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Parental stressors in professional youth football academies: A qualitative investigation of
specializing stage parents

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Abstract

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3 In order to improve our understanding of parental experiences in elite youth sport, the present
4 study investigated parental stressors within the context of professional football (i.e., soccer)
5 academies in Great Britain. Focusing upon the specializing stage of athlete development
6 (Côtè & Hay, 2002), a total of 41 parents attended six focus groups exploring their
7 experiences of stressors during the early and later phases of the specializing stage. A
8 hierarchical thematic content analysis led to four dimensions of parental stressor: academy
9 processes and quality of communication; match-related factors; sport-family role conflict; and
10 school support and education issues. Parents across the entire specializing phase identified
11 uncertainty of their son's retention in the academy and quality of communication with staff as
12 significant ongoing stressors. Unfamiliar coaching and match practices emerged as stressors
13 for early stage parents, whereas the management of school and academy demands were most
14 prominent for later stage parents. Their experiences suggested that management of a parent's
15 expectations for their child in an academy, and the ability for a professional club to
16 communicate its 'developmental' and 'non-developmental' practices might be central to
17 parental support and well-being. Strategic implications for practitioners, coaches and
18 organisations are presented with these findings in mind.

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20 Key words: parent, stress, football, development, youth sport
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1 Parental stressors in professional youth football academies:

2 A qualitative investigation of specializing stage parents

3 It is perhaps a sad indictment of today's youth sport culture when we read reports of parental
4 abuse towards young athletes (DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997; Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, &
5 Power, 2005), tragic fights between parents, young athletes and referees (CBS, 2006; Wong,
6 2001), and one tennis father's recent conviction for manslaughter after he drugged his teenage
7 son's opponents causing one of them to be fatally injured (Lichfield, 2006). Programs in
8 youth football (i.e., soccer) within the United States have inaugurated fan behavior induction
9 seminars for parents and 'Silent Saturdays or Sundays' as a behavioral deterrent against
10 excessive verbal abuse, inappropriate coaching from the sidelines and sideline rage (see
11 Wong, 2001).

12 Yet whilst there is an extensive body of popular literature and research on the roles
13 and behaviors of parents from both negative and positive perspectives (Baxter-Jones &
14 Maffuli, 2003; Fish & Magee, 2001; Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes & Pennisi, 2006, 2008;
15 Hellstedt, 1990; Holt, Tamminen, Black, Zehn & Wall, 2008; Hoyle & Leff, 1997; Leff &
16 Hoyle, 1995), there is a limited academic understanding of the stressors and issues
17 experienced by parents as they support their child through the stages of sport development
18 (Côtè, 1999). If youth sport programs and organizations seek to optimize the role of sport
19 parents, then it is important to appreciate parental constructions of stress and explore the
20 inherent stressors that may impact on the quality of their 'performance' and role with the
21 child-athlete (see Gould et al., 2006, 2008; Holt et al., 2008).

22 The roles of parent and child in the youth sport environment are clearly very different.
23 Parents serve as provider, interpreter and role model for the young athlete who is effectively a
24 user or consumer of the sport experience (see Green & Chalip, 1997; Fredricks & Eccles
25 2004; Wuerth, Lee & Alfermann, 2004). The provision of logistical opportunities, finance,
26 and transport as organizational demands, are equally matched by the emotional demands of

1 competition and the importance of reacting to all competitive events in adaptive and
2 supportive manners. According to Fredricks and Eccles (2004) the degree to which these
3 roles are fulfilled by parents serves to influence a child's beliefs and values and in turn, their
4 motivated behaviors and performance.

5 Research has illustrated how the time commitment required from parents can impede
6 their occupational, social, and family life (Kirk et al., 1997b), causing particular strain if their
7 time and attention becomes centered upon one child-athlete at the expense of non-sport
8 siblings. Further, from a financial perspective, Kirk and colleagues (1997a) concluded that the
9 economic costs of junior sport can negatively affect both a child's sport participation and
10 impact more widely throughout family life. Baxter-Jones and Maffuli (2003) corroborated
11 these findings within a tennis-specific sample identifying that approximately 12% of the
12 family budget was spent on tennis, with 16% of parents reporting severe financial hardship as
13 a consequence.

14 From a conceptual perspective, researchers have recently made the distinction
15 between those stressors linked specifically to competition and competitive performance (i.e.,
16 competitive stress) with the stressors associated primarily with the organization within which
17 the individual is operating (i.e., organizational stress; Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006;
18 Hanton & Fletcher, 2005; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). In conducting this research, these
19 investigators have essentially viewed stressors as a 'sensitizing' concept (Blumer, 1954, 1969;
20 Patton, 2002) with their intention focused on refining our understanding of the multiple ways
21 in which overall (elite) sport participation can be psychologically demanding from the
22 perspective of the protagonist. As Charmaz (2003) notes, "sensitizing concepts offer ways of
23 seeing, organising and understanding experience; they are embedded in our disciplinary
24 emphases and perspectival proclivities" (p. 259). For sport psychologists, this research has
25 reinforced the importance of understanding stress as a social construct that resides within
26 athletes. However, it is clear that many of these stressors may be shared by parents. Indeed,

1 within youth sport, organizational stressors such as finance, travel, sport policies and
2 interpersonal conflict are more likely to frame the parent's experience as opposed to the child-
3 athlete's.

4 In establishing a line of research that specifically targeted parental perspectives,
5 Harwood and Knight (2009a) investigated the stressors articulated by 123 British tennis
6 parents. The wide range of stressors emerging from their open-ended survey coalesced into
7 seven core themes of parental stress. These included stressors associated with attendance at
8 competitive matches and tournaments; coaches' behaviors and responsibilities; financial and
9 time demands placed upon the family; sibling resentment and inequality of attention;
10 inefficiencies and inequalities attributed to tennis organizations; and developmental concerns
11 related to educational and future tennis transitions.

12 A limitation of this research was the inability to focus on parental stressors associated
13 with a specific stage of their child's sport development. Côté (1999) identified four stages of
14 participation: sampling, specializing, investment, and recreation. His model traces the
15 intensity of sport participation from early childhood to late adolescence and identifies
16 differences in the experiences and requirements of athletes during each stage. The role and
17 requirements of parents have also been noted to progressively change through the sampling,
18 specializing and investment stages (see Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002).

19 Harwood and Knight's (2009a) study was subsequently extended by conducting
20 qualitative interviews with eighteen tennis parents whose children were currently at one of
21 these three stages of participation (Harwood & Knight, 2009b). Their results reinforced the
22 prominence of competitive, organizational and developmental stressors identified through the
23 survey. However, stage-specific analyses suggested that the specializing stage parents
24 experienced and shared the greatest range of stressors compared to the other two phases.

25 Whilst these prior studies serve to assist coaches and relevant tennis organizations in
26 empathizing with parental demands and educational needs, the experience of parents in an

1 organized team sport context is lacking. Consequently, in progressing this area, the present
2 study investigates parental stressors within a team sport, focusing specifically on the
3 specializing stage of athlete development.

4 British football parents whose children had signed for a professional football club
5 academy were purposely selected for the project as they represent a rather unique group of
6 individuals. Within British football, unlike all other team sports in the UK, talented players
7 are scouted and inaugurated into a 'professional club' academy system at as young as eight
8 years of age with financed coaching offered for up to seven more years. Whilst de-selection
9 (i.e., release) is a yearly process, young players may retain their place as an 'academy
10 schoolboy' up to 16 years of age. At this point, players may enter the professional (i.e.,
11 investment stage) domain as an 'academy scholar' if they are one of the few selected for this
12 next stage. With considerable weekly time commitments, the specializing stage of
13 development is a lengthy process (i.e., seven years), with parents potentially experiencing a
14 variety of different stressors as their child progresses through this stage. Supported by the
15 Football Association of England (the FA), the present study therefore focuses on the
16 experiences of academy football parents across the specializing stage, with delineated
17 attention to the differing stressors associated with younger and older players within this phase
18 of development.

19 Method

20 *Philosophical orientation and methods*

21 This study was essentially grounded in a postpositivist paradigm (Campbell, 1999),
22 and supported a critical realist philosophy (Bhaskar, 1975; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sayer,
23 2000). In this respect, we do not believe in one unitary truth about stress, but we do believe
24 that stressors exist in the real world of youth football; that they are complex, subjective and
25 that they affect lives. We believe that a more accurate and valid truth about stressors in
26 academy football parents is possible and that this might be constructed through dialogue with

1 members of that community in activating the respondents 'stock of knowledge' (Ritchie &
2 Rigano, 2001). Therefore, as opposed to simply testing whether soccer is stressful for parents
3 and establishing specific mechanisms of influence, our focus was firmly upon learning,
4 discovery and then interpretation of the reality of being a 'football parent' vis a vis the
5 sensitizing concept of stressors that were meaningful to them.

6 To most appropriately investigate this question, we targeted the community of football
7 parents and pursued a focus-group methodology with parents from three different professional
8 youth academies. Though under-utilized in social-psychological research, focus group
9 interviews are well suited to gaining in-depth responses and facilitating a large amount of
10 group interaction on a specified topic over a small period of time (Morgan, 1997). In this
11 specific study, focus group interviews were particularly useful and advantageous in gathering
12 richer data than might have been expected through individual interviews. Specifically, they
13 offered the possibility of collaborative sharing amongst participants and the stimulation of
14 new perspectives and spontaneous insights that would have been less likely in one-to-one
15 settings. These possibilities were optimised in this study because all of the parents were part
16 of the football academy community and the opportunity for enhanced interaction and richer
17 discussion around parent-role stressors was perceived to be greater given their common
18 experience of the same club. In addition, it was considered important to listen to the stories
19 and interactions of parents who were all in the early specializing stage compared with those
20 parents who shared their experiences of supporting later specializing players.

21 *Participants*

22 Participants were drawn from three professional football club academies within the
23 north, midlands, and south of England. In total, 41 participants, 25 fathers and 16 mothers,
24 participated in one of six focus groups. In order to investigate whether specific stressors
25 develop or change across the specializing stage, three focus group interviews were conducted
26 with parents from two academy age ranges: The U9's to U12's (early specializing) and the

1 U13's to U15's (later specializing). The twenty two parents in the U9-U12 groups considered
2 themselves to have been in the role of 'football parent' for an average of 5.25 years ($SD:1.76$),
3 whereas the nineteen U13-U15 parents reported an average of 7.26 years ($SD:2.38$)
4 experience.

5 *Procedure*

6 Following completion of all ethical clearance procedures, Academy Managers from
7 three football academies were approached via logistical assistance from the FA to assist in
8 parental recruitment. Participants were sent a letter prior to the focus group interview,
9 explaining the purpose of the study, as well assuring the confidentiality of their responses.
10 Demographic information was collected along with participants' informed consent.

11 Each focus group consisted of between five to eight participants (Morgan, 1997) and
12 was moderated with a semi-structured questioning route designed in line with a process
13 proposed by Krueger and Casey (2000). All participants received a standardized introduction,
14 explaining the aim and format of the focus group and the role of the moderator. More
15 important to the integrity and value of the focus group approach, however, was the careful
16 distribution of only two or three parents from the relevant age groups (i.e., U9 to U12; U13 to
17 U15) into each stage-related focus group. This ensured that no single age group or clique of
18 parents dominated a particular focus group discussion. Parents shared their experiences
19 openly and collaborated with parents of children who were in slightly younger or older age
20 groups within that specific stage at the same club.

21 Interview questions were guided by the initial findings of Harwood and Knight
22 (2009a,b) with sensitivity to covering a broad range of contexts relevant to competition,
23 organizational, and developmental aspects.. An introductory question allowed parents to get
24 to know each other before focusing the interaction on their general experiences of stressors
25 within the youth academy. Subsequent questions and probes served to stimulate discussion
26 around contexts such as matches and training, coaches and academy systems, finance and

1 time, personal and social aspects, and education and development. Most critically, closing
2 questions allowed the moderator to check parents' had shared *all experiences* that they felt
3 were important to them. Each of the focus groups were videoed and recorded, ranging from
4 53 to 65 minutes length ($M: 57.5$ minutes; $SD:4.65$).

5 *Data analysis*

6 Data from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim and a hierarchical thematic
7 content analysis was conducted that incorporated both inductive and deductive elements
8 (Côté, Salmela, Baria & Russell, 1993; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994).
9 As noted earlier, a stressor was used as a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1954) about which
10 prior studies (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2009a,b) had gained initial insights within an
11 'individual sport' setting . Therefore, prior knowledge around stressors in parents did exist
12 and it should be acknowledged that the contexts in which stressors were reported served,
13 albeit informally, as useful reference points for the initial stages of analysis. However, the
14 authors were careful to ensure that the deductive element of this process ended there, and that
15 progressively inductive data interpretation guided the research team towards non-
16 predetermined themes of stressor. Such induction was facilitated given that no research to
17 date had interviewed youth soccer parents about any aspect of their experience of being a
18 parent in a professional academy.

19 Following data collection, meaningful comments and quotes from the raw data that
20 were interpreted as a stressor were coded as a meaning unit or essence phrase (Maykut &
21 Morehouse, 1994). These essence phrases enabled the development of raw data themes that
22 essentially represented a list of similar quotes emerging from the parents. This analytical
23 process then progressed inductively to a higher thematic level whereby raw data themes were
24 clustered around a common, underlying higher order category. Field notes and video footage
25 were checked in-between groups in order to ensure the moderators' ongoing insight and
26 familiarity with the emerging data. Further hierarchical categorizations that represented these

1 higher order categories and their raw data themes emerged in the form of general dimensions.
2 Careful data management within and between the different focus groups ensured the
3 identification of reported stressors that were shared by both early and later specializing stage
4 parents, as well as themes specific to each phase alone (see Results section).

5 *Methodological rigor*

6 Although the processes of reliability and validity in qualitative research remain
7 contentious areas of debate (Patton, 2002; Sparkes & Smith, 2009), we supported the
8 importance of optimising these elements of our data analysis, particularly given our research
9 goal of developing a credible and collaborative understanding of the stressors faced by
10 football parents in the specializing stage. Trustworthiness in this case was facilitated by two
11 main methods focused on enhancing this level of credibility and minimizing researcher bias
12 related to the interpretive analysis of the second author (Johnson, 1997; Lincoln & Guba,
13 1985). Firstly, investigator triangulation processes involved the first and third authors
14 independently coding one separate transcript from each focus group classification (i.e., early
15 and later specializing) as part of an inter-coder consistency check on the initial interpretations
16 of the second author (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A 79% level of intercoder reliability emerged
17 which led to discussion, agreement and minor coding revisions. Following this process, the
18 first author reviewed the interpretive allocation and labelling of the raw data themes into their
19 higher order theme. He repeated this verification process for the allocation of higher order
20 themes into subsequent general dimensions. Interpretations were openly discussed and
21 challenged appropriately at each stage with a final consensus achieved. At this end point, the
22 third author then served in the capacity of a peer-debriefer or 'critical friend' (Cresswell,
23 1998) by reviewing the emergent framework as a whole and critically probing for
24 explanations of certain decisions made by the two other research colleagues.

25 Secondly, a comprehensive member check was conducted in order to gain participant
26 feedback and continued collaboration on the interpretive accuracy of the results and emerging

1 framework. Documents were sent out to a randomly selected review panel of participants in
2 each focus group. Beyond being asked to verify their verbal contributions to the focus group,
3 they also received an illustration of the emergent themes and finalized hierarchy from the
4 study, alongside an explanatory summary. The entire review panel validated the information
5 and interpretations related to their group, and agreed that the final thematic hierarchy was an
6 accurate, plausible and authentic representation of parental stressors across the specializing
7 stage.

8 Results

9 Over the six focus groups, 77 raw data themes emerged from the analysis. These themes
10 coalesced into 23 higher order sub-themes which were subsequently categorized into four
11 general dimensions of parental stressor. These were: academy processes and quality of
12 communication; match-related stressors; sport-family role conflict; and school support and
13 education issues. Figure 1 illustrates the content of these four dimensions, their corresponding
14 themes, and differentiates between those themes that were specific to either specializing
15 phase, or common to both phases. Each general dimension will be elaborated upon using
16 specific quotes from parents. Each quote is identified by a parent ID number. (e.g., P3), the
17 number of the focus group (e.g., F2) and whether it was a later or early specializing stage
18 group (e.g., *P3;F2;Later*).

19 *Academy processes and quality of communication*

20 All focus groups raised issues that were inherent to the processes and systems of the
21 academy, particularly with respect to the flow of communication and information to parents
22 related to the security of their child's place. Firstly, a sense of fear and uncertainty about signing
23 their child with the academy emerged for a number of parents. One parent stated:

24 A parent's natural instinct is to protect their child and make sure they feel confident in
25 themselves. Therefore, anything that may open them up to failure or lowering their self-

1 esteem. you worry about; you want them to have the opportunity, but you want to protect
2 them (*P1, F3, Early*).

3 Fear of signing was inextricably related to the fear of failure and prospect of release from the
4 academy. Parents expressed that their sons' potential reactions to release and the possibility of
5 any long-term effects due to release were particularly stressful. The following extract from focus
6 group 3 (later specializing) captures the essence of the theme here:

7 P1: There were some lads who'd all been together since they were 8 (years old) and
8 quite a few of them went (i.e., were released). I was stood out there having my cup of
9 tea and players were coming out [of the meeting] like this (wiping tears) and having
10 to walk in there [the dressing room] to the rest of the lads.

11 P5: You feel like they've had a big failure and I wonder what knock on effect it'll
12 have in later life.

13 P2: One of my son's friends was at XX academy from 8 to 16, when he got released
14 he was on valium and all and in a right mess.

15 P6: You know the longer they are in, the harder the fall cos they are in it longer and
16 longer. And as they get older there are so many things going on in their lives which
17 you're worried about...and you really want to prepare them for something that's
18 going to be as devastating as this to these guys. By the time they've been doing it for
19 this long they really really do want to do it, they're so keen, and its huge blow.

20 P2 (whose son was in that specific team): My son said to me, 'Dad, if I get released I
21 don't want to go through there [i.e., the door back to the dressing room]'. He didn't
22 want all the people coming to him saying 'sorry'. He wanted to go out of that door
23 [he points to the fire escape]. So if he'd got released we'd have gone out of that door,
24 and we'd have gone home.

25 Parents understood that difficult decisions about player retention had to be made by
26 coaching staff, yet this did not counteract the feelings of uncertainty concerning decisions about

1 their own child and the lack of preparation or forewarning that was perceived. Additionally,
2 parents in later stage focus groups referred to how releases are handled by the academy citing
3 examples of insensitive comments and processes where players are released prior to training
4 sessions. Many were concerned about the lack of empathy or due consideration for the future
5 welfare of their child and the time devoted to the academy. One parent stated:

6 My son was at XX Academy for three months and his coach comes up to us and says
7 'I'm really pleased with this squad and I've got no reason at all to change this for a
8 year' and I said to my son 'well you're fine then'. The following week it was 'you,
9 you, you, you and you are finished'. That was a week after they were told they were
10 gonna be there for a year! (*P1, F3, Later*)

11 Early specializing parents in all focus groups referred to difficulties they
12 encountered through the limited information they received from their academy before and
13 on signing their child, and a lack of education about expectations and procedures ("It's the
14 unknown when you join a club like this and the lack of information"(*P3, F2, Early*). This
15 was also closely aligned to perceptions of poor feedback that proved frustrating for parents
16 when their son was on trial for the academy: "It was stressful for me not knowing whether
17 he was in or not. I mean it had been that long....three months and no information. As a
18 parent you get stressed and you're thinking 'is it worth it?' " (*P3, F1, Early*).

19 Many parents noted the inadequate communication after their son joined the
20 academy. A consistent theme from each of the six focus groups was the poor quality and
21 regularity of feedback that parents received about their son's progress. A sense of
22 frustration was evident not only in terms of frequency of feedback, but also the validity and
23 inconsistency of the feedback. One parent challenged feedback quality, targeting the
24 superficiality of their academy's simple grading system:

25 We had a report after every game but he wasn't taking him to one side and saying how
26 to sort a problem out. You can get given a D because you aren't doing it correctly, and

1 the next week he is given a B and he hadn't changed anything! And he's not actually
2 told him how to change it either. *(P5, F2, Later)*

3 Finally, parents cited the inconsistent behavior of coaches and how they sometimes failed to
4 support and appreciate the logistical and personal demands of their family role. One father
5 recalled:

6 We couldn't make a particular Sunday game and I'd seen the coach the week before and
7 he'd said 'don't worry, no problem'. Then the Wednesday game comes along, which is
8 quite important, and he says 'sorry you can't go [i.e., my son can't play] because you
9 never turned up! [on Sunday]. They don't see the other side of it when you're at home
10 trying to console your upset child saying 'don't worry about it!' *(P3, F2, Early)*

11 Perceptions of limited empathy and understanding when faced with difficult family choices or
12 circumstances was exemplified by three further parents. One stated: "You know I'm dashing to
13 drop one lad off at XX Academy boys training and then shoot off over here with another lad.
14 It's a given really isn't it in this sort of environment, they expect that at 7 o'clock the fairies
15 will drop them off" *(P2, F2, Later)*. The second parent recounted:

16 It was my son's best friends birthday party and he wanted to go so I rang the coach
17 early that week to let them know that he couldn't play. The next time we went to the
18 academy the look we got from the coach...it made you feel 'ahhh, may be we shouldn't
19 have said or done that' but at the time we felt it was the right thing to do because our
20 son was only 8 years old. *(P4, F3, Early)*

21 While the third parent recalled:

22 My son broke his arm in pre-season training this year and I was really upset that we
23 didn't get a phone call from the club. It affected my boy as well because he couldn't
24 understand why the coach or whoever didn't ring to see how he was doing. He's been
25 missing for seven weeks and I think they've got to understand the stress the boys are
26 under. *(P3, F2, Early)*

1 *Match-related stressors*

2 All focus group parents shared a number of experiences associated with their son's
3 participation in competitive matches, although their child's performance [and resultant
4 anxieties around mistakes] emerged as a theme in only one late specializing focus group:

5 Watching him play – that is stress. I mean it's the most stressful time for me. I mean
6 when they played XX team that was awful – I wanted him to come off in case he made
7 a mistake. He's a defender as well and with the youth team coach coming to watch, I
8 thought if he touches the ball and makes a mistake, then that's it! (*P3, F3, Later*)

9 Another parent, in the same group, followed up by disclosing how she only watches the game
10 if the other goalkeeper [i.e., not her own son] is playing:

11 It's just a nightmare, I can't even watch.....I'm more relaxed watching the other goal
12 keeper because it's not my son in goal. But when he's actually in goal I'm just scared.
13 I mean I don't know why I put myself through it, I should just sit in the car, I don't
14 know why I bother I really don't. (*P5,F3,Later*)

15 Later specializing parents also discussed their experiences around their sons' reactions to
16 losing matches and the negative anticipation of what the after-match mood was going to be
17 like which they felt they had to deal with.

18 A further cluster of match-based issues revolved around coaching and coaches'
19 decision-making regarding players and tactics in matches. Some early stage parents
20 struggled to resist interfering in matches by coaching or instructing their son from the
21 sidelines, whilst most focus groups raised the issue of coaches rotating players and making
22 incomprehensible substitutions: "As long as I live I will never ever work out coach
23 decisions, when they take people off when they put people on and I'm not alone. We sit
24 there going 'why've they done that?'" (*P6, F3, Later*). Some early stage parents also spoke
25 negatively [and passionately] about the coach's practice of moving their son into different
26 playing positions, and in some cases, with insufficient feedback and explanation to the

1 player and parent as to why. Most interestingly, this issue was closely allied with the
2 problems some parents cited with respect to match-winning situations being sacrificed in
3 favour of achieving developmental goals. A number of parents referred to the emotions
4 they experienced when watching matches where the team were winning, only for the coach
5 to change the team or tactics [for developmental reasons]:

6 I find it straining that they'll put the best team on with the lads playing their
7 positions and then when they are 2 or 3 [goals] up in the last 20 minutes they'll say
8 'right' and put different lads on.....and then we end up losing the game (*P5, F1,*
9 *Early*)

10 A further group of early specializing parents also reacted negatively to the
11 introduction of small sided (5-a-side) mix-in games that had been organized in favour of
12 full competitive fixtures. They viewed these developmental games as just another training
13 session that they felt did not test players competitively and many cited that they would not
14 watch these types of games if they knew in advance that this was the format.

15 Negative encounters with other football parents were reported as
16 infrequent, however, a number of parents disclosed unpleasant touchline comments
17 directed at their son which they found personally difficult to cope with: "I find it hard to
18 deal sometimes with parent's comments that you can hear if they stand there; it's really
19 hard and I stand there and I'm quite shy so I don't react - so it's really hard."(*P5, F3,*
20 *Later*).

21 Finally, stories about injury emerged in both early and late specializing groups as
22 parents shared their experience of physical worries for their son. Fear of injury appeared to
23 increase in conjunction with the increased physicality of the game and physical
24 development of players. However, due to the pressured competition environment
25 characteristic of later specializing players vying for contracts, the negative compensatory

1 behaviors of overtraining, and masking injuries were particularly worrying for parents of
2 older players. This is illustrated in the quote below:

3 “See that’s a stress as well for me - rushing them back from injury; they rush
4 themselves back. This player goes out and plays with an injury he’s trying to mask it
5 but you knew his parents weren’t there and XX, the coach goes ‘what’s wrong with
6 X’ and then they tell them off for not having said. But the player is thinking ‘my
7 contract’s coming up in a few weeks’ and so players try to stretch it another month.”
8 *(P4, F3, Late).*

9 *Sport-family role conflict*

10 Six higher order sub-themes reflected components of the overall sport-family role
11 conflict that emerged in all focus groups due to the demands of academy commitments
12 impacting on normal family routines and lifestyle. Few, if any, parents resented the
13 demanding travel routines and the resultant work sacrifices that also impacted financially on
14 the family. However, the challenging nature of these logistical and time issues were clear
15 across each focus group:

16 Getting the lad here is stressful to me, you know – Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and
17 then the game on Saturday and if you’ve got work commitments as well. That’s the
18 biggest stress – getting here as I have to drive 60 miles each way *(P5, F2, Late)*

19 Another parent relayed the same sentiments when disclosing that their travel routine utilized
20 only public transport:

21 I’ve been doing it for 3 years – getting the train from X to here and a taxi from the
22 station to here and back again. Catching the train at 8.20pm on a Tuesday and
23 Thursday night and we’re not getting home till 11.30pm. And then he’s up at 7.30am
24 next day for school *(P2, F2, Later).*

25 It was evident that having a son or several sons in an academy was a financial strain
26 for nearly all parents. This was particularly true for those parents who had farther distances to

1 travel, due to ensuing petrol costs, and those who worked at weekends resulting in loss of
 2 earnings. One single mother stated, “It is a big stress for me – my other kids go without so my
 3 son goes here”(P7, F2, *Early*). However, a number of parents agreed that “If they weren’t
 4 doing football it would be doing something else you’d be funding”(P5, F1, *Early*) suggesting
 5 that participation in football did not transcend normal or expected family financial demands.

6 Whilst some parents developed relationships with other football parents, many parents
 7 discussed how their personal and social lives had become one dimensional and non-existent
 8 due to their commitment to football. One early specializing parent stated:

9 It’s the lack of time at home and splitting the family, and lack of family time due to
 10 being here the whole weekend so you can’t have a day out with the family or see
 11 relatives. Just everything stops because you are always saying ‘Sorry, I’m at football’
 12 (P4, F2, *Early*)

13 To which another early stage parent, concerned for how future involvement would impact on
 14 their lives, added:

15 “When it gets to U-16 you have to remember some of those lads in those teams are
 16 only 14/15 years old; they are training here everyday in the Summer holidays,
 17 everyday in the Easter holidays and if you think your life’s messed up now, how are
 18 you gonna cope with that? (P7, F2, *Early*).

19 Finally, parents with other children raised the issue of sibling inequality as a
 20 prominent challenge and their resultant experience of guilt associated with perceptions of
 21 neglect. Some parents disclosed how they tried to compensate their other children by
 22 spending more of their time doing things for them, as one parent reported, “You sometimes
 23 try to compensate for that by taking them somewhere else, driving them about where you
 24 wouldn’t normally.”(P3, F1, *Late*). Another parent echoed this sentiment hinting at the
 25 problems of resentment felt by siblings:

1 It's hard to give the other children the attention when you're away Tuesday,
2 Thursday nights and Saturday mornings. We've got two girls aged 7 and they do
3 feel their noses are being pushed past. Then they play up when you do see them and
4 they wind you up even more, so it's a vicious circle (*P8, F2, Early*).

5 *School support and education issues*

6 The final dimension of stressors encompassed specific factors associated with school,
7 school work, and reconciling the demands of education with the demands of academy
8 participation. These issues were almost exclusively related to late specializing parents when
9 academy demands were greatest and general educational pressure was heightening with
10 examinations and homework. Early stage parents had not yet reached this transition and
11 indeed many successfully used completion of homework and good schoolwork as basic,
12 contingent criteria for their young son's attendance at the academy (i.e., fail to do your
13 homework = no football).

14 Two later stage focus groups discussed at length their concerns about their sons
15 physical tiredness from the training and match regime alongside homework and exam
16 pressure. The reality of this regime and how it's effects are manifested at home was
17 articulated by one parent who stated:

18 He does all his schoolwork on the Wednesday in between the Tuesday and Thursday
19 night sessions. My wife has to wake him up on the Wednesday morning and he comes
20 in at 3.30pm. The next thing happens is I walk in at 4.45pm and I'm waking him up
21 off his bed because he's just flaked out. (*P2, F2, Later*).

22 Parents at this later stage also exchanged their problematic experiences of managing pressure
23 for their son to participate in school sport with sometimes the direct conflict of attendance at
24 the academy. A number of parents referred to the behaviour of certain PE teachers towards
25 their son in these circumstances when they could not attend a school fixture. The following
26 quote serves as a good representation of the issue:

1 He (son) plays badminton for the school, does reasonably well at it and he's told
 2 he'll never play for school again...what impression is that making on the kid? And
 3 he's (teacher) saying that my son has got an attitude problem! (*P3, F1, Later*).

4 A number of parents also acknowledged concerns over the treatment of their child from an
 5 educational perspective because they attended the football academy. The issue not simply
 6 being a lack of school support for football, but a fear of unfair academic treatment by teaching
 7 staff. Two fathers whose sons had conflicted with a PE teacher over school football
 8 attendance were now concerned with how the teacher would treat their sons as an assessor of
 9 their examination in sport:

10 P1: My concern with it now is my son is going to do his GCSE [British examination at
 11 16 years old] in Sport

12 P4: Snap

13 P1: Is this teacher gonna hold it against them because a lot of the assessment is done by
 14 the teacher watching them play sport?

15 P4: I said to the teacher 'is this gonna affect him next year? Because I certainly hope it
 16 doesn't'. So we have one or two issues with the school, yes.

17 Discussion

18 By using multiple focus groups, the current study engaged the realities facing parents
 19 of talented footballers, and delineated between those stressors that were either prolonged
 20 across the specializing stage or specific to early and later phases. At a conceptual level, the
 21 findings offer further support to the utility of distinguishing between competitive,
 22 organizational and developmental-based stressors when supporting parents in their youth
 23 sport role (Fletcher et al., 2006; Harwood & Knight, 2009a,b). In addition, the exchanges
 24 between parents often illustrated how their deep desire for success and commitment to their
 25 son's football underpinned many of these three dimensions of stressor. Conflict, uncertainty,
 26 tension and 'gripping' were regular features of the focus group discussions, with academy

1 practices being fairly central determinants. Competitive stressors emerged through a range of
2 factors associated with matches, some of which appeared to be more pertinent to certain
3 developmental time points. Most notably, a number of early stage parents making the
4 transition to the academy from local youth football appeared to struggle with certain academy
5 expectations and practices. Professional academies tend to adopt strict policies of parental
6 touchline behavior that appropriately forbid coaching and instruction. It is also common
7 developmental practice in the early stages to move players around different positions to aid
8 their understanding of positional demands and to assess the players 'fit' for the future. Whilst
9 a substantial number of parents across the focus groups understood and praised this
10 developmental element of academy policy, including shared game time for all squad players,
11 there were parents at each stage who were clearly and consistently perturbed by certain
12 substitution practices, positional changes, and the reduced focus on winning and intra-squad
13 competition. These parents almost exclusively believed that winning matches and having the
14 best team on the pitch served as the greatest source of confidence for their son and the team.

15 Fear of injury emerged as a stressor across the specializing stage, but was heightened
16 in the later stages due to the increased physical nature of the game, the potential consequences
17 regarding career progression, and the increased tendency for players to mask an injury.
18 Linked to these consequences, their child's level of performance and the anticipation of their
19 son's negative post-match reactions became more specific stressors discussed within later
20 stage focus groups. This is potentially attributable to the enhanced focus on retaining a place
21 at the academy and the increasing pressure for success and opportunities that are more
22 relevant at 14 and 15 years of age.

23 In summary on these points, whilst the majority of parents viewed their son's
24 participation at the academy as a developmental privilege and applauded mastery-oriented
25 coaching approaches (Smoll & Cumming, 2006), a number of parents brought an ego-
26 oriented tension to the focus group, highlighted by a more 'winning is all that matters'

1 mentality to their son's involvement. The philosophies, behaviors and stressors of these
2 particular parents corresponded with some of the negative parenting practices in tennis
3 identified by Gould et al. (2008).

4 Beyond competitive issues, organizational stressors held a day-to-day prominence in
5 the lives of academy parents. Adapting the organization-based work of Cooper, Dewe, and
6 O'Driscoll (2001), Hanton and Fletcher (2005) forwarded five dimensions of organizational
7 stressor in sport: factors intrinsic to the sport (e.g., finances, time, travel, training, injury);
8 roles in the sport organization (e.g., role ambiguity; expectations; managing role conflicts);
9 sport relationships and interpersonal demands (e.g., with other parents; coaches;
10 teachers/school); organizational structure and climate of the sport (e.g., selection policies;
11 autonomy in decision making; match schedules); and athletic career and performance
12 development issues (e.g., security of position; retention vs release; funding support).

13 Components of these dimensions resonated greatly with parents' narratives around
14 academy processes, communication, sport-family role conflict and school support. Firstly,
15 even though academies attempt to promote a careful and sensitive developmental approach,
16 they still remain as professional businesses that release young players who fail to attain the
17 appropriate standard. This model of organised youth sport created uncertainty in parents both
18 before and after signing their child for the football academy.

19 Their son's potential release at the end of a season was a preoccupation for all focus
20 groups. However, this was not aided by parents' perceptions of the limited information,
21 feedback and communication that they received from their relationship with coaches or the
22 academy overall. In some cases, it appeared that the role that parents wanted to play either
23 did not correspond with or was not information-rich enough in respect to the norms of the
24 academies. Early stage parents recalled concerns about the availability of information and
25 education related to themselves and their sons' involvement in the academy. All focus groups
26 lamented being somewhat excluded from the communication loop, unable to assist in their

1 son's development, and being treated with a lack of empathy given their personal and social
2 sacrifices.. This particular finding replicates the stressors emergent in specializing stage
3 parents in tennis with respect to lack of feedback from national governing body training
4 camps (Harwood & Knight, 2009b). Later stage focus groups raised anxieties over the process
5 of release and feared degrees of insensitive conduct on behalf of the academy. Parents cited
6 limited control to help prepare their sons for what might happen yet anticipated the
7 devastating effect that release would have on their child.

8 It appears likely that the impact of release worsens later in the specializing stage
9 because a child is approaching the investment stage (i.e., a professional academy contract)
10 when his career prospects are dealt a severe blow. Release can therefore be likened to
11 involuntary career termination (Taylor, Ogilvie, & Lavalley, 2006) and is recognised as a
12 traumatic experience for athletes. Parents identified with this potential trauma and
13 experienced the policy of release as a prolonging stressor due to chronic uncertainty and lack
14 of control.

15 Heavy time, travel and financial commitments [for some] were organizational
16 stressors intrinsic to the sport that led to greater sport-family role conflict where the role
17 pressures of being a football parent conflicted with other family activities and responsibilities
18 (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The lack of attention to other siblings, resultant guilt and
19 compensatory behavior, corresponded directly with the experiences of tennis parents
20 (Harwood & Knight, 2009a,b; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). However, many parents maintained
21 a positive view of their time and financial burden by observing that if they weren't funding
22 football then they'd be funding something else that might 'keep their child off the streets'.

23 Beyond isolated concerns about the consequences of injury, the combination of the
24 physical training regime with school pressures, relationships with the school (including PE
25 teachers) and the management of sport-education conflicts represented prominent
26 developmental issues in the later specializing phase. In concert with the perceptions of

1 specializing parents of elite tennis juniors (Harwood & Knight, 2009b), it is at this juncture
2 where demands from academy football, school sport and school work were at their greatest. In
3 two focus groups there were clearly strained relationships between the school, the academy
4 and parents that, as a number of parents voiced, suggested the need for more proactive
5 dialogue between academies and schools in relation to player development and welfare. This
6 included considerations to the training regimen of players during exam periods and the
7 management of player fatigue.

8 Convergent with findings in youth tennis, whilst football parents talked through many
9 negative and troubling issues, not all of these were accompanied by a sense of strain and an
10 inability to cope (Lazarus, 2006). A limitation of this study is that it did not set out to study
11 sources of strain and coping per se. Whilst the focus group discussions promoted many
12 examples of negative appraisal processes and the disclosure of negative emotions, there was
13 evidence that parents used emotion-focused coping by selectively-attending to the positive
14 aspects of their situation. Namely, that such stressors (e.g., lack of communication and
15 feedback) were acceptable because of the importance they assigned to the opportunity for
16 their son to train at the academy. Whilst it would be remiss of this study not to report the
17 positive tone of many parents about their academy experience, it would be equally negligent
18 to conclude that only a limited room for improvement existed in assisting parents.

19 Various implications can be drawn from this study that are of central importance to
20 practitioners, coaches, and sporting academies when dealing with the parents of talented
21 young players. Firstly, there is a continued premium placed on the early education of parents
22 in relation to the psychological and emotional demands of the specializing stage of youth
23 sport. Such a youth sport education policy would serve to ensure that parents develop the
24 necessary motivation-related knowledge and cognitive-behavioral skills both to manage
25 themselves and to optimally influence the development of their child (Gould et al., 2008).
26 For specialist academies this may include induction protocols (perhaps through compulsory

1 interactive workshops) where parents gain honest, transparent information on the philosophy
2 and organizational practices of the academy. However, more critically, it may require
3 academies to first reflect on their philosophy of player development and its application. In this
4 study, whilst academies employed certain development-oriented practices, they were also
5 perceived to offer limited ‘improvement feedback’, grade players weekly (with dubious
6 objectivity), and de-select young players on a yearly basis based on ability. These practices
7 align with a more commodity, performance-based orientation that can represent a professional
8 club’s interest in filtering out weaker players without belief in ‘late developers’ or due
9 attention to the emotional impact of release. An academy’s reflection of its values and
10 practices in view of potential ‘mixed messages’ may assist in its explanation to parents about
11 the developmental and non-developmental aspects of its policy.

12 Subsequently, this points to an agreed understanding of the scope of the parental role
13 and associated expectations within an academy. Communication, monitoring, school-academy
14 relations, and timely feedback pertaining to their child’s progress are particularly sensitive
15 areas for academies to consider alongside greater empathy with the inevitable personal
16 demands facing parents. Attention to such strategies and consistent organizational practices
17 are likely to enhance the perceived value, behavioral roles, and well-being of parents as they
18 progress through this demanding stage of athlete development.

19 In conclusion, the results of this study underscore the tremendous psychological,
20 emotional, and social investment that characterizes parents of gifted footballers throughout
21 the early to later specializing phase (Côtè, 1999; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). The intensive
22 journey of the young academy player is paralleled by a similarly demanding journey for their
23 parents. Only by understanding and appreciating the ‘sport parent’ might applied researchers
24 and youth sport organizations assist in the process of helping parents to enjoy and optimize
25 their role as a key social agent in their child-athlete’s development.

26

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5

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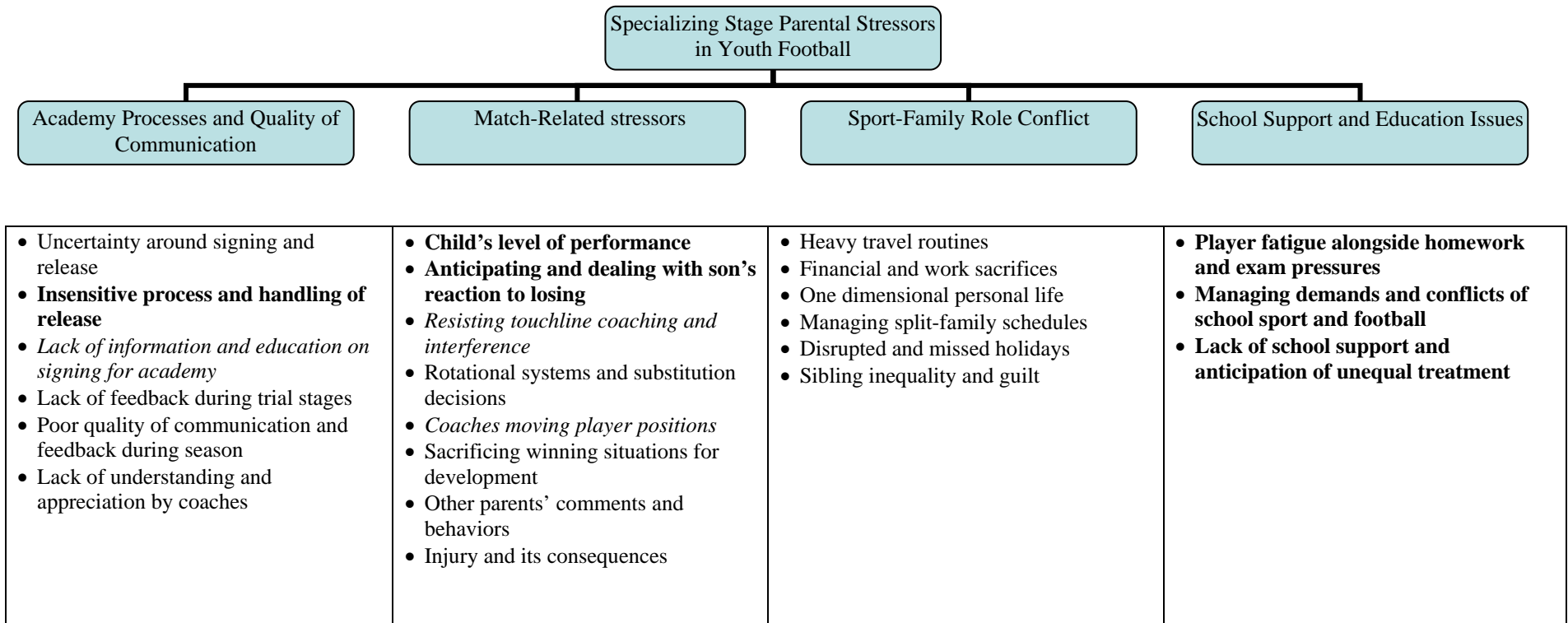
4

Figure Caption

5 *Figure 1: Specializing stage parental stressors in youth football*

6

Figure 1



(Note. Normal text indicates themes emerging from both early and late specializing focus groups; text in **bold** indicates late specializing themes alone; text in *italics* indicates early specializing themes alone.)