Youth Hockey Violence: An Analysis of Contributing Factors

Violence in ice hockey has been argued about and debated for years. One of the main supporting arguments for getting rid of unnecessary violence in hockey is because of the example it sets for children. People are concerned that kids will see the violence demonstrated in hockey and learn from it, which will affect their behaviors. This concern is not only the driving force behind most arguments to get rid of violence in hockey, but it is also continuously giving hockey a bad reputation. There are other significant contributing factors to violence in youth hockey that need to be considered. Additionally, there are changes that can be made to mitigate violence in youth hockey which are unrelated to how kids learn violence from the pros.

Violence in hockey dates back to when the game was created. While body checking has always been a part of the game, fighting was formally introduced by the National Hockey League (NHL) and according to their website, it was enacted in 1922 under rule 56 in the rule book. The sport was founded with these violent actions as a part of the game, and recently, questions have been raised as to the necessity of these actions. Because of this public outcry, many leagues have already banned fighting, and the NHL is currently one of the last hockey leagues that does not issue a match penalty for fighting. Because fighting has been allowed hockey, and brought to the mainstream through the popularity of the NHL, the role of the enforcer was born. These players are on the team because of their ability to fight well and hit hard. They are not necessarily skilled in hockey and are only on the ice for intimidation and
retaliation purposes. This leads to the arguments that these players are simply being paid to be violent (Haisken-DeNew and Vorell 11). This popularization of violence in hockey, and the NHL specifically, is what is causing so much concern about how youth players are learning to play the sport.

Some of this concern is valid, as it is proven that youth hockey players do learn from the professional players. In their article, *Learning from the Pros: Violence in Youth Hockey*, Jeffrey Nash and Eric Lerner discuss at length that youth players learn violence from the pros. They concluded that the youth hockey players learn from professional hockey players the same way that they learn from any adult. They say that the children “simplify and accentuate themes of available adult models in terms of their own needs and social relationships” (Nash and Lerner 242). Basically, the players are taking the themes of violence that they see in professional hockey, and applying it to their own game in a more exaggerated way. Nash and Lerner also found that while they were learning violence from the pros, the kids also learned “situational violence”, in that the children new when, where, and what type of aggression was okay (242). While the children are learning violent behaviors from pro players, learning situational violence shows that they are aware of how to be safe while playing an inherently aggressive and violent game. Also, since they are learning from the pros, it is fair to use it as a concern when talking about violence in hockey. However, it is not fair to the extent that people currently make this claim because there are other factors playing into youth hockey violence that can, and should be addressed first.

There are two other significant contributing factors to violence in youth hockey. The first is parental violence and pressure. Parents are crucial to the development of their children and their attitudes can make a huge impact on how the child plays sports. The second is how the team
and league are organized and ran. A league or teams focus on competitiveness, or lack thereof, can significantly change a child’s outlook on the game and the way the child plays the game.

Parents of youth athletes have proven to be one of the main factors affecting the behaviors of the athletes. When people are pointing to the pros and claiming they need to be better role models for youth players, those people forget the fact that the parents need to be doing the same. Looking at Nash and Lerner’s conclusion about how youth athletes learn from pro athletes, they found that they were learning from the pros the same way that they learn from any adult. Similarly, this means that the athletes are learning from their parents the same way they learn from the pros. However, people still focus on the pros and not parents, even though parents are a more direct influence on the child. In a study done on parental rage in youth sports, Dianna Fiore concludes that, “parents and other adults have committed senseless violent acts with little or no consequence, inadvertently transmitting an example to children that violence wins” (128). Throughout the article, she describes multiple incidents of parental violence in which the consequences are not substantial enough to demonstrate to kids that violence is not acceptable. Even if they are shown that violence is not acceptable, the fact that they are seeing it, and from people as influential as their parents, means they are still learning from it as Nash and Lerner suggest.

Along with learning violence from their parents, youth athletes also must deal with the pressure that parents put on their children in youth sports. Fiore mentions in her article a study done on youth athletes that stated of twenty million youth athletes, fourteen million quit by age thirteen and the most common reason was that adults, and specifically parents, made sports a “joyless, negative experience” (116). This pressure brought on by parents, and other adult figures such as coaches, not only influences why youth athletes quit, but can also increase these athletes’
negative behaviors. In a study done on the anxiety between a youth athlete and their parent, it was found that in relationships where the parent wanted their child to outperform others, the children had increased levels of worry (Kate et al. 180). These increased levels of worry can lead to frustrations and aggressive behavior when the athlete does not perform up to their parents’ standards.

The way the league and team is run also adds to aggressive and violent behaviors in youth hockey. In a study on a girl’s hockey league that will be discussed more in depth later, they found that a lack of seriousness in a league had significant benefits to how the girls played the game (Bean et al. 66). The researchers discussed that this lack of seriousness affected the parents as well, helping them relax and keeping them from focusing on winning the game, which translates to relaxing the players and keeping the aggressive behavior out of the games (Bean et al. 67). When a league takes itself less seriously, it benefits everyone involved and makes an enormous impact on how the youth athletes play.

Youth hockey leagues also contribute to the players’ aggressive behaviors by valuing individual success over team success. Obviously, leagues do value team success as seen with the rewarding of champions; however, they indirectly encourage individual success by keeping track of statistics and rewarding star players. Teams do the same thing when they give better players more playing time. This means that a player is not only competing against another team, but now they are competing against their teammates. This only adds to the pressure on the children adding to their frustrations. In the girls’ league that was studied, the researchers found that because of a focus on the team instead of the individual, the players were less egocentric and more focused on enjoying the social aspect of playing (Bean et al. 67). This is the best-case scenario, in contrast to how the players would be worrying about losing ice time because they are
not as good as their other teammates, which would lead to more frustration and negative behavior. Valuing individual success over team success also makes it hard for the players to have healthy friendships on the team because they are always competing against each other.

The way the team is managed and coached can lead to violent behavior in youth hockey as well. Obviously, the first factor to note is that the players are also learning violence from their coaches in accordance Nash and Lerner’s conclusions. The coaches also have a more direct influence on the kids because they are the ones on the bench with the children during a game or practice. This should be a greater concern than children imitating professionals because when a coach gets aggressive, the players can go out on the ice instantly to mimic his actions and behaviors. While on the other hand, if a child watches a game on television, they must wait before they get back onto the ice to copy what they saw. Also, how a team values winning has a significant effect on the children’s behaviors as well. Similar to how parents put pressure on their kids to win, if a team values winning over other important skills learned from hockey, the players will feel pressured to perform well. With this pressure, if they do not meet expectations, the players will get aggravated and begin to act negatively and violently.

The effects on the youth athletes from parents, the league, and teams are all rooted in over-competitiveness. Society’s emphasis on competition and winning is the main reason that these are issues in youth sports. Fiore discusses how competitiveness is a cause of violence in youth sports in her article about parental rage. She talks about how society has perpetuated Vince Lombardi’s mentality of winning being “the only thing” (Fiore 114). Fiore adds that winning has become more important than participation and because of this the “physical and emotional nature of youth sporting events continues to change for the worse” (115). This deterioration of the physical and emotional nature of these events that she mentions is referencing the increasing
violence we see within youth sports, and specifically youth hockey. The competitive mindset is causing this and it is having a serious enough impact on the kids to the point that it needs to be addressed. In a study done on sportsmanship in youth sports, it was concluded that players who played for extrinsic values instead of intrinsic values had lower levels of prosocial attitudes (Ryska 288). Basically, if a player was playing with the goal of winning, or receiving an award such as a scholarship, they had lower levels of prosocial values than those who played to improve their skills or self-esteem (Ryska 288). This means that those who played to be competitive instead of focusing on themselves and their enjoyment were proven to have more negative behaviors. If this competitiveness is proven to be bad for youth athletes, why does everyone who organizes their sports focus so much on it? For example, in the Colorado Competitive Youth Hockey League’s statement of purpose that was found on their website, “competitive spirit” was listed before improving skills and developing leadership. Considering how obsessed people are with children’s competition, why is it surprising to people that the kids are acting aggressively? It is ridiculous to blame professional hockey players for something that can be fixed by the people blaming them.

One example of a youth hockey league that was successful in minimizing violence was the Ottawa Girls’ Hockey Association. A group of researchers studied the social interactions in this league and how it differed from a boys’ league, which provided some insight on how to successfully minimize violence in any league. (Bean et al. 63). These researchers found that there were four main factors that made the league healthy and fun for the young players: rule differences, seriousness, parental support, and collective success (Bean et al. 66). In regards to the rule differences, the researchers discuss how the lack of body checking in the league contributes to the positive atmosphere the girls feel in this league. While this is supporting
changing the rules of hockey to get rid of violence, the focus here should be on the fact that the girls are choosing not to replicate what they see in the pros. What is happening here is that the other changes the league made had an impact on how aggressively the girls played. In boys’ leagues who do not make changes to parental support and seriousness, violent behavior is still seen in leagues with body checking illegal. So, the other aspects the league addressed were the real reason for this lack of violent behavior, and not only the rule change. The researchers found that these other factors had enormous impacts on how the players viewed the sport. Parental support was a big contributor in this example specifically because, as the researchers discuss, the parents of the girls were aware of their impact and the concern of violence and avidly tried to create an atmosphere to prevent violence and negative behaviors (Bean et al. 66). The seriousness of the league also helped this because, as discussed previously, the parents were more relaxed about the games and less focused on winning. Also discussed earlier, collective success over individual success helped encourage positivity in the league. This league had specific rules set in place to help address this. The girls all had equal amounts of playing time, and constantly rotated positions and who they played with (Bean et al. 67). The researchers found that this is what contributed to why almost all the girls’ favorite part of playing was the friendships and social relationships (Bean et al. 67). This is also a testament to how well the team was managed and coached. The fact that the coaches did this means they were also aware of how their actions played into the behavior of the children. All the changes to this league demonstrate what can be done to help keep violence and aggressive behavior out of youth hockey games.

Another example of a hockey league that was able to minimize was a church hockey league that was studied by Robert Dunn and Christopher Stevenson. While this is not a youth hockey league, this study is still relevant because it demonstrates how having certain attitudes
about the sport can prevent violence and aggression in the game. The study was performed because Dunn and Stevenson wanted to see how the churches participating in the league could successfully apply Christian beliefs to a sport that is inherently violent (131). The researchers found that first way the league was able to apply Christian values to the sport were some rule changes, not only on the ice, but off the ice as well (Dunn and Stevenson 134). Body checking was illegal in this example also, however, the players still kept from other violent behaviors because of the other aspects in how the league was run. For example, this league also enforced the rule that players had to have equal playing time to combat feeling competitive towards other teammates. Along with this, the league did not keep team standings, this helped the players focus on the game at hand and not worry about how their performance and if they are going to lose playing time because of it. The girls’ league, however, did not do this as they recorded team statistics, but not individual statistics. Both of these methods proved to be effective, however the Christian league took a harder stance on it. Another rule the Christian league enacted that helped prevent negative behaviors was mandating a community prayer before every game. This brought the teams together before each game and helped create a positive atmosphere before each game. This atmosphere that the league was able to provide because of these rules helped significantly with curtailing negative behaviors. However, this league did not come without some issues and the researchers found that it was players with the wrong attitudes who were acting negatively. Dunn and Stevenson categorized all players into three groups: consistent types, struggling types, and nominal types (136-138). Basically, consistent types were those who were aware of their Christian values and able to apply it to the sport, struggling types had some troubles applying their values to the sport and would slip up but be aware of their mistakes, and nominal types would make more mistakes than the previous two and feel less remorse about it (Dunn and
Essentially, what they found was that those who had a more competitive, and less Christian, attitude about the sport were the ones who acted more aggressively and violently during the games, reinforcing the idea that competitiveness in sports is causing this behavior.

Blaming professional hockey players for the aggression and violence in youth hockey is no longer acceptable. There are other significant contributing factors to the aggression in youth hockey that are proven to have an impact on the way children play the game that are easier to address than changing the rules of the sport. While children do learn violence from the professionals, it is important to remember that at the same time, they are also learning violence from their parents and coaches as well. Positive parental support has been proven to be crucial in how it affects youth athletes and this encouragement goes a long way when it comes to how children play all sports, not just hockey. Parents need to be aware of this when they put their children into youth hockey as having the parents help create a positive atmosphere for the kids has been proven to help reduce negative behavior as seen in the example of the youth girls’ hockey league. League and team management was also shown to have a great impact on youth athletes’ behaviors. Having a league focus on fun and not success was also important in creating a positive atmosphere for the kids so they can enjoy the sport and focus on having fun with their friends. Along with this, team management can help by setting some ground rules for playing time and rotating positions and lines so players never feel like they are going to lose playing time for not being as good as the other players on their team. Again, this helps the children enjoy the game instead of worrying about their performance. Basically, if everyone were a little less competitive when it came to youth sports, and specifically youth hockey, an atmosphere can be created where kids can develop their skills and learn the game, while still having a good time.
with their friends. These steps should be taken first before people try to amend the rules of the sport as they have been proven to make a difference and are also fairly easy changes to make. As long as everyone takes a look at how they are affecting their children and makes the necessary changes, it is possible to almost completely rid youth hockey of unnecessary violence and makes it so there is no need to drastically change the rules of the game. This is also much easier to do than convincing the NHL to change the rules of the sport, so this should be the first course of action for those concerned about violence in youth hockey. These ideas are put together nicely by Daniel Rhind, Elaine Cook, and Kim D. Dorsch in their article, *Looking at Youth Hockey from a Human Rights Perspective*, by saying, “instead of repeatedly debating the idea of what hockey should look like and who gets to define that vision, maybe we need to ask why are we playing hockey at all – what kind of environment do our children deserve?” (263). Basically, we should not be arguing about changing the game, we should be arguing about changing the environment for our children and the steps discussed previously can help us achieve this desired environment and reduce violence and aggression in youth hockey.

- Well-developed thesis and argument based on evidence 4
- Strong explanation of the problem 4
- Skillful examination of the social context of the problem 4
- Effective selection of research materials 5
- Strength and clarity of writing and citation 4

21

This is a very strong paper, Nick. You made a persuasive argument and used excellent sources. You could have been a bit more careful to polish your writing and led the reader
through your argument more effectively, but overall a really impressive and persuasive work.

If you are interested in revising, I think this would be a good submission for the Livingstone Prize or *Maneto*. Let me know; I’d be happy to work with you.
Works Cited


