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Strategies Used and Assistance Required to Facilitate Children’s Involvement in Tennis: Parents’ Perspectives

Camilla J. Knight & Nicholas L. Holt

University of Alberta

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to (a) identify the strategies parents use to be able to support their children’s involvement in competitive tennis and (b) identify additional assistance parents require to better facilitate their children’s involvement in tennis. Interviews were conducted with 41 parents of junior players in the United States. Data analysis led to the identification of four strategies parents used to be able to support to their children: Spouses working together, interacting with other parents, selecting an appropriate coach, and researching information. Five areas where parents required additional assistance were also identified. These were understanding and negotiating player progression, education on behaving and encouraging players at tournaments, evaluating and selecting coaches, identifying and accessing financial support, and managing and maintaining schooling. These findings indicated that parents ‘surrounded themselves with support’ to facilitate their children’s involvement in tennis, but required additional information regarding specific aspects of tennis parenting.
Strategies Used and Assistance Required to Facilitate Children’s Involvement in Tennis:

Parents’ Perspectives

Parents are extremely important in youth sport, providing children with support to enable them to participate and progress (Horn & Horn, 2007; Wuerth, Alfermann, & Lee, 2004). Such support is provided through parents financing their children’s involvement, transporting children to training and competition, comforting children when they have lost or are injured, and providing children with information about future careers, schooling options, and their sporting performance (Côté, 1999; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Parents also provide support to their children when they are at competitions. Such support might include the provision of practical advice, providing children with feedback regarding their attitude and effort, and displaying positive body language (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006; 2008; Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010; Knight, Neely, & Holt, 2011; Omli & Weise-Bjornstal, 2011).

When parents provide appropriate support for their children it is associated with a range of positive outcomes, such as enjoyment, higher perceptions of competence, long-term involvement, enhanced motivation, and achievement of an elite status in sport (Brustad, 1993; Côté, 1999; Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavallee, 2009; Leff & Hoyle, 1995; McCarthy, Jones, & Clark-Carter, 2008; Power & Woolger, 1994). On the other hand, when parents provide inappropriate types of support to their children (e.g., place pressure upon children or hold unrealistic expectations for children) it can be associated with a range of negative outcomes, including heightened anxiety, fear of failure, conflict between parents and children, and dropout (Bois, Lalanne, & Delforge, 2009; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008; Le Bars, Gernigon, &
Ninot, 2009; Sager & Lavallee, 2010). Given the consequences of parental support, it appears that it is an important area of study.

Although considerable attention has been given to examining parents’ provision of support and the consequences of providing such support, less attention has been given to what parents do to be able to provide the necessary support. For example, although it has been recognized that parents need to commit time to transport children to training and competitions, less is known about what strategies or resources parents need or use to be able to make this time commitment. Some evidence has indicated that parents have to find ways to structure their lives in order to support their children in sport (Côté, 1999; Kirk et al., 1997a; Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010a; 2010b; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). One of the most obvious examples of this is displayed through parents changing their working day or employment. That is, parents have indicated they might choose to work shorter days, not take promotions, work in occupations that have flexible hours, and not stay late at work so they were available to take their children to training and competitions (e.g., Côté, 1999; Harwood & Knight, 2009a; 2009b; Kirk et al., 1997a; Lauer et al., 2010a; 2010b). Additionally, in some families only one parent will work, so the other parent can complete the tasks (such as transporting their children to training) associated with having a child participating in youth sport (Côté, 1999; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Kirk et al., 1997a; 1997b; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).

Parents have also recalled making changes to their family schedule and structure to ensure that children are able to attend training and competitions (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009; van Rossum, 1995). For example, family meal times are often replaced with fast, easy meals, sometimes eaten in cars or at practice venues (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). Siblings might be split between parents, with one parent being responsible for transporting a child to training, while
the other parent transports siblings to their activities (Harwood & Knight, 2009a; 2009b; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Family holidays may also be cancelled or organized to take place at sport venues so as not to interfere with sporting schedules (Côté, 1999; Dorsch et al., 2009; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006).

Changes to work and family schedules are made to ensure parents have sufficient time to commit to their children’s sporting schedules. However, such changes could have other implications for parents. For example, having only one parent work or reducing the amount of time parents’ work will have financial implications for parents (Harwood & Knight, 2009a; 2009b; Kirk et al., 1997b). In addition to reduced working time, parents often spend considerable amounts of money to allow their children to participate in sport (Kirk et al., 1997b). As such, parents might change their spending habits to be able to finance their children’s involvement. For example, parents have indicated they might restrict their own social lives to ensure they can finance their children’s participation (Côté, 1999; Harwood & Knight, 2009a; 2009b; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).

The aforementioned literature clearly illustrates a variety of strategies parents use to be able to provide the necessary support (particularly tangible support) to help their children participate and progress in sport. To date, the strategies that have been identified have, generally, focused on the changes parents make within the family unit to be able to provide tangible support to their children (e.g., Côté, 1999; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Kirk et al., 1997a; 1997b; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). However, it is well known that in addition to tangible support, parents provide emotional and informational support to their children. But, little is known about the strategies parents develop to be able to provide these types of support to their children. Additionally, one might anticipate that parents also develop strategies that extend
beyond the family unit. For example, in a study of talent development in youth tennis,
Wolfenden and Holt (2005) identified that parents and coaches worked as a team to be able to
provide the necessary support to help children progress. It is also feasible to imagine parents use
different strategies to help provide support beyond money and time. Thus, one of the aims of the
current study is to extend our knowledge of the strategies parents use to be able to provide the
necessary support to their children in sport.

In addition to understanding how parents find ways to provide support to their children,
identifying any additional help parents need to be able to support their children in sport might
also be useful given the range of challenges ‘sport parents’ face (Harwood & Knight, 2009a;
2009b; Kirk et al., 1997a; 1997b; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). For example, a study conducted by
Wiersma and Fifer (2008) with parents of youth sport showed parents found providing
instrumental and emotional support to their children particularly challenging. The provision of
instrumental support was challenging due to the consequences it had on general family life and
parents’ ability to fulfill other parenting responsibilities. Challenges associated with providing
emotional support arose because parents were unsure of how to support their children in difficult
situations.

Similar findings were identified in a series of studies examining stressors parents of
youth tennis players and footballers encountered (Harwood, Drew, & Knight, 2010; Harwood &
Knight, 2009a; 2009b). Through these studies it emerged that parents encountered a range of
stressors associated with competitions (e.g., watching matches, logistical concerns),
organizational factors (e.g., financial concerns, time issues, coaching issues), and developmental
issues (e.g., sport progression, academic concerns). Overall, one of the most consistent issues
parents expressed across these three studies was not knowing what to do in different situations
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(Harwood et al., 2010; Harwood & Knight, 2009a; 2009b). That is, parents indicated they did not know what to do to be able to best support their children.

Recognising the challenges parents can face as they attempt to provide support to their children and the fact that parents are often unsure of how to best support their children, the purpose of this study is twofold. The purposes of this study were to (a) identify the strategies parents use to be able to support their children’s involvement in competitive tennis and (b) identify additional assistance parents require to better facilitate their children’s involvement in tennis.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample was comprised of 41 parents from the United States. The United States is split into 17 geographical sections for tennis. Children are allocated a ranking in the section where they reside based on their results at tournaments. The parents were purposefully sampled (Patton, 2002) based on the age of their child (10-16 years) and the standard of their child (in the top 25 in their section or higher). The sampling criteria were selected to help ensure parents had supported their children to relatively high levels in tennis. Thus, these criteria enabled us to recruit participants who were ‘information-rich’ cases and could provide detailed accounts of relevant experiences to fulfill the purposes of this study.

There were 24 mothers and 17 fathers of 25 female players and 33 male players. At the time of the interviews all participants had *at least one* child aged between 10 and 16 (*M* age of children = 13.25 years, *SD* = 2.35) participating in tennis. All children were in the top 25 in their section and, of these players, 25 were ranked in the top 65 for their age group in the entire United
States. On average, the participants’ children had been involved in tennis for 7.7 years ($SD = 3.72$).

Forty of the 41 participants were in two parent families. Of the 40 parents in two-parent families, one of these parents was in a second marriage. Sixteen of the families had only one child, 13 had two children, eight had three children, and four had more than three children. The age of the children in the families ranged from eight-24 years.

**Procedure**

Institutional Research Ethics Board approval was obtained and permission to conduct the study was gained from the tennis managers and coaches at two regional training centers in the United States. Coaches at each center were given the sampling criteria, the study information letter, and informed consent forms to distribute to potential participants. Interested participants contacted the lead author (via e-mail) to schedule an interview during fieldwork trips to each center. On arriving at each center, additional participants were recruited by the lead author while they were watching their children practice. Prior to the interviews all participants provided written informed consent. They were reminded their participation was voluntary, all information was confidential, and were given an opportunity to ask questions.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected via individual semi-structured interviews lasting, on average, 50 minutes ($SD = 13$ minutes). The interview guide was structured based on the guidelines provided by Rubin and Rubin (2005) and the questions informed by previous studies of parenting in tennis (e.g., Gould et al., 2008, Harwood & Knight, 2009a; 2009b; Knight et al., 2010). Two pilot interviews were conducted with parents to refine the interview guide, which is provided in the appendix. Data from the pilot interviews were not included in the analysis.
Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in 902 pages of single-spaced data. Transcripts were read and re-read by the lead author to ensure immersion in the data. Analysis was conducted following the process presented by Miles and Huberman (1994) whereby data is reduced through coding, data displays are developed, and conclusions are drawn and verified based on the data displays and the transcripts. Data reduction was carried out by selecting and abstracting meaningful units of data from the transcripts. That is, excerpts from the interview transcripts were reviewed and units of data that appeared meaningful (i.e., words or sentences that related to the research purposes) were identified and allocated codes. Initially, transcripts were coded using descriptive codes, which simply describe the content of the data and involve little interpretation. For example, when participants discussed other parents, descriptive codes such as talking to other parents and making friends with parents were allocated to the data. Once descriptive codes had been developed, interpretive codes were assigned to the data. Interpretive codes are more abstract than descriptive codes and involve the integration of multiple ideas and background information. Interpretive codes in this study included seeking guidance from other parents and other parents as a distraction. Finally, pattern codes were allocated to the data. Pattern codes are more inferential and explanatory, and illustrate relationships between interpretive codes. The final patterns codes are presented in the results.

After the initial coding occurred, data displays (“A visual format that presents information systematically,” Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 91) of the codes were developed to help identify how the codes fitted together. Two types of data displays were used in this study: data networks and data matrices. Data networks are “a collection of ‘nodes’ or points connected by lines” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 94). Data networks were used during the earlier stages of
data analysis to help the authors visually depict how codes fitted together and develop pattern codes. Once data networks had been developed and the pattern codes had been developed, data matrices were developed. Data matrices are “essentially a ‘crossing’ of two lists, set up as rows and columns” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 93). Data matrices were particularly useful in allowing the comparison of specific codes across the entire set of participants. Two data matrices summarizing data relating to the two purposes of the study were created and are available from the first author upon request.

**Methodological Rigor**

Steps were taken during and following data collection to enhance the methodological rigor of this study (see Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Specifically, three strategies (two during and two following data collection) were incorporated in the study to enhance methodological rigor. First, audio-files of the interview(s) conducted on the previous day were reviewed prior to the interview(s) conducted the next day and emerging ideas were recorded. By integrating audio analysis during the data collection phase, the authors ensured the data being collected would answer their research questions (e.g., data was focused on the support parents needed rather than the support they provided to children). Second, during the process of data collection and analysis a reflexive journal was also maintained by the lead author to record emerging ideas and thoughts regarding the data (Patton, 2002). This helped ensure biases and pre-existing ideas were identified during the research process, which was important because the lead author was a former competitive tennis player and had completed previous research examining parenting in tennis. For example, through the maintenance of the reflexive journal, the lead author became aware that she was becoming overly concerned with examples of negative...
parental behaviors rather than focusing on the topic of concern. By reflecting on this, the author was able to redirect her attention to the appropriate questions.

Finally, during data analysis the second author was presented with the data displays and provided with verbal and written explanations of the emerging codes. The two authors engaged in extensive discussions about the results, seeking to ensure a balanced, comprehensive, and explanatory account was created – one that would be clear to someone not familiar with the original data or the subculture of junior tennis. Then, acting as an inter-rater reliability check, the second author was given a list of the codes and a sample of quotes. Although the two authors agreed on the coding of the majority of the data, the second author questioned the production of the pattern codes and the coding of the quotes to help ensure the codes had been allocated to discrete and self-contained units of data. This questioning and justification of data allocation continued throughout the process of writing the results.

**Results**

In the following sections the categories that depict the strategies participants used to be able to support their children’s involvement in tennis are presented. Challenges associated with these strategies are also reported in the interest of providing a balanced account. Next, areas participants wanted additional assistance with are presented.

**Strategies Parents Adopted to Facilitate their Children’s Tennis Involvement**

**Spouses Working Together.** One strategy that helped participants facilitate their children’s tennis involvement was working ‘as a team’ with their spouse (all but one of the participants in this study were in two-parent families). For example, the mother of two national junior players explained that she and her husband were, “a team…Not only the support, communication, or committing time to each other, but really working together” (P28). For
example, the mother of one of the highest nationally ranked juniors explained the distinct roles she and her husband fulfilled. In their family the father, “spent [name of son’s] whole childhood at tournaments. He was gone every week, at least two or three weekends a month.” While the father travelled with the son, the mother has, “sort of been the IMG sports manager…registering for tournaments…trying to understand each of the systems… and then making the travel arrangements, getting the hotel with two double beds, finding the lowest airfare…” (P37).

By sharing these tasks parents described being better able to fulfill the extensive demands associated with having a child playing tennis. Participants were also able to avoid tasks they found particularly stressful or challenging. For example, when discussing attendance at tournaments, one mother explained, “No, my husband goes [to tournaments], I always have him take my daughter. I don’t like to take her” (P23). By sharing responsibilities participants could avoid tasks they did not like but still ensure their children had sufficient support to progress.

**Interacting with Other Parents.** Participants often interacted with other parents to find ways in which they could facilitate their children’s involvement in tennis. For example, participants turned to other parents for advice and information when their children initially became involved in the sport. As one mother said:

I talked to [other] parents a lot about tennis… I feel like you learn a lot from other parents, what they’ve done. Especially with kids at different levels so I think that’s [important]. I definitely tried to make time for most of her lessons to be there by the courts… then I could sort of talk to the parents… meet the other families (P29).

However, participants cautioned against blindly copying other parents. This was illustrated by one mother who explained the negative effect copying other parents’ behaviors had on her daughter’s tennis:
You know you see other parents getting results by yelling at kids during and after matches, getting them to perform. So as a bystander I would see it and think, “OK she’s getting results, maybe this is the method I should use.” So I adopted some methods that were really bad and didn’t work. I found out later all it did was make her hate the sport (P7).

Similarly, whereas many participants said parents helped each other, a caveat was that some parents were viewed as being secretive and unhelpful. As one father recalled, “I don’t think that all parents are forthright when they talk to you, ‘cause they’re always fearful of your kid being better than theirs” (P26). Thus, although parents relied on the advice of other parents to support their own children, they cautioned against relying on their information too much.

In addition to gaining information from parents, participants also sought other parents for support in terms of friendship and camaraderie. The mother of a national male player explained, “It’s funny, you’ll find the same group of friends, you kinda make a group of friends and, you know, we text each other and you know we help each other out” (P20). Such friendships appeared particularly helpful at tournaments, as many participants found these to be challenging experiences. By developing friendships with other parents, participants were able to distract themselves from the anxiety they may experience when watching their child compete.

**Selecting an Appropriate Coach.** Another way participants were able to support their children was by finding coaches who were not just technically proficient but also had the skills and education to provide a holistic training program to help children develop as players and people. For example, one mother explained how she selected a coach that would completely manage her son’s tennis development. She said:

I don’t want to be his [son’s] obstacle. So, I told him [his coach], “I expect you to manage him, not just to train him also manage him, what he needs, the overall package, because I
don’t know. I have no clue in sport, OK I played, but never, you know, never professional
and I have no clue what to do. You have to, you have to come and tell me he needs this, he
needs this, he needs this. I don’t even know when he needs to change racquets, I don’t
know… so you come and tell me what I should do” (P30).

Participants also sought out coaches who would provide parents themselves with guidance
and support. A father explained, “A good coach is coaching parents, they share their experience
and what they have learned” (P24). Similarly, a father explained the “coach is very important to
tell parents what [the] kid needs right now to develop their game for the next level” (P22). In
particular, participants sought coaches who could provide them with emotional support to help
them cope with the challenges associated with being a tennis parent. As the father of two
nationally ranked players said, “You’ve got to cry on their [coaches’] shoulders cause they’re the
ones that you rely on and that’s what I’m paying them to do, to help” (P26). Participants’ need
for emotional support from coaches appeared particularly necessary when children had lost or
had difficult tournament experiences.

Participants also proactively sought help from coaches. For example, one mother asked her
daughter’s coach to talk to her husband about his inappropriate behavior at tournaments. Her
daughter came home saying:

“I just wish dad would stop telling me [what to do] and trying to be a coach.” So I went to
[name of coach], I said, “Is there any way you could talk to [husband] and tell him like he
is dad, be her dad not her coach?” And he’s like, “I’ll talk to him” (P19).

**Researching Information.** Many participants recognized they needed to “become students
of the game” (P14), educating themselves about tennis and how to be a tennis parent. For
example, participants discussed learning about tennis psychology. One mother said:
The mental aspect of tennis is very important, and that’s where I decided to read these books and get a little bit more information. Being that my kids are pretty young, it’s hard for them to pick up these books and read it and understand it, so you listen to the TV, you listen to the things that other players experience and try to draw from that (P7).

A father explained how he went about educating himself on tennis technique. He said “I would go on YouTube and we would just like type in like ‘Federer’s forehand’ or something and we would watch it. We’re trying to become more knowledgeable that way ‘cause I really don’t know anything about tennis” (P18). In addition to using the Internet, parents also read autobiographies of tennis players and their parents because, “it’s always good to read more about it [tennis] you know, from people who do have experience” (P4).

**Additional Help Parents Required to Facilitate Children’s Involvement in Tennis**

**Understanding and Negotiating Player Progression.** Although participants gained information about tennis from a range of sources, they all highlighted a need for more information regarding how to help their child progress. They wanted information related to starting and progressing in tournaments. Such information was desired because participants had difficulties understanding the tournament structure (the different tournament levels that children progress through as they improve in tennis) and choosing which tournaments to enter. For example, summarizing the additional help he would like, one father said:

Like I mentioned before, how to choose the tournament you know, that would be [a] great help and that, provided information about ah, the most important tournaments and tournaments that have the best facilities, direction on that (P4).

The second area participants indicated needing more information about was obtaining college scholarships. Participants appeared unsure of how to actually help their children at this
stage of their career because they did not always know what was required to achieve a college scholarship. As one mother said, “Tennis costs about 30 grand a year at this level with travel and coaching, it’s a year’s college tuition… so we’re looking at college scholarships…what kind of support is there? Talking and guessing?” (P9). Another mother stated, “Nobody knows what is going on, where and when selections for colleges happen… parents need to know more” (P13).

**Education About Behaving and Encouraging Children at Tournaments.** Participants indicated that parental education would be helpful because they often felt unprepared to provide support to their children at tournaments. A mother explained, “We have to find out for ourselves each time when we face some situation, we have to find out the answer ourselves and we are not prepared” (P14). She later returned to this issue:

> Every tournament something new pops up, you know, like the last time it was cheating, the time before he [son] lost and was discouraged and he said he didn’t want to play any more, you know it’s like everytime something, yeah, something new to figure out.

Rather than having to just ‘figure out’ what to do participants indicated they would benefit from being advised how they could provide feedback after matches. For example, when discussing supporting her son after matches, one mother said:

> It would be nice if somebody came and just told me these answers, ‘cause it would make my life a lot easier. ‘Cause there are times when, you know, I try not to be hard on him …But there should be a tennis 101, you know, for parents and kids (P15).

Overall, participants perceived that educating parents about their behaviors at tournaments and how to emotionally support their children would ensure parents were better prepared to create positive and beneficial tournament experiences for their children.
Selecting and Evaluating Coaches. Although participants emphasized the importance of finding the right coach for their children, they described having little guidance or information regarding how to select an appropriate coach. As one parent explained:

Well the parents are on their own. Literally it’s a trial by fire. You try this coach, you try that coach until you get to the right guy. I was fortunate enough to, the first personal coach that [name of child] had was a very good guy, he taught him very well (P12).

Unfortunately, not all the participants had been so successful at selecting a coach. For example, repeating a story provided by many, one mother said, “We had tried a lot of programs and they were terrible. They were basically money makers with no real good coaching” (P3).

Participants thought more information from the USTA regarding how to select coaches or assess the quality of coaches would be beneficial. For example, one father suggested, “Maybe there could be a rating system, maybe the parents could say ‘I like this coach or this coach is good for this or that.’ That should be something that the USTA should think about” (P26).

Advocating for a similar idea, another mother said, “It would be very helpful to have a summary of what each one [coach] offers, what their caliber is, what kind of students they coach, their strengths, their styles… I think it would be awesome” (P27). Overall, participants perceived that having access to more evaluative information about coaches would allow them to make informed choices regarding their children’s coach, allowing them to provide the best support to their children.

Identifying and Accessing Funding Opportunities. Competitive tennis is expensive, particularly as children reach higher national and international levels. For example, the mother of a top national player discussed the costs of paying for her son and his coach to travel:
The biggest issue with tennis is it costs too much. You know to go to the tournaments, that [player’s junior world ranking] was about a $20,000-$25,000 [per year]. A one-week tournament $2000, [and] close to $4000 for a 10-day tournament. You know, somebody asked me that once, “what do I spend? “I said “with [name of coach] and [name of child] travelling a ballpark of $2000-$2500 a week,” and I mean if they go to Mexico with that airfare [it’s] expensive, $5000 a week, and this is juniors! (P37).

Given the expense of tennis, some participants indicated they had to restrict the opportunities they provided to their children. As one father said, “I don’t have that kind of money to pick up with my kid and have him all over the place playing tournaments. I would be broke” (P11).

Participants provided numerous suggestions for how the USTA and clubs could help reduce some of the costs associated with tennis. For example, one participant thought tennis should be subsidized, “You would think that the USTA would like you know try to help subsidize some of that [the travel costs] with the parents who really want their kid to play tennis but they don’t” (P12). Another participant said, “One of the things I think that the USTA could do is provide more scholarships and stuff for parents that need the money to take their kids through that journey cause it’s an expensive sport” (P7).

Managing and Maintaining Schooling. Given the time commitment associated with tennis, some participants discussed the difficulties associated with maintaining their children’s schooling. The main difficulties were negotiating time for their children to miss school for tournaments and balancing homework and training requirements. As one mother said, her main difficulty in supporting her son had been him, “missing classes, I mean it’s [name of city] you don’t miss school, I mean we’ve had to lie to go to a National tournament and we’re lying to a [religious-based] School, that’s just great!” (P37).
Given these concerns, participants perceived they would be able to help their children if schools could be more understanding of tennis and the USTA could be more understanding of children’s school commitments. For example, the mother of a national player explained, “They’re missing a lot of school… and parents have an issue with school, sometimes we have to take a week off for the Orange Bowl [the unofficial junior world tennis championships] and the school won’t cooperate” (P13). On the other hand, one mother summarized the sentiments of many when she explained:

I would like the whole [tennis] system to respect school. You know and that school should come first and you know they’re not all you know, forget this hype because they’re not going to be professionals. And the other side is you know it’s fine to be a teaching coach and feed balls, but even those jobs are not limitless. So you know you really need to stress having an education so that you can do something else (P2).

To help schools better understand children’s tennis commitments, parents thought it would be useful if the USTA could produce letters for schools explaining when and why children would be away for tournaments. In addition to helping schools to understand tennis commitments, participants discussed a number of ways the USTA could help them balance the school and tennis commitments, particularly related to scheduling of tournaments.

Discussion

The purposes of this study were to (a) identify the strategies parents use to be able to support their children’s involvement in competitive tennis and (b) identify additional assistance parents require to better facilitate their children’s involvement in tennis. Participants indicated they actively sought information, guidance, and emotional support from a range of sources to be able to provide the necessary support to their children. Participants highlighted strategies that
extended beyond the family unit. These strategies appeared to help parents not only provide the necessary tangible support (e.g., money and time), but also informational and emotional support. To be better able to support their children, parents indicated that they required more tennis-specific information.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that the support parents are able to provide to their children is, to an extent, influenced by the knowledge, understanding, and general support parents themselves receive from those around them. In other words, the parents in this study appeared to surround themselves with support so they could facilitate their children’s involvement in tennis. This idea is consistent with research from developmental psychology, which has shown the support parents access can positively influence the quality of their parenting, along with their perceptions of stress, mental health, and even their children’s development (e.g., Belsky, 1984; Koeske & Koeske, 1990).

Previous research has highlighted a number of strategies parents use within the family unit to be able to facilitate their children’s involvement in sport (e.g., sharing tasks, altering work commitments) (Côté, 1999; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Kirk et al., 1997a; 1997b; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Our finding that spouses worked together corroborates these previous studies. However, the current findings point to an additional benefit of parents working together to support their children. That is, by sharing tasks parents could avoid tasks they did not enjoy or found challenging (e.g., attending competitions). Studies examining parental involvement and behaviors at competitions have indicated that the quality of emotional support parents can provide to their children might be influenced by their experience and emotions (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2009a; 2009b; Knight & Holt, in press). Thus, extrapolating from previous research and the current findings, a practical implication for sport psychology consultants is to
work with parents to identify ways in which spouses can support each other and identify the
tasks that are more or less suited to each of the parents. By addressing such issues with parents
consultants can help ensure that parents are able to provide the appropriate and necessary
emotional support to their children.

Beyond the family unit, the parents in the current study indicated they were reliant on
their child’s coach and other parents to be able to support their child in tennis. One of the
strategies that might be underutilized within youth sport is the concept of parents supporting
parents. Previous research has indicated that ‘inappropriate’ parental behaviors or interactions
can cause parents stress and that inappropriate parental behaviors at youth sport competitions
might arise due to rivalries or disagreements between parents (Harwood & Knight, 2009a;
2009b). As such, particularly at competitions, it has often been advocated that parents sit apart
and limit their interactions (cf. Strean, 1995). However, the findings of this study actually run
counter to these suggestions and highlight the potential benefits for parents of encouraging
interactions between parents to help reduce anxiety at competitions and provide parents with
necessary information.

Consistent with the findings of Wolfenden and Holt (2005), the current study also points
to the importance of parents and coaches being able to work together to support children in sport.
Participants in the current study wanted coaches to provide guidance regarding their children’s
overall tennis program, support their development as people, and provide parents themselves
with emotional and tangible help when they faced difficulties. When examining previous studies,
particularly those which have focused almost exclusively upon the family unit (e.g., Côté, 1999),
it is apparent that parents have developed strategies to be able to provide tangible support to
children. The findings of the current study extend this research by highlighting parents use of and
need for strategies to gain emotional, informational, and social support to be able to provide informational and emotional support to their children. That is, the parents in the current study indicated that they used their spouse, other parents and their child’s coach as a source of emotional support. By using others for emotional support, parents were then able to provide the appropriate emotional support to their children. Thus, understanding that parents seek their own support to be able to provide emotional and informational support, in addition to tangible support to their children might be useful to guide consultants’ work with parents.

Parents spent extensive amounts of time researching information. Previous studies have shown coaches sometimes interpret parents turning to other sources of information as a lack of trust in their coaching abilities (Gould et al., 2006; 2008; Knight & Harwood, 2009b). However, the parents in the current study did not seem to be researching additional information because they did not trust coaches. Rather, it appeared researching information provided parents with more knowledge, which they thought allowed them to provide better support to their children. In fact, despite parents’ best efforts to obtain information from a range of sources, they still wanted more tennis-specific information.

The five areas of additional assistance parents wanted were all forms of informational support. Parents highlighted a need for more information to help them, understand how children progress in tennis, behave appropriately at tournaments, evaluate and select coaches, access funding, and make decisions regarding schooling. Dorsch and colleagues (2009) recently identified that one of the main changes parents undergo when their children participate in sport is a change in their cognition – particularly their knowledge about sport. Although parents’ knowledge of sport is likely to increase through their children’s participation in sport, it was apparent in the current study that parents would prefer to be provided with pertinent information
ahead of time, rather than learning as they went through the experience. The amount of pertinent information parents have about their child’s sport is likely to underpin the effectiveness and efficiency of all the other support they provide to their children. For example, if parents have information regarding how to behave at competitions, they can provide better emotional support to their children. Similarly, if parents are aware of the appropriate amount of training and tournaments their children should engage in at different stages in their career, they can ensure they provide the necessary tangible support at different stages. As such, working to identify the information parents need and providing this information in easily accessible forms appears crucial to ensure parents can best help their children participate and progress in sport.

Recognizing the importance of an extended support network for parents, it appears that parents might benefit from a greater emphasis upon developing a youth sport environment in which multiple individuals are working together to support each other. Sport psychology consultants may be able to use this idea of surrounding parents with support to help parents overcome some of the challenges they associate with being “sport parents” (Harwood & Knight, 2009a; 2009b). For example, consultants could work with parents to help them identify who they can turn to for support and how this support can be helpful. By understanding the resources that are available to them parents might feel more confident to cope with the extensive demands that can arise in youth sport. Consultants could also work directly with coaches to help them understand the importance of the support they provide to parents. Unfortunately, parents are often seen as “something” for coaches to “deal with” and a distraction from the coaching role (Gould et al., 2006; Knight & Harwood, 2010). Consultants could help overcome this perception by working with coaches to illustrate the benefits that athletes, parents, and coaches themselves will gain if coaches provide appropriate and necessary support to parents. Finally, consultants
could also work directly with sports organizations to help them understand parents need for information and the important role organizations play in ensuring that coaches have the skills to communicate with and support parents.

The current findings must be considered against the limitations of the study. Data were collected via fieldwork trips to two tennis centers in the United States – thus, they may not be representative of parents’ experiences at different centers. Given that participants volunteered to discuss their parenting and there were few examples of the negative stereotype of the ‘pushy’ tennis parent, there may have been a risk of sampling bias. Another limitation was parents’ data were not triangulated or compared with data from players, coaches, clubs, or representatives from the USTA. Finally, information about family income was not obtained, which may have been an oversight because of the high financial demands of tennis participation (indeed, one of the findings referred to finding additional sources of financial support).

The indication that parents themselves need support from a range of external sources to be able to help their children participate and progress in tennis highlights the continuing necessity of expanding parenting research to examine the broader social context (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009; Juntumaa, Keskivaara, & Punamaki, 2005) and the influence that external sources have on parents and the support they can provide to their children (Harwood & Knight, 2009b; Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008). Although we have begun to examine how certain relationships, such as the parent-coach relationship and familial relationships, can influence children’s experiences in sport (e.g., Côté, 1999; Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005), the results of this study point to the importance of examining the influence of more relationships and the interaction between relationships (e.g., familial, coach, and other parents) on parents and consequently on children’s experiences in sport.
Given the importance of spouses working together, it may be important to further consider the experiences of single parents to identify if they adopt any additional strategies to be able to support their children. Previous research has indicated that children from single parent families may be disadvantaged in sport (e.g., less likely to participate, more likely to discontinue participation) due to parents’ reduced time and income to commit to sport (cf. Kirk et al., 1997a; 1997b). However, a longitudinal examination in Finland actually concluded that children from single parent families were more likely to remain active in sport compared to children with a parent (particularly father) who was not involved in their sport (Yang, Telama, & Laakso, 1996). Thus, further research examining how single parents are able to support their children in sport and the additional help they require might be warranted.

Overall, the findings of the current study corroborate previous literature, which indicate that “successful sport families” (in this study, tennis families) find ways to organize their lives to provide the necessary tangible support to facilitate children’s sport participation. However, the current study also highlights the strategies (particularly utilizing their spouse, other parents, and coaches) that parents develop to further enhance the emotional, informational and tangible support they can provide to their children. To further enhance the support they can provide, parents indicated a need for additional informational support from organizations and coaches.
References


## Parent Interview Guide

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<th>Area</th>
<th>Question</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Area</strong></td>
<td><strong>Question</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>How long have you been involved in tennis as a parent?</td>
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<td>How many children do you have that play tennis?</td>
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<td>What age are your children?</td>
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<td>What standard are your children?</td>
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<td>Where do your children train? Have they always trained there? If not, where else have they trained?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What kind of club is it? (e.g., an academy, national training centre etc).</td>
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<td>How frequently are your children competing?</td>
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<td>What are your goals and your child’s goals for their tennis involvement?</td>
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<td>Tennis History</td>
<td>Can you tell me a bit of your history as a tennis parent?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>When your child first started playing tennis what was their involvement like?</td>
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<td>How has the child’s involvement in tennis and training changed over time? How has your role changed?</td>
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<td>How would you describe your experience of being a tennis parent?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What was it like when you first “became a tennis parent?” How were your initial experiences?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>As your child progressed in tennis how did you feel? How did your experiences change?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How about now? What does it feel like now to be a tennis parent?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How about your child’s tennis experience, what do you think their experience has been like?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents’ provision of support to their children</td>
<td>What do you think is the role of parents in tennis?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How have you been able to fulfill these roles?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Has your role changed as your child has progressed? (how?)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How have you been able to fulfill these changing roles?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What have you done to help your child progress in sport?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Who did you seek help from to be able to support your child’s progress?</td>
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<td>What did you do initially to help your child when they first started in tennis?</td>
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<td>• What help or guidance did you seek at this time?</td>
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<td>What did you do to help your child when they first started tournaments?</td>
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<td>• What help or guidance did you seek at this time?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Specific sources of help and guidance</td>
<td>Who has provided you with help as a tennis parent?</td>
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<td>• Has this help been useful? If yes, in what way has it been useful? If no, can you think of a reason why it hasn’t been helpful?</td>
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<td>Specify potential sources of help – USTA, Club, Coach, other parents etc</td>
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<td>• What help have you received from them?</td>
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<td>• What has been your best help or guidance?</td>
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<td>Additional help or guidance required</td>
<td>What help do you feel would have been beneficial or helpful which maybe you didn’t receive?</td>
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<td>How would this have been helpful?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Who would you have liked to receive this help from?</td>
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<td>• Can you think of a reason why you might not have received this support?</td>
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<td>• How would you have liked this support to be provided?</td>
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<td>Parental support and optimal experiences</td>
<td>Overall, what would you say has been most important in allowing you to support your child in tennis?</td>
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<td>What help do you feel has most helped to enhance your child’s experiences in sport?</td>
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<td>What help has most enhanced your experience as a tennis parent?</td>
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<td>What support do you feel would have helped you to further enhance your children’s experiences?</td>
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<td>Summary Questions</td>
<td>Overall, how can we best help parents in tennis?</td>
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<td>What advice would you have for organizing bodies and clubs to help parents?</td>
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<td>How can coaches best help parents of tennis-playing children?</td>
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<td>What advice would you have for other parents regarding how to support their child in tennis?</td>
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<td>Overall, what would you say has been most beneficial in allowing you to support your child in tennis?</td>
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<td>Is there anything else regarding your help or support that you feel I should have covered that I haven’t?</td>
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<td>Anything else you would like to tell me?</td>
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