn’t afford to go to Colorado or Wisconsin... when you are looking at hotels for four or five days and eating out for four or five days...” Another parent expressed:

... we’re from Northern California... nationals used to be all over the place and now over what, the last six years I think... it’s been here in Atlanta... for us that’s a long way... for maybe a new climber that comes and climbs you know, one day. But you know we have families... that spend almost $8,000 to come here... a family of four... it’s a big deal to come here every year. Some families can’t even do it.

The third subtheme included parents’ lack of awareness of ICC and the challenges parents initially face in understanding the sport. One parent reflected, “I actually didn’t even know that climbing was a sport that people competed in.” Another parent shared this perspective from when they first joined the sport, saying, “…the first year was pretty much a crap shoot... I learned a lot all the way through... so the next time it came around I wasn’t so ill prepared.”

To summarize, this study examined three research questions:

1. How is parent involvement in ICC expressed by parents?
2. What factors facilitate parent involvement in ICC?
3. What factors constrain parent involvement in ICC?

Findings addressing these questions suggested parent involvement in ICC was characterized by the supports parents provided to their athletes (e.g., financial support, transportation), influenced by experiences that catalyzed parent and child involvement in the sport (e.g., climbing-themed birthday parties and exposure to mobile climbing walls; strong sense-of-community at climbing events and enriched through parent volunteerism). Factors that limited parent involvement in ICC included structural financial and distance constraints as well as a lack of parental awareness and understanding of the sport.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand both parent involvement in ICC and the factors that facilitate or constrain parent involvement in an alternative sport setting.
Parent involvement broadly reflected not only how parents engaged with their children within the context of ICC (i.e., reflecting traditional views of parent involvement in sport as variable and evolving; Dorsch et al., 2015; Holt et al., 2008) but also how parents engaged within ICC culture (i.e., volunteerism that increased over time) based on parents’ emerging understanding of the sport as well as the time and resources parents could commit. Thus, engaging parents within ICC may require involving parents at multiple levels, providing a ladder of participation that varies in type and scope, and helping parents negotiate those opportunities as they seek to become more involved in a sport that does not have the years of formalization and structure characteristic of mainstream sports.

The provision of parental supports for their child’s ICC participation was an important dimension of parent involvement in this study. The findings describing how parents’ financial investment enabled their children’s participation supports a large body of research on the role of parents in youth sport as providers (Dunn et al., 2016; Harwood & Knight, 2015; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Further, parents’ description of the strong sense of community within the sport of ICC was reflected in social supports provided by parents and coaches and is a notable dimension of ICC representative of Wolfenden and Holt’s (2005) concept of emotional support parents provide to other athletes. The impact of community within ICC for meeting parents’ social needs is also reflective of Harwood and Knight’s (2015) discussion of the importance of parents having “a social network where [parents] can feel part of a sporting community” (p. 30). Clearly, community is an asset within the sport of ICC that may be better leveraged to increase parental involvement. Further research is needed to explore how the youth and parent social communities in ICC may differ from those in mainstream sports.

The finding that ICC is a sport often pursued by youth and parents dissatisfied with mainstream team sports is compelling and may help explain why the sport has experienced significant growth (International Federation of Sport Climbing, 2017; Gagnon et al., 2016) while the “churn rate” (i.e., percentage of youth who stopped playing a sport) has been increasing for mainstream sports (The Aspen Institute, 2018). Future research exploring the matriculation process of these dissatisfied youth from other sports into ICC would be helpful for owners of climbing gyms and climbing coaches trying to engage such families as well as inform education and support programs for new parents and new parent volunteers interested in engaging with ICC (Knight et al., 2017). A better understanding of this process may have significant economic benefits for local communities because ICC tends to attract families with more discretionary income compared to other sports. As Gagnon, Stone, Garst, Brookover, and Mowery (2017) noted in their investigation of the economic value of ICC, “…lifestyle sport participants likely contribute more per capita to local communities than do traditional sport participants” (p. 37). ICC may offer communities another financially viable youth sport opportunity alongside mainstream sports.

Although parents expressed concerns about structural constraints or challenges (i.e., cost and distance; Thrower et al., 2016; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008) impacting their ICC involvement, parents appeared to negotiate many of those constraints (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001), presumably by making choices about how to use family discretionary income (i.e., choosing to spend money on a child’s climbing competition instead of
another family experience such as a vacation). However, because this article represents
the responses of parents who were highly involved and who successfully negotiated con-
straints to participation, this study does not represent the perspective of parents who
were unable to participate because of contextual factors or their own lack of resources.
Future research should explore how families negotiate constraints to ICC participation,
particularly financial constraints. Although the climbing community has traditionally
comprised families with more disposable income (Gagnon et al., 2017), the growth of
the sport may depend on engaging families across a wider socio-economic range.
Helping parents navigate financial and travel constraints may increase parent and youth
involvement in the sport, particularly when trying to engage socio-economically diverse
families. In sum, alternative sports such as ICC may provide a mechanism for engaging
more diverse youth and families into sport.

In this study, emergent overparenting behaviors within the context of ICC were noted
by participants who described other parents as “too connected” and “hovering,” which
supports evidence of excessive and directive parent behaviors identified within the parent-
ing in sport literature (Bois et al., 2009; Holt et al., 2008). Further exploration of these
overparenting-like behaviors within ICC may identify factors that influence overparenting
and offer solutions for how owners of climbing gyms and climbing coaches can manage
overparenting behaviors. It may be the combination of the high pressure, relatively high
risk, and competitive context of ICC makes overparenting behaviors more likely to be
expressed. Future research on overparenting within ICC could compare such behaviors
across out-of-school settings (e.g., parents whose children are involved in summertime
youth sport programs compared with those whose children are involved in after-school
sports). However, other factors may influence these behaviors, and it may be overparent-
ing is no more likely to occur in a ICC than it is in other out-of-school time youth set-
tings. As Knight et al. (2017) stressed, “we need to move beyond placing the ‘blame’ on
individual parents, if they are not engaged in appropriate ways, to considering the exten-
sive environmental and cultural aspects that are likely to be influencing involvement”
(p. 95). Excessive and directive parenting within the context of ICC sport may be more
reflective of what Stefansen, Smette, and Strandbu (2018) have labeled “deep involvement
(i.e., ‘… attending most games, engaging in one-to-one ‘coaching’, post-game debriefing
and talk of individual strategies for further development and opportunities, and essentially
to use … sports as the primary context for being and bonding with the child”; p. 7) rather
than what has been labeled overparenting (Gagnon & Garst, 2019).

Although study participants were well represented according to identified gender (i.e.,
55.6% female and 40.7% male), no gendered comments about parent involvement were
expressed. Gendered effects have been a notable element of some of the parent involve-
ment studies in the youth sport literature, often reflecting stereotypical views of parent
gender roles (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005), even though such effects are not always sup-
ported in the broader parent literature (Endendijk, Groeneveld, Bakermans-Kranenburg,
& Mesman, 2016; Gagnon & Garst, 2019). The lack of gendered effects within ICC may
be more reflective of Coakley’s (2006) discussion of the diverse roles of fathers within
sports settings.

Some study limitations are acknowledged. One, the use of parent focus groups relied
on self-reports, which provided data on what parents perceived but allowed no

assessment of actual parent behaviors (Baker & Soden, 2012). Parents may not have been entirely forthcoming or accurate in their descriptions of their involvement (Hollander, 2004), and they may have presented only the most idealistic expression of their selves during the focus groups (Elliot & Drummond, 2013). Two, as human instruments, the investigators who analyzed the data may have been influenced by personal bias during the analysis process; however, the use of reflexivity across multiple coders and synthesized member checking were incorporated to mitigate this limitation (Maxwell, 2013). Three, the time that passed between the end of the study and the member check could have affected parent recall during the member checking process because participants’ perspectives may have changed over time based on changes in their lives (Birt et al., 2016). However, the high response rate to the synthesized member check and the quality of feedback affirming the study findings and interpretations potentially minimized this limitation.

Conclusion

Prior to this investigation, parent involvement in ICC had not been explored within the parenting in sport literature. As an alternative youth sport experiencing significant growth, such an examination is critical for ICC practitioners interested in enhancing their parent engagement and education strategies and for researchers interested in understanding parent involvement within an alternative sport setting. Practitioners (i.e., climbing governing bodies, gyms, and coaches) could begin educating parents about volunteer roles and processes that may increase parent volunteerism, improve the parent volunteer experience, and facilitate parent knowledge of the sport. As noted by Thrower et al. (2016), such education efforts are critical for parent engagement as their involvement patterns change because “…parents’ needs change alongside their roles, experiences, and demands as their child progresses through [sport]” (p. 121). Structuring parent involvement opportunities (e.g., through targeted volunteer opportunities) to accommodate escalating forms of parent involvement may increase the number of parents supporting ICC at the local and regional levels. In addition, promoting local climbing opportunities to parents and youth through collaboration with community-based organizations may reduce barriers associated with a lack of awareness or distance while broadening engagement to reach a more diverse population of climbers and their families.

This study contributed to the parenting in sport literature in several ways. First, this study provided evidence that parent involvement in ICC reflects previously conceptualized parent involvement models viewing parent involvement as complex and evolving (Knight et al., 2017). Second, the study provided a glimpse into ICC as a sport strongly built on sense of community and reflecting one of Harwood and Knight’s (2015) postulates of parenting, that is, maintaining “healthy relationships with significant others” (p. 29). Third, this study produced findings indicating overparenting as a dimension of parent involvement, which adds to the growing body of literature suggesting overparenting exists within the context of sport (Bois et al., 2009; Holt et al., 2008; Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009) as well as out-of-school time broadly (Gagnon & Garst, 2019; Hong et al., 2015). Fourth, this study’s lack of a gendered effect related to parent involvement suggests parents may not perceive such stereotypical roles
based on gender within ICC, at least in the identified sample of parents, creating a rich opportunity for further exploration of this alternative sport context for facilitating the expression of diverse forms of parent involvement. Fifth, the finding that ICC is a sport often pursued by youth dissatisfied with traditional team sports suggests how ICC may provide an alternative path for sport involvement, which provides insight into why the sport has experienced significant growth (Gagnon et al., 2016). Alternative sports such as ICC have a quality, which Gilchrist and Wheaton (2011) describe as a “common ethos… distinct from most traditional sport” (p. 112), which may provide a gateway into the development of parent involvement policies and programs that allow for engaging families at a broader level. Future research is warranted to further illuminate these exploratory findings.

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