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Understanding the culture of adult sideline behaviour in youth rugby league from a Social Learning Theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

Research Question: Adults are key to children's sport participation and enjoyment, though their influence can also be negative. This novel study explored the influence of adult involvement on youth rugby league players' experiences through the lens of Social Learning Theory (SLT).

Research Methods: Data were captured from a rigorous multi-method data set across two clubs, including field notes of 14 games, parent interviews ($n = 14$) and focus groups with players in U7's to U16's competitions ($n = 4$). Data were analysed abductively using a novel theory of SLT from Akers.

Results and Findings: findings categorised into the theory's four themes (differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation).

Implications: The study highlights the role of adults (both parents and coaches) in creating and reinforcing a culture of sideline behaviour, be it positive or negative, within the interconnected relationships among the key youth sport constituents. Findings offer significant recommendations for future research to consider the broader context of sideline behaviours, and for governing bodies aiming to improve sideline behaviour to implement multilayered interventions supporting improvements in all adult sideline behaviour rather than a single group (e.g. just parents).

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Introduction

Within organised youth sport, parents and coaches play a significant role in supporting, encouraging, and developing young players (S. Elliott, 2021; Santos et al., 2025). Positive adult involvement has consistently been associated with enhanced competence, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation (Dorsch et al., 2021). However, these developmental outcomes are not guaranteed. Adult behaviours can also

undermine children's sporting experiences through excessive pressure, criticism, and various forms of psychological, physical, and sexual violence, negatively influencing enjoyment, motivation and continuation behaviour (Dorsch et al., 2021; Knight, 2019; Pankowiak et al., 2023; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008).

The competitive sideline represents one setting where these behaviours frequently emerge (S. Elliott & Drummond, 2017,

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S. K. 2017a, S. K. 2017b). Research examining verbal interactions during youth sport has consistently demonstrated that a substantial proportion (ranging 15–40%) of comments from sideline attendees – presumably parents and coaches – are instructional or negatively oriented (e.g. Bowker et al., 2009; Holt et al., 2009; Kidman et al., 1999; S. R. Walters et al., 2012). The frequency of both negative and instructional comments, as well as some well-intentioned comments, is potentially concerning because they possess the potential to negatively influence children’s sporting experiences and outcomes (S. K. Elliott & Drummond, 2017b). This cannot be understated given that negative experiences tend to exert much greater influence than positive experiences in developmental and social settings. These concerns extend beyond parents to coaches and match officials, highlighting sideline behaviours as an important feature of the broader youth sport environment (S. Walters et al., 2016).

Subsequent research has sought to move beyond describing the frequency of sideline behaviours to understanding their underlying meaning and consequences. Parents have been shown to rationalise or justify their verbal behaviours despite recognising that these behaviours do not always align with the developmental goals they hold for their children (Dorsch et al., 2015; S. Elliott & Drummond, 2017). Similarly, coach sideline behaviours have been examined through the lenses of interpersonal violence, misconduct and maltreatment, with evidence demonstrating negative psychological and developmental consequences for young athletes (Constandt et al., 2024; Kerr et al., 2019; Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Collectively, this work suggests that problematic sideline behaviours are neither isolated nor incidental but represent a potentially recurring feature of organised youth sport. Their persistence suggests they may become socially accepted and normalised within youth sport cultures. Indeed, S. Elliott and Drummond (2017) argued that the frequency and largely

unchallenged nature of sideline verbal behaviours has contributed to a culture that has become “ostensibly problematic for youth sport” (p. 653).

Despite these advances, an important limitation in the current stock of knowledge remains. Existing research has predominantly documented *what* problematic sideline behaviours look like and *what* consequences they produce. Considerably less attention has been directed towards understanding *how* these behaviours are learned, reinforced, justified and ultimately normalised within youth sport cultures. Social learning provides a useful framework for understanding these social processes. Rooted in Bandura and colleagues’ landmark research (see Bandura, 1986), social learning perspectives propose that behaviours are acquired through observing and imitating significant others (e.g. parents), interpreting social norms, and experiencing reinforcement.

Akers (1998) extension of Social Learning Theory is particularly relevant because it explains how behaviours are learned and maintained through four interrelated mechanisms: differential associations, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation (Akers & Sellers, 2013). *Differential association* involves the influence of significant individuals in one’s environment. If these individuals endorse or exhibit behaviours like aggression or inappropriate language, there is a high probability of adopting these behaviours. Subsequently, individuals learn to evaluate these behaviours as acceptable or unacceptable based on *definitions* (e.g. norms, attitudes, orientations) emphasised by their environments. Definitions can be verbal or cognitive behaviours which, when reinforced, shape further behaviours (Akers & Jennings, 2015). The more a behaviour is defined as good or justified, the more likely it is to be adopted. *Differential reinforcement* refers to the balance of perceived or anticipated rewards or punishments following a behaviour. If the behaviour is frequently rewarded, then it is likely to continue. Lastly, *imitation* involves

observing and replicating others' behaviours and their consequences, known as vicarious reinforcement (Bandura, 1979). The impact of imitation is contingent on the characteristics of the model, the actual modelled behaviour, and the observed consequences/outcomes.

These mechanisms have been successfully applied to explain antisocial behaviour across a range of contexts, including sports coaching (Kabiri et al., 2020), yet they have rarely been used to examine the culture of match-day sideline behaviour in organised youth sport. Further, where learning theory or SLT has been previously mentioned, it has been used in a superficial or descriptive manner (e.g. Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014). Accordingly, this study applied Aker's Social Learning Theory to examine how sideline behaviours in junior rugby league are shaped through differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation. Drawing on researcher field notes, parent interviews, and player focus groups across multiple age groups, this study seeks to explain the social processes underpinning the development and maintenance of sideline behaviour culture. By shifting attention from documenting problematic behaviours to understanding how they are learned and sustained, the study offers a theoretically informed contribution that extends existing descriptive accounts of sideline behaviour to inform stronger interventions aimed at improving youth sport environments.

Methods

Methodological approach

The study aims to gain a deeper insight into multi-actor perspectives (parent, coach, and player) of adult sideline behaviour within youth RFL. Therefore, we have adopted a social constructionist approach to understand shared meanings that parents, coaches and players co-create on the sidelines. Observations are used to see the actual modelling of

behaviour that is happening in these settings; interviews were used to understand the individual motivation and how the parent justifies sideline behaviour based on their perception of RFL; and focus groups were used to co-construct meaning of what the players feel is acceptable and unacceptable.

Researcher position

The research team consists of 11 members, and so we felt it important to address researcher positionality and acknowledge the various roles held by members of the research team. We balanced the needs of the funder and the multiple perspectives of the research team, which includes 5 females and 6 males, all identifying as white or Asian, between the ages of mid-20's to mid-50's, and reflect a combination of academics, PhD researchers and Professional Doctorate students. All members are active participants in sport or physical activity, of varying types and ability levels. Additionally, several members of the team ($N = 5$) have experience of being sports parents, others are, or have been, qualified sport coaches ($N = 8$), and/or held administrative roles in community sport ($N = 6$). Our collective positionality provides a unique combination of insider and outsider viewpoints on the topic of adult sideline behaviour. Refer to [Table 1](#) for a breakdown of the research team's roles.

Table 1. Research team roles.

Researcher	Role
1	Data collection (parent interviews, observations), data analysis
2	Not involved in data collection, but supported write-up
3	Data collection (observations), data analysis
4	Data collection (observations)
5	Data collection (observations)
6	Data collection (parent interviews, observations)
7	Data collection (parent interviews, observations)
8	Data collection (parent interviews, focus groups)
9	Data collection (observations)
10	Data collection (parent interviews, focus groups)
11	Data collection (observations)

Context

In England, the governing body for rugby league is named the Rugby Football League (RFL) (Collins, 2012). Rugby league has been stereotyped as a northern, (de)-industrial, white, working-class, and (hetero-masculine) environment (Mirshak et al., 2026; Spracklen, 2007). Junior Leagues in community club settings officially launched in the 1970s and have continued to grow (Collins, 2012). In the age ranges related to this research, there were 14,602 Primary players (U7-U11), 11,962 Junior players (U12-U15) and 2,416 Youth players (U16) across a total of 1,167 teams at the end of 2023 (Rugby Football League, 2023). The RFL complies with the Code of Sports Governance ("the Code") as set out by the Government and Sport England (Rugby Football League, 2023). As part of its strategic aims, the RFL states that it wants excellent governance not only at National Governing Body level but also for all constituent parts of the sport in the professional and community game (Rugby Football League, 2023). The Community Game Operations Team govern and deliver leagues across England and have launched many initiatives in line with the sports strategy such as the new Respect campaign to promote positive environments for all (players, match officials, parents, volunteers and spectators), Game Day Managers who volunteer at each community club to manage the spectators on match days, League Entry Criteria related to the correct workforce and qualifications in place at clubs, and Club Health Checks to audit the running of the club (Rugby Football League, 2023).

The sport has recognised poor sideline behaviour in the past, for example during the 2019 internal Game Wide Review (The Rugby Football League, 2019). The RFL communicated to the research team that internal procedures and case management logs are also increasing in relation to poor sideline behaviour, such as the Safeguarding and Disciplinary procedures, but also the Issues Log that monitors recurring

poor behaviour to identify frequently offending clubs to challenge their behaviours and escalate into a Disciplinary case. The proactive senior management in the Development Team recognised the need for independent research to gain a greater understanding and funded this research as part of a wider project to investigate parent sideline behaviour during youth rugby league match days – with the full support from The Community Board, The Board of Directors and The Non-executive Board.

The data included within this study includes parent interviews, children's (player) focus groups and researcher observations. Some of these data have also been used to inform additional outputs including: a conference presentation, additional academic papers, as well as a report and infographic for the RFL.

Participants

Participants were recruited through snowball and purposive sampling, utilising the RFL as a gatekeeper between the research team and potential participants. The RFL sent out a recruitment email to all affiliated RFL clubs, detailing the study and their involvement. As a result, two clubs volunteered as participants, one based in the North West and one in Yorkshire. Each club consented for specific games to be recorded and for members (players, parents and volunteers) to be approached to take part in further data collection (e.g. interviews and focus groups). The decision about which games to record was a pragmatic one, made based on the number of games that could be observed during a one-day visit, as well as the availability of the research team.

Data collection

A multi-method approach was utilised to collect data within this study, including observations ($n = 14$) supported with field notes, semi-structured interviews ($n = 14$) and focus groups ($n = 4$).

Parent interviews

Upon completion of a survey as part of the broader project, participants were given the option to leave their details if they were interested in taking part in an interview. Through snowball sampling, a total of 14 parents were recruited from RFL-affiliated clubs (female $n = 8$, male $n = 6$). Each parent took part in one semi-structured interview, producing 11 h, 31 s of data, with interviews lasting on average 47 min. Their children were members of teams ranging from U7 to U16, with 4 parents having children across multiple age groups. Several parents had active roles within the clubs as coaches ($n = 5$), team managers ($n = 2$) and committee members ($n = 1$). Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to allow parents to share their experiences on game day behaviour (e.g. “Talk me through what a typical match day looks like for you”; “what do you think is inappropriate sideline behaviour”; “what do you observe from other spectators in the crowd?”). To enable in-depth information to be captured, it was pertinent that the interview environments were safe and private (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Therefore, of the 14 interviews conducted, two were in person, at the participants’ rugby club, and twelve interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Questions were informed by existing research on parenting styles (Holt et al., 2009), parenting experiences in other sports (Knight, 2019), sideline behaviours (Dorsch et al., 2015), information garnered from the project’s survey, observation and focus group data, as well as drawing on the collective expertise and knowledge about parenting involvement in organised sport within the research team.

Children’s focus groups

Four focus groups were used to gain an insight into the children and young people’s experiences of match day behaviour. At club A, focus group

participants consisted of children from the U9s team ($n = 5$) and a group from U12s ($n = 4$), whilst at club B participants were also from the U9s team ($n = 5$) as well as a group from the U16s team ($n = 5$). A creative methods approach was adopted for the focus groups, which enabled the young people to immerse themselves in the experience and to express their perceptions through drawing and writing activities (Davies et al., 2021). Focus groups took place at the clubs of the participants involved, so they were familiar with and comfortable in the environment, with parents/guardians nearby but not within earshot. At the start of each focus group, researchers introduced the activity to participants, encouraging them to just draw what they felt sidelines looked and sounded like, acknowledging that they won’t get anyone into trouble based on their drawings. These drawings were then used by the researcher as prompts for discussions.

The two under 9 s focus groups were given 10 minutes and asked to draw a picture of all the people at a rugby match, including the sideline, and how everyone was feeling (e.g. facial expressions), and things that people may say in speech bubbles. An example of a drawing can be seen in Figure 1. They were then asked several questions about a typical match-day experience, their motivations for playing, and what a “good” and “bad” sideline looks like and how it makes them feel.

For the focus groups with Under 12s and 16s, they were asked to contribute to two spider diagrams: (1) what a good sideline looks like, (2) what a bad sideline looks like. An example of these spider diagrams can be seen in Figure 2. The participants were then also asked several questions relating to their match day experience, motivations for playing and sideline behaviours.

All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Drawings were scanned onto password-protected computers and spider diagrams (which were sketched by the researcher conducting the focus groups) were re-created digitally.



Figure 1. An example drawing of a match day including sideline (U9s focus group).

Observations with field notes

The research team conducted non-participant observations at 14 games, across the two clubs between June and September 2022. To account for different contextual nuances and pressures incurred throughout a season, observations were conducted at three time points: the start, middle and end of the youth Rugby League season. This also provided an opportunity to observe a mixture of age groups (see Table 2 below). Multiple methods of observation were employed; audio field notes (in-action) and reflective notes (post-match). The sideline was defined as the space alongside the edge of either side of the pitch; typically, one side is occupied by spectators and the other comprises coaches and player substitutes. Audio fieldnote observations were recorded individually by at least 1 researcher standing behind the crowd at each game. The purpose

was to document researcher impressions and encourage ongoing reflection throughout the observations (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Information in relation to context, demographics, player, coach and spectator behaviour, and conversations or comments were recorded.

Data analysis

Initially, an inductive approach was used to capture the multiple sources of data, and initial data analysis was also theory-free. The transcribed focus groups, interviews and field notes were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2019), developing 37 themes/codes (e.g. non-verbal encouragement, dissent towards referee, arguments on the sideline, positive encouragement), and categorised into the groups of adults present at a match day:

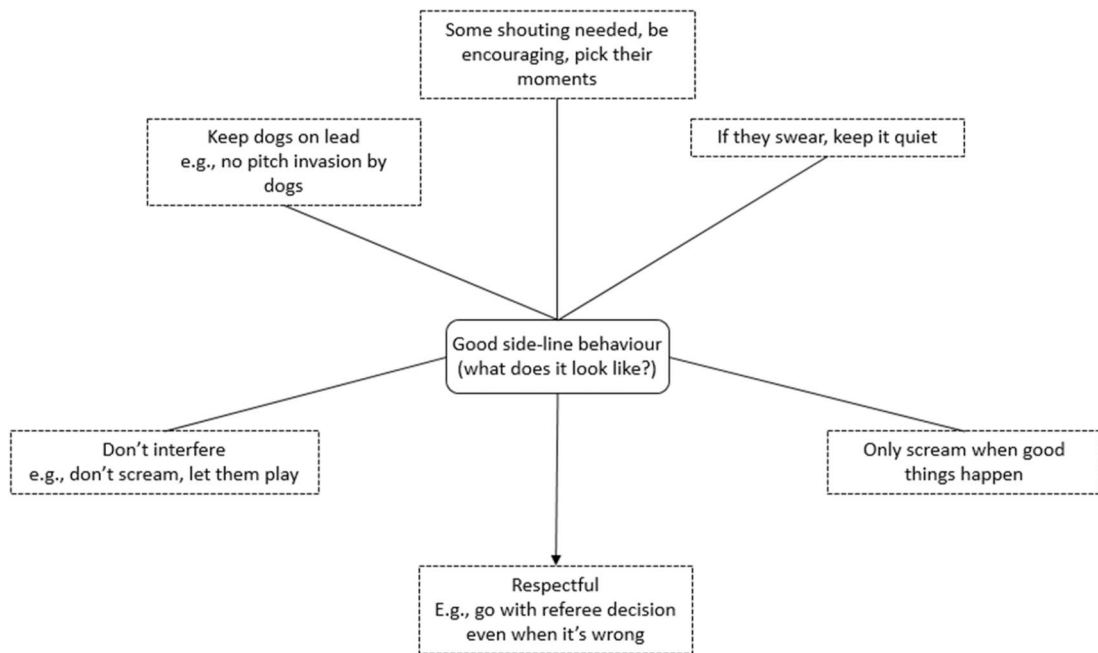


Figure 2. An example spider diagram of good sideline behaviour (U12s focus group). List of Figures.

coaches, referees and parents (sideline spectators). Through this analysis, research team discussion and further reading, it was decided that the four theoretical concepts (differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation), within Akers (1998) Social Learning theory, aligned with the data; hence, we feel the analysis was not constrained by the use of theory. Using this framework, the data (parent interviews, field notes, children's

focus groups) were re-analysed abductively, aligning quotes which each of the four concepts. Given the aim of the study to understand the culture of adult sideline behaviour, we felt the breadth of the Akers (1998) SLT, effectively represents the data and participants' experiences.

Rigour

This study aimed to ensure rigour through the following ways: (1) it sought to generate multiple perspectives through the use of multiple methods across a wide range of participant stakeholders; (2) to promote trustworthiness through the use of collaborative critical friends from within the research team. For example, we recruited an expert in the field of parent sideline behaviour but outside of the data collection process, to offer both an outsider's perspective on the data analysis but also a critical perspective on the approach to data analysis (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Table 2. Numbers of games observed at each age group.

Age category	Primary rugby league	Number of games observed at each age group	Total number of games observed at each age category
Primary rugby league	Under 7s	3	7
	Under 9s	2	
	Under 10s	2	
Junior rugby league	Under 12s	2	6
	Under 13s	1	
	Under 14s	1	
	Under 15s	2	
Youth rugby league	Under 16s	1	1

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was gained from the University Ethics Board (Liverpool John Moores University, reference numbers: 22/SPS/049 & 22/SPS/059) prior to participant recruitment and data collection. The research team utilised both “overt” (focus groups and interviews), and somewhat “covert” (observations) methods for data collection. Observations were somewhat covert, as audio field notes were conducted by members of the research team in university-branded clothing under the pretence of researching “game day practices in junior rugby league”.

The Rugby Football League (RFL), who provided financial support and access for this project, acted as a gatekeeper throughout. Consent was initially gained from the two clubs, for researchers to approach their volunteers, parents and players. The RFL shared information sheets and consent forms to potential parental participants, as well as assent forms and participant information sheets for the children’s focus groups, which were completed by parents/guardians alongside their child.

Throughout, we had an ethical responsibility to uphold confidentiality. However, given the involvement of children within this study, we did have a duty of care to breach this should circumstances have arisen, such as disclosure of abuse or poor behaviour. This was not observed by researchers during our data collection, although some researchers did state they observed poor coaching practices, homophobic language and swearing. Clubs have structures in place to mitigate this negative and inappropriate behaviour.

Results

The aim was to investigate adult involvement in creating, maintaining, and reinforcing a culture of sideline behaviour in youth rugby league. During data collection and research team debrief, it was found that the main adults of

influence were parents and coaches; hence, this became the focus of the analysis. What became apparent throughout the data analysis was that there was a shift in reported adult behaviours from younger age groups into older age groups, and therefore the data presented aims to represent this. The results are presented from a Social Learning Theory perspective, and as a result each overarching theme represents one of the theoretical concepts within the theory. However, within each theme, we provide observations across age groups to demonstrate the nuances between these age groups.

Theme 1: differential association

This theme presents *Differential association*, which refers to players’ exposure to norms values, attitudes and behaviours from significant others, in this case, parents and coaches within their own and opposition teams. Parents highlighted how the positive or negative behaviours exhibited on match day is often dictated by whom the opposing team are, and is influenced by behaviours of players, parents or coaches associated with them, “I mean it does depend on who the opposition are because some games are more kind of friendly, other games can be not, I mean it just depends, it depends on the coaches and the parents” (Parent 10, U14s).

Notably, there were also differences in norms, behaviours and values displayed between the different age groups. Coaches working with older players appear to be more negative, whilst coaches working with younger players were more involved in the game and provided lots of encouragement, as is demonstrated below:

Coaches were part of the games guiding players as referees – ‘step back here, well done, run hard’. This was nearly always positive, age appropriate. Positive behaviours such as learning rules, shaking hands, clapping through a tunnel, working hard, playing hard,

and tidying up afterwards were demonstrated and reinforced. (Field Notes, U7 Yorkshire)

This positivity with younger players was also reflected in the behaviour from spectators where “encouragement and praise, in terms of shouting and clapping, appear to be the main behaviours shown” (Field Notes, U7 North West). This was also demonstrated with the end-of-game routine: “everyone clapping, and all children lined up to do a running lap, exchanging high fives with the sideline. All adults stuck their hands out for the children to high-five them, regardless of side” (Field Notes, U9 North West). However, as athletes become older, negative coach behaviour, such as aggressively shouting or swearing, appears to be more pertinent, with instances during warm-ups: “in the warmup I heard one coach shout at a kid ‘are you trying to f***ing wind me up’. From there the same coach and to an extent others, had aggressive comments – ‘F***ing smash em lads’” (Field Notes, U16 Yorkshire). This was mirrored during gameplay: “Lots of swearing from the players and the teams of staff/volunteers on the other touchline. I could hear this from the opposite touchline and was stood behind the spectators” (Field Notes, U16 Yorkshire). The volume at which the coach was shouting, and the lack of reaction from the spectators, indicates the behaviour is a regular occurrence. Although this may be the norm, players did highlight that it can negatively impact them.

It’s too negative and they expect too much, some. We’ve got a new coach but yeah, other one still looks angry. I wanted to quit, I wanted to quit, everything, it made me feel like shit, it’s still affected me but yeah. (Focus Group, Yorkshire U16)

This extended to younger age groups, despite the negative behaviour being less of a regular occurrence: “baddest thing is sometimes swearing as well and it feels like, well sometimes parents can get into arguments with other parents so, like, I think it’s swearing lots quite bad and stuff”. (Focus Group, North West U9).

Spectators also demonstrated inappropriate behaviours by encouraging players to act aggressively towards their opponents.

“some comments from away team supporters when we came close to scoring ‘smash him’, ‘snap him lads’, ‘get it legs’ (Field Notes, U15 Yorkshire). One parent acknowledges their dislike for this behaviour, however, alluded to it being the ‘norm’ in this context.

The worst things about it here and other parents telling their child on the pitch to just smash another kid. I just don’t like it at all. I know it’s rugby and maybe I should just stick with like dancing or something. (Parent 7, U13s)

That being said, parents did highlight several positive aspects to match days, such as the social and family-like atmosphere that is typically the norm at their clubs:

I think rugby league, it definitely seems to be like a family event like the mum and dad are both there and like the probably gonna stay at the clubhouse or if you drinks afterwards, you know, sometimes in the night on the nicer days, you know, the mums are a little bit more sort of dressed up. They’ve got all the other kids with them, you know, and it’s almost like a bit of a day out really (Parent 7, U7s & U13s).

There’s a good crowd of, erm, you know, fans who are other parents and it’s usually quite sociable and we usually go, we sort of, you know, cheer on the, cheer on the girls and then, er, meet up afterwards in the clubhouse and have something to eat and a drink and, you know, the girls all get together and have something to eat and drink. (Parent 5, U16s)

Theme 2: definitions

Theme two refers to definitions, which are values, orientation and attitudes that individual’s have towards antisocial or conforming behaviour. Individuals will evaluate these definitions (norms, attitudes, orientations) of the behaviour as good and bad. These definitions can be verbal and cognitive

behaviours which can be directly reinforced and also act as cue stimuli for other behaviour.

Several aspects of sideline behaviour were identified and deemed “good” or appropriate, with common themes being encouragement and clapping. One parent highlighted the importance of this, “Because I think it’s important to actually show support to the team, I think it’s important to my son that we’re there and actively showing an interest in what he’s doing” (Parent 3, U16s).

One parent described the ideal behaviours of both parents and players, “I think a good clean game, parents shouting encouragement and things and at the end of the game the parents clapping and shaking the kids’ hands and things and that is what we experience most times and it’s great” (Parent 14, U15s). Another parent expanded on this stating the influence positive sideline behaviour has on the overall atmosphere “a good sideline, cheering, applauding good behaviour, not good behaviour, good play, good strategy, erm, you know, if someone does well, applause, erm, shouting on, shouting encouragement, erm, yeah and it adds to the atmosphere” (Parent 5, U16s).

Opposing this, parents discussed several behaviours they identified as “bad” or inappropriate. These behaviours were evident from both coaches and spectators, and directed at players, match officials, or other coaches: “It really grates on me when people [spectators] are shouting at referees, when people are shouting at players, when people are calling kids names because they’re on the opposite team and they’ve made a mistake” (Parent 8, U12s).

Although the data evidences this across all age groups, it is more pertinent as the players become older. It could be argued that negative behaviours are therefore being reinforced, and in some instances could be demonstrating conformity towards antisocial behaviour:

There’s been a little bit on the field with the coaches arguing with the referee and coaches going onto the field and getting in

the referee’s face and a bit between coaches as well, sort of squaring up to each other a little bit, goaded on by parents, parents shouting on and, you know, using expletives to, you know, ‘f’ing smash ‘em’ or ‘chop her off’, ‘smack her head in’ or whatever, you know, it’s, erm, things like that which, you know, is not really appropriate. (Parent 5, U16s)

However, researchers did observe at one game spectators discouraging negative, or “bad” behaviour between the players on the field: “Man shouts ‘walk away, walk away’ during the pushing and shoving between players on pitch. ‘Get off him now’ after tackle and players are now pushing and shoving on the pitch” (Field Notes, U16 Yorkshire).

During observations, it also became apparent that several spectators did not deem it inappropriate to shout in a negative manner at the match official. For example, one researcher witnessed dissent towards the referee “one spectator called him a ‘tool’ and parents were angrily shouting (away team spectators)” (Field Notes, U14 North West). Spectators received no sanctions for their negative behaviour and so may believe that such behaviour is permitted under similar circumstances. Players also highlighted how the lack of punishment for negative parental behaviour acts as reinforcement “Parents can do it in a way cos they won’t get as badly done as players, you know what I mean” (Focus Group, Yorkshire U16). The players also discussed how spectators encouraged “bad” and inappropriate behaviour, using referee decisions as their justification: “one incident of parents/spectators telling their player to push another player out of touch purposefully as the other team has just done it and not been punished” (Focus Group, North West, U12).

Theme 3: differential reinforcement

Differential reinforcement refers to the balance of perceived experienced or anticipated rewards or punishments that follow the

performance and reinforcement of the behaviour. This could also occur when the behaviour is reflected in wider society. Negative differential reinforcement was observed through the behaviours of both the spectators and coaches. One parent described their child's coach using physical punishment:

Sometimes other coaches can be a bit, like, sergeant majors with their team but we don't really, we don't do that, certainly when we talk about Under 7s, no. Yeah, be a bit like if they don't listen right they've got 10 push ups and stuff like that. (Parent 1, U12s)

Whilst another described how some parents shout negative encouragement at players by supporting or rewarding dirty tackles or play:

The physicality as a parent is a bit of one cos some of the things that get shouted on to the pitch by the other parents is like 'smash him, get into him, get him into the ground, get him on his back, get on top of him, hit him hard' you know, 'swing for him, don't take that off him, get him back', you know, all these things that get shouted on by parents. (Parent 8, U12s)

Further to this, it was not uncommon for spectators to verbally demonstrate their frustration at players for mistakes or spells of poor play, "pass the ball Jesus Christ" (Field Notes, U12 North West). This was evidenced at both clubs observed "Man shouts 'Oh my god what are you doing' to the team he was supporting" (Field Notes, U16 Yorkshire). Some spectators also demonstrated their frustration physically, "Man with a loud shout 'This is pathetic' after a try by the opposition and walks off/away from the pitch for Est 15 min until halftime and re-joins for second half" (Field Notes, U16 Yorkshire). Although this behaviour occurred mostly in the older age groups, it was observed in younger, "Opposition scored and she shouted for her son to 'wake up' and shrugged at him as if to say what are you doing" (Field Notes, U7 North West).

Players also highlighted the use of swearing and berating behaviours aimed at them,

demonstrated by coaches and other players: "So basically, I try and, right, I tried kicking ball through and it didn't work, it went to touch so he [opposition parent] called me a "little di**head" and said I'm sh*t and started laughing in my face". (Focus Group, Yorkshire U16), whilst another player shared a similar experience: "That they're gonna tw*t you and parents getting threats saying "you're f***ing sh*t and we're gonna do this, we're gonna do that", yeah. Threats from players and coaches". (Focus Group, Yorkshire U16).

Although examples above are directed at players, coaches also acted in the same manner towards spectators and referees, "Erm, one time, erm, a coach, erm, from the opposition team, came on the pitch and shouted at the ref and he got Red carded" (Focus Group, Yorkshire U9). This demonstrates a coach receiving punishment from the referee for their negative behaviour, although this is the only such example despite other examples of negative behaviour. The lack of punishment therefore reinforces the poor behaviour demonstrated by coaches. At the same time, there were several examples throughout the data of positive differential reinforcement. From coaches, this was mainly verbal "coaches are very encouraging of both teams (feedback such as – 'great pass X', 'well done X, brilliant footwork') and encourage kids to celebrate when they score" (Field Notes, U7 North West). Spectators demonstrated positive differential reinforcement both verbally "Say if you were losing, like, 6–0 and then the parents on the sideline are, like, 'come on, keep your heads up' and stuff like that". (Field Notes, U11 Yorkshire), and non-verbally, "clapping from spectators when a try is scored or a good pass is made. Spectators clapping for both teams throughout, not just theirs" (Field Notes, U7 Yorkshire). Although this is evident across all age groups, it was more frequently evidenced in the younger age groups.

Theme 4: imitation

Imitation relates to individuals directly observing the behaviours performed or modelled by others, including the consequences of others' behaviours. How imitation exerts in the social learning process is contingent on a variety of factors and circumstances such as the characteristics of the model themselves, the actual behaviour itself being modelled, and any directly observed consequences for the model. Findings highlighted spectators and players, are often influenced by the behaviour of the coach, with one parent explaining how this influences the crowd "if the coach is getting particularly animated, it can provoke a bit of a reaction" (Parent 14, U15s), and it is often the negative behaviours that are imitated:

I think that coaches have a lot to answer for how their teams conduct themselves on the pitch. If you've got an aggressive coach who might swear, again, not acceptable, might encourage, you know, foul play, erm, that's gonna be replicated in the players. (Parent 14, U15s).

Well the coach is meant to be setting an example to the team aren't they and to the parents as well and you look up to the coach and I suppose if you see the coach doing it then it's, it's like it's almost acceptable for you to do it. (Parent 2, U14s & U16s)

In turn, spectators' behaviour can also impact coaches. One parent describes how parents' frustrations with the referees can be imitated by the coaches, "I also think if the sideline sorta start, erm, maybe questioning a ref's decision and shouting and balling it might, er, spur the coach to go, you know and question something or remonstrate about something" (Parent 5, U16s). Further to this, is the impact of spectator behaviour on players, "It's bad enough, you know, trying to stop the teenagers from being potty mouth without the parents actively kind of showing, yeah you can do this" (Parent 3, U16s). Typically, players imitating spectators was in a negative and mainly impacted the older age groups. Further, it was

highlighted through observations that spectator behaviour will often be imitated by fellow spectators. For example:

One female is spectator shouting 'coaching points' from the sideline, "Team name, get in your line", "tackle, tackle, get their legs" "make space", "stand in a strong line" through game, numerous times. She was then joined by 2 more female spectators later in the game also shouting similar. (Field Notes, U15 Yorkshire)

The level of imitation and spectator interaction was often influenced by the timepoint in the game, with spectators being more likely to be influenced towards the end of games. This was demonstrated through imitation of complete silence, "North West team scored a couple of try's near the very end of the game and the opposition spectators were all silent, not one of them was clapping" (Field Notes, U13 North West), or becoming more animated:

Away team spectators got a lot more animated towards the end of the game, as players were close to scoring try's, there was one mum jumping up and down on the spot, a lot more of the spectators joined in with the clapping and cheering. (Field Notes, U13 North West)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate adult involvement in creating, maintaining, and reinforcing a culture of sideline behaviour in junior rugby league through the lens of Akers (1998) Social Learning Theory. The findings provide a novel explanation of how adult sideline behaviours become socially learned and normalised through the interconnected influences of parents, coaches, players, and the broader club environment. While previous research has largely documented the prevalence and consequences of problematic sideline behaviour (e.g. S. R. Walters et al., 2012), the present findings demonstrate how repeated interactions between key social agents contribute to the

development and maintenance of sideline culture through differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation. In doing so, this study extends existing sport parenting research, which has predominantly examined adult behaviour from a psychological perspective (for review, see Dorsch et al., 2021), by offering a sociocultural explanation of why these behaviours persist in organised youth sport.

Perhaps the most important finding was that problematic sideline behaviours were rarely portrayed as exceptional or unexpected. Instead, participants frequently described them as anticipated features of junior rugby league, shaped by the atmosphere of the game which comprised the opposing team, their coaches, and their spectators. These findings suggest that sideline behaviours are shaped less by individual personalities and more by the social environments in which families are situated. This is consistent with recently published evidence suggesting that contextual factors such as coaching pressures and team demand exert stronger influence on parental commitment and investment in youth sport than parents' own beliefs and expectations (Alexander et al., 2026). From the perspective of Aker's Social Learning Theory, repeated exposure to particular behavioural norms through coaches, parents, and fellow spectators provides opportunities for behaviours to become socially accepted through *differential association*.

Importantly, participants rarely expressed surprise when aggressive language, criticism, or hostility occurred, particularly in older age groups. Instead, many appeared to anticipate such behaviours as expected features of junior rugby league. This expectation is significant because it suggests that repeated exposure gradually shifts what individuals perceive to be acceptable (S. K. Elliott & Drummond, 2013). Rather than viewing aggression or verbal hostility as inappropriate, repeated

observation and limited challenge may redefine these behaviours as "normal" expressions of competitiveness or passion. This interpretation extends S. Elliott and Drummond's (2017) proposition that problematic sideline behaviours become normalised through their frequency by demonstrating the social mechanisms through which redefining behaviour occurs.

This process may be further reinforced by the broader sociocultural context of rugby league. Recognised as a sport played and predominantly followed by "hard gritty men" in northern mill towns and (ex)-mining communities (Spracklen et al., 2010), rugby league is thought to be the "flag carrier" of masculinity and manliness (Hutchins & Mikosza, 1998). The clubs observed in the present study were situated within these traditional rugby league communities, where such masculine ideals have historically developed and continued to shape behavioural expectations. Recent observational work has documented offensive chanting and hypermasculine behaviours among Championship rugby league supporters (Mirshak et al., 2026). Although social class and occupation data were not collected in the present study, the increasing acceptance of aggression, hostility, and antisocial behaviour among older age groups aligns with this broader sociocultural understanding of rugby league culture.

Perhaps the most novel finding was the clear shift in sideline culture across the junior pathway. Across observations, interviews, and focus groups, younger age groups were consistently characterised by family-oriented interactions, praise, and encouragement. In contrast, older age groups were characterised by swearing, criticism, aggressive coaching, and spectators encouraging physical aggression towards opponents. While Wuerth et al. (2004) highlighted a potential link between athlete age and parental behaviour, the current study suggests that age itself is unlikely to explain perceptions of deteriorating sideline behaviour. Rather, age appears to represent

broad shifts in how competition is experienced and understood, thus illustrating the interpretive complexity of defining “good” and “bad” sideline behaviour, as behaviours perceived as inappropriate in some contexts may be interpreted quite differently by those embedded within rugby league culture (Constandt et al., 2024). Within Akers’ framework, this reflects changing *definitions* of acceptable behaviour. Through this lens, behaviours that may have once been considered inappropriate become increasingly interpreted as demonstrations of commitment or passion. This social process coincides with transitions into older age-based leagues, where competition is separated by gender and broader masculine norms associated with rugby league become more pronounced. As such, changing sideline behaviours might reflect changing social expectations surrounding competition, constituting a revision to definitions that underwrite the persistence of aggressive sideline behaviour.

The findings also demonstrate that the frequency of sideline behaviours is shaped by *reinforcement*. Parents noted that spectators often encouraged physical aggression, observations documented repeated verbal abuse of match officials, and players themselves recognised that parents could behave in ways that would not be tolerated from players. The inadequacy of policies (e.g. codes of behaviour – S. Elliott & Drummond, 2015) and absence of formal consequences appears to reinforce the perception that these behaviours are acceptable within competitive contexts. Behaviours that are repeatedly left unchallenged may become interpreted as permissible, reinforcing their continuation and increasing the likelihood that they will be modelled by others (Akers & Jennings, 2015). Conversely, reinforcement was not exclusively negative. Players reported valuing encouragement over criticism, supporting previous research demonstrating children’s preferences for positive adult involvement. This tension is significant because it emphasises two

competing systems of reinforcement operating within junior rugby league. From the perspective of Aker’s Social Learning Theory, this is noteworthy because such a perspective shifts the focus from viewing adult sideline behaviours as inherently problematic to understanding how socially reinforced behaviours become embedded within youth sport culture (S. Elliott et al., 2025).

Limitations

As alluded to within the discussion, rugby league has its own social norms and cultural history steeped in hetero-normative masculinity (Mirshak et al., 2026), and although we have captured a wider range of data through several methods, these social norms and behaviours exist outside the participants within this study. We did not fully consider the wider social environment (e.g. geographical social norms) of where these data were collected. Particularly given the importance of differential association, the influence of the wider rugby league context at least should also be considered in more depth, as this will undoubtedly influence the behaviours that spectators, coaches and players are exposed to and in turn define as “normal” or “acceptable”. In addition, the data were captured within one geographical area within the UK (the North of England), and therefore, we might see differing findings from different locations.

Another potential limitation might relate to the games that the research team had access to. Although we hope that readers can take naturalistic generalisability from the study (Smith, 2018), we also acknowledge that the study was limited by the fact that we had only two clubs as participants and were restricted by the availability of the team. Future studies that involve undertaking fieldwork in competitive settings that are *not* determined by an overarching governing body may reveal new insights into the nature of adult sideline behaviour.

Given the studies focus on culture and behaviour, it should also be acknowledged that the research team is not fully representative of broader ethnic diversity within society. Thus, the teams' may have influenced their assumptions during the research process and may have influenced data interpretation based on their backgrounds and perspectives.

Implications for research and practice

Given the key findings from this research, we have several recommendations. First, within practice, education on positive and effective sidelines is needed. Any proposed interventions aimed at sideline behavioural change should involve coaches, as it would appear they are a key part of determining the culture. Not only this, but the majority of negative behaviours demonstrated by spectators, coaches and players occurred in age groups 12 and above, and so we suggest that interventions should look to target those age groups.

From a research perspective, although rugby league is a predominantly northern England sport, more clubs across a wider geographic span should be considered in future research to understand cultural differences and influence.

Conclusion

This study investigated how adult sideline behaviours are created, maintained, and reinforced within junior rugby league through the sociological lens of Akers (1998) Social Learning Theory. By drawing on the perspectives of parents, players, and researchers, the findings provide a basis from which social processes underpinning sideline behaviour can be explained. Rather than suggesting that age itself drives these behaviours, the findings indicate that changing social expectations surrounding competition, together with broader cultural norms associated with rugby league, may progressively redefine what constitutes

acceptable behaviour. Collectively, the findings suggest that improving sideline behaviour requires more than changing the behaviour of individual parents and coaches. Instead, interventions should seek to influence broader club culture through consistent modelling, reinforcement, and accountability for appropriate behaviours from the outset. National governing bodies, such as the Rugby Football League, are therefore encouraged to support efforts to establish positive behavioural norms early in the junior pathway, particularly before the transition into older age groups where negative behaviours are increasingly tolerated, overlooked, or worse, normalised.

Disclosure statement

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