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Revealing Findings in Youth Sport Parenting Research

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### Abstract

It is widely accepted that parents are a pivotal part of young people's sporting journey, and over the last four decades there has been a substantial growth in research pertaining to youth sport parenting. The aim of this paper is to review the status of the literature pertaining to parenting in youth sport and to suggest areas for future work. Specifically, this paper provides a very brief history of sport parenting research before turning attention to the three areas of study that are currently attracting the majority of researchers' attention: 1) the influence of parental involvement in youth sport, 2) factors affecting parental involvement in youth sport, and 3) strategies to promote high-quality parental involvement. Future research directions pertaining to the sport parenting questions that are asked, the populations that are sampled, and the interventions that are developed and evaluated are subsequently provided. Finally, the paper concludes with some considerations for best practice within sports clubs and organizations that seek to foster more adaptive youth sport parenting.

*Keywords: parent pressure, social influence, sport socialization, parent support*

Access to social support, the provision of aid and assistance through interpersonal exchanges and within relationships (Beets, Cardinal, and Alderman, 2010), can substantially influence athletes' psychosocial development and performance (e.g., Rees & Hardy, 2000). Throughout their sporting career, athletes will seek support from a range of sources including coaches, teammates, partners, and teachers (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). One of the most influential sources, particularly for children and adolescents, is their parents<sup>1</sup>. Through their involvement, the vast majority of parents positively influence their children's sporting experiences; however, although in the minority, there are some parents who have a detrimental influence on their children's experiences (Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017). Recognizing the potential benefits and negative consequences that can arise when parents are appropriately involved within youth sport, youth sport researchers have given considerable attention to developing an evidence-base pertaining to sport parenting (Holt & Knight, 2014).

Researchers and practitioners are increasingly working with sports organizations, coaches, and parents themselves to promote high-quality parental involvement in youth sport (e.g., Dorsch, King, Dunn, Osai, & Tulane, 2017; Thrower, Harwood, & Spray, 2017). To ensure such work is effective, it is important that researchers and practitioners are aware of the current status of research in this area. To this end, in this paper I provide a brief history of youth sport parenting research before turning attention to three areas of study that are currently attracting the majority of researchers' attention: 1) the influence of parental involvement in sport, 2) factors affecting parental involvement in youth sport, and 3) strategies to promote high-quality parental involvement. I then share selected research limitations, areas for future research, and

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, the term parents is used to refer to the central care-giver(s) in a young person's life

considerations for best practice that are important to address to advance scholarship and practice with respect to this important youth sport topic.

### **A (Very) Brief History of Youth Sport Parenting Research**

#### **Initial Descriptive Insights**

Insights into parental involvement in youth sport can be traced to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when studies of youth sport motives and attrition began to emerge from the United States (e.g., Gould, Feltz, Horn, & Weiss, 1982; Gould, Feltz, & Weiss, 1985). These early (usually descriptive, correlational, atheoretical) studies suggested that parents contribute to children's ongoing participation or dropout from sport. For instance, children consistently indicated that an overemphasis on winning and/or perceptions of pressure contributed to sport dropout (e.g., Gould et al., 1982; Orlick, 1974). In contrast, support and/or encouragement from parents were cited as reasons why children participated in sport (e.g., Gould et al., 1985).

This line of work continued throughout the 1980s, when numerous studies were designed to advance understanding of the factors influencing positive and negative affective outcomes in youth sport. Again, utilizing mostly descriptive, correlational designs with populations from the United States, it was identified that greater perceptions of parental pressure, expectations, and negative evaluations were associated with higher rates of anxiety among young athletes (e.g., Lewthwaite & Scanlan, 1989; Passer, 1983; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984), while concerns about what parents would think or say were also identified as a source of stress for children (e.g., Pierce & Stratton, 1981). In contrast, less parental pressure and more positive perceptions of parental satisfaction with performance, as well as general involvement and interactions, were associated with more enjoyment and positive affect (e.g., Brustad, 1988; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986).

Similar studies continued throughout the 1990s, with researchers explicitly comparing the psychosocial consequences associated with parents' behaviors that were supportive or pressuring (e.g., Cohn, 1990; Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1991). Parental support, that is, an "athlete's perception of his or her parents' behavior aimed at facilitating his or her involvement and participation" (Leff & Hoyle, 1995, p.190) was generally associated with positive outcomes such as enjoyment and self-esteem (Leff & Hoyle, 1995, 1997). In contrast, parental pressure, defined as, "behavior exhibited by parents that is perceived by their children as indicating high, unlikely, or possibly even unattainable expectations" (Leff & Hoyle, 1995, p. 190), shows less consistent findings (Leff & Hoyle, 1995, 1997) but is often associated with negative consequences for young athletes (Holt & Knight, 2014).

The identification of such contrasting outcomes laid the foundation for further examination of parental involvement in youth sport. However, due to the largely atheoretical, correlational nature of these early studies, the findings lacked the contextual understanding and complexity to enable the identification of *why* or *how* different parental behaviors may lead to such affective outcomes in young athletes. Nevertheless, this study of, and distinction between, pressuring and supportive behaviors has continued to permeate sport parenting research throughout the last two decades and has influenced the (overly simplistic) dichotomous, "good versus bad" approach often used when considering parental involvement in youth sport (Knight et al., 2017).

**Theoretical and Topical Advances.** The 1990s were also characterized by a growth in understanding and application of motivation-related theories such as Achievement Goal Theory (Ames, 1992; Nicholls, 1984), Competence Motivation Theory (Harter, 1999), Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), and others. These theories provided an opportunity to overcome the

limitations associated with atheoretical studies of youth sport parenting, and enable a clearer understanding of *why* specific parental behaviors, such as expressions of confidence and provision of feedback, might affect children's motivation and subsequent psychosocial outcomes (e.g., Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Duda & Horn, 1993; White, Duda & Hart, 1992). For instance, applying Competence Motivation Theory, Felson (1989) and McCullagh, Matzkanin, Shaw, and Maldonado (1993) found that children who perceived their parents had high beliefs in their sport competency had higher appraisals of their own sport abilities. Moreover, Babkes and Weiss (1999) found parents reporting more role modeling of sport behavior, more positive feedback following children's sporting performances, and more positive beliefs regarding their children's sporting competence had children who reported higher perceptions of their own competence, sport enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation.

Similarly, researchers drew on Eccles and colleagues' (Eccles, 2005; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998) Expectancy-Value Theory to understand how parents' attitudes and beliefs might relate to children's attitudes, beliefs, and values in relation to sport (see Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Horn & Horn, 2007). Originally examining parental influence on gender socialization, Eccles et al. (1998) proposed a complex theory to explain children's behavior choices based upon children's expectations for success in a given task and the importance or value they place upon the task. Within youth sport, parents' perceptions of their children's competence appear to particularly influence children's involvement and motivation. For instance, parents who expressed higher perceptions of their child's sporting competency provided more opportunities and equipment for children to engage (Brustad, 1993). Further, children reported higher levels of perceived competence when their parents had higher perceptions of their competence, independent of children's actual competence (Eccles & Harold, 1991).

Alongside this work, Côté (1999) published a study examining the influence of the family on the development of talented Canadian athletes. Based on interviews with four athletes and their families, Côté explicitly identified the importance of parents in talent development, adding to the previous findings pertaining to psychological and affective outcomes. Côté also drew attention to the ever present, but always changing, influence of parents over an athlete's career. This emphasized the need to adopt a developmental approach to studying parents in sport and thus highlighted the need to move beyond single-time point, correlational, descriptive studies to understand parents' involvement. The use of a qualitative research approach also enabled novel insights into the interrelationships among individuals within an athletes' support network.

Overall, the combination of theoretically driven studies, consideration of talent development, and expansion of research approaches enabled some of the complexity of youth sport parenting to be uncovered. Moreover, researchers' attention was increasingly drawn to sport parenting, resulting in a substantial growth in the field. For instance, an April 2018 Scopus search using the terms "youth sport" and "parent" identified an increase in studies from less than 10 per year before 2000, to over 20 per year from 2000 to 2010, to near annual increases over the current decade, with 85 studies being published in 2018 alone. Recent research coheres around three main areas of study: 1) the influence of parental involvement on children and adolescents in youth sport, 2) factors influencing parental involvement in youth sport, and 3) strategies to optimize parental involvement to be of high quality. Each of these areas is considered below.

### **Influence of Parental Involvement on Children and Adolescents**

#### **Involved in Youth Sport**

Parenting is a complex, social process and as such requires nuanced and critical consideration at conceptual and methodological levels (Knight et al., 2017). As discussed above,



until the early 2000s the majority of sport parenting research focused on understanding how parental behaviors, most notably those associated with pressure or support, linked with children's psychosocial outcomes and progression in sport. Such studies were useful in justifying the need to study parental involvement and providing an indication of the behaviors that may be more likely to lead to positive or negative outcomes. However, they also highlighted the need to account for a greater breadth of individual, relational, and contextual factors that may influence the different outcomes children experience (Dorsch, Smith, & Dotterer, 2016; Holt & Knight, 2014). Over the last decade or so, researchers have increasingly identified and considered such factors.

For instance, research has highlighted the importance of considering parental behaviors within the parenting style adopted by parents. Parenting style is the overall emotional climate created by parents and it is within this parenting style that specific behaviors are interpreted by children (Holt & Knight, 2014). Unfortunately, relatively limited attention has been given to this within sport, despite Horn and Horn (2007) calling for this over a decade ago. Those studies that have considered parenting styles have generally drawn on quantitative methods (e.g., Juntumaa, Keskivaara, & Punamäki, 2005; Sapieja, Dunn, & Holt, 2011) to identify the relationship between different parenting styles and certain outcomes (e.g., sport satisfaction, perfectionism), or qualitative methods to examine the parenting practices associated with different styles (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009). Generally, based mostly on data collected in North America, autonomy-supportive or authoritative parenting styles appear to be associated with positive practices and outcomes in youth sport (Holt & Knight, 2014). However, there are methodological issues with the validity of measures used and the classification of parenting style typologies. Moreover, culture must be considered when examining parenting styles because

general psychology literature indicates that in certain non-western cultures the adoption of more authoritarian parenting approaches may be associated with positive outcomes (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Due to the lack of diversity in sport parenting research such considerations have yet to be fully explored.

Beyond parenting styles, it is evident that children's perceptions of, and preferences for, different types of parental involvement may depend upon time and location (Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010; Knight, Little, Harwood, & Goodger, 2016; Knight, Neely, & Holt, 2011). For instance, focus groups with Canadian adolescent tennis players indicated that they want their parents to be supportive without being pressuring at competitions and suggested ways parents can do this (i.e., not providing tactical advice, helping with physical preparation encouraging both teams, respecting sporting etiquette, and providing honest but positive feedback after games; Knight et al., 2010). However, athletes have also indicated that the types of behaviors that are supportive from parents will vary depending upon the context (e.g., home, training, and competitions; Knight, Little et al., 2016) and timing (e.g., before, during, or after competitions; Knight et al., 2011), as well as athletes' goals for sport and that competition (Knight & Holt, 2014), the outcome of the game (Knight et al., 2010, 2011), and parent expertise (Knight, Dorsch et al., 2016).

Together, such studies clearly indicate that the appropriateness of certain behaviors depends on context. Attention must be given to parent behaviors displayed at specific times, in different contexts, and in relation to each individual child to fully understand their impact. Further, understanding the quality of the parent-child relationship (e.g., Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006) as well as the influences of others within the environment is necessary. For instance, Clarke, Harwood, and Cushion (2016) explored parents'

and children's experiences of their interaction and relationship in the context of youth soccer in the United Kingdom and identified that through their involvement, support, and beliefs, other family members' influence the parent-child relationship and the involvement of the parent. Similarly, researchers have recognized that parents' involvement might be influenced by coach, peer, sibling, and teammate behaviors (e.g., Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavalley, 2009). For example, the link between parents' autonomy support with children's motivation is a function of the autonomy support provided by children's peers and coaches (Amorose, Anderson-Butcher, Newman, Fraina, & Iachini, 2016). Similarly, the motivational climate created by parents, coaches, and peers is likely to more strongly predict athletes' poor sport behaviors than parent-created climates alone (Davies, Babkes Stellino, Nichols, & Coleman, 2016). Such findings reinforce the importance of conducting parenting research at a relational rather than individual level, to ensure that such interactions are fully accounted for (Clarke et al., 2016). Unfortunately, such research is generally lacking within youth sport.

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

While much attention has been given to trying to understand how parents influence children, researchers have also increasingly sought to understand the experiences of parenting children involved in youth sport, and specifically why parents do what they do. That is, researchers have sought to delineate the mechanisms that might influence parents and subsequently effect children's performance and psychosocial outcomes (Horn & Horn, 2007; Knight et al., 2017). As aforementioned, initial research in this area was based on Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles, 2005), and focused broadly on how parents' attitudes and beliefs might relate to children's engagement in physical activity (e.g., Eccles & Harold, 1991). More recently, consideration has been given to how parents' beliefs, attitudes, and expectations (among others)

may influence their involvement in their children's sport (e.g., Knight, Dorsch et al., 2016). For instance, a survey with parents in the United Kingdom and the United States demonstrated that parents had a range of beliefs regarding sport, why they wanted their children to participate, and what they hoped they would gain as a result (Knight, Dorsch et al., 2016). These beliefs, expectations, and values subsequently influenced the specific roles (i.e., coach, administrator, supporter) parents adopted and the behaviors they displayed. Such insights point to the importance of considering parents as a diverse group and ensuring that individual differences are accounted for when studying or working with youth sport parents.

Recent qualitative studies of sport parents' experiences have indicated that although parents may hold certain attitudes or beliefs towards sport or achievement when they initially introduce their children to sport, as parents are socialized into the environment and culture these, as well as associated behaviors, may start to change (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009, 2015; McMahon & Penney, 2015; Tamminen, Poucher, & Povilaitis, 2017). For instance, Dorsch and colleagues (2015) examined the socialization experiences of parents during the first year of their children's involvement in sport in the United States. Over the course of 15 months, parents' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors changed, particularly as they became behaviorally and emotionally engaged in their child's sport. Similarly, in a study of parents' experiences of their child's transition into an elite youth soccer academy in the United Kingdom, Clarke and Harwood (2014), identified changes in parents' identity, perceived responsibility, and relationships with other parents as a result of their environment.

More recently, it has been suggested that broader social expectations of parents may also influence parents' decisions and involvement in relation to children's sport (e.g., Stefansen, Smette, & Strandbu, 2018). For instance, a recent qualitative study from Canada sought to

examine how the good parenting ideal has changed in relation to active free play in childhood (Pynn et al., 2019). Through an intergenerational study with grandparent–parent dyads it became apparent that, somewhat due to perceptions of safety and judgement on social media, parents perceived a need to have their children involved in more structured activities (e.g., organized sport compared to free play) and to take a more active role in these activities. Such research is still somewhat in its infancy, so further research examining specific relationships between social expectations, sporting cultures, parents' involvement, and child outcomes would be beneficial.

Researchers have also gained some insights into the demands and challenges parents face in sport (e.g., Burgess, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016; Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b; Hayward, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2017). Drawing on interview and focus group data, these studies have illustrated that parents experience a range of competition-related, organizational, and developmental stressors when seeking to support their children's sporting involvement in tennis and soccer in the United Kingdom (Harwood & Knight, 2009a). Based on the recognition within general psychology that parenting stress can affect parenting behaviors and child outcomes (Belsky, 1984), it has been suggested that the stressors associated with sport might influence parents' (negative) involvement, (Burgess et al., 2016). However, this relationship has yet to be explicitly examined within sport and thus remains speculative.

One arena that can be particularly challenging for parents is competitions. The behaviors parents display at competitions are public (Trussell & Shaw, 2012) and as such receive substantial scrutiny in the media and by researchers (e.g., Bowker et al., 2009; Elliott & Drummond, 2017; Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008; Omli & LaVoi, 2012). Moreover, competitions are often emotionally charged environments (Knight & Holt, 2013), which may impact upon parents' involvement, particularly due to the empathy parents have for

their child (e.g., Holt et al., 2008; Knight & Holt, 2013). Further, certain competition situations, such as perceived injustice towards a parent's child, poor refereeing, or inappropriate behaviors from other parents, may increase the likelihood of parents experiencing anger at competitions (Omli & LaVoi, 2012), which may lead to negative reactions. It has also been suggested that certain behaviors (e.g., excessive expectations) arise due to parents' unfulfilled dreams or a desire for a return on their financial investment (Bean, Jeffery-Tosoni, Baker, & Fraser-Thomas, 2016; Brummelman et al., 2013). However, while these suggestions are all useful, there is a lack of consolidated evidence pertaining to why different parents engage in certain ways at competitions, which will likely affect the success of any strategies to enhance parent behaviors during competitions.

### **Strategies to Promote Quality Parental Involvement**

In 2006, Gould and colleagues acknowledged that it is little wonder that parents might interfere in their children's sporting development "given the fact that sport parents receive little or no training about how to help their child develop and are exposed to a youth sports environment that is increasingly professional" (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006, p. 635). Fortunately, over the last decade, researchers have begun to develop programs to promote higher quality parent involvement in youth sport, although the evidence-base is still small. The development of evidence-based programs is particularly important because just as youth sport parenting has captured the attention of researchers, negative parental involvement has also drawn the attention of international media and sport organizations, with organizations highlighting a desire for more research, including parent education, to address youth sport parenting issues (Holt et al., 2018).

Initial evidence pertaining to sport parenting interventions came in the form of practitioner reflections. Richards and Winter (2013) shared their experiences of delivering an education program for parents of competitive gymnasts in the United Kingdom. The program consisted of six, weekly 20 to 30-minute sessions focused on helping a group of 21 parents create a task-oriented motivational climate. Parental feedback on the intervention was positive, with 75% of parents indicating that they would utilize the strategies learned in the sessions. Reflecting on the program, Richards and Winter suggested that positive outcomes arose because they considered parents' logistical constraints and scheduled the intervention to enhance opportunities for attendance. However, they suggested that greater commitment to the program from the coaching and management teams may further increase parents' willingness to engage. Subsequently, Vincent and Christensen (2015) implemented a series of education workshops to parents of children involved in an elite youth soccer program in the United States. Although the intervention was generally positively received, Vincent and Christensen also highlighted the challenge of parent attendance and, similarly perceived that having the support of the organization was needed to increase parents' engagement.

Adding to this early work, three very recent parent interventions have been published. The first of these was a pilot study by Dorsch and colleagues (2017) which sought to examine the impact of a full (seminar and sport parent guide) and partial (just the sport parent guide) intervention on parents' support, warmth, pressure, and conflict, and subsequent psychosocial outcomes for children. Parents from youth soccer teams in the United States participated; 18 parents attended a 45-minute seminar and received a 33-page sport parent guide providing information on topics including developmental models of sport participation, communication, working with coaches, and tips for positive sport parenting; 36 parents received just the guide,

and; 27 parents did not receive the seminar or guide. Following the intervention, children of parents in the seminar and guide group reported higher perceived parent support and warmth, as well as less perceived parent pressure and parent–child conflict. Children of these parents also reported increased enjoyment, higher perceptions of competence, and lower levels of stress. Although only including a small number of parents, the study clearly indicates the value of evidence-based interventions on parents.

Similarly, both a face-to-face program of workshops (Thrower et al., 2017) and an online program (Thrower, Harwood, & Spray, 2018) delivered to parents in the United Kingdom were also associated with positive outcomes. In their first study, Thrower and colleagues delivered six workshops over a 12-week period to parents with tennis-involved children aged 5 to 10 years. On average, 22 parents attended the workshops which covered topics including the mini-tennis system, child development, and competition roles of parents. Overall, the findings of the study indicated that such workshops can improve parents' knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Thrower and colleagues' next study evaluated the effectiveness of an online education program for tennis parents. Thirteen parents completed the online program, covering similar topics to the previous face-to-face workshops. Again, data indicated that the intervention had a positive effect on parents' emotional experiences, goal orientations, and both tennis parent and general parenting efficacy. Unfortunately, the number of parents completing the interventions was small. Clearly, across parent intervention studies session attendance is a consistent issue. This is a notable challenge for researchers who are trying to provide evidence-based solutions to sports organizations. Thus, more research designed to identify barriers to delivery of parent interventions in sport would be particularly valuable to help guide future research in this area (see Dorsch et al., 2018).



### **Future Research Directions**

As indicated, knowledge regarding youth sport parenting has increased substantially, but there remain substantial gaps in our knowledge. Particularly important directions for future research are detailed below.

#### **Capturing Complexity**

Based on the early youth sport parenting research, there has been a tendency to dichotomously classify parent behaviors as supportive and pressuring, and subsequent outcomes as positive and negative. However, youth sport parenting is complex both as a phenomenon and an area of study; thus, more nuanced questions regarding, and approaches to studying, youth sport parenting are required. For instance, drawing on more specific theories of parental involvement from within and beyond sport (e.g., Teques & Serpa, 2009; Teques, Serpa, Rosado, Silva, & Calmeiro, 2018), as well as expanding the methodologies used in sport parenting research, could enable more detailed examinations of sport cultures, accounting of parent and athlete developmental and life histories, and accommodation of multiple stakeholders' perspectives. Further, there is a need for more explicit examinations of how varying behaviors from multiple individuals within a child's environment interact to influence performance and development. Similarly, further examination of the factors that influence parental involvement, particularly considering aspects both within and beyond sport, are required to enable a thorough understanding of why parents are behaving in different manners.

#### **Diversifying Participant Populations**

In seeking to better account for the complexity of sport parenting there is also a need to diversify research participant populations. A major limitation of the current evidence base, particularly when considering application to or making recommendations to sport organizations,

is the predominance of data on North American and United Kingdom samples, particularly with adolescents or their parents in football (soccer) and tennis (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Moreover, where data has been provided (it is often lacking, which is an issue in itself) on the backgrounds of participants such as family make-up, SES, and ethnicity, research appears to be dominated by Western, Caucasian, two-parent, moderate-to-high earning families (Dorsch, Vierimaa, & Plucinik, 2019). Thus, caution must be used when applying findings in practice, particularly when making recommendations regarding parents' involvement that may not be logistically possible or align with cultural expectations. To overcome such limitations, research is needed on the demands that single parents encounter when attempting to support their children, attitudes and beliefs of parents from different cultures towards sport and their expectations for their children, and the parenting style associated with more positive outcomes in young athletes from different cultures.

### **Evidence-Based Interventions**

There are numerous challenges with attempting to examine the effectiveness of sport parenting interventions, not least of which are full intervention engagement and the completion of necessary data collection measures (e.g., Dorsch et al., 2016; Thrower et al., 2017; Richards & Winter, 2013). Papers reflecting on the challenges researchers and practitioners have encountered when seeking to implement and evaluate interventions with parents and sharing practices that have been both successful or unsuccessful in encouraging parents to engage would be particularly useful (e.g., Knight & Newport, 2017). If parents do engage with sessions, the second challenge for researchers is which measures to use to evaluate the intervention. Currently, there are few validated, theory-grounded measures available that can be used to specifically examine changes in parents' involvement, behaviors, or attitudes (cf., Harwood, Caglar,

Thrower, & Smith, 2019). Additionally, there is a need to consider the varying ways we can deliver interventions (e.g., online). To date the majority of parenting interventions have occurred through a series of face-to-face workshops, which allow for information to be tailored to the specific audience and encourage interaction, but are more difficult to administer on a larger scale. Being creative with the types of interventions that are provided (Knight & Newport, 2017) and comparing the efficacy of different interventions types would be beneficial (e.g., Dorsch et al., 2016). Furthermore, identification of the optimal length, content, and delivery style of interventions would be useful to maximize both efficacy and efficiency (Dorsch et al., 2018). This will require more critical appraisals of interventions, accompanied by long-term follow up.

### **Considerations for Best Practice**

Acknowledging the limitations to knowledge described above and the complexity of youth sport parenting, the extant literature enables a variety of recommendations for best practice when seeking to guide youth sport parents and sport organizations. Recommendations and considerations for practice are described below, organized within individual, relational, and cultural levels.

#### **Individual Consideration**

It is important to consider parents as diverse with, among others, different reasons for supporting their children's involvement, a vast range of experiences within and beyond sport, varying beliefs and attitudes regarding sport involvement, and unique relationships with their children. Consequently, parents have diverse desires in terms of information and support needed, as well as differing perceptions of behaviors that are appropriate or inappropriate in relation to their children. Although it may not always be possible for large organizations and clubs to produce entirely individualized information and support for parents, it is important that coaches

and practitioners take time to get to know the parents they are working with, learn about their individual circumstances and, where possible, utilize creative approaches to engage different parents. If such differentiation is not possible, at a minimum anticipating that parents may respond in different ways based on their different backgrounds, skills, and expectations can help facilitate more effective and positive parent–coach and parent–practitioner relationships.

### **Relational Understanding**

Building on the idea above, it is important to understand that the consequences of different parenting behaviors depend on the *relationship* that exists between a parent and a child, and also relationships between the parent, child, and others within a child’s sporting life (e.g., coaches, peers, siblings). Thus, when seeking to enhance quality parental involvement in sport, it is important to encourage parents to identify what works in their unique situation and to regularly communicate with their child to understand how different behaviors are perceived and the types of involvement that are preferred. It is also important for coaches to consider that they might be influenced by or influence the parent-child relationship and recognize how their behaviors might encourage inappropriate or detrimental types of involvement from parents (e.g., when coaches create a climate focused on winning this may encourage parents to do the same).

### **Cultural Changes**

Tied to the influence coaches might have on parents, it is also important to understand the extent to which the current climate of youth sport and the cultures that are being created are influencing parental involvement. As detailed previously, it appears that certain parental behaviors, thoughts, and feelings may be influenced, at least to some degree, by the given competitive environment and the demands of youth sport on parents. Thus, if we seek higher quality parent involvement, a culture shift from an increasingly professionalized, outcome-

focused, demanding youth sport environment might be needed. Such a shift in culture could start at the coach level, with a reduced emphasis on early selection and specialization. It could also expand to the clubs and organizations by reducing the pressure on coaches to demonstrate success through outcomes, reducing the costs of participation, and seeking to minimize the demands placed on parents. Furthermore, focusing on creating an environment which welcomes and encourages participation and engagement from parents (as opposed to only “educating” parents) may help parents gain a better understanding of their children’s experience and subsequently be in a better position to be positively involved.

### **Conclusion**

In 2004, Fredricks and Eccles published a chapter critically examining the parental involvement in sport literature. In concluding on areas for future research, they argued that, “much more attention needs to focus on unpacking the constructs of parental involvement, encouragement, and support in the athletic context” (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004, p. 157). Over the last 10 to 15 years, sport psychology and youth sport researchers have responded to this call, and as a result there has been an increase in knowledge regarding parental involvement in youth sport. Consolidated efforts to “unpack” parental involvement have led to a noticeable shift in the types of research conducted and the focus of studies. The field has progressed from mostly descriptive and correlational studies that sought to identify the broad roles and possible influence of parents within sport and physical activity contexts to more nuanced studies explicitly focused on parenting children who are participating in competitive, organized youth sport contexts. Specifically, the youth sport parenting discipline has expanded to concern itself with seeking to uncover the effect of parental involvement in youth sport on young athletes’ performances and psychosocial outcomes, identify the individual, environmental, and cultural influences on

parents' involvement, and develop strategies to enhance or optimize youth sport parenting.

Although many areas require further examination, this is an exciting time for the field because there is increasing evidence to draw upon when seeking to develop education or support programs for parents. It is through the development and implementation of such programs that positive changes in the experiences of parents and children may start to occur within youth sport.

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