The role of parents in promoting the welfare of children involved in sport

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Introduction

The importance of parents taking active roles within their children’s sporting life cannot be underestimated, but neither can the complexity of their involvement or the challenges they can face when seeking to promote their children’s welfare in and through sport. It is widely accepted that it is only as a result of parents’ support and encouragement that many children are able to participate in sport (Holt & Knight, 2014; Knight, Berrow & Harwood, 2017). Further, parents are uniquely positioned to be key actors in safeguarding their children from potential physical, psychological, or sexual harm that may arise as a result of their sport participation. However, parenting children involved in sport is not always easy, and although many parents play a positive role in supporting their children to reach their potential, a minority of parents may engage in less than optimal manners. In such cases, parents themselves may become a threat to children’s physical and/or psychological health and well-being. Recognising such complexity, this chapter first seeks to unpack the influence of parents in sport, with a particular emphasis on the types of involvement that positively or negatively contribute to children’s welfare. Next, an examination of parents’ role in safeguarding their children in sport, and the associated challenges, is presented. Finally, the chapter concludes by outlining key strategies that clubs, coaches, and parents can take to optimise parental involvement in children’s sporting lives and take the necessary steps to maximise children’s welfare within and beyond sport.

Influences of parents within youth sport

Children’s initial and continuing engagement in sport is heavily dependent upon their parents (Holt & Knight, 2014). Parents are responsible for introducing their children to sport and providing opportunities for participation (Côté, 1999). It is parents who usually purchase equipment, provide transportation to training and competitions, pay registration fees, and identify pertinent information pertaining to participation (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004, 2005; Horn & Horn, 2007). Moreover, parents often find themselves spectating at training and competitions, volunteering in sports clubs, or even organising competitions (e.g. Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). As a result, parents are substantially involved and invested in their children’s sport and, as a result of their beliefs, expectations, and involvement, can significantly influence children’s enjoyment,
psychosocial development, and well-being (e.g. Berrow, Knight & Hudson, 2018; Bois, Sarrazin, Brustad, Trouilloud & Cury, 2002; Horn & Horn, 2007).

Over the last three decades, increasing evidence has emerged regarding types of parental involvement that may be associated with more positive outcomes for children involved in sport (Harwood & Knight, 2015; Holt & Knight, 2014). Generally, literature has indicated that supportive behaviours, such as the provision of praise, focusing on individual improvement and effort, and providing tangible support (e.g. money, time), are associated with positive or beneficial psychosocial outcomes (e.g. enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, continued engagement, perceived competence). In contrast, pressuring behaviours from parents, such as excessive expectations, exclusive focus on outcomes, withdrawal of love in response to poor performances, and encouraging overtraining, are associated with negative or detrimental psychosocial outcomes (e.g. anxiety, fear of failure, withdrawal from sport, burnout; see Holt & Knight, 2014, and Knight et al., 2017, for summaries).

However, simply considering certain behaviours supportive and, as a result, positive and others pressuring and, consequently, negative is an oversimplification of parenting that does not account for the complexity of parental involvement (Knight & Holt, 2014; Knight et al., 2017) or the way in which different children perceive or interpret their parents’ behaviours (Dorsch, Smith & Dotterer, 2016; Knight, Neely & Holt, 2011; Sheridan, Coffee & Lavallee, 2014). For instance, research evidence has indicated that the same behaviours can be perceived as both supportive and pressuring and result in both positive and negative outcomes for children (e.g. Dorsch et al., 2016; Rouquette, Knight, Lovett & Heuzé, 2018). Consequently, when trying to reach a conclusion regarding how parents can positively or negatively contribute to children’s well-being in and through sport, avoiding simply perceiving behaviours as a dichotomy of pressure or support is important.

Nevertheless, by drawing on well-established psychological theories and collections of research, it is possible to identify specific types of parental involvement that generally positively or negatively influence children’s well-being and psychosocial development in sport. For instance, drawing on self-determination theory (SDT), we can start to understand how parents can influence children’s enjoyment in sport (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In SDT, enjoyment is considered an outcome of optimal functioning and intrinsic motivation (i.e. behaviours and actions are perceived as self-determined). SDT posits that the fulfilment of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness leads to optimal functioning and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Research in sport consistently demonstrates that children’s perceptions of parental support, and the fulfillment of the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, are positively related to their intrinsic motivation and enjoyment (e.g. Amado, Sanchez-Oliva, Gonzalez-Ponce, Pulido-Gonzalez & Sanchez-Miguel, 2015; Babkes & Weiss, 1999). Furthermore, a parent adopting an autonomy-supportive style is more likely to witness their child exhibiting more positive well-being outcomes (such as self-esteem and vitality; see Gagné, Ryan & Bargmann, 2010). In contrast, self-esteem and vitality in youth athletes are negatively associated with a controlling style of parenting (Gagné et al., 2010).

Another perspective comes from achievement goal theory (AGT; see Nicholls, 1984), in which positive outcomes, such as enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and enhanced well-being, have been consistently associated with a task/mastery orientation (i.e. when individuals seek to demonstrate their competence in a self-referenced manner and personal improvement). Research in sport using AGT demonstrates that parents can positively influence children’s mastery goal orientation through the creation and reinforcement of a task-involving motivational climate (i.e. focus on effort and personal improvement) and that a task-involving motivational climate influences children’s sport competence, self-esteem, enjoyment, and intention of sport.
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continuation (e.g. Atkins, Johnson, Force & Petrie, 2013; O’Rourke, Smith, Smoll & Cumming, 2013; Weltevreden, van Hoof & van Vianen, 2018). In contrast, a parent-initiated ego-climate (i.e. an environment focused on normative success) positively relates to athlete anxiety (O’Rourke, Smith, Smoll & Cumming, 2014; Schwebel, Smith & Smoll, 2016) and athlete worry (Kaye, Frith & Vosloo, 2014).

Beyond SDT and AGT, a range of qualitative studies have shed light on specific actions and the conditions in which these behaviours are delivered that may contribute to children’s positive or negative experiences and well-being in sport (e.g. Knight, Boden & Holt, 2010; Knight et al., 2011; Knight & Holt, 2014; Lauer, Gould, Roman & Pierce, 2010). For instance, positive parental influences are reported when parents focus on children’s work ethic, good sportspersonship, and respect for opponents (Knight et al., 2010; Lauer et al., 2010). Further, when parents help children maintain a balance between their sport, school, and social commitments during development; restrict the pressure they place on children; and value fun and enjoyment rather than performance, they appear to more positively impact children’s experiences (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes & Pennisi, 2008; Lauer et al., 2010). Additionally, positive perceptions and outcomes of parental involvement are reported by children when their parents provide them with practical advice, such as helping them prepare or recover from competitions, because it demonstrates that parents care (Knight et al., 2010, 2011).

However, if children perceive that their parents care too much or are committing too much to their sport, even if such behaviours are perceived to be necessary or supportive from parents, this can negatively impact children’s experiences and well-being. For instance, in retrospective interviews, elite tennis players indicated that they felt under pressure to perform because their parents provided them with so much support, even though they perceived that their parents were doing the best they could to support them (Lauer et al., 2010). Similarly, there appears to be a relationship between the amount that parents invest in their children’s sport and the pressure children perceive (Dunn, Dorsch, King & Rothlisberger, 2016), even though parents might be investing with the very best intentions. Also, parents that do too much for their child (e.g. packing bags, signing children up for all their competitions, arranging additional training without consultation) can be perceived by coaches and athletes as breeding dependence and thwarting autonomy (Lauer et al., 2010), as can parents providing practical advice in a repetitive manner without ‘reading’ their child’s mood (Knight et al., 2010). Clearly, when seeking to provide support, there is a fine line for parents to walk between being engaged in a manner that results in positive perceptions by and outcomes for children and engaging in a manner that negatively impacts children.

In contrast, there are certain parental behaviours that are more clearly aligned with negative outcomes. For instance, children consistently indicate that when parents are perceived to be excessively focused on winning, demonstrate a negative communication style (i.e. yelling, being critical, or not encouraging), control the behaviours of athletes (i.e. limiting their social life), or do not control their emotions at competitions, it can negatively influence their experience due to increased perceptions of parental pressure (Knight et al., 2010, 2011; Lauer et al., 2010). Additionally, parental behaviours that draw attention to either athletes themselves or their parents (e.g., very loud cheering from the sidelines, overly enthusiastic encouragement) can be particularly embarrassing for children and negatively impact their sporting experiences (Knight et al., 2011). Importantly, it is not only verbal behaviours that may impact children’s sporting experiences and well-being. Rather, children report being aware of their parents’ facial expressions, noticing inconsistencies between parents’ comments and tone, and, as a result, facial expressions or body language that display frustration or disappointment can become a source of pressure for children (Knight et al., 2010). However, again, perceptions of parents’ reasons for
engaging in these behaviours, as well as cultural expectations or norms and children's specific
preferences for their parents' involvement, can mediate the relationship between these behav-
iours and psychosocial outcomes (e.g. Knight et al., 2017).

Parents’ roles in safeguarding children in sport
Despite the complexity of the literature previously, there does appear to be evidence to sug-
gest that there are certain parental behaviours or types of involvement that, although context
and person specific, can negatively impact children's enjoyment, psychosocial development,
and well-being. Thus, it would seem logical to assume that if parents want to enhance their
children's well-being in and through sport, parents should simply avoid such behaviours and
instead engage in manners associated with positive outcomes. Unfortunately, however, the
ways in which parents are involved in their child's sporting lives are influenced by a range of
factors that may restrict the ease with which parents can engage in desirable manners (Knight
et al., 2017; Knight & Newport, 2017). For instance, evidence from general parenting litera-
ture indicates that when parents are experiencing stress, they are more likely to display punitive
behaviours such as conditional love and punishments (Belsky, 1984). Supporting children's
involvement in sport presents a range of stressors for parents, on top of general parenting
stressors, which may explain why some parents display some of the behaviours that are asso-
ciated with negative psychosocial outcomes (Burgess, Knight & Mellalieu, 2016; Hayward,
Knight & Mellalieu, 2017). Similarly, some parents have indicated that the ways in which they
are involved in their children's sport are influenced by their perceptions of other parents and
coaches (Knight, Dorsch, Osai, Haderlie & Sellars, 2016; Knight & Holt, 2013). Specifically,
perceptions of poor coaching and pressure from other parents may result in parents perceiving
that they need to take more active roles in their child's sport and, as a result, commit more
and engage in more active support for their children at competitions, which may be perceived
negatively (Knight et al., 2016).

Beyond such individual or relational factors, club, organisational, and sport culture also
appear to have relatively substantial impacts upon the types of behaviours that parents engage
in. For instance, in a study examining parental involvement within elite swimming in Australia,
the authors concluded that parents of Australian swimmers deliberately acted or manipulated
their actions to fit with the specific cultural narratives pertaining to performance and perfection
generated within Australian swimming culture (McMahon & Penney, 2015). That is, as a result
of being in a culture that emphasised a continual focus on swimmers needing to be a particular
body size to be successful, parents found themselves drawn into commenting on their children's
weight, monitoring their food consumption, and blaming 'poor performances' on their child’s
physical shape. The cultural impact on parents’ involvement in sport has also been identified in
studies of parents’ socialisation into youth sport, which have shown that although parents might
enter sport with certain intentions regarding their involvement and expectations, over time,
their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are moulded by the environment they find themselves
in (e.g. Dorsch, Smith & McDonough, 2009). For instance, although parents might introduce
their children to sport with a desire for them to simply enjoy participating, over time, they can
find themselves becoming more concerned with performance outcomes, which subsequently
impacts the behaviours they display at competitions (Dorsch, Smith, Wilson & McDonough,
2015). Similarly, parents might engage in conversations in the car ride home after competitions
that are overly critical and disliked by children because they perceive it is a necessary part of the
parenting role within youth sport culture (Elliott & Drummond, 2017; Tamminen, Poucher &
Povilaitis, 2017).
Understanding the impact that sport culture has on parents’ behaviours and involvement is particularly important when we consider the impact this has on parents’ abilities to safeguard their children within (particularly elite) sport settings (cf. Brackenridge, 1998; Brackenridge & Leahy, 2014; Kerr & Stirling, 2012) and the acceptance and reporting of inappropriate practices and behaviours (Jacobs, Smits & Knoppers, 2017; Smits, Jacobs & Knoppers, 2017). Unfortunately, evidence indicates that parents are often unaware of the negative practices that can occur in sport (Brackenridge, 1998; Grenfell & Reinhart, 2003), and they are often silent bystanders in their children’s experiences in sport (Kerr & Stirling, 2012). Within an environment in which abusive behaviours (particularly emotionally abusive coaching behaviours) are normalised and accepted (Jacobs et al., 2017), this lack of intervention from parents might put children at risk. However, the culture of sport is also complicit in this lack of intervention (Kerr & Stirling, 2012; Smits et al., 2017).

The youth sport environment, both at the elite and non–elite level, continues to be largely focused on a competitive performance ideology, in which the focus is on doing anything (including accepting abusive practices) to produce elite athletes (Jacobs et al., 2017; Lang, 2010; Stirling & Kerr, 2009; Kerr & Stirling, 2012). Within such an environment, the coach is usually highly dominant, encouraging compliance from athletes who do not feel they have a right to voice concerns (Denison, 2007; Denison & Avner, 2011; Lang, 2010). Tied to this, on entry into the elite world, parents are encouraged to relinquish control over their children’s sporting experience (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Kerr & Stirling, 2012). In a world in which winning is centralised and coaches are dominant, parents can find themselves trying to walk a tightrope between being there and available for their children, commenting on practices that they deem inappropriate, and not acting in a manner that may upset a coach and could subsequently impact their child’s chances of success in sport (cf. Lally & Kerr, 2008; McMahon, Knight & McGannon, 2018). This balancing act is made all the more complicated as a result of certain practices that coaches and organisations may have in place (i.e. banning parents’ attendance at training or competitions, silencing parents, distancing themselves from parents, and generally discounting and devaluing parents) in response to the dominant (although in our experience inaccurate in relation to most parents) narrative in print and social media about sport parents as being over–involved, pushy, and demanding (Knight & Newport, 2017).

Within the competitive youth sporting environment, although not commonplace and recognised as poor practice, parents have raised concerns regarding an environment characterised by high levels of intensive training, a requirement to ignore injuries/compete through pain, and coaches who expect too much from young children (Kerr & Stirling, 2012; Lally & Kerr, 2008). However, parents are often shut out of practice and limited from involvement (Jacobs et al., 2017; Smits et al., 2017). Parents may be unable to raise concerns to coaches due to coaches’ subsequent response to their child (Stirling & Kerr, 2012), a belief that coaches know best (McMahon et al., 2018; Smits et al., 2017), and a belief that such practices are required to achieve elite levels in sport (Smits et al., 2017). Consequently, by learning from other parents (Kerr & Stirling, 2012), as well as rationalising and normalising certain practices (Smits et al., 2017), parents may start to accept potentially abusive practices rather than questioning their appropriateness (Kerr & Stirling, 2012).

With the increasing awareness of the sources and types of abuse that may occur within sport settings, there has been a recognition of the growing need to implement strategies and policies to enhance the safety of sport (Brackenridge & Leahy, 2014). Recently, Mountjoy and colleagues (2016) indicated that one strategy to address this would be to educate parents regarding abuse in sport. Such education for parents is particularly important given that parents are often some of the only people that athletes may feel they can talk to about behaviours or practices that
they feel are unsafe or inappropriate. A recent study by McMahon and colleagues (2018) sought to uncover the impact that a parent education programme delivered through narrative pedagogy would have on parents’ ability to identify abuse that occurred in sport (see Jenny McMahon’s chapter in this compilation for more on the benefits of narrative pedagogy). Fourteen parents with children involved in swimming and gymnastics were presented with three athletes’ stories that detailed cases of emotional and physical abuse from coaches as shared by athletes. Having read the stories, the parents subsequently engaged in conversations regarding their thoughts on the stories, particularly their feelings regarding the coach behaviours. Next, parents were provided with some insights into the academic literature on abuse, what constitutes abuse towards children in sport, and what it might look like in the sporting context. Analysis of the data indicated that parents, after reviewing the cases against the academic literature, recognised that the coaching practices were unacceptable but expressed some tension because they also felt that the practices were necessary to help their child perform. This belief that abusive practices are necessary for performance aligns with previous studies that have highlighted the impact of the normalisation of abusive practices in sport (e.g. Kerr & Stirling, 2012; Markula, 1995, 2001, 2003). Further, parents’ perceptions of practices were influenced by the belief that the coach knows best – reflecting the power differentials that exist within the parent–coach relationship (Smits et al., 2017). Clearly, the normalisation, rationalisation, and acceptance of such practices as a result of the performance narrative within youth sport impact parents’ perceptions and, subsequently, their ability to keep children safe in sport.

**Strategies for optimising parental involvement in sport**

Given the substantial influence parents have on children’s psychosocial development and well-being in sport, as well as the important role they play in helping to safeguard children involved in sport, it is pertinent to identify strategies that extend from individual parents to the sporting culture to optimise parental involvement and, subsequently, children’s well-being in sport.

*Clubs and organisations:* It is important for clubs and organisations to acknowledge the importance of parents and engage with parents regularly. Such engagement is necessary in order to ensure that clubs, coaches, children, and parents are on the same page regarding the child’s development within the sport, as well as to understand expectations of each other. Specifically, clubs and organisations should proactively welcome new parents into the environment and provide parents with appropriate information about the sport and the club, such as the rules and regulations of competitions and training, as well as the development pathway for progression. In addition, clubs can actively support parents to understand the types of behaviours that may be most useful for their child through workshops or information booklets (cf. Dorsch, King, Dunn, Osai & Tulane, 2017; Thrower, Harwood & Spray, 2017). For instance, sharing information regarding the importance of managing emotions at competitions; identifying their child’s perceptions of, and preferences for, different behaviours; and adapting behaviours in line with their child’s development may all be useful (Knight & Newport, 2017). Further, providing the opportunity for parents to meet other parents and develop support networks is particularly beneficial in helping parents adapt to the environment and feel supported as they negotiate the inevitable challenges of youth sport (Burgess et al., 2016).

Beyond providing information to parents, engagement from parents should also be welcomed. Specifically, queries and feedback from parents should be welcomed by clubs and organisations, especially given that parents may be unfamiliar with certain aspects of youth sport, such as different coaching approaches, types of training, or competition demands. If parents are to feel truly valued and, more importantly, recognised as pivotal actors in safeguarding
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their children, appropriately listening and responding to parents’ concerns and questions are vital. A shift in the culture of youth sport from expecting parents to be bystanders in their children’s experience to active and valuable members of their support team will be required for such a change to truly come into force.

Coaches: As with clubs and organisations, coaches need to recognise and understand the impact parents have on children’s participation in sport and should aim to encourage positive parental involvement. Coaches should recognise the need to develop relationships with parents from the outset of a child’s participation in a new club (Harwood, 2011) and welcome them as valuable and useful members of the child’s support network (cf. Harwood & Knight, 2015). It is recognised that coaches can encounter challenges with overzealous parents and can sometimes feel overwhelmed by parents (Knight & Harwood, 2009); however, questions or challenges from parents should not be avoided. Rather than pushing parents to the side and minimising their engagement, proactively working with parents, facilitating open communication to understand the basis of parents’ concerns and questions, and developing shared goals and expectations may help to reduce issues in the long run and ensure that parents and coaches are working together to optimise children’s sporting enjoyment and welfare.

Coaches should also understand that parents may face a range of challenges when supporting their children in sport, such as managing their own emotions when watching their child compete, supporting their child when they are disappointed, and responding to injuries (Harwood & Knight, 2009). Such challenges are often exacerbated for parents due to the close emotional bond between parents and their children, as well as their desire to see them succeed (Omlie, LaVoi & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2008). Recognising these challenges, seeking to minimise them where possible, and demonstrating some empathy for parents can help to enhance the parent–coach relationship and again reduce long-term issues. Further, some parents will be new to sport or new to parenting a child in sport and thus may feel ill equipped regarding how best to support their child (e.g. Harwood, 2011; Knight & Holt, 2013). Thus, making time to inform, guide, and support parents as they embark upon and travel through the youth sport journey can help enhance and develop parental support, as well as encouraging their positive involvement. However, it may also be useful for coaches to spend time learning from parents regarding children’s needs and preferences within sport because children spend the majority of their time in the family environment (Côté, 1999), and thus parents’ knowledge can be a particularly useful additional resource to enhancing children’s sporting experiences and welfare.

Parents: When seeking to enhance their child’s experience and welfare, it is important for parents to make informed decisions when it comes to selecting appropriate clubs and coaches for their child. Rather than assuming that a club or coach has the necessary certifications and experiences, parents should make it their responsibility to check that the club they choose for their child has appropriate policies in place to keep their child safe in sport. The NSPCC Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) suggests a few key things parents should look for when selecting a club for their child (CPSU, 2019). They advise that parents should first check that the club has a safeguarding policy in place and a contactable welfare officer in case they have any questions regarding their child’s welfare. In addition, parents should check that coaches and staff working with their child have recognised qualifications and have had appropriate criminal record or history checks. Finally, parents should make sure that the club has guidance and procedures for reporting and responding to injuries, accidents, and welfare concerns (for further details, see https://thecpsu.org.uk/parents/).

Once parents have selected a club for their child, it is important for them to acknowledge that they have a key role in encouraging and supporting their child’s sporting experience. As such, parents should reflect upon their involvement and the potential impact it may be having
on their child’s sporting experience and welfare. Sport is an important avenue through which parents can connect with children emotionally (Stefansen, Smette & Strandbu, 2016), so it is important for them to use the resources available to them to best enhance that relationship. Children enjoy engaging in conversations with parents about their sport (Tamminen et al., 2017), so parents should regularly engage in conversations with children to understand what they want from their parents but also so parents can explain why it may not always be possible to engage in ways they desire (Furusa, 2019). For example, while children may want their parents to attend every competition, due to time/work commitments or the needs of other siblings, this may not be possible. Similarly, while a child might want to continually increase their training, a parent might need to explain that this is not possible due to the potential physical harm it could cause the child.

Additionally, parents should also work to develop a relationship with their child’s coach; ask questions about their training background, coaching philosophy, and expectations of their child and themselves; and seek advice on how they can best support their child (cf. Knight & Gould, 2016). By developing a strong relationship with their child’s coach, parents will be better positioned to raise concerns if necessary but also to learn about their child’s sport and their child’s sporting needs. Such information is invaluable in helping parents to optimise their involvement in their child’s sporting life (Knight & Holt, 2014).

References


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