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# Children's Perceptions of Cohesion

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# Children's perceptions of cohesion

Luc J. Martin, Albert V. Carron, Mark A. Eys & Todd Loughhead

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*The general purpose of the two studies reported here was to examine perceptions of team cohesiveness in children aged 9 to 12 years. In Study 1, focus groups were used to examine individual perceptions of cohesion from the perspective of group integration – the group as a totality. In Study 2, open-ended questionnaires were used to examine individual perceptions of cohesion from the perspective of individual attractions to the group. The results showed that children as young as nine years understand the phenomenon known as cohesion. They can discuss the group as a totality, the characteristics of cohesive and non-cohesive teams, and identify the major factors attracting them to and maintaining their involvement in the group. Also, the ability to clearly distinguish between task and social cohesion is present. The results provide insight into the world of child sport and emphasise the importance of group cohesion, affiliation, and other social constructs in children's involvement and adherence to sport groups.*

**Keywords:** cohesion; children; sports; group integration; individual attraction.

**S**PORT, although seen by many as an enjoyable activity for children, is much more than that. As Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2006) pointed out, sport has the potential to accomplish four important objectives in a child's development: namely, to afford opportunities to learn life skills (e.g. discipline, leadership, and self-control), to increase psychosocial development (e.g. social skills involving peer interactions and co-operation), to acquire motor skills, and to obtain physical activity – an outcome that has taken on increasing importance in this millennium. A physically active lifestyle is associated with physiological benefits such as increased cardiovascular health, increased muscular strength, and reduced probability of Type 2 diabetes (Curtis, McTeer & White, 1999; Lox, Martin-Ginis, & Petruzzello, 2006). Physical activity is also associated with psychosocial benefits such as reductions in depression and anxiety (Camacho et al., 1990; Lox et al., 2006).

However, national surveys undertaken around the world indicate that children are becoming progressively less active thereby

contributing to concerns about weight and obesity. For example, in Canada, 26 per cent of children and adolescents (aged 2 to 17 years) met the criteria for being either obese or overweight (Statistics Canada, 2006). Further, the prevalence of overweight youth ages 17 and under has doubled in the last 25 years while obesity has tripled (Statistics Canada, 2006). One reason that may be contributing to these troubling statistics is the fact that 33 per cent of individuals between the ages of 10 and 17 withdraw from sport every year (Weinberg & Gould, 2003).

One general approach undertaken in an attempt to understand why adherence in sport and physical activity is problematic has been to examine children's motives for joining, maintaining, and ceasing their involvement. Social factors play an important role in these motives. For example, Ewing and Seefeldt (1996) had 8000 youth (49 per cent male, 51 per cent female) rate possible reasons for participation in sport on a Likert scale. The mean responses were then rank ordered with the top reasons being to have fun, to play as part of a team,

to make new friends, and to get exercise. These results were consistent with Weiss and Petchlickoff's (1989) findings that the four major reasons for participation in youth sport were fun, affiliation, competence, and fitness.

As indicated above, to be with friends, to affiliate with others, and to be a part of a group or team is a recurring theme when children are queried about their involvement in sport and physical activity. For example, Pate and O'Neill (2008) carried out a review of after-school interventions aimed at increasing physical activity among youth. The authors stressed that independent of the success of the intervention, an important outcome from the children's perspective was that the physical activity programs allowed them to have fun and be with their friends.

As another example, Ullrich-French and Smith (2009) found youth soccer players' perceptions of peer relationships predicted continued involvement with the same team. Elite level soccer players ( $N=148$ ) aged 10 to 14 filled out questionnaires assessing perceived friendship quality and perceived peer acceptance. Soccer continuation with the same team was assessed one year following the completion of the questionnaires. Results showed that positive perceptions of friendship quality and peer relationships reliably predicted continuation on the same soccer team.

A second general approach used to understand low adherence rates in sport and physical activity has been to examine individuals' perceptions of their connection (e.g. closeness, unity, cohesiveness) to their group or team. To date, the focus for this general approach has been mostly older sport participants. In one study with older youth (approximately 15- to 18-years-old), Robinson and Carron (1982) examined perceptions of cohesion (using the Sport Cohesiveness Questionnaire) in high school North American football players who were categorised as starters (regular competitors), survivors (practiced but played less than 10

per cent of the time), or dropouts (quit the team of their own volition). Robinson and Carron reported that starters possessed a stronger sense of belonging and expressed greater enjoyment than survivors, who in turn were superior to the dropouts for both sense of belonging and enjoyment. Conversely, dropouts perceived the team as more close-knit than survivors who in turn held stronger perceptions than starters. The authors noted, 'in short, the dropouts perceived the team to be a close unit, but considered themselves to be relatively excluded' (Robinson & Carron, 1982, p.374).

Cohesion by its very nature suggests 'sticking together', which is seen in its definition; 'a dynamic process which is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its goals and objectives' (Carron, Brawley & Widmeyer, 1998, p.213). Therefore, since cohesion aids in the development and maintenance of a group towards its goals, it is logical to suggest a relationship to member adherence. Considerable research with older populations (college age to mid-30s) has tested the generalisability of this relationship. That body of research has consistently shown a positive association between cohesion and a variety of indicants of adherence such as punctuality and attendance (e.g. Loughead, Colman & Carron, 2001), resistance to the effects of disruptive events (e.g. Brawley, Carron & Widmeyer, 1988, Study 1), and work output (e.g. Prapavessis & Carron, 1997).

Affiliation – being with friends, being on a team or group, having a sense of unity or togetherness with others – is important to young people (Smith, 2007; Weiss & Petchlickoff, 1989). A fundamental manifestation of the degree to which these social constructs are present is perceptions of cohesiveness. Carron and his colleagues (Carron et al., 1988; Carron, Widmeyer & Brawley, 1985) proposed a conceptual model to account for the nature of cohesion in sport teams. This conceptual model evolved from three assumptions. The first, based on

research on social cognitions (cf. Kenny & Lavoie, 1985; Levine & Moreland, 1991; Schlenker, 1975; Schlenker & Miller, 1977; Zander, 1971), is that cohesion (a group property) can be assessed through the perceptions of individuals. The second is that the social cognitions that individuals form about their groups are related to the *group as a totality* (referred to as group integration) and to the manner in which the *group satisfies personal needs and objectives* (referred to as individual attractions to the group). The final assumption is that the two fundamental focuses of an individual's perception of cohesion are the task and social relationships. The result was a four-factor model comprised of *individual attractions to the group task* (ATG-T), *individual attractions to the group social* (ATG-S), *group integration-task* (GI-T), and *group integration-social* (GIS).

Recent research with younger populations (ages 13 to 17), however, contributes to the suggestion that youth do not necessarily perceive cohesion in the same way as adults (Eys et al., 2009a; Eys et al., 2009b). Eys and colleagues found that although youth participants could easily understand and discuss aspects of cohesion, they did not perceive the four-factor structure advanced by Carron and his colleagues (Carron et al., 1998; Carron et al., 1985). Instead, a two-factor structure emerged based solely on task and social aspects. The fact that youth athletes did not perceive cohesion in the same fashion as adults is not surprising since researchers have long cautioned against attempting to generalise from adult operational definitions to younger populations (Duda, 1982, 1987).

Therefore, based on research that has highlighted: (a) the importance of peer groups for children; (b) children's strong motivations to affiliate; (c) the importance of cohesion in older populations; and (d) the possible dissimilarity between adults and children in perceptions of cohesion, two studies were undertaken. The general objective of both was to examine perceptions of

team cohesiveness in children aged 9 to 12 years.

### Study 1

In Study 1, the focus was on examining individual perceptions of cohesion from the perspective of group integration—the group as a totality. A qualitative approach involving focus groups was used to determine young children's understanding of the factors present in cohesive and absent in non-cohesive teams as well as their understanding of how cohesion develops. A qualitative approach was used on the premise that through proper guidance from the focus group leader, participants would describe, in rich detail, the complex experiences and the reasoning behind their actions, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes which other methods might not capture (Carey & Smith, 1994).

### Method

**Participants:** The participants were 35 (males=14, females=21) children ( $M_{\text{age}} 10.7 \pm .9$ ; range=9 to 12 years) from four elementary schools in the city of London, Ontario and its surrounding area. A heterogeneous sample was used to increase the generalisability of the results (i.e. to insure that the results were not gender-, or sport-, or competition level-specific). To this end, the sample included male and female current and former sport participants. Both the current and former sport participants had engaged in a variety of sports including hockey, soccer, North American football, basketball, tennis, swimming, horseshoes, and baseball. Finally, the competitive level of the participants varied from community recreational to area representative.

**Procedure:** Initially, principals and teachers from four elementary schools were approached to determine if they would be interested in allowing their students to participate in the study after institutional ethical approval was obtained. The research proposal was submitted to the lead author's

university ethics board and the area's school board for approval. When approval was obtained from these adjudicating panels, a schedule for testing was set up with the teachers who had indicated a willingness to participate. The first author provided a verbal description of the study to children in the classroom. Those expressing interest in participating were given parental consent forms and participant assent forms to take home. When both of these forms were returned to the school, the focus group phase was initiated.

Although participants were randomly assigned to one of seven focus groups, attempts were made to ensure children were placed with others of the same age category. This approach is recommended when working with younger children. In particular, there should only be a one- to two-year age difference between participants due to factors such as ability, level of comprehension and abstraction (Kennedy, Kools & Krueger, 2001). Another consideration concerns the size of the focus groups. When working with younger children, Gibson (2007) recommended a group size of four to six participants, which allows for lively discussion and manageable activity. In the present study, focus groups were comprised of five participants. Each session lasted an average of 30 minutes and took place in a classroom. A trained researcher moderated each focus group using a semi-structured interview guide adapted from the one used by Eys et al. (2009a). The Flesch-Kincaid reading levels for the interview questions were grade 4 or lower. The interview guide contained four sections and was developed based on the recommendations of Krueger and Casey (2000) and Patton (1990). These included:

1. *Introductory questions:* The goal of these questions was to stimulate conversation between the moderator and participants and among participants (e.g. 'Can you give me an example of when you have been a member of a sports team?').

2. *Transition questions:* The purpose of these questions was to direct attention towards the

participants' teams (e.g. 'How many people were on these teams?', 'How did you know them?').

3. *Key questions:* The aim of these questions was to gather information on individuals' perceptions of the indicators of cohesive teams, the indicators of non-cohesive teams, as well as methods in which cohesion could be developed within teams (e.g. 'Thinking back to your team, why do you believe your team was cohesive? What goes on in a cohesive group? What goes on in a non-cohesive group? How could you increase the cohesion in your group?'). It was assumed that having respondents focus on the team (cohesive, non-cohesive) would direct attention to the group integration manifestations of cohesiveness from the Carron et al. (1985) model.

4. *Concluding questions:* The goal of these questions was to terminate the session while also allowing for any final thoughts on the topic (e.g. 'That is the end of our discussion, is there anything you would like to add?').

Each focus group was audio taped and researchers transcribed the responses. Carey and Smith (1994) pointed out 'to capture the richness of data which transcript cannot convey (tone, pace, inflection, nonverbal communication) and subsequent meaning (satire, humour, emotion, intensity), it is important to do immediate debriefing and recording of field notes' (p.126). Both inductive and deductive approaches were utilised in the categorisation of responses. These approaches have been used in qualitative research with youth and children (e.g. Eys et al., 2009a; Munroe-Chandler et al., 2007). More specifically, initially, the responses were categorised deductively using the Carron et al. (1985) and Eys et al. (2009b) conceptual models of cohesion for adults and youth; both of these models distinguished between task and social cohesion. Subsequent analyses involved inductive categorisations based on two main operations suggested by Côté et al. (1993). First, meaningful text segments were coded and/or tags created and, second, general categories were created and again

text segments were grouped together. In order to ensure trustworthiness and validity, two researchers worked as a coding team and achieved 100 per cent agreement for item categorisation (Sparkes, 1998).

## Results

Figures 1, 2, and 3 provide an overview of the responses to each of the three key questions (i.e. indicators of cohesive teams, indicators of non-cohesive teams, and methods by which cohesion can be developed). All responses pertaining to the indicators of cohesive and non-cohesive teams (see Figures 1 and 2) fell within three categories: *task cohesion* (i.e. performance issues pertaining to unity at the personal or team level), *social cohesion* (i.e. social issues pertaining to unity at the personal or team level), and *not categorised* (i.e. responses that were not possible to categorise because the context was indeterminate). In order for a response to be categorised, the context needed to be clear. For example, in the statement, 'our team is cohesive because we all know each other's role on *the ice*,' there is no doubt that the frame of referenced used is the task. Similarly, in the statement, 'our team is cohesive because we don't leave anyone out at *team get-togethers*,' there is no doubt that the frame of reference is a social situation. Conversely, however, in the statement 'our team is cohesive because we don't fight,' it is unclear whether the frame of reference was a task or social situation; thus, the response was not categorised. As Figure 3 shows, suggestions for methods that could be used to develop cohesion on a team fell into two categories: task-related and social-related.

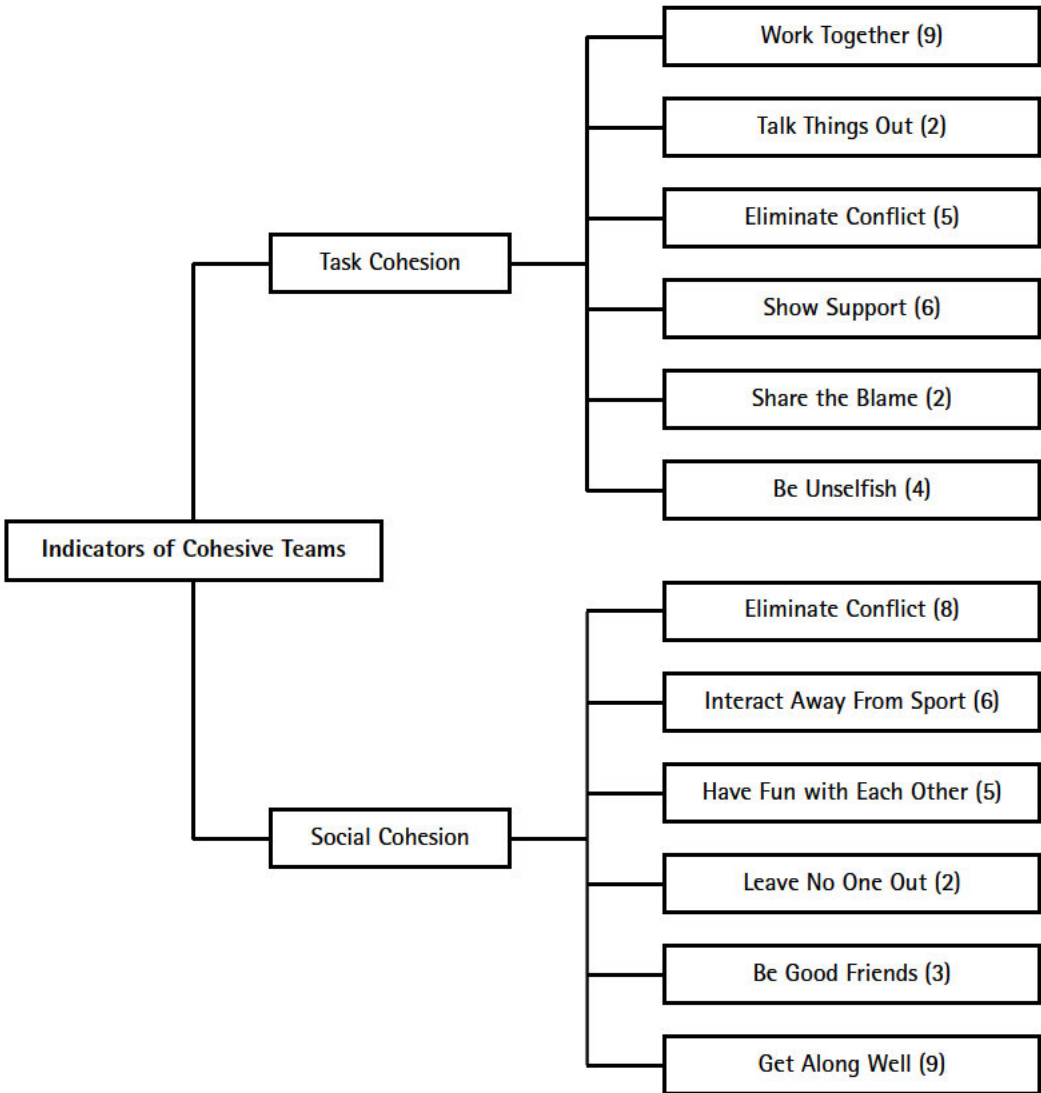
**Indicators of cohesive teams.** Overall, 65 meaning units were obtained. In terms of the meaning units associated with task cohesion, six themes emerged. These were 'work together', 'talk things out', 'eliminate conflict', 'show support', 'share the blame', and 'be unselfish'. Six themes also emerged for social cohesion. These were 'eliminate

conflict', 'interact away from sport', 'have fun with each other', 'leave no one out', 'be good friends', and 'get along well'. Figure 1 contains a summary of the frequency with which each theme was stated. As indicated above, responses were not categorised when it was not possible to clearly discern whether the context was practice/competition or social situations. Some examples of uncategorised statements are 'say nice things to each other', 'we are close because of the sport', and 'everyone thought it was cool to learn each other's names'.

**Indicators of non-cohesive teams.** In response to the query about the indicators of non-cohesive teams, 57 meaning units emerged. For task cohesion, the four themes were; 'do not work together', 'presence of conflict', 'do not share the blame', and 'selfishness is present'. As for social cohesion, the three themes were 'presence of conflict', 'leave people out', and 'do not get along well'. The frequency with which each theme was stated is indicated in Figure 2. The responses that could not be categorised were 'we argue', 'we fight', and 'people set bad examples'.

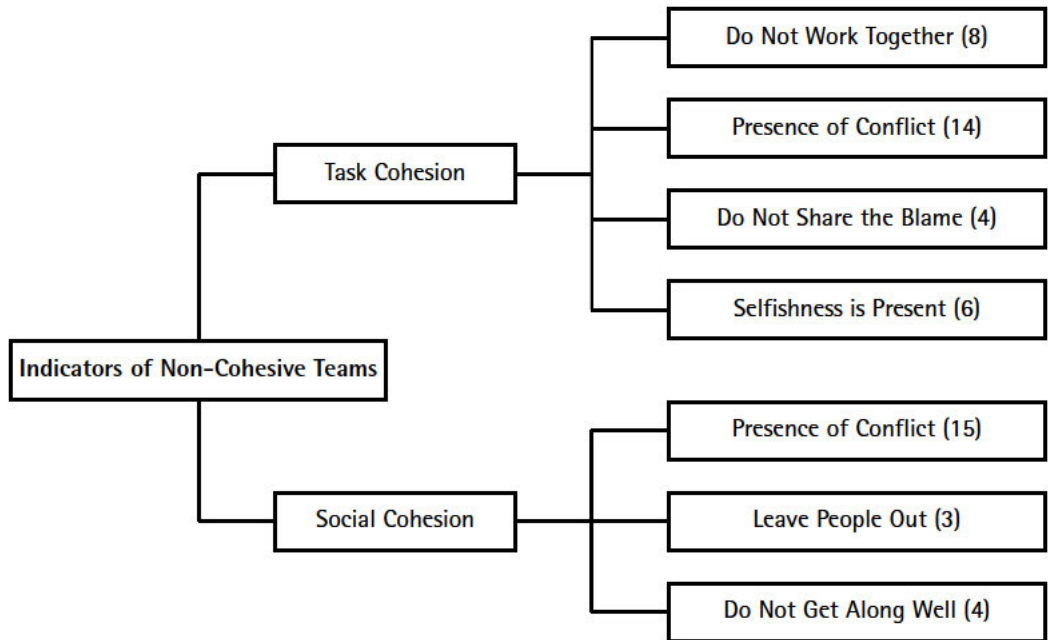
**Methods used for developing cohesion.** The seven themes resulting from questions concerning general procedures for developing task cohesion were 'communication', 'be positive', 'put the team first', 'work together', 'punish bad/reward good behaviour', 'be open to change', and 'be a good teammate.' The three themes emerging from questions pertaining to how to develop social cohesion were 'have team events', 'treat everyone equally', and 'make new friendships'. Perhaps due to the directness or nature of the questions, the researchers were able to categorise all 60 responses provided by participants. That is, for all of the responses, the individuals made clear whether they were discussing task or social cohesion. Again, for the frequencies of responses, refer to Figure 3.

Figure 1: Responses for Cohesive Teams (number of meaning units in parentheses)



Note: Four responses could not be categorised resulting in a total of 65.

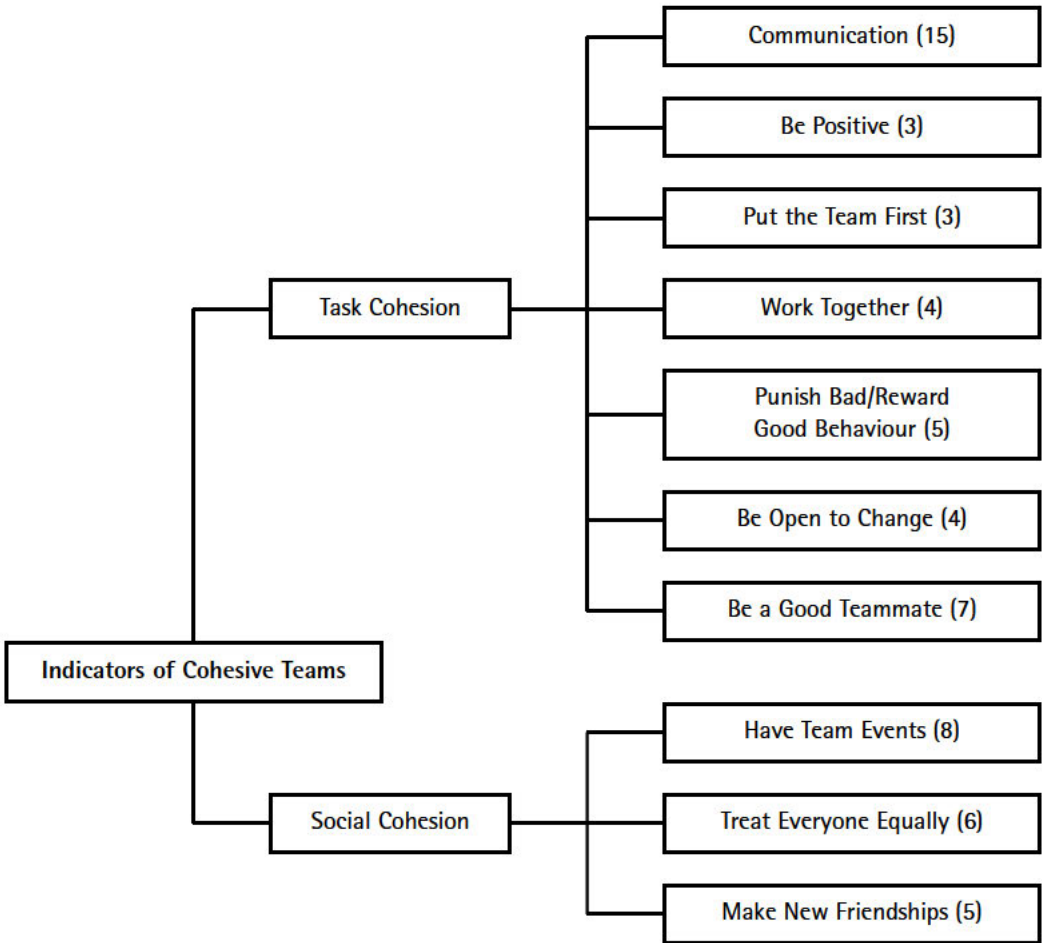
Figure 2: Responses for Non-Cohesive Teams (number of meaning units in parentheses)



Note: Three responses could not be categorised resulting in a total of 57.



Figure 3: Methods for Developing Cohesion (number of meaning units in parentheses)



## Study 2

It was noted above that the Carron et al.'s (1985) conceptual model for cohesion is founded on three assumptions: a group's cohesiveness is apparent to its individual members; individual members process information about cohesion from the perspective of the group as a totality and as a forum in which personal needs and motives are satisfied; and, that information is typically of a task or social nature. The results from Study 1 provided information consistent with some aspects of the Carron et al. conceptual model. That is, when young children (ages 9 to 12) considered cohesion from the perspective of the group as a totality (i.e. group integration), the manifestations were almost exclusively task or social in nature.

In order to gain insight into the generalisability of the findings, two modifications were made for Study 2. One was to alter the focus. That is, in Study 2, the focus was on examining young children's (ages 9 to 12) perceptions of cohesion from the perspective of individual attractions to the group – the personal needs and motives underlying group membership. The second was to alter the information-gathering protocol using an open-ended questionnaire. The open-ended questionnaires offered the children a better opportunity to provide more in-depth information about their attitudes and feelings concerning the factors that personally attracted them to sport teams.

## Method

**Participants.** The sample consisted of 132 children (males=63, females=69) between the ages of 9 to 12 years ( $M_{age}=11.3 \pm .99$ ) from four elementary schools in London, Ontario and the surrounding area. Similar to Study 1, a heterogeneous sample (with respect to gender, sport, and competitive level) was recruited.

**Procedure.** The protocol used to secure school board approval, ethical approval from the lead author's institution, the co-operation of elementary school principals and teachers, and to recruit participants and

obtain their and their parent's approval was identical to that used in Study 1. After the successive levels of consent were obtained, the open-ended questionnaires were distributed to the participants during their lunch break at school.

The questionnaires took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Participants were asked to answer three questions in order to fully explore individual attractions to the group: (1) Why individuals join sport groups, for example, 'Please indicate why you *joined* your current sport team'; (2) Why individuals stay with sport groups, for example, 'Please indicate why you are *staying as* a member of your current sport team', and (3) Why individuals withdraw from sport groups, for example, 'Why might you *stop participating* with your sport team'. These questions were adapted from the ones used by Eys et al. (2009b); the adaptation was undertaken in order to lower the average Flesch-Kincaid reading level to grade 4 or lower. Participants who had previously dropped out of their sports team, were asked to hypothetically answer the questions (i.e. why *would* you join a sports team or why *would* you have stayed a member of your sports team).

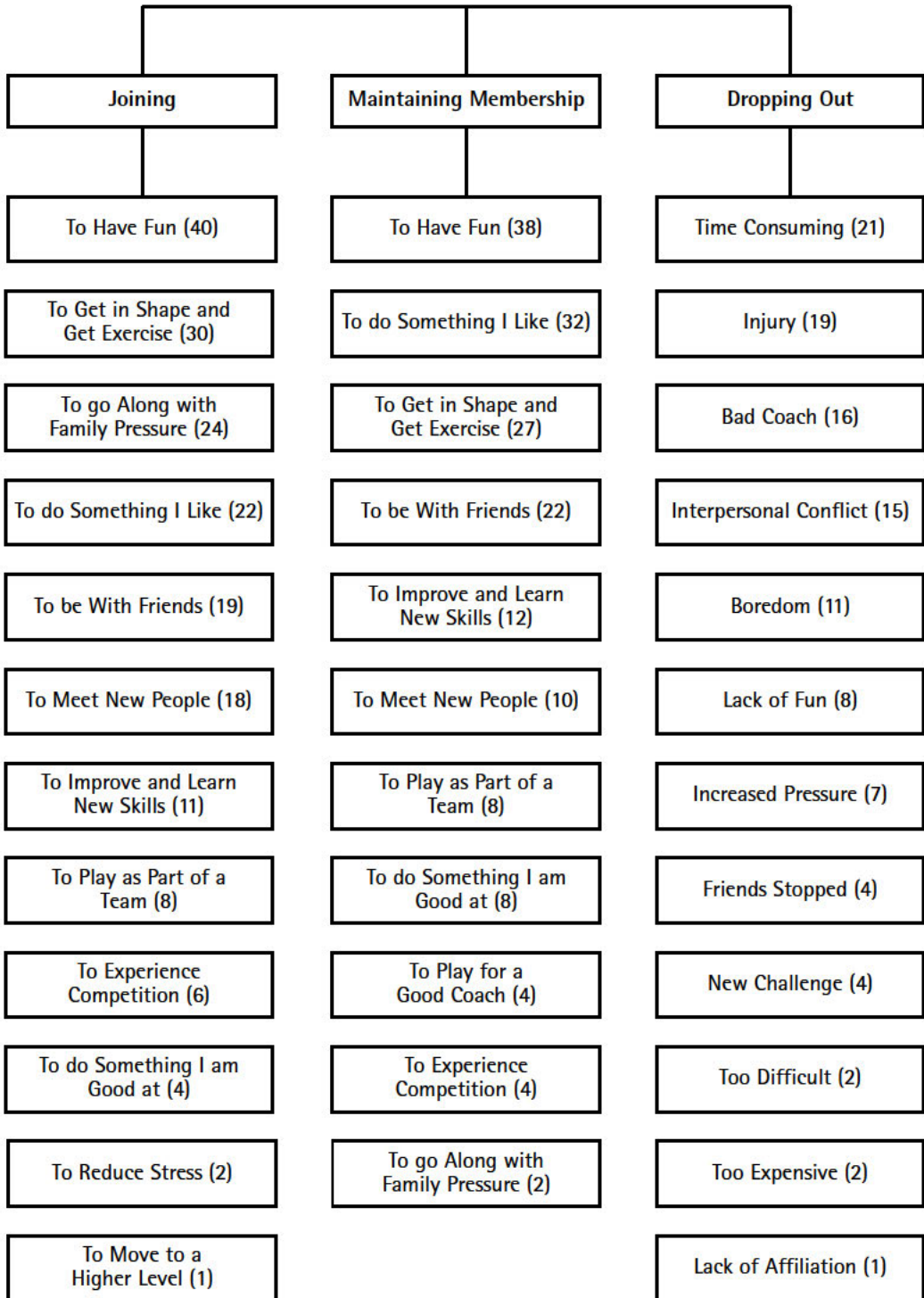
Study 2 utilised the identical inductive and deductive protocols as Study 1 for data analysis (Côté et al., 1993; Eys et al., 2009a; Munroe-Chandler et al., 2007; Sparkes, 1998). Similar to the process used for Study 1, 100 per cent agreement by the first two authors was required for the items to be included in the categories established.

## Results

Figure 4 provides an outline of the reasons (i.e. interpersonal attractions) given for joining, maintaining membership, and dropping out of a sports team, as well as the frequencies with which they appeared.

**Reasons for joining.** In total, 185 reasons for joining sports teams were cited by the participants (e.g. 'I wanted to have fun', 'I wanted to try something new', 'I wanted to stay fit and active', 'I wanted to be with my friends

Figure 4: Reasons for Joining, Maintaining Membership, and Dropping Out of Sport (number of meaning units in parentheses).



who were playing', etc.). These reasons were categorised into 12 larger themes: to have fun, to get in shape and get exercise, to go along with family pressure, to do something I like, to be with friends, to meet new people, to improve and learn new skills, to play as part of a team, to experience competition, to do something I am good at, to reduce stress, and to move to a higher level. Figure 4 provides an outline of these categories in order of prevalence.

**Reasons for maintaining membership.** Overall, 167 reasons for maintaining membership in sports teams were cited by the participants. Some examples from the list include 'because I'm having so much fun', 'because I am getting better', 'because it is exciting', 'because I want to stay healthy and live long', 'because my mom and dad made me', and 'because I like the coach'. A total of 11 general themes emerged: to have fun, to do something I like, to get in shape and get exercise, to be with friends, to improve and learn new skills, to meet new people, to play as part of a team, to do something I am good at, to play for a good coach, to experience competition, and to go along with family pressure. The themes are provided in Figure 4.

**Reasons for stopping.** There were 110 reasons cited for why individuals stopped or would stop participating on their sports teams. Some examples of the responses were; 'I didn't fit in with the team', 'I stopped having fun', 'it became too competitive', 'I didn't like the coach', and 'my team didn't have cohesion'. After the analysis, the reasons were placed into 12 themes by the researchers: time consuming, injury, bad coach, interpersonal conflict, boredom, lack of fun, increased pressure, friends stopped, new challenge, too difficult, too expensive, and lack of affiliation. These categories, as well as the prevalence with which they were cited, can be found in Figure 4.

## **Discussion**

The general purpose of the two studies reported here was to examine perceptions of team cohesiveness in children aged 9 to 12

years. In Study 1, focus groups were used to examine individual perceptions of cohesion from the perspective of group integration – the group as a totality. In Study 2, open-ended questionnaires were used to examine individual perceptions of cohesion from the perspective of individual attractions to the group. Four general findings merit discussion.

The first finding pertains to young children's understanding of the concept of cohesion. Developmentally, children begin to understand complex constructs and differentiate among them at different stages. Thus, for example, Roberts (1993) found that the ability to distinguish between ability and effort as contributors to performance outcomes is not present until the age of 12 years. As another example, Passer (1996) reported that by the age of 7, children develop a distinct interest in social comparison with their peers. Our results demonstrated that children as young as 9 years understand the phenomenon known as cohesion, and they can discuss the group as a totality, and describe the characteristics of cohesive and non-cohesive teams. Further, consistent with the results from previous research, individual factors attracting children to sport teams (and, therefore, contributing to cohesion) include being with friends, and being affiliated with others (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1996; Weiss & Petchlickoff, 1989).

A second related point is that young children possess the ability to distinguish between task and social cohesiveness. One of the assumptions established by Carron et al., (1985, 1988) in their conceptual model of cohesion was that both the individual- and the group-oriented perceptions have a task or a social orientation. Our results suggest that children of this age (9 to 12 years) can in fact differentiate between task and social cohesiveness (i.e. 'our team works well together during games' and 'our team gets along well at parties').

These results are in agreement with the findings of Eys et al. (2009a) who examined

the meaning attached to group cohesion in a *youth* population (ages 13 to 17). Their results also highlighted the ability of youth sport participants to distinguish between task and social cohesion. This is an important finding; it suggests that children are not only attracted to the social aspect of their teams, but also understand and enjoy the closeness of a task-oriented group. Sport practitioners and coaches may be able to use such information in the development of practice and game plans, with an overall goal of maintaining sport participation.

A third finding that warrants discussion pertains to the individual perceptions of cohesion based on individual attractions to the group; namely affiliation, being with friends, meeting new people, and being a member of a team. These personal sources of attraction to the group are social in nature, and are consistent with the theorising from Baumeister and Leary (1995), who provided comprehensive support for their proposition that the need to belong and the desire for interpersonal attachments is a fundamental human motivation. Research that focuses on children's reasons for participation in sport in general has also shown consistency with our findings for teams specifically (Weiss & Ferrer-Caja, 2002; Weiss, Kimmel & Smith, 2001; Weiss & Petchlickoff, 1989). Our results show support for the importance of cohesion in child sport, in that our findings from Study 2 (with a focus on individual attractions to the group) parallel those from other researchers who have examined children's reasons for participation. Again, this provides support for the suggestion that cohesion plays a major role in child sports team or group involvement.

The fourth point, one closely related to the third, evolves from the depth of information gained from the questions asked in Study 2. These questions enabled us to gain insight into the reasons why children join, why they continue to participate, and finally why they might leave their groups. Thus, for

example, insofar as discontinuation is concerned, interpersonal conflict was the first group-related construct listed (i.e. following 'too time consuming', 'injury', and 'bad coach').

The importance attached to conflict is consistent with previous research that has discussed interpersonal conflict as a source of stress and burnout for athletes (Smith, 2007) and fits well with the overall topic of Study 1. As indicated above, participants in Study 1 described characteristics of cohesive and non-cohesive teams. Many of the examples given for non-cohesive teams (e.g. the presence of conflict, not getting along very well, leaving people out) are closely related to interpersonal conflict. Thus, it would seem reasonable to assume that a more cohesive group would have decreased levels of interpersonal conflict. In fact, Sullivan and Feltz (2001) provided support for this assumption in their work with hockey players (ages 21 to 39). Specifically, they found that task and social cohesion were negatively related to disruptive styles of interpersonal conflict. The question that remains is whether this information is generalisable to a younger population.

Study 1 demonstrated that children as young as 9 years understand the concept of cohesion along with the advantages associated with its presence and the disadvantages associated with its absence. Also, Study 2 provided insight into individual attractions to the group. Overall, the two studies highlight the importance of the group for children. What remains a challenge for the future is the development of some method to assess the degree to which children experience a sense of 'groupness' (i.e. cohesion). As Lord Kelvin pointed out, 'if you cannot measure it, you cannot improve it' (Sir William Thomas, 2009, para. 1). Therefore, a necessary next step is to develop a cohesion inventory specifically tailored for this young population.

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