

Advancing the study of parental involvement to optimise the psychosocial development and experiences of young athletes

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to review and critique the literature in youth sport that specifically relates to parental influence on the experiences and psychosocial development of young athletes. First, we consider the literature examining the extent to which parental involvement in organised youth sport has been associated with psychosocial outcomes in young people. Within this critique, we draw upon what has been learned from the sport-based positive youth development (PYD) and life skills literature. Second, we address conceptual and methodological limitations of existing literature (e.g., homogeneity of samples, oversimplification of parenting in sport, studying parental involvement in isolation) and target key scientific gaps that exist in facilitating our understanding of optimal parental involvement (e.g., raising parental awareness and facilitating opportunities to support psychosocial development, improving coach education to facilitate parent-coach relationships, collaborating with coaches through well designed interventions, working on the “right” assets at the right time). Such gaps represent how parents appear to have been overlooked within the intentional process of psychosocial development. We offer concluding remarks about the future of youth sport in this area and provide specific recommendations to inspire future researchers and practitioners towards the challenge of empowering parents and more fully enabling their potential.

*Key Words: Parenting, Youth Sport, Psychosocial development, Positive Youth Development*

In a special issue of *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* in 2015, we (Harwood & Knight) proposed that expertise in sport parenting was “demonstrated through parental involvement that increases the chances for children to achieve their sporting potential, have a positive psychosocial experience, and develop a range of positive developmental outcomes” (p. 25). This statement was based upon the belief that success for children and adolescents involved in youth sport cannot, and should not, be measured by athletic performance alone. Rather, we believe that a ‘successful’ sport environment is one that facilitates a child’s on-going involvement in sport and physical activity, supports psychological wellbeing, and provides young people with opportunities to develop transferable life skills.

Such aspirations for youth sport have also been reflected by international sport organisations. For instance, in their position statement on youth athlete development, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) expert panel referred to the importance of a *commitment* to the psychological development of *resilient* and *adaptable* athletes (Bergeron et al., 2015). Specifically, the authors articulated a clear, but multifaceted goal for sport: “Develop healthy, capable and resilient young athletes, while attaining widespread, inclusive, sustainable and enjoyable participation and success for all levels of individual athletic achievement” (p. 834). The specific proposition *being* that sport experiences should equip young people with appropriate coping skills and psychosocial qualities regardless of sporting level/attainments. The panel admonished that “this is a considerable challenge for all stakeholders in youth sports—parents, coaches, administrators, sport governing bodies *and*, especially, youth athletes” (p. 834).

Recognizing the challenge and complexity of parental involvement that could help to nurture such positive psychosocial outcomes, we previously posited that parents

must engage in a “consistent cycle of triangular responsibilities that revolve around managing and supporting the needs of their child, managing themselves and their own well-being, and managing their interactions with others in the youth sport environment” (Harwood & Knight, 2015, p. 32). This interpretation was driven by an examination of studies in organised youth sport. However, on reflection, we realise that we failed to critically appraise the literature in terms of the balance between studies examining parental influence upon ‘in situ’ experiential consequences (e.g., motivation, affective responses, and sporting behaviour in youth sport situations) and *psychosocial development* (i.e., the growth of social, cognitive, emotional and behavioural skills/qualities through sport; Holt, 2016; Pierce, Gould, & Camiré, 2017). Although these ‘consequences’ are likely linked, the latter aspiration, psychosocial development, requires a more proactive and targeted approach from parents. Such aspirations are reflective of the mission of sport-based positive youth development (PYD) and life skills programs, where there exists a clear intentionality to use sporting activities to help young people harness a wide range of internal and external assets (e.g., Bean, Kramers, Forneris & Camiré, 2018; Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012; Holt et al., 2017; Jacobs & Wright, 2018).

Given that every young person has a right to high quality, developmentally-rich experiences *in* and *through* sport, we believe there is a responsibility on scholars not only to understand and illustrate how parents can impact the ‘in situ’ sporting experience of a young person (i.e., positive psychological states) but also how parents can nurture more enduring psychosocial attributes as internal resources for adult life. With these points in mind, the aims of this present article are threefold. First, we will critically reflect upon literature examining the impact of parental involvement in

organised youth sport on young peoples' psychosocial outcomes; we consider the impact on motivational, affective, social, behavioural, and developmental indices as well as what has been learned from sport-based PYD and life skills literature. Second, we aim to identify the conceptual and methodological limitations of existing literature, with a particular emphasis on addressing scientific gaps that exist in facilitating our understanding of optimal parental involvement. Third, we aim to inspire future researchers and practitioners in this area by considering challenges and opportunities that exist by empowering parents and their potential capabilities more fully.

### **Parental involvement in organised youth sport settings**

Researchers have committed extensively to understanding how parents may positively or negatively affect the quality of young people's experiences in sport (Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017). When evaluating this body of work, a diversity of what we will term 'psychosocial outcomes' emerges due to different types of parental practices and involvement. Such outcomes range from motivational regulations, affective responses, self-perceptions, moral behaviour, coping strategies, and well-being consequences that have been reported or displayed by young athletes through both quantitative and qualitative investigations (Berrow, Knight, & Hudson, 2018; Knight & Holt, 2014). Several elements of parental involvement have been found to influence these psychosocial outcomes including; parenting style; parenting practices across contexts (e.g., used at home, in relation to training, and those displayed at competitions); and parental relationships and interactions with others in the sporting environment. A brief overview of these three areas is provided below (a full review is beyond the scope of this paper, Berrow et al. (2018) provide further details).

**Parenting style.** A growing number of studies (e.g., Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009; Juntumma, Keskivaara, & Punamäki, 2005; Sapieja, Dunn, & Holt, 2011) point to the influence of general parenting styles (defined as “a constellation of attitudes toward the child that are communicated to the child and that, taken together, create an emotional climate in which the parent’s behaviours are expressed” (Darling & Steinberg, 1993, p. 488) on certain psychosocial outcomes in children. Specifically, research indicates that autonomy-supportive or authoritative parenting positively impacts on children, by reducing amotivation and increasing more self-determined forms of motivation (e.g., Chew & Wang, 2010; Gagné, Ryan, & Bargmann, 2010). Further, an authoritative parenting style is associated with enhanced sport satisfaction (Juntumma et al., 2005) and higher rates of healthy and non-perfectionism (Sapieja et al., 2011), while an autonomy supportive approach is associated with enhanced well-being (Gagné et al., 2010). In contrast, controlling or authoritarian parenting styles have been associated with reduced self-esteem and vitality (Gagné et al., 2010) as well as increased likelihood for young athletes to engage in norm-breaking behaviours (Juntumma et al., 2005).

**Parenting practices across contexts.** Researchers in youth sport have made a frequent distinction between parental behaviours or practices that are perceived to be supportive and those that are viewed as pressuring. Generally, positive psychosocial outcomes are associated with supportive behaviours displayed at home, in training and at competitions, while negative or detrimental psychosocial outcomes are associated with pressure, particularly in relation to competitions (Knight et al., 2017). For instance, the provision of tangible support, particularly in the form of money and time, from parents is especially important (e.g., Baxter-Jones & Maffuli, 2003; Wuerth, Lee,

& Alfermann, 2004). Such tangible support is identified by athletes as a necessary requirement to ensure children's participation and progression in sport (Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005) and thus is the basis to subsequent psychosocial development. The provision of tangible support from parents demonstrates to children that they value their sporting involvement (Boiche, Guillet, Bois, & Sazzarin, 2011), which can enhance feelings of enjoyment (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008), competence (Hassell, Sabiston, & Bloom, 2010), motivation (Knight, Little, Harwood, & Goodger, 2016) and persistence (Dunn, Dorsch, King, & Rothlisberger, 2016). However, athletes can become aware of their parents' commitment and subsequently perceive pressure to "repay" their parents (Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010).

Recent research has shown a direct relationship between the amount of money parents commit to their child's sport and subsequent perceptions of pressure reported by child-athletes (Dunn et al., 2016). When children perceive pressure from parents, it can impact on continued engagement in sport (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2009), their sport enjoyment (Amado, Sanchez-Olivia, Gonzalez-Ponce, Pulido-Gonzalez, & Sanchez-Miguel, 2015; Babkes & Weiss, 1999), anxiety levels (Power & Woolger, 1994; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986), and engagement in unsporting behaviours (Leo, Sanchez-Miguel, Sanchez-Olivia, Amado, & García-Calvo, 2015). Further, **at competitions**, if parents are focused on winning, punish children, or provide critical feedback it can reduce children's perceptions of competence (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Knight, Dorsch, Osai, Haderlie, Sellars, 2016), and increase both anxiety (Bean, Jeffery-Tosoni, Baker, & Fraser-Thomas, 2016; Elliott & Drummond, 2017) and fear of failure (Sagar & Lavalley, 2010). It is also noteworthy that high parental expectations

and concerns about parental criticism is associated with unhealthy or negative forms of perfectionism (Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Miller, 2006; Sagar & Stoeber, 2009).

In contrast, when children perceive their parents focus on effort, self-referenced achievement, and personal improvement **at competitions and in relation to training** (creating a parental task-involving/mastery climate) athletes report higher levels and quality of motivation (Knight et al., 2016; McArdle & Duda, 2004), commitment (D'Arripe-Longueville, Hars, Debois, & Calmels, 2009), perceived competence (Atkins, Johnson, Force, & Petrie, 2013), enjoyment (Morris & Kavussanu, 2008), effort (Gutiérrez, Caus, & Ruiz, 2005), self-esteem (O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2014), and sporting behaviour (Davies, Babkes-Stellino, Nichols, & Coleman, 2016). Further, praise and encouragement with constructive feedback after **competitions** can facilitate motivation (Keegan, Spray, Harwood, & Lavalley, 2010; Knight et al., 2016) and increase confidence and positive affect (Elliott & Drummond, 2017). Positive reinforcement can increase perceptions of competence and effort (Babkes & Weiss, 1999) and help athletes rationalise their thoughts and feelings (Connaughton, Wadey, Hanton, & Jones, 2008).

However, the impact of parental feedback on psychosocial outcomes, **particularly the feedback provided at competitions**, appears to be influenced by children's individual preferences and their perceptions of their parents' knowledge (Knight et al., 2010; Knight et al., 2016). In general, children have reported that when parents have appropriate knowledge about their sport (either as a result of playing or coaching experience) or possess pertinent life or sport experiences, the provision of sport-specific information **in relation to competitions** (i.e., tactical or technical feedback) is positively received and enhances enjoyment, concentration, and



confidence. In contrast, unsolicited sport-specific feedback before or after competitions from parents deemed to be lacking in the necessary knowledge or experience is described to lead to feelings of confusion, frustration, or pressure (Knight et al., 2010; Knight et al., 2016).

**Parental relationships and interactions with others.** Parents engage with many other individuals within the youth sport environment (i.e., other parents, coaches, and officials; Harwood & Knight, 2015). Although surprisingly limited in scope, available research indicates that the quality of parental interactions with other individuals impacts on children's sport experience (cf. Holt et al., 2009; Omli & LaVoi, 2011). For instance, when parents engage with other parents (either of children on the same team, or opposing team) in a respectful and supportive manner, children report that it enhances their enjoyment of sport (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009). Similarly, children have explained that encouraging and congratulating other children on their team and their opponents can also enhance their enjoyment, increase motivation, and reduce embarrassment (Knight et al., 2010). In contrast, if parents engage in angry exchanges with other parents it can lead to children feeling embarrassed or anxious (Knight et al., 2010; Omli & LaVoi, 2011).

The way in which parents interact with their child's coach is also reported to affect children's sport experience (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2009; Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005). For instance, athletes and coaches have explained that if parents question coaches or interfere with practices it can result in feelings of pressure or anxiety for children (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2008; Lauer et al., 2010). In contrast, open and honest relationships between parents and coaches can increase a child's trust in their coach, help parents to learn about their child's sport and be more

206 optimally involved, and enable parents to help children to solve athlete-coach conflicts  
207 (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005; Knight & Holt, 2014). Further, parents and coaches  
208 can both actively influence the development of athlete's coping strategies (Tamminen  
209 & Holt, 2012; Tamminen, McEwen, & Crocker, 2016) by questioning and reminding  
210 athletes of previous coping attempts, sharing their own experiences, and initiating  
211 conversations about coping. If coaches and parents work together to implement these  
212 strategies, it is likely that athletes' development of coping strategies will be enhanced.

213 **Methodological caveats and limitations of the literature.** The body of  
214 evidence reviewed above offers extensive insights into the types of parental  
215 involvement that have been positively and negatively associated with a range of  
216 psychosocial outcomes in child-athletes. However, there are several methodological  
217 points that are important to share at this juncture. First, we would caution the reader  
218 against simply concluding what is 'good or bad' sport parenting particularly given the  
219 lack of research on certain areas. For instance, when considering the "best" parenting  
220 style to use within youth sport there is tremendous homogeneity in the populations  
221 being studied (Berrow et al., 2018; Harwood & Knight, 2015) and this limits our  
222 understanding of cultural and developmental influences. Moreover, family structure is  
223 seldom reported within existing literature which restricts our appreciation of the roles  
224 or influence of parental involvement outside that of traditional heterosexual parenting.

225 Second, we are at great risk of oversimplifying parenting and parental  
226 involvement in sport (cf. Knight et al., 2017) because behaviours within studies are  
227 often broadly categorised as supportive or pressuring. The meaning of these terms is  
228 often vague and can be applied to a range of individual practices from autonomy-  
229 support, support of basic psychological needs, tangible, informational, and emotional

support, and positive-reinforcement (Berrow et al., 2018). Furthermore, distinct concepts are occasionally conflated and labelled ‘support’, such as the facilitation of sport participation and autonomy-support (Anderson, Funk, Elliott, & Smith, 2003). Consequently, when we talk about pressure or support, we might actually be making reference to a range of different practices that may make their own unique contribution to children’s sport experiences and developmental outcomes.

The exact impact of different parental practices on children is further complicated because how children perceive their parents’ behaviours appears to be influenced by the timing of the behaviour (e.g., comments before competitions may have a different impact to those after events; Elliott & Drummond, 2015, Knight et al., 2010), the presence of others within the environment (e.g., the coach-created motivational climate might mediate the impact that a parent-initiated climate has on a child; Amorose, Anderson-Butcher, Newman, Fraina, & Iachini, 2016), and also specific parent and child characteristics such as parent beliefs or goals regarding sport involvement or the quality of the relationship between a parent and child (Knight et al., 2017). Thus, when we consider parental involvement in isolation or devoid of contextual information, we risk creating an incomplete and potentially misleading picture of how parents influence young people.

Finally, perhaps the most predominant reflection of studies that have employed parent and athlete samples from traditional, organised youth sport settings, is that few have investigated the potential role of parents on the child’s perceived or actual development of specific social, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural skills. The body of literature is characterised by **quantitative** cross-sectional associations between (perceived) **parental behaviours (generally situation-specific and negative)** and

consequences reported by athletes and qualitative (often one-off) interviews with athletes reflecting upon parental involvement usually at competitions. Beyond Tamminen's work on the development of adolescent coping skills (Tamminen & Holt, 2012; Tamminen et al., 2016), there appear to be few empirical investigations in these traditional youth sport samples that have examined the parental involvement with a specific focus upon how parents may facilitate the development or growth (perceived or objective) of enduring psychosocial assets that are so important for development (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000; Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005).

One potential reason for this is that although the general mission of traditional, organised youth sport programs should be focused on a high quality, enriching experience, the actual focus of youth sport imbalances maladaptively towards athlete skill development and competition outcomes. Forneris, Camiré and Trudel (2012) provide some empirical support for this proposition in their study of high school coaches, parents, athletes, and administrators' perceptions of the youth sport mission, experiences, and expectations. Their findings indicated lapses in awareness of the broader mission of youth sport alongside discrepancies in what stakeholders expected in terms of the integration of life skills and positive sport values compared to perceptions of the degree to which these skills and values were actually being integrated within their programme. As an alternative to youth sport programs that primarily focus on sport skill development, sport-based PYD programs view young people as resources to be developed and intentionally focus on developmentally-rich experiences through their involvement in organised activities (Holt & Neely, 2011; Petitpas et al., 2005). Importantly, parents and family are viewed as key external assets within PYD research (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002) and so it is pertinent to

appraise what we know about parental involvement in the context of the sport-based PYD literature.

### **Parental involvement within sport-based PYD research**

A sport-based PYD approach can be applied to all forms of youth sport program whether or not the primary focus is on intervention or prevention to reduce negative adolescent behaviours, life skills development and transfer, or athletic potential and sport skill acquisition (Petitpas et al., 2005). However, in noting the importance of the context within which the activity occurs, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (NRCIM, 2002) proposed eight necessary contextual features for optimising development outcomes. These include a physically and psychologically safe environment that has appropriate structure and supportive relationships, integrating school, family, and the community where possible. There also needs to be opportunities to belong and feel valued in order to develop confidence in addition to the presence of positive social norms. Opportunities to build and develop new skills (e.g., both physical and internal, psychosocial assets) must also be present (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Aligned with the NRCIM, Petitpas et al. (2005) specifically note: “Parents and guardians who become involved in their children’s activities and demonstrate a clear interest on a day-by-day basis without being intrusive, are in the best position to reinforce appropriate behaviours and attitudes” (p. 70). Côté, Turnnidge, and Evans’ (2014) Personal Assets Framework (PAF) for sport-based youth development also pays attention to the role that parents play in providing appropriate opportunities for young athletes to develop quality relationships that ultimately lead to better psychosocial development (i.e., the 4Cs – confidence, connection, character, and competence).

Most recently, Holt and colleagues (2017) used a meta-synthesis design to systematically synthesise key findings from the qualitative PYD literature, resulting in a grounded theory of PYD through sport. Consistent with earlier frameworks, their theory emphasises the salient role of parents and proposes that: (1) distal ecological systems (e.g., community, policy, culture) and individual factors influence PYD through sport; (2) A PYD climate (based on relationships between athletes and peers, parents, and other adults) can produce PYD outcomes (i.e., through implicit processes); (3) PYD outcomes can be attained if a life skills program focus (involving life skill building activities and transfer activities) is in place (i.e., through explicit processes) and in the presence of a PYD climate; (4) The combined effects of a PYD climate and a life skills focus will produce more PYD outcomes than a PYD climate alone, and; (5) Gaining PYD outcomes in and through sport will facilitate transfer and enable youth to thrive and contribute to their communities. The theory offers an important extension and contribution to the literature, with its attempt to make a clear distinction between the influence of implicit processes (i.e., intentional yet natural activities and interactions that foster development) and the value of explicit life skill programs in supplementing parent (coach and peer) initiated PYD climates (see Bean et al., 2018; Gould & Carson, 2008; Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Turnnidge, Côté, & Hancock, 2014 for reviews).

Although each of these latter models implicate parents (alongside coaches and peers) in creating an appropriate social environment for promoting and reinforcing psychosocial development, parents have actually received limited scientific attention in the sport-based PYD literature. Specifically, in Holt and colleagues' (2017) meta-synthesis only 9 (14%) of the 63 studies collected data from parents and very few of these studies placed the parent as an active participant in their investigation (i.e.,

collected data on the parent's role-related behaviours and activities per se). The majority of studies explored parents' perceptions of the benefits of sport and the role it can play in their child's development (e.g., Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2009; Holt, Kingsley, Tink, & Scherer, 2011; Light, 2010; Neely & Holt, 2014; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008) or their perceptions (alongside coaches and peers) of sport-based PYD program quality (Hardcastle, Tye, Glassey, & Hagger, 2013; Hodge, Kanters, Forneris, Bocarro, & Sayre-McCord, 2017; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2011).

Within many sport-based PYD intervention studies (including both implicit and explicit development programs), the role of parents within the processes of psychosocial development have been posited even when parents have not been part of the intervention (see Camiré, Trudel, & Bernard, 2013; Hodge et al., 2017; Strachan, Côté, & Deakin, 2011; Turnnidge, Vierimaa, & Côté, 2012). These studies position parents as potential mechanisms for delivery and reinforcement in explicit PYD programs particularly with regards to supporting key messages and facilitating life skill transfer. For example, in one of the more targeted studies of the role of the family in a sport-based life skills program, Hodge and colleagues (2017) found that parents used specific events (e.g., car rides and dinnertime) as opportunities to recognise and reinforce what children had learned and to ask how such insights could be applied outside of the sporting context. Similarly, Neely and Holt (2014) highlighted how parents seized upon 'teachable moments' around lessons learned through sport when documenting the strategies they used to help facilitate PYD.

In conclusion, as Dorsch and Vierimaa (2017) surmised, although PYD researchers have procured substantive knowledge on the pedagogical strategies and activities enacted by model youth sport coaches to teach life skills (e.g., Camiré et al.,

2012; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007), much less is known about how sport parents can facilitate psychosocial development as part of the youth sport experience. This is largely due to (semi) structured parental involvement and intentional sport parenting strategies (and importantly their impact) remaining absent from empirical interventions.

### **Addressing gaps in youth sport parenting research and practice**

From the outset of this article we have focused intentionally on young people's right to high quality developmental experiences in and through sport, a right that we believe most, if not all, parents would endorse for their child's sporting experience. Such experiences are those that comprise positive 'in situ' psychological states and social behaviour linked to the sport activity (e.g., recreational play, practice, competition), and those that help to develop more enduring psychosocial attributes as critical resources for adult life (Lerner et al., 2000). Our review of studies in more traditional, organised youth sport suggests parents can influence children's experiences through associations with motivational, cognitive, social, and affective responses. However, the literature falls short of illustrating how parents can proactively and intentionally contribute to their child's psychosocial development. Sport-based PYD researchers have targeted psychosocial development in a range of settings and populations (e.g., after-school, high school programs) through implicit and explicit intervention processes (Bean et al., 2018; Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Turnnidge et al., 2014), yet parents remain 'peripheral' in these studies. Moreover, there is an absence of research which has explicitly examined the impact that parents may have on the effectiveness of psychosocial or life skill development interventions with young athletes.



The current **evidence base** presents opportunities in respect of research questions that remain to be asked, and in more innovative applied research designs incorporating parents. One justifiable question to consider is the degree to which **coaches, organisations and governing bodies** should intentionally involve parents from the outset **to facilitate** a youth sport **environment** and experience that prioritizes children's psychosocial development (**both in and through sport**). We know from research and personal experience as practitioners that parents **are often not** afforded this opportunity, potentially limiting the benefits their child (and they) may gain from sport participation. **Where an organisation's program focuses on sport skill or talent development, coaches may be less inviting of parental involvement (Gould et al., 2008).** Presently, as applied researchers **we are frustrated by** the underutilisation of parents as a valuable resource to support coaches and other stakeholders for the betterment of child-athletes. Interestingly, beyond Harwood and Swain (2002), we could not locate a single, empirical intervention study where parents and coach(es) have intentionally worked *in tandem* to influence or improve general or specific child-athlete psychosocial factors. In addition, few studies exploring the processes and impact of parent-coach-athlete relationships on athlete factors exist (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005; Smoll, Cumming, & Smith, 2011), but none of these are intervention studies comprised of empirical data from the athletes. From the position, therefore, of advancing more proactive parental involvement to facilitate the development of their child, a number of research avenues and designs emerge as clear opportunities.

**Raising parental awareness and facilitating opportunities to support psychosocial development.** If one takes a humanistic perspective towards parents as valued resources who are **well-intentioned** and capable of both learning from coaches

and offering insights into optimizing their child's experience, then it is important for researchers to **raise parents' awareness of how** they can explicitly support their child's psychosocial development **and facilitate opportunities for parents to engage in this manner**. This may include intentionally educating or sensitising parents to the psychosocial qualities and life skills that may be derived through sport (cf. Neely & Holt, 2014), and gaining their perspective on how they can promote and support the development of each attribute. **By encouraging sport support staff to work with parents more proactively** to raise their awareness and facilitate opportunities for engagement, we will also better understand any challenges they foresee in the implementation of proposed strategies. Qualitative or mixed-methods research may afford scholars a clearer insight into the prospect and feasibility of parents contributing to the development of their child's psychosocial assets **in sport and across different settings** (see Johnston, Harwood & Minniti, 2013).

**Improving coach education to facilitate parent-coach relationships.** We believe that making parental involvement more **focused and targeted** towards facilitating psychosocial development is largely dependent upon the philosophy of the coach or organisation. In many respects, coaches are the 'gatekeepers' to a child-athlete development program and our **experience** is that parents are often kept 'at arms length' by coaches and National Governing Bodies. The limited study of the processes of parents and coaches working together for the child-athlete is indicative evidence of this. The **continual referral** to 'pushy', '**overinvolved**' and 'demanding' parents reflects a **well-ingrained discourse** that still appears to irrationally dominate pockets of the youth sport sector (Knight & Newport, 2017). Mindful of the implications of such negative views, researchers could seek to better understand the landscape of coach education and

development in relation to a coach's understanding of the needs and skills of parents, as well as the psychology of parent-coach relationships.

In reviewing the strategies employed by high school coaches to facilitate PYD through sport, Camiré et al. (2012) noted that coaches developed a well-considered coaching philosophy and presented it to parents and athletes to ensure everyone knew the approach that the coach was going to take that year. Intentional planning of developmental strategies into coaching activities and opportunities to practice life skills in sport were also deliberate features. These coaches appeared educated to purposefully offer the athlete opportunities to facilitate their athletic/talent development in tandem with their psychosocial development (see Harwood & Johnston, 2016). Integrating parents within this process would therefore appear pertinent and it is perhaps timely for researchers to appraise how coach development, education, and qualification systems prepare coaches (see Bean & Forneris, 2016) to collaborate with parents to enhance performance and psychosocial development. Only by addressing how applied researchers may influence coaches and coach development systems to inherently value and enact a psychosocial approach (Bean & Forneris, 2016; Lacroix, Camiré, & Trudel, 2008; McAllister, Blinde & Weiss, 2000) will we 'open the door' for parents to be fully integrated into programs and recognised as valuable collaborators (Strachan et al., 2011).

**Collaborating with coaches through well designed interventions.** Research indicates that the interactions parents have with others in youth sport contexts impacts the child's experience (Gould, Pierce, Wright, Lauer, & Nalepa, 2016; Knight & Holt, 2013; Omli & LaVoi, 2011). However, little attention has been given to actually understanding what underpins successful or effective coach-parent or parent-parent

relationships (Holt & Knight, 2014). As applied researchers, two of the most common questions we are asked is how can coaches' work better with parents? And how can parents develop better relationships with coaches? Yet there is a dearth of empirical research that has explicitly examined relationship development and the subsequent impact that improving these relationships might have on children's psychosocial outcomes (Knight & Gould, 2016). Longitudinal, intervention designs serve as promising mechanisms to answer such questions. For example, grounded in an elite youth soccer academy, Harwood (2008) reported on the support roles of parents to coaches and players in conjunction with a psychosocial coaching efficacy intervention. The primary focus here was placed on educating and empowering coaches to more explicitly integrate the psychosocial concepts of commitment, communication, concentration, control, and confidence into soccer practice. Parents were sensitised to the 5Cs in group workshops and supported the coaches in helping their sons to complete training and match reflection journals focused on demonstrations of the 5Cs in soccer. Findings over the three-month intervention supported improvements in coaching efficacy to integrate the 5Cs as well as perceived developments in the squad. In qualitative follow-up interviews, parents noted the value and perceived impacts of the work, but no data on parent practices or behaviour was gathered.

The future direction here lies in attention to more sophisticated and novel designs. Applied researchers and practitioners should look to incorporate parents more fully in the psychosocial education and delivery process and seek to observe and examine the combined effects of parent education, working in parallel with the coach / coach education, on indices of psychosocial development in the athlete. Opportunities for parent-coach collaborations exist for team and individual sports, and it would be

interesting to generate knowledge on different sport types and cultures in terms of successful pedagogical strategies and challenges encountered.

**Working on the “right” assets at the right time.** A final, more advanced consideration for applied researchers working in this field of youth sport is to achieve a more detailed understanding of when and how parental involvement may most impact on an athlete’s developmental assets. It is recognised that there are certain developmental stages where parental influence upon the child is more salient (e.g., Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). However, our scientific appreciation of questions such as: ‘Do mothers versus fathers have greater impact on helping adolescent daughter-athletes to master their emotions?’; ‘At what age should parents encourage greater ownership, organisational, and decision-making skills?’, or ‘Which life skills introduced to adolescent athletes are particularly easy for parents to reinforce, and which are most difficult?’ is empirically limited. It may be that parental influences through facilitating child input, role modelling, feedback, support, and ‘teachable moments’ are less impactful and salient than the parallel roles of coaches or peers at different ages. However, we need data to arrive at any evidence-based conclusions.

#### **The Next 50 Years: Challenging Systems and Improving Policies**

Acknowledging the 50 years of FEPSAC as the leading body in European Sport and Exercise Psychology, it is fitting to provide some concluding remarks that reflect a vision of what progressive research should be striving to achieve for incoming generations. Improving the study of parental involvement and, by definition, the experience and development of young athletes means urging scholars towards research initiatives that will raise the profile of parents within the fulfilment of youth sport developmental goals. This can involve efforts to inform the policies and practice of

youth sport federations or governing bodies to more skilfully empower parents, recognising that organizations often require or request guidance regarding how to best integrate research into practice (Holt et al., 2018). To achieve this, researchers must look beyond knowledge acquisition and consider knowledge translation and dissemination when designing research studies to narrow the research-to-practice gap and ensure findings make more of a contribution to practice in youth sport settings (see Gould, 2016).

Our four priority areas of research conceptually challenge the functioning of systems in which parents and athletes are stakeholders. Drawing from Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological theory, it is clear that much of our research on sport parents has existed within the ecological *microsystem* – the ecological niche or context that is closest to directly influencing the child. However, microsystems comprising coaching or parental attitudes and behaviour are influenced by a series of more distal outer systems or contexts (see Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008) including *mesosystems* and *exosystems* (e.g., restrictions on parental involvement due to work pressures/culture; how a coach is evaluated in his/her job environment by an employer; how parents are perceived by coaches and administrators within different clubs and sports organisations; the coach education and qualification framework of a national governing body; traditions regarding parental involvement). Notably, the wider social, cultural, and political context within which these inner environments operate is known as a *macrosystem* and this system sets the aims, operating standards, and measures of effectiveness. Consequently, perhaps the most effective manner through which we might see changes in our practices relating to sport parents is if a change occurs within the macrosystem. For example, if governments and their funded

national sport federations adopted a stronger political stance on the duty of care, psychosocial development, and well-being of young athletes (e.g., as requested by DCMS, 2016), the criteria against which sport programs and coaches are judged would start to change. Ideally this would translate into improved coach education, more holistic philosophies, and a clearer parental engagement and empowerment strategy in clubs and youth sport settings to ensure that all individuals within an athletes' microsystem could successfully, effectively, and appropriately contribute to athletes' psychosocial development and wellbeing. Such a chain of conditions and consequences aligns with Holt and colleagues (2017) model – beginning with the most distal ecological system.

With the ideal of macrosystem change in mind, we believe that researchers can employ stronger designs in consideration of Bronfenbrenner's model that offer better data on what improvements in child development are possible through youth sport with more proactive parental engagement. Recent studies have illustrated the value of delivering intentional group-based or online sport parent interventions (i.e., Dorsch, King, Dunn, Osai, & Tulane, 2017; Thrower, Harwood, & Spray, 2018) through improvements in parental confidence, task-orientated parent-child communication, support, and warmth. However, although such initial findings are important in the context of relational factors that underpin a PYD climate (Holt et al., 2017), interventions with parents targeting specific 'in situ' (e.g., enjoyment, reduced anxiety, focus) and long-term child developmental outcomes (e.g., enhanced confidence, emotional regulation and coping skills, communication skills, self-awareness, leadership) are necessary. Applied researchers interested in this area are encouraged to draw upon the well-established, mainstream parent education and training literature

base (e.g., Breitenstein, Gross, & Christophersen, 2014; Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008).

A diversity of research designs may serve as pertinent mechanisms for capturing how more empowered parents can exert their capabilities in engaging with coaches and the youth sport community in best practices to help their child's developmental growth and overall experiences in and through sport. Longitudinal mixed methods approaches with attention to education, relationship development, support, and reinforcement practices, as well as targeted organisational and club change are perhaps most exciting as they may combine intervention, observation, and participant reflection with multiple stakeholders (e.g., parents, coaches, athletes, other parents, peers). We recognise that such research may be time consuming and not without organisational, political and cultural barriers (see Dorsch et al., in press). Nevertheless, the last 25 years of research in sport psychology is characterised more by studies '*of parents*' opposed to '*with parents*'; it is timely that we more closely examine what parents are capable of as opposed to studying them as incidental consumers and 'influencers' in environments that can purposely limit their engagement with the research process and subsequent practice.

In conclusion, we have adopted a vantage point in this **commemorative** article that intentionally critiques and questions the health of sport parent research in terms of its scientific contribution to the developmental goals of sport participation for young people. In the United Kingdom, we are presently in the midst of a political discourse characterised by cultural worries over a lack of duty of care, safeguarding, athlete mental health, and inappropriate environments for young people involved in sport (Knight, Harwood, & Gould, 2017). Such environments may foster delays and deficits



566 in life skills as opposed to progression, and may not be unique to the UK. We believe  
567 that parents are more than capable, especially when equipped with the right support  
568 from others in the youth sport environment to ensure more positive developmental  
569 outcomes and sustained participation in youth sport, yet research has not examined the  
570 facets of this proposition fully. We trust that researchers will engage the challenges  
571 presented here.

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