



The Golden Lie: A Retrospective Look at Parents Experiences in Youth Hockey and their Perceived Pressures

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Abstract

Background: This descriptive qualitative inquiry examines the pervasive social pressures that push parents toward advocating for Early Sport Specialization (ESS) in their children, focusing specifically on youth hockey. The push for intense early training was partly fueled by the popularized, though often misapplied, "10,000-hour rule," which created a false urgency that specialization must begin at a young age to achieve expertise (Mercier, 2018). The current high-pressure environment in North American youth sport stems from several cultural and structural shifts. Concurrently, the successes of the centralized Soviet sport structure in the mid-20th century, while actually advocating for multi-sport sampling before specialized training in most sports, were often misinterpreted as validation for ESS (e.g. Dufraisie, 2020). Adding to this environment is the structural change in North American communities: the defunding of recreation programs has contributed to the privatization of youth sport, significantly increasing costs and shifting control from community-based initiatives to elite, year-round club models (Mercier, 2018; SPKN, 2024).

Methodology: This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to unpack the experiences of six parents who had engaged in ESS during their children's hockey careers. Data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews and then later analyzed for latent themes.

Results & Conclusions: Conversations with these parents revealed significant motivations for early specialization. Findings denote that parents were largely unaware of the documented harmful effects of ESS, which include increased risk of overuse injuries and psychological burnout. Their actions were primarily motivated by a perceived necessity to specialize early so their kids did not "fall behind." Furthermore, parents identified social peer pressure and organizational politics within the youth sport landscape as key drivers compelling them to enroll their children in intensive, single-sport regimens. This research highlights the critical need for educational interventions to inform parents about the developmental consequences of ESS and mitigate the powerful, often uninformed, social pressures within youth hockey and sport.

Keywords: Early Sport Specialization; Social Peer Pressure; Organizational Politics



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