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Parenting in Sport

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief summary and commentary on the growing literature on parenting in sport, with a particular emphasis on literature from the last 2-3 years. Following a brief introduction overviewing the topic area, we firstly focus on the influence of parental involvement on children. Specifically, we examine the range of factors that influence children’s perceptions of parental involvement and the consequences of different behaviors. Next we discuss the factors influencing parental involvement, such as the challenges and stressors associated with parenting children in sport and the culture within different sports. Finally, our review focuses upon the strategies developed by parents to facilitate their involvement in their children’s sport, as well as the few papers focused upon parent education and support. We conclude by examining the need for further research and examination of support strategies for parents.

37 **Parenting in Sport**

38 **Introduction**

39 Parental involvement and influence in sport has piqued the interest of academics for
40 around 40 years [e.g.,1]. Studies have generally focused on the broad contribution of parents
41 to the development of talented athletes [e.g.,2,3,4], as well as the positive and detrimental
42 impact parents can have on children’s psychosocial experiences (e.g.,5,6,7). Taken together,
43 research has provided a clear indication of the different roles parents fulfil in lives of young
44 athletes; ranging from providing opportunities for participation and role modelling
45 appropriate sporting engagement to helping children interpret their competitive experience.
46 Further, evidence highlights the need for parents to ensure that, when fulfilling these roles,
47 they are engaged in supportive rather than pressurizing manners [see 8 for review]. Such
48 knowledge has played an important role in stimulating continued study in this area and
49 ensuring that the value of parents in sport is understood [8]. Consequently, there has been a
50 proliferation of research in this area over the last decade. Such dedicated interest has resulted
51 in increasingly diverse and nuanced studies, which have helped to create a more complete
52 picture of sport parenting. The focus of this review is on unpacking and exploring this
53 complexity across three interconnected areas of sport parenting research from the last two to
54 five years.

55 **Influence of Parents in Sport**

56 Much is known about the ways in which parents can influence children’s sporting
57 experiences [see 8 for review] and strides have recently been made to identify specific models
58 of sport parenting [9,10]. Consistent with previous findings, the most recent evidence
59 continues to highlight the detrimental impact parental pressure (e.g., displayed by
60 overstepping boundaries and holding excessive expectations) can have on children [11,12,13].
61 Similarly, parental support, provided as guidance and encouragement for example, continues

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62 to be associated with positive developmental and psychosocial consequences [14,13,10].
63 However, as Dorsch, Smith, and Dotterer [15] identified, the distinction between pressuring
64 behaviors as negative and supportive behaviors as positive is not necessarily clear-cut. Results
65 from their cross-sectional survey of 201 families highlighted that, in certain situations,
66 traditionally positive or negative outcomes (specifically positive affect and conflict) were
67 associated with both pressure and support.

68 Drawing on the expanding research in this area it is apparent that many factors are
69 likely to influence perceptions of parental involvement (e.g., as “pressuring” or “supportive”)
70 and subsequently the consequences parental involvement has on children. For example,
71 Knight and Holt [9] identified that the goals parents and children adopt subsequently
72 influence how parents are involved and also how children interpret types of involvement.
73 Consequently, depending on the goals children hold, different comments and reactions from
74 parents will be perceived as pressuring or supportive. Further, the timing of parental
75 behaviors (e.g., before, during, and after competitions) and the context in which they occur
76 (e.g., at home, training, or competition) may also alter athletes’ perceptions and the
77 subsequent impact they have on children [16,17].

78 The presence and involvement of others in the environment also alters the impact
79 parental behaviors have on children [e.g.,18,19,20,21]. For instance, the impact of parents’
80 autonomy support on children’s motivation is influenced by the autonomy support provided
81 by children’s peers and coaches [18,22]. Similarly, the motivational climate created by
82 parents, coaches, and peers is likely to have a greater impact on athletes’ involvement in poor
83 sport behaviors than parent-created climates alone [23,24].

84 Additionally, children’s perceptions of their parents’ involvement in their sport (e.g.,
85 whether behaviors are pressuring or supportive) appear to be dictated by specific
86 characteristics of parents and children (e.g., gender), and also the quality of the relationship

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87 between parents and children [e.g.,25]. For example, Amado and colleagues [11] identified
88 that male athletes report higher levels of perceived parental pressure compared to female
89 athletes, while Gustafasson, Hill, Stenling, and Wagnsson [26] established that athletes' levels
90 of perfectionism may alter the impact of parental climate on athlete burnout. Kang, Jeon,
91 Kwon, and Park [27] meanwhile found that the quality of parental attachment mediated the
92 influence of parental support on the self-esteem of Korean athletes.

93 In summary, perceptions of parental involvement, and the subsequent influence
94 parents have on children's sporting experiences, appears to depend upon many factors. Such
95 factors are associated not only with parents themselves, but with the characteristics, goals, and
96 behavior of their children, as well as the concurrent influence of others, in what constitutes a
97 rather dynamic and complex 'youth sport' environment. To expedite our understanding of the
98 influence of parents in sport, ensuring that future research considers and accounts for such
99 complexity is necessary.

100 **Factors Influencing Parental Involvement in Sport**

101 When reviewing media representations of parents or seeking the views of sport
102 stakeholders, the traditional justification for parents' engaging "inappropriately" is that they
103 are overinvested in their child's sport, hold unrealistic expectations that their children will
104 "make it" or perhaps living their own (unfulfilled) dreams through their children [28,8].

105 While there is some evidence to support such contentions [12,29,28], systematic
106 investigations to uncover what triggers "inappropriate" (or "appropriate") involvement have
107 only just begun. One such study is that by Dunn, Dorsch, King, and Rothlisberger [30] who
108 examined the relationship between the financial investment parents make in their children's
109 sport and the corresponding feelings of pressure, enjoyment, and commitment to sport that
110 children report. Dunn et al. identified that parents who invested a greater proportion of their

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111 family income to their children's sport were associated with higher athlete perceptions of
112 pressure as well as decreased child enjoyment and commitment.

113 Adding to these findings, a survey of sport parents from the US and the UK
114 highlighted that parents approach sport with different aims, goals, or expectations for their
115 children based on their past experiences as well as their sport knowledge [28]. Depending
116 upon these experiences and their desires for their child's involvement, parents take on
117 different roles within their child's sport, for instance as a coach or as a supporter and adapt
118 their involvement to these roles. Consequently, for one to understand why parents are
119 involved in "appropriate" or "inappropriate" ways, it is necessary to first understand parents'
120 goals, experiences, and background.

121 Additionally, consideration should be given to the relationship between parents and
122 children [31], particularly the empathy parents feel for their children when they are competing
123 as this appears to influence parents' responses [32,33]. For example, in an examination of
124 parents' experiences at tennis tournaments, parents indicated that watching their children
125 compete when they are upset or losing can be extremely hard as they "feel for their child" and
126 share their disappointment [34]. Parents are then confronted with a challenging situation as
127 they seek to appropriately comfort and respond to their child's emotions, which can result in
128 parents experiencing anxiety or stress and potentially lead to inappropriate responses
129 [16,34,35].

130 Parents face numerous other challenges and stressors within the competitive sport
131 environment [36,32,37,38]. Evidence from general psychology points to the relationship
132 between parenting stress and punitive behaviors [39], as such it is feasible that when parents
133 are in particularly demanding sport environments they may react inappropriately [8]. For
134 instance, Clarke and Harwood [40] explored the phenomenon of being a parent of a youth
135 footballer at an academy and established that it can be challenging and complicated.

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136 Particularly, parents described reassessing their role as the parent of an elite athlete, which
137 was associated with an enhanced status but also heightened concerns regarding potential
138 negative consequences for their child and a need to protect their children from harm. Parents
139 described having to learn about the social and organizational expectations of the environment,
140 associated with increased time and monetary investment but also a decrease in their role as
141 they hand over responsibility to coaches and are required to stay detached from their child's
142 experience. As parents attempt to negotiate these changes and challenges, one could see how
143 parents might "get it wrong" and find their involvement to be less than optimal.

144 Additionally, consideration must be given to specific sport cultures on the
145 involvement of parents [8]. For instance, McMahon and Penney [41] explored the impact the
146 Australian swimming culture had on parents' identities and as a result how they engaged with
147 their children and the values they endorsed. It emerged that parents' identities were shaped by
148 a culture of perfection and performance and consequently parents adopted a number of (often
149 negative) behaviors to reinforce attitudes and expectations that were embedded in the culture.
150 Similarly, Dorsch, Smith, Wilson, and McDonough [42] sought to explore the relationship
151 between parents' goals for their children's involvement and the verbal sideline behavior.
152 Initially, parents consistently endorsed goals associated with wanting their children to have
153 fun and enjoy their participation. However, as parents were increasingly embedded within the
154 sport culture, their goals started to change in line with the youth sport environment,
155 particularly becoming more focused on identity (e.g., how they and their children were
156 viewed by others) goals.

157 Overall, given the impact of sport culture on parents, as well as the potential effect of
158 costs and stressors on parental involvement, it would seem pertinent that we move beyond
159 placing the "blame" on individual parents if they are not engaged in appropriate ways to
160 considering the extensive environmental and cultural aspects that are likely to be influencing

161 involvement. However, more research examining and exploring the various factors that
162 influence involvement, and specific strategies to address these factors, is greatly needed.

163 **Strategies to Enhance Parental Involvement in Sport**

164 Given the demands parents can experience in sport, parents are reliant on a range of
165 individuals and develop numerous strategies to be able to continue supporting their children
166 [40,33,43]. Recent studies with parents of youth tennis players [34] and elite youth gymnasts
167 [32] have provided some important insights into some of these strategies. For instance, it
168 appears that parents are heavily reliant upon the help of their spouse/partner and extended
169 family to meet the time demands of sport and complete necessary tasks, draw on the
170 knowledge and support of coaches to begin to understand the needs of their children and the
171 sport, while also relying on children themselves to manage their own emotions.

172 Unfortunately, it appears that rather than being supported or guided to develop
173 strategies that may help them to cope with demands, parents often develop these coping
174 strategies through a process of trial and error [32] and their experiences in the sport
175 [40,44,42]. However, such learning by trial and error or through experience is unlikely to be
176 the most effective mechanism for either parents or children [34], so gaining a better
177 understanding of the needs of parents [see 45 for an example], as well as effective and
178 successful strategies for successfully navigating these needs is critical in moving forwards
179 [46].

180 Beyond teaching parents skills to cope with demands, there is an ongoing need to
181 develop and evaluate broader strategies to help parents support their children in sport. A
182 number of suggestions have been provided in various articles regarding the different
183 approaches or strategies that can be used to enhance parental involvement [e.g.,47,33] and
184 many sports organizations have sought to embed strategies, policies, or practices in their clubs
185 and at competitions to address “poor” parental involvement [8]. However, few of these

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186 strategies or policies are evidence-based or have been evaluated to establish the
187 appropriateness or impact of such behaviors [48].

188 In one of the first evaluated parent-education interventions, Dorsch and colleagues
189 [49] conducted a pilot study with 81 parents from seven U8 or U10 soccer teams. Parents
190 were separated across three groups: a full intervention group, who received a research-
191 informed 45 minute presentation along with an education guide; a partial intervention group
192 who received only the guide, and; a non-implementation group who received no information.
193 Overall, the results of this pilot study point to the value of an evidence-based intervention on
194 parental involvement, parent-child relationships, and children's enjoyment and competence in
195 sport. Such evidence of the effectiveness of parent education programs is useful and important
196 in helping to encourage the integration of evidence-based interventions within sports clubs
197 and organisations. However, caution must be used when interpreting the results from this
198 particular study given the limited sample size and the lack of variation in the population.
199 Furthermore, whether education programmes are the most effective way to help parents,
200 bearing in mind the challenges and demands illustrated in the preceding section, also requires
201 some considerations.

202 Expanding beyond the presentation model used by Dorsch and colleagues [49], both
203 Lafferty and Trigg [50] and Vincent and Christensen [51] have shared details of
204 programmes/workshops they have used with parents. Lafferty and Trigg developed the
205 Working with Parents in Sport Model (WWPS-model), which is centered around the critical
206 role of reflection and empowering parents to positively and proactively support their children
207 in sport. The WWPS-model points to the critical need to educate parents to understand their
208 roles and responsibilities throughout the lifetime of their child's sporting involvement, while
209 also teaching parents strategies to manage their own behaviors that might arise due to the
210 emotional investment they make in their children's sport. The importance of education

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211 pertaining to roles and responsibilities as well as the development of behavior management
212 strategies were also reinforced in a series of workshops conducted and reviewed by Vincent
213 and Christensen [51]. Together, these two articles provide clear support for the value of
214 utilizing reflective, practical activities to facilitate parents' understanding and awareness of
215 their involvement. Nevertheless, further evaluation of the impact of these, and similar,
216 activities would be beneficial to fully illustrate the effectiveness of such approaches.

217 **Conclusions**

218 Parental involvement in sport is extremely complex; the consequences of involvement
219 are varied, the reasons for different types of involvement are diverse, and the strategies
220 needed to support parents are (should be) multifaceted. Recent research has started to delve
221 into this complexity and help researchers and practitioners alike to understand that sport
222 parenting is not simply a matter of “good” versus “bad” or “do’s” versus “don’t’s” but an
223 intricate social experience, influenced by a whole host of factors and variables. However, as
224 illustrated throughout the review, there are still many gaps to fill, particularly regarding
225 parenting experiences and support strategies. We are taking steps in the right direction but we
226 still have a long way to go in ensuring that we have an evidence-base from which we can
227 develop effective, and efficient, strategies to support (not simply educate) parents and
228 encourage change in organisations and clubs, so parents in turn can best help their children
229 enjoy their sport participation and fulfil their potential.

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