



Parenting experiences in elite youth football: A phenomenological study



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of parents of elite specializing stage youth footballers.

Design: A descriptive phenomenological approach guided the study design.

Methods: Data from interviews with five mothers and five fathers of youth players registered to English football academies were analysed using descriptive phenomenological analysis (Giorgi, 2009).

Results: Three essences characterized the phenomenon of being a parent of an elite youth footballer: parent socialization into elite youth football culture; enhanced parental identity; and increased parental responsibility. Parents' socialization into the football academy culture was facilitated by their interaction with coaches and parent peers, highlighting the social nature of parenting. Being the parent of a child identified as talented meant that parents experienced enhanced status and a heightened responsibility to facilitate his development. Although parents were compelled to support their son in football, their instinct to protect their child meant they experienced uncertainty regarding the commitment required to play at an academy, given the potential for negative consequences. Together, these findings illustrate that parents experienced a transition as their son progressed into the specialization stage of football. We postulate that formal recognition of a child as talented contributed to this transition, and that knowledge of sport and perception of the parent–child relationship shaped how parents adapted.

Conclusions: This study provides a new way of understanding the psychological phenomena of parenting in elite youth football. Implications for practitioners working with parents in sport are provided.

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The sport parenting literature to date has been dominated by research that has sought to identify the “optimal” behaviours for parents that if adopted will result in positive child outcomes such as higher enjoyment, reduced anxiety and successful progression in sport (e.g. Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Bois, Lalanne, & Delforge, 2009; O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll & Cumming, 2011; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004). A focus on parental behaviours has made an important contribution to understanding the role of parents in youth sport, but has often overlooked the social and cultural context in which these behaviours occur.

The influence of contextual factors on parents' behaviours in sport has previously been identified. For example, Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough (2009) illustrated that parents' behaviour, cognition and affect changed in response to their child's participation in

sport, through an interactive process involving the agency of the parent, the influence of the child and the social context. The authors proposed that further research into how these features interact, and specifically parents' responsiveness to their child and the influence of the sport setting, is required to enhance theoretical understanding of parents' socialization experiences in sport.

Qualitative methods are particularly suited to exploring the experiences of parents and allow for the personal and contextual aspects of a phenomenon to be examined. However, only a limited number of studies have thus far investigated parental experiences in sport, meaning parents' voices in research are currently under-represented. As Knight and Holt (2013) note, although it is important not to discount children's experiences, understanding how parents interpret and make sense of their child's sport participation can identify ways in which parents' experiences can be enhanced. For example, in-depth descriptions of how a parent experiences their role can encourage coaches and practitioners to empathize with the demands of being a sport parent (Harwood, Drew, & Knight, 2010; Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b). Furthermore,

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Wiersma and Fifer (2008) recommended that theoretical links between parent and child behaviours should be supplemented with research that seeks to understand why or how parents adopt certain behaviours. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to explore the experiences of parents in elite youth football.

Parental experiences in youth sport

In one of the few studies that cite giving parents a voice in the purpose of their research, Wiersma and Fifer (2008) held focus group interviews to understand parental involvement in youth sport from the parent's perspective. Parents described the satisfaction they gained from the increased opportunity to interact with their child and the vicarious experience of observing their child learning, enjoying, and being successful in sport. The difficulties parents faced included providing effective support for their child in challenging situations (such as dealing with injury or a lack of motivation) and helping young athletes cope with the demands of their sport. This study highlighted how children can influence parents' experiences in sport; a finding which has been supported by Knight and Holt (2013), who identified that children's performances, on-court behaviours and emotional reactions to matches affected parents' experiences of watching junior tennis tournaments, and were in fact a source of stress for some parents (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b). These exploratory studies point toward the significance of parent–child interactions in sport settings, but did not explicitly examine parents' experiences of this relationship within the scope of their research.

Dorsch et al. (2009) described the parent–child relationship as fluid and dynamic, because it can be enhanced from being in the sport environment, but also encounter friction. Frequent or unresolved conflict between parents and young athletes can lead to strained relationships and negative consequences in later years, such as perceived parental pressure and conditional support (Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010a). Therefore, a better understanding of parent–child relationships can help to identify ways to facilitate positive experiences for all those involved. However, parent's experience of interaction and their relationship with children in sport settings has to date received limited attention.

Watching a child participate in a sport event can be an emotional experience for parents, increasingly so as parents invest more in their child's sport over time (Dorsch et al., 2009). Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, and Wall (2008) observed that parents' emotions at youth soccer matches were intensified by contextual factors including crowd segregation, sideline disputes and the game situation, which in turn influenced the nature of their sideline comments. Similarly, from an analysis of parents' accounts of "a time when you became angry during a sport event that your child was participating in", Omli and LaVoi (2012) highlighted that parents (of athletes aged 5–19 years) experienced anger in situations when behaviours of the coach, referee, athlete or other parents were perceived to be unjust, uncaring or incompetent. These studies suggest that interaction with significant others and situational triggers can influence parents' behaviour and emotions when watching their child perform.

Moreover, the characteristics of the sport context can contribute to parents' experience of stress. Parents of youth football and tennis players in the specializing and investment stages of sport (Côté, 1999) described encountering organizational stressors such as selection policies, competition formats and heavy time and financial demands (Harwood et al., 2010; Harwood & Knight, 2009a). In contrast to grassroots sport, where the parent and coach role may commonly overlap (Dorsch et al., 2009; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008), parents in elite sport settings also experienced stress from a perceived lack of feedback, communication and respect from

coaches (Harwood et al., 2010; Harwood & Knight, 2009a). This illustrates how parents' relationships with coaches can change as children progress in sport, and demonstrates the need to understand parental experiences within specific cultures, given each sport's uniqueness (Dorsch et al., 2009; Lauer et al., 2010a; Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010b).

Dorsch et al. (2009) recommended that future parenting research include the community sport context within its focus. Although studies have highlighted contextual influences on parents' experience of watching their child perform in competition (e.g. Holt et al., 2008; Omli & LaVoi, 2012) and of stress (Harwood et al., 2010; Harwood & Knight, 2009a), a broader investigation of the influence of the sport setting on parents' experiences presents a gap in the literature.

In order to address the limitations of the existing literature, and enhance understanding of the influence of the social and cultural context on parenting in youth sport, a phenomenological approach was employed in this study. Phenomenology rejects the subject–object dualism that underpins traditional positivist and post-positivist research, and instead seeks to explore experience and how the world appears to people through a focus on the intentional relationship between a person's consciousness and the object to which it is directed (Giorgi, 2009). In doing so, phenomenology places social interaction and the cultural context at the heart of the research endeavour. Accordingly, this research aims to explore how parental experiences are shaped by the personal, social and cultural context of elite youth football.

Methodology and methods

The sport context

The youth football talent development system in England is managed by a network of professional football clubs, which offer intensive training and competition programmes to male players aged 8–18 years who are identified as talented. These elite players will attend a football academy; a training environment which aims to produce players for the professional game (The Premier League Elite Player Performance Plan, 2011). Parents of players in the initial phase of the specializing stage (aged 8–11 years; as defined in Harwood et al., 2010) help players to manage the transition from grassroots to elite academy level football, and are highly involved through the considerable weekly training and competition commitment that academies demand. Players are expected to train between five and eight hours per week, typically structured over two weekday evenings and both weekend mornings (The Premier League Elite Player Performance Plan, 2011). As players can live up to a maximum of one hour travel time from the football club, parents are responsible for transporting their child to training and matches. Harwood et al. (2010) identified a range of stressors that specializing stage parents in football described experiencing, arising from academy expectations, practices and communication. Parents struggled to accept academy practices which prioritized player development over winning, and felt that they received inadequate feedback on their child's progress and limited appreciation of their role from coaches. Given the significance of the transition to academy football for parents and players, and the potential for parents to experience stress, the present study explored the experiences of mothers and fathers of specializing stage footballers.

Participants

Parents of boys registered to an elite football academy aged between 8 and 11 were recruited from three English professional

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