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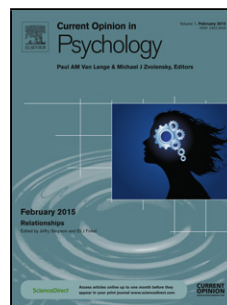
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Parenting in Sport

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## PARENTING IN SPORT

**Parenting in Sport Highlights**

- This review examines the sport parenting research from the last 5 years
- The complexity of parental involvement is increasingly understood
- Various factors appear to impact upon parental involvement in sport
- Limited studies of parent support or education have been conducted

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**Abstract**

This paper provides a brief summary and commentary on the growing literature on parenting in sport, with a particular emphasis on literature from the last 2-3 years. Following a brief introduction overviewing the topic area, we firstly focus on the influence of parental involvement on children. Specifically, we examine the range of factors that influence children's perceptions of parental involvement and the consequences of different behaviors. Next we discuss the factors influencing parental involvement, such as the challenges and stressors associated with parenting children in sport and the culture within different sports. Finally, our review focuses upon the strategies developed by parents to facilitate their involvement in their children's sport, as well as the few papers focused upon parent education and support. We conclude by examining the need for further research and examination of support strategies for parents.

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**Parenting in Sport****Introduction**

Parental involvement and influence in sport has piqued the interest of academics for around 40 years [e.g.,1]. Studies have generally focused on the broad contribution of parents to the development of talented athletes [e.g.,2,3,4], as well as the positive and detrimental impact parents can have on children's psychosocial experiences (e.g.,5,6,7). Taken together, research has provided a clear indication of the different roles parents fulfil in lives of young athletes; ranging from providing opportunities for participation and role modelling appropriate sporting engagement to helping children interpret their competitive experience. Further, evidence highlights the need for parents to ensure that, when fulfilling these roles, they are engaged in supportive rather than pressurizing manners [see 8 for review]. Such knowledge has played an important role in stimulating continued study in this area and ensuring that the value of parents in sport is understood [8]. Consequently, there has been a proliferation of research in this area over the last decade. Such dedicated interest has resulted in increasingly diverse and nuanced studies, which have helped to create a more complete picture of sport parenting. The focus of this review is on unpacking and exploring this complexity across three interconnected areas of sport parenting research from the last two to five years.

**Influence of Parents in Sport**

Much is known about the ways in which parents can influence children's sporting experiences [see 8 for review] and strides have recently been made to identify specific models of sport parenting [9,10]. Consistent with previous findings, the most recent evidence continues to highlight the detrimental impact parental pressure (e.g., displayed by overstepping boundaries and holding excessive expectations) can have on children [11,12,13]. Similarly, parental support, provided as guidance and encouragement for example, continues

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to be associated with positive developmental and psychosocial consequences [14,13,10].

However, as Dorsch, Smith, and Dotterer [15] identified, the distinction between pressuring behaviors as negative and supportive behaviors as positive is not necessarily clear-cut. Results from their cross-sectional survey of 201 families highlighted that, in certain situations, traditionally positive or negative outcomes (specifically positive affect and conflict) were associated with both pressure and support.

Drawing on the expanding research in this area it is apparent that many factors are likely to influence perceptions of parental involvement (e.g., as “pressuring” or “supportive”) and subsequently the consequences parental involvement has on children. For example, Knight and Holt [9] identified that the goals parents and children adopt subsequently influence how parents are involved and also how children interpret types of involvement. Consequently, depending on the goals children hold, different comments and reactions from parents will be perceived as pressuring or supportive. Further, the timing of parental behaviors (e.g., before, during, and after competitions) and the context in which they occur (e.g., at home, training, or competition) may also alter athletes’ perceptions and the subsequent impact they have on children [16,17].

The presence and involvement of others in the environment also alters the impact parental behaviors have on children [e.g.,18,19,20,21]. For instance, the impact of parents’ autonomy support on children’s motivation is influenced by the autonomy support provided by children’s peers and coaches [18,22]. Similarly, the motivational climate created by parents, coaches, and peers is likely to have a greater impact on athletes’ involvement in poor sport behaviors than parent-created climates alone [23,24].

Additionally, children’s perceptions of their parents’ involvement in their sport (e.g., whether behaviors are pressuring or supportive) appear to be dictated by specific characteristics of parents and children (e.g., gender), and also the quality of the relationship

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between parents and children [e.g.,25]. For example, Amado and colleagues [11] identified that male athletes report higher levels of perceived parental pressure compared to female athletes, while Gustafasson, Hill, Stenling, and Wagnsson [26] established that athletes' levels of perfectionism may alter the impact of parental climate on athlete burnout. Kang, Jeon, Kwon, and Park [27] meanwhile found that the quality of parental attachment mediated the influence of parental support on the self-esteem of Korean athletes.

In summary, perceptions of parental involvement, and the subsequent influence parents have on children's sporting experiences, appears to depend upon many factors. Such factors are associated not only with parents themselves, but with the characteristics, goals, and behavior of their children, as well as the concurrent influence of others, in what constitutes a rather dynamic and complex 'youth sport' environment. To expedite our understanding of the influence of parents in sport, ensuring that future research considers and accounts for such complexity is necessary.

### **Factors Influencing Parental Involvement in Sport**

When reviewing media representations of parents or seeking the views of sport stakeholders, the traditional justification for parents' engaging "inappropriately" is that they are overinvested in their child's sport, hold unrealistic expectations that their children will "make it" or perhaps living their own (unfulfilled) dreams through their children [28,8].

While there is some evidence to support such contentions [12,29,28], systematic investigations to uncover what triggers "inappropriate" (or "appropriate") involvement have only just begun. One such study is that by Dunn, Dorsch, King, and Rothlisberger [30] who examined the relationship between the financial investment parents make in their children's sport and the corresponding feelings of pressure, enjoyment, and commitment to sport that children report. Dunn et al. identified that parents who invested a greater proportion of their



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family income to their children's sport were associated with higher athlete perceptions of pressure as well as decreased child enjoyment and commitment.

Adding to these findings, a survey of sport parents from the US and the UK highlighted that parents approach sport with different aims, goals, or expectations for their children based on their past experiences as well as their sport knowledge [28]. Depending upon these experiences and their desires for their child's involvement, parents take on different roles within their child's sport, for instance as a coach or as a supporter and adapt their involvement to these roles. Consequently, for one to understand why parents are involved in "appropriate" or "inappropriate" ways, it is necessary to first understand parents' goals, experiences, and background.

Additionally, consideration should be given to the relationship between parents and children [31], particularly the empathy parents feel for their children when they are competing as this appears to influence parents' responses [32,33]. For example, in an examination of parents' experiences at tennis tournaments, parents indicated that watching their children compete when they are upset or losing can be extremely hard as they "feel for their child" and share their disappointment [34]. Parents are then confronted with a challenging situation as they seek to appropriately comfort and respond to their child's emotions, which can result in parents experiencing anxiety or stress and potentially lead to inappropriate responses [16,34,35].

Parents face numerous other challenges and stressors within the competitive sport environment [36,32,37,38]. Evidence from general psychology points to the relationship between parenting stress and punitive behaviors [39], as such it is feasible that when parents are in particularly demanding sport environments they may react inappropriately [8]. For instance, Clarke and Harwood [40] explored the phenomenon of being a parent of a youth footballer at an academy and established that it can be challenging and complicated.

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Particularly, parents described reassessing their role as the parent of an elite athlete, which was associated with an enhanced status but also heightened concerns regarding potential negative consequences for their child and a need to protect their children from harm. Parents described having to learn about the social and organizational expectations of the environment, associated with increased time and monetary investment but also a decrease in their role as they hand over responsibility to coaches and are required to stay detached from their child's experience. As parents attempt to negotiate these changes and challenges, one could see how parents might "get it wrong" and find their involvement to be less than optimal.

Additionally, consideration must be given to specific sport cultures on the involvement of parents [8]. For instance, McMahon and Penney [41] explored the impact the Australian swimming culture had on parents' identities and as a result how they engaged with their children and the values they endorsed. It emerged that parents' identities were shaped by a culture of perfection and performance and consequently parents adopted a number of (often negative) behaviors to reinforce attitudes and expectations that were embedded in the culture. Similarly, Dorsch, Smith, Wilson, and McDonough [42] sought to explore the relationship between parents' goals for their children's involvement and the verbal sideline behavior. Initially, parents consistently endorsed goals associated with wanting their children to have fun and enjoy their participation. However, as parents were increasingly embedded within the sport culture, their goals started to change in line with the youth sport environment, particularly becoming more focused on identity (e.g., how they and their children were viewed by others) goals.

Overall, given the impact of sport culture on parents, as well as the potential effect of costs and stressors on parental involvement, it would seem pertinent that we move beyond placing the "blame" on individual parents if they are not engaged in appropriate ways to considering the extensive environmental and cultural aspects that are likely to be influencing

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involvement. However, more research examining and exploring the various factors that influence involvement, and specific strategies to address these factors, is greatly needed.

### **Strategies to Enhance Parental Involvement in Sport**

Given the demands parents can experience in sport, parents are reliant on a range of individuals and develop numerous strategies to be able to continue supporting their children [40,33,43]. Recent studies with parents of youth tennis players [34] and elite youth gymnasts [32] have provided some important insights into some of these strategies. For instance, it appears that parents are heavily reliant upon the help of their spouse/partner and extended family to meet the time demands of sport and complete necessary tasks, draw on the knowledge and support of coaches to begin to understand the needs of their children and the sport, while also relying on children themselves to manage their own emotions.

Unfortunately, it appears that rather than being supported or guided to develop strategies that may help them to cope with demands, parents often develop these coping strategies through a process of trial and error [32] and their experiences in the sport [40,44,42]. However, such learning by trial and error or through experience is unlikely to be the most effective mechanism for either parents or children [34], so gaining a better understanding of the needs of parents [see 45 for an example], as well as effective and successful strategies for successfully navigating these needs is critical in moving forwards [46].

Beyond teaching parents skills to cope with demands, there is an ongoing need to develop and evaluate broader strategies to help parents support their children in sport. A number of suggestions have been provided in various articles regarding the different approaches or strategies that can be used to enhance parental involvement [e.g.,47,33] and many sports organizations have sought to embed strategies, policies, or practices in their clubs and at competitions to address “poor” parental involvement [8]. However, few of these

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strategies or policies are evidence-based or have been evaluated to establish the appropriateness or impact of such behaviors [48].

In one of the first evaluated parent-education interventions, Dorsch and colleagues [49] conducted a pilot study with 81 parents from seven U8 or U10 soccer teams. Parents were separated across three groups: a full intervention group, who received a research-informed 45 minute presentation along with an education guide; a partial intervention group who received only the guide, and; a non-implementation group who received no information. Overall, the results of this pilot study point to the value of an evidence-based intervention on parental involvement, parent-child relationships, and children's enjoyment and competence in sport. Such evidence of the effectiveness of parent education programs is useful and important in helping to encourage the integration of evidence-based interventions within sports clubs and organisations. However, caution must be used when interpreting the results from this particular study given the limited sample size and the lack of variation in the population. Furthermore, whether education programmes are the most effective way to help parents, bearing in mind the challenges and demands illustrated in the preceding section, also requires some considerations.

Expanding beyond the presentation model used by Dorsch and colleagues [49], both Lafferty and Trigg [50] and Vincent and Christensen [51] have shared details of programmes/workshops they have used with parents. Lafferty and Trigg developed the Working with Parents in Sport Model (WWPS-model), which is centered around the critical role of reflection and empowering parents to positively and proactively support their children in sport. The WWPS-model points to the critical need to educate parents to understand their roles and responsibilities throughout the lifetime of their child's sporting involvement, while also teaching parents strategies to manage their own behaviors that might arise due to the emotional investment they make in their children's sport. The importance of education

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pertaining to roles and responsibilities as well as the development of behavior management strategies were also reinforced in a series of workshops conducted and reviewed by Vincent and Christensen [51]. Together, these two articles provide clear support for the value of utilizing reflective, practical activities to facilitate parents' understanding and awareness of their involvement. Nevertheless, further evaluation of the impact of these, and similar, activities would be beneficial to fully illustrate the effectiveness of such approaches.

### **Conclusions**

Parental involvement in sport is extremely complex; the consequences of involvement are varied, the reasons for different types of involvement are diverse, and the strategies needed to support parents are (should be) multifaceted. Recent research has started to delve into this complexity and help researchers and practitioners alike to understand that sport parenting is not simply a matter of “good” versus “bad” or “do’s” versus “don’t’s” but an intricate social experience, influenced by a whole host of factors and variables. However, as illustrated throughout the review, there are still many gaps to fill, particularly regarding parenting experiences and support strategies. We are taking steps in the right direction but we still have a long way to go in ensuring that we have an evidence-base from which we can develop effective, and efficient, strategies to support (not simply educate) parents and encourage change in organisations and clubs, so parents in turn can best help their children enjoy their sport participation and fulfil their potential.

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In this paper the authors develop a grounded theory of optimal parental involvement in junior tennis. The authors highlight that the parental involvement is underpinned by parents seeking to understand and enhance their children's individual tennis journey and that this is achieved through shared and communicated goals, an understanding emotional climate, and enhancing parental practices.

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This manuscript explores the various factors associated with parental pressure and support. Results from a cross-sectional survey of 201 families indicated that parental warmth, positive affect, and a mastery climate were positively associated with support, whereas parental conflict, negative affect, and an ego climate were positively associated with pressure from mothers and fathers. But, both conflict and positive affect were associated with pressure and support in certain situations.

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This manuscript provides a detailed examination of the impact financial investment has on children's perceptions of pressure and support in sport. Drawing on investment theory as well as extensive knowledge of sport parenting, this study highlights the impact the costs of sport can have on children.

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The authors provide an insight into parents attempts to cope with the stressors encountered in elite gymnastics. Parents indicated attempting to detach from gymnastics, a need to normalize experiences, being willing to learn and adopting emotion-focused coping strategies to facilitate their engagement in their children's sport.

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This study provides detailed insights into the specific experiences of parents as they are socialized into youth football academies in the UK. Parents provide detailed insights into the various changes they experience as their children enter this environment and they struggle to manage and negotiate the expectations they experience as parents.

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Recognizing the limited evidence or evaluation of "sport parenting policies", the authors sought to examine perceptions of particular policies in Australian football. Findings indicate that although there is much positive feeling about the policies, their inconsistent application reduces their effectiveness.

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