

performance with attention to health, wellbeing, and development. Practitioners who integrate effectively with coaches and support staff create the opportunity to develop a practical, educational platform for athletes to engage richly with all that sport psychology has to offer. Critically, this engagement is one where young athletes view sport psychology not with any 'old school stigma' or 'cynical derogation' but with a belief that psychological skills and strategies are as relevant, natural, and invaluable as gym work, serving practice, or shooting drills.

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# 27

## UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING WITH PARENTS OF YOUNG ATHLETES

Camilla J. Knight and Rachael A. Newport

*Don't just tell parents that they're doing everything wrong, it's hard enough being a parent as it is, everyone judging what you're doing all the time.*

For the last ten years, through my research and practice, I (Camilla) have had the privilege of talking to hundreds of parents of young athletes. I have spoken to them about their experiences, their needs, and, of course, their children. I have sat, silenced by the tears streaming down their face, as they shared the heartache of watching their child's world come crumbling down as they were cut from teams, criticised by coaches, or experienced severe injuries. I have shared in their joy as they have described seeing their child rewarded for their efforts, finally mastering a skill they have been practising for weeks, or receiving positive feedback from their coach. I've been shocked by the tales of divorce, the limited social lives, and the deterioration in parents' mental and physical health as they have committed to helping their children realise their dreams. And, too often, I've bubbled with frustration as I've heard parent recall times when they were judged, ignored, or criticised as they tried their best to support their children.

Through all these stories and emotions, I constantly return to the opening quote. In 2005, my mother made this throwaway comment as we discussed my impending dissertation research on tennis parents. Over the last decade, as I have gained an increasing appreciation for just how hard it can be to parent children involved in sport, this comment has increasingly guided my work as a practitioner and a researcher. I am unashamedly parent-focused in my work; I seek to demonstrate the value and importance of parents, and, most importantly, try to create cultures that support parents as they attempt to support their children. This is not an approach that is easy, nor is it one that is always welcomed by sports organisations or coaches, but it is one that I believe is extremely important and we hope to illustrate why through this chapter.

Throughout this book numerous references are made to the importance of including parents in work with young athletes (see Chapters 11, 12, 21, and 24) and Travis Dorsch (Chapter 10) has provided excellent insights into strategies for educating parents to optimise their involvement. In the current chapter, we seek to add to Travis' work by providing insights into the experiences of parents. Particularly we are focused on exploring how an understanding of these experiences can inform the work we do with parents to help them support their children. However, we are well aware that it is not always easy for practitioners to engage with parents. Thus, we also describe some of the strategies we use when working with parents, as well as a small selection of the *numerous* lessons we have learnt (and continue to learn) through this work.

### (Mis)perceptions of parents

Prior to examining the experiences of parents in sport, we believe it is important to first reflect upon what we, and others, think about parents. As practitioners, we can play an important role in advocating for parents and in helping to optimise their involvement in sport (see Chapter 10; Lafferty & Triggs, 2014; Vincent & Christensen, 2015). However, just as our consulting philosophy and theoretical orientations impact upon our work with young athletes (see Chapters 20 and 24), our perceptions of parents will impact upon how we engage with them (Knight & Harwood, 2015). A quick perusal of major media outlets provides numerous examples of inappropriate or negative parental involvement in sport (e.g. Kinder, 2014; White, 2017). Such stories are often shocking, detailing abusive and pressuring behaviours from parents towards (adolescent) referees, coaches, and children themselves, and leave the reader to question why any parent would ever behave in such a manner. As a national coach once said, 'What is it about youth sport that makes successful, rational adults lose all perspective?'

In seeking to explain such behaviours, media stories often draw on traditional explanations, including: parents being overly focused on winning, parents expecting a return on their financial/time investments, and 'failed athlete' parents living their unfulfilled dreams through their children (cf. Paton, 2014; Philipson, 2013). Similarly, when recalling their experiences, coaches often provide similar explanations for the behaviour of 'overinvolved' and 'pushy' parents (e.g. Knight & Harwood, 2009; Ross, Mallett, & Parkes, 2015). However, despite the consistency with which these explanations are provided, empirical evidence to support such statements is limited (Holt & Knight, 2014). This may be due to limitations in research itself (i.e. it is often difficult to engage with parents who demonstrate such behaviours to understand what leads to this involvement) or because such explanations generally oversimplify complex parent behaviours (see Chapter 10 for further details).

One thing that is common across such explanations of negative or inappropriate parental behaviour is that they place the blame on individual parents; the implication is that parents should know better; they should just control their emotions and keep things in perspective. However, decades of study into human and parenting

behaviours (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Grolnick, 2003; McConnell, 1974) demonstrate that parenting is much more complicated than simply knowing what to do and doing it. We cannot imagine there are many parents who do not know that tripping an opposing team member (Kinder, 2014) or screaming at child referees (White, 2017) is less than optimal behaviour, yet we still see these behaviours. Understanding the dominant narrative about parents and our limited explanations for their involvement is, in our opinion, an important first step in effectively working with parents.

### Understanding parents' experiences in youth sport

So what is it like to parent a child in sport? As neither of us are parents we do not have a personal appreciation of the intensity of the emotional bond between a parent and a child, nor can we fully understand just how hard it is to juggle the various demands associated with parenting. However, if we do not attempt to understand what it is like to have a child involved in youth sport, how can we expect parents to accept or welcome our support? Fortunately, over the last ten years, there has been a growth in research examining parents' experiences in youth sport (see Holt & Knight, 2014, and Chapter 10 for further details) and it is this literature that we draw on to underpin the work we conduct with parents. As a full review of this literature is beyond the scope of this chapter, we have identified select areas that we deem particularly important for understanding parents' experiences and involvement.

### Emotional demands and the parent-child relationship

In 2010, Maria Ana Pareira, mother of Rafael Nadal, shared:

...when I'm watching a match, I see from a distance whether or not he has problems, and when he does, I want the match to end. I can't watch him suffer, it's too much for me ... When he wins a big one it's impressive because at home I see how much he works, how much he struggles. From the outside you only see the spectacle and, make no mistake, this world is very hard, it's full of obstacles. (Rafaholics.com, 2010)

As the mother of one of the greatest tennis players in the modern era, one might be forgiven for thinking that Maria Ana would be used to watching her son compete. However, sharing the sentiments of many parents of young athletes (cf. Clarke, Harwood, & Cushion, 2016; Harwood and Knight, 2009a; Knight & Holt, 2013a, 2013b), as a mother, Maria Ana wants to protect her son and she shares in his struggles and his disappointments.

Such empathy from parents has been identified as a contributing factor to the verbal behaviours parents display on the sideline (e.g. Holt, Tammien, Black, Selin, & Wall, 2008) and how they react to their children's performances (e.g. Burgess,

Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016). Parents consistently indicate that watching their children compete can be very challenging, especially when they see them struggling or disappointed (Knight & Holt, 2013a). This challenge can be further exacerbated because parents know they are going to have to try and comfort their child after the competition (Knight & Holt, 2013b) and they often do not know what to say (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b).

As practitioners, when seeking to support parents, we have found it useful to first try and understand the emotions they are experiencing and then introduce different activities to help them manage their emotions (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Such strategies include:

- Helping parents to anticipate the emotions they might experience at competitions through the presentation and discussion of different scenarios. For instance, we ask parents to imagine their child being taken off for a 'poor performance' and then ask them to reflect upon the emotions they might experience. Through such reflection parents have an opportunity to understand how they might respond in different situations and identify *why* such emotions might arise.
- Working with parents to role-play different situations that are identified as particularly challenging. For instance, we act out different post-game conversations (e.g. when children have won and lost) and highlight the importance of consistency. When conducted in small groups, these activities have stimulated extensive discussion as parents develop a better understanding of their anticipated experiences.
- Giving parents general guidelines regarding what to say before, during, and after competitions. This was something that we were somewhat adverse to because of perceptions that we might be telling parents how to parent, but parents have consistently indicated that they want some guidance around this (Thrower, Harwood, & Spray, 2016). As such, we provide basic information regarding structuring pre- and post-game conversations, as well as some suggestions regarding competition behaviours. However, our first suggestion is always for parents to first talk to their individual child.
- Helping parents to develop emotional coping strategies. Parents have indicated that emotional coping strategies are one of the key ways in which they can manage the stressors they can encounter in youth sport (Burgess et al., 2016). As such, we also spend time teaching parents basic emotional coping strategies (e.g. breathing strategies, self-talk). By increasing their 'toolkit' of techniques (Harwood & Knight, 2015), we hope they feel better equipped to manage the emotional stressors they may encounter.
- When working with parents individually, we have sought to help them reappraise competitive situations by understanding what their child is gaining through challenging experiences. Evidence increasingly indicates that there is a need for children to experience some adversity to develop resilience and raising parents' awareness of this can facilitate reflection on their children's and

### Organisational demands and stressors

Over the last ten years, there has been a rapid increase in our understanding of environmental demands (stressors) that parents might experience (e.g. Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Harwood, Drew, & Knight, 2010; Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b). Such research is valuable because there is consistent evidence that parenting stress is associated with more punitive behaviours (Knight, Holt, & Tamminen, 2009). Studies by Harwood and colleagues (2009a, 2009b, 2010) indicated that parents of children involved in tennis and football experience numerous stressors, arising from three main sources: competitive, organisational, and developmental. The main competitive stressors relate to the ideas outlined above pertaining to children's performance and response to performances, while organisational stressors pertain to demands that arise as result of the broader organisational aspects of youth sport, and developmental stressors are parental concerns arising in relation to their child's future.

The organisational challenges that dominate research and our conversations with parents are the large financial and time demands associated with youth sport (e.g. Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Harwood et al., 2010, Knight & Harwood, 2009a, 2009b). Such demands can result in parents experiencing guilt over the lack of time spent with other children, restricted social lives, and in some cases limited career progression (Bean, Fortier, Post, & Chima, 2014). Unfortunately, in our work with parents, there is often little we can do to directly address these stressors or concerns. However, we have found the following two activities beneficial:

- Providing parents with safe, confidential environments in which to offload about the demands they are encountering. Then engaging in supported reflection to help parents reframe their experiences and understand the many benefits their children are gaining as a result of their support and commitment.
- Facilitating parent networks to encourage life sharing, social engagements, and develop parents' access to social support. Further, through participating in these networks parents are able to see that others are also experiencing similar challenges.

Many other organisational demands can arise, including interactions with coaches, competition and training structures, and expectations of sports organisations (e.g. Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2015; Harwood & Knight, 2009b). Given such an extensive range of organisational stressors, when seeking to work with parents we also try and include work with coaches, club managers, and sports organisations to help address some of these concerns. Consequently, we spend time:

- Encouraging parents and coaches to engage in open and honest communication. In such instances, we often have to work (very hard) with coaches to help them understand the benefits of communicating with parents before any issues

can arise. Structured approaches to sharing information and offering opportunities for parents to feed back can be useful.

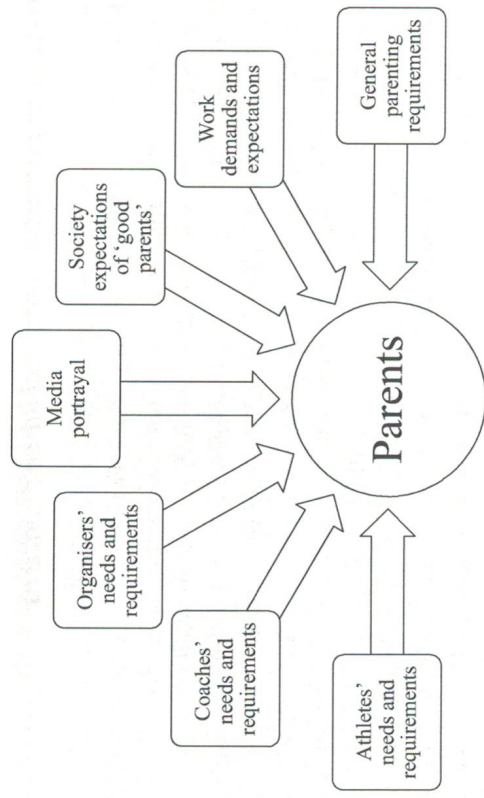
- Evaluating and assessing the needs of parents to identify what specific challenges they are encountering in that club or organisation. Then working with parents individually to identify potential strategies to manage these issues and taking collective feedback to managers or coaches to encourage change, or at the very least reflection.

### **Cultural demands and expectations**

In addition to the challenges encountered as a result of organisational demands, parents also recall stressors relating to their child's development, and particularly the pressures on them to make the 'right' decisions for their child's future (Harwood & Knight, 2009b). Parents want to provide their children with the best possible chances for success in the future and, as such, it is their responsibility to decide such things as how much time children should commit to sport, whether they should leave school and attend sports schools or academies, and how long they should support their children's sporting dreams when they look out of reach. Such decisions are made against broader societal expectations of what it means to be a 'good' parent in today's society (cf. Coakley, 2006).

Unfortunately, certain youth sport cultures might directly oppose what parents feel is best for their children or guide parents' decisions in a direction that might actually make their experience of developmental stressors worse (cf. Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Dorsch, Smith, Wilson, & McDonough, 2015). For instance, most youth football academies in the UK require children to leave school at 16 and limit the level to which they study, while in the tennis environment it has long been common for parents to take their children out of school for some of the day to train. For many parents, their child's education is paramount; however, through exposure and involvement in these sporting environments they can find themselves having to make difficult decisions regarding the balance of sport and school. Further, some sports cultures may endorse such things as unhealthy dieting practices (e.g. McMahon & Penney, 2015), winning over enjoyment (cf. Dorsch, Smith, Wilson, et al., 2015), and early specialisation (Chapter 6). As a result of being part of these cultures, parents can subsequently find themselves reinforcing such messages (Dorsch, Smith, Wilson, et al., 2015).

As with the organisational demands, given the impact that culture can have on parental involvement, we commit to critically appraising the environments in which we are working. Where appropriate and possible, we then seek to engage with coaches and organisations to review the culture they are creating (see Chapter 20 for further details). Unfortunately, however, this is often beyond the scope of our work. Overall, when seeking to understand the experiences of parents and subsequently help others (e.g. coaches, managers, sometimes parents themselves) to reflect upon the complexity of the parenting role, we find an (oversimplified) figure to be help-



**FIGURE 27.1** Influences and demands on parents

helping all parties (ourselves included) to remember that parental involvement in and beyond sport is continually influenced by expectations of, and interactions with, others. Only by examining, critiquing, and appreciating these external influences can we begin to appreciate just what it is like to try and support a young athlete.

### **Personal experiences of working with parents**

Practitioners may work with parents for many reasons and using varying approaches. Below we discuss some challenges we have encountered when working with parents in different situations, along with suggestions to overcome these.

#### ***Working with parents to support athletes' sport psychology programmes***

When working with individual athletes or teams, practitioners may also work with parents so that they understand and reinforce what their child is learning (see Chapters 22 and 24 for examples). In our experience, if expectations and methods of communication are established early, there are minimal demands on parents, and it is clear to parents why their engagement is valuable, this type of involvement is usually relatively straightforward. However, parents can harbour some reservations about engaging in sport psychology, often due to their lack of understanding of what sport psychology is (Chapter 22; Knight, Love, & Berrow). As such, clearly articulating what sport psychology is and how easily parents can support their children's psychological development is useful. Further, when feasible, we have found that offering informal drop-in sessions for parents to discuss the programme and ask questions confidentially is useful.

### *Working with parents to address children's concerns*

Practitioners may also engage with parents in response to information shared by children in one-to-one or group sessions. For example, when we have been working with young athletes in individual sessions they often describe aspects of their parent(s)' involvement that they dislike or wish would change. Then, having identified these concerns, they often ask us to talk to their parent about it. Depending upon the quality of the relationship that we have developed with both the child and parent(s), these conversations have varied from relatively easy to extremely challenging. When parents have engaged in the consultation process from the outset and asked us to tell them how they can better support their child, a brief, informal conversation is usually sufficient to encourage the parent to reflect on their involvement and then talk to their child (usually with our support) about what they could change, and most importantly, why this change is important. However, other parents have taken our attempts to share insights from their child as criticisms of them as parents or they have dismissed their child's experiences entirely.

We understand that no matter what our intentions are when delivering feedback to parents, it may be hard for them to hear. As such, we prepare for emotional reactions and spend time planning what we are going to say and ensuring that it is positively framed (e.g. what children would like from the parent rather than what they do not like). Further, we select a time and location that is appropriate for a conversation of this nature. Nevertheless, if negative reactions do occur it can be very challenging, especially if we feel we have let the child down. In such situations, we often want to end the conversation quickly and never return to it! However, rather than do this, we make sure that we take more time with these parents and try to help them understand that this information is being shared so that we can all work towards helping their child enjoy their sport involvement and perform to their best. We have found it particularly helpful to draw on stories and examples from other cases (without any identifying information) to help normalise and contextualise the feedback.

Further, we have learnt from our previous experiences that, rather than jumping into conversations with parents about their involvement, we must take time to ensure we have developed a strong and trusting relationship with both the parent and child and have demonstrated a commitment to them as a family. Relatively simple strategies such as texting parents when their child is competing and asking them how their child is performing and if they are enjoying the day, as well as asking the parent how the experience was for them, can go a long way in fostering such a relationship. Further, taking time to learn about the parent's day-to-day demands and experiences helps them understand that you are there to support them as well as their child. Once we have developed these relationships and helped parents to realise that we are always there to help, not judge, we find parents are much more receptive to conversations about their involvement.

### *Group support programmes*

Finally, we also work with groups of parents. In our group sessions, our aim is always to increase parents' feeling of support, so that they can subsequently enhance the support they provide to their children. Group sessions are often delivered at the request of coaches or sports organisations and range from one-off workshops to year-long programmes. In delivering these sessions, we frequently encounter an issue that appears to be common in youth sport parenting work (e.g. Richards & Winters, 2013; Vincent & Christensen, 2015). This problem is parent attendance at sessions, and particularly the attendance of parents who might benefit most from our support. To understand why parents do not always attend sessions, we have recently sought extensive feedback from parents we are working with and identified some strategies to overcome these, which are detailed below.

### *Marketing and value of the product*

When introducing sessions for parents, they (and coaches) are often sceptical about the purpose of the sessions, as well as the potential value or impact of them. When talking with parents, we have learnt that the negative portrayal of parents in the media, the perception that they should be 'dealt with' by coaches, and the idea that an 'outsider' might be trying to teach them how to parent all contribute to their scepticism and subsequent attendance. Given these concerns and through our conversations with parents we have learnt that:

- 1) Cultural change must accompany the programme. Simply introducing a support programme for parents within an environment that generally dismisses or criticises parents will be ineffective. Working with coaches, managers, and organisers to ensure a coherent message in the environment is necessary to ensure parents see that there is some value to the programme.
- 2) Spending time in the environment so parents are familiar with us and understand our purpose and philosophy is important. As such, rather than just turning up, delivering a session to parents, and leaving, we build in time to informally chat with parents around training sessions and competitions, and ensure that we provide regular communication to parents who have missed sessions.
- 3) The marketing of the sessions as supportive and parent-focused is critical. Providing examples of topics to be covered, the underlying rationale for the sessions, and the intended outcomes in advertising/marketing materials is useful. Further, it is important to provide clear expectations for the programme and the sessions so that parents know what they will gain from attending – and then ensure you deliver!

### *Location of delivery*

A practical challenge that we encounter is that parent sessions are usually delivered in classrooms or meeting rooms. When reflecting with parents on some of

them have told us that they associate being in a classroom with previous negative experiences of being in school and meeting rooms with work. Consequently, for some, the location creates negative perceptions of sessions before they have even arrived. Unfortunately, we usually do not have access to any other space for delivery, so all we can do is change how we deliver sessions to minimise similarities to work or school. For instance, we design our sessions to incorporate a range of practical scenarios and activities, rather than using powerpoints or lecturing. Further, we encourage parents to bring coffee and snacks to make the sessions seem less formal, and try to keep our delivery informal. Additionally, rather than leading sessions from the front, we often structure sessions around group discussion and encourage parents to take the lead in guiding conversations and topics.

### *Perception of sessions as adding to demands*

Based on our understanding of parents' experiences, we are always conscious that we do not want our sessions or programme to negatively impact upon the already overstretched parents. However, it is not uncommon for parents to refer to workshops as 'another thing we're expected to do'. By appropriately marketing sessions we try and minimise this perception and we also schedule sessions when children are at a training so that we do not add to the time commitments required from parents. Further, based on our engagement with parents we have learnt that the following steps are useful in overcoming this negative perception:

- Provide parents with as much information and notice to plan as possible.
- Avoid making changes to or disrupting the plan to both facilitate parents' scheduling but also demonstrate the importance of the programme.
- Allow parents to bring other children with them to sessions.
- Keep sessions short, interactive, and focused.
- Incorporate group discussions and encourage sharing of experiences.
- Tailor sessions and materials to the specific needs of parents following consultation with them.
- Engage in ongoing dialogue with parents to assess the utility of the programme and make changes based on this ongoing feedback.

### **Conclusion**

Children and parents travel through youth sport together; when children experience highs so too do their parents, and when children experience challenges or setbacks it is their parents who are there to pick up the pieces and help them continue moving forwards. For parents to be able to successfully and effectively support their children's sporting endeavours they too may need support. However, for this support to be welcomed and positively received it needs to be provided in a manner

young athletes are facing. Parents are the linchpins in youth sport and demonstrating an appreciation for everything they do is an important first step in engaging and working with them.

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To mum and dad for always supporting me;  
To all the young athletes, parents, and coaches who have given me  
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To Becs, James, and Millie for the opportunities to be a role model

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To all the coaches that made my own youth sport experience a wonder  
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