The Youth Football Journey: Parents’ Experiences and Recommendations for Support

Rachael A. Newport*, C. J. Knight, and Thomas. D. Love

School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Swansea University, Swansea, Wales

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand parents’ experiences and offer recommendations for supporting parents within youth academy football. The lead researcher was embedded within a football academy for eight months and collected data through 29 formal interviews, three focus groups, observations, informal conversations, and field notes. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2018, 2019). Overall, analysis of the data indicated that, while their son was in the academy, parents experience a journey that consists of four individual phases; 1) excited and amazed, 2) dawning of reality, 3) accepting and rationalising, and 4) focusing on the future. Two overarching themes were also present throughout the journey; 1) enjoyment, opportunity, and development, and, 2) sacrifices, commitment, and consequences on personal life. To support parents through these phases, informational and social support, along with cultural changes would be useful. Specifically, parents may benefit from a parent supportive culture in which they are welcomed, respected, and valued, combined with a programme of specific support sessions. Overall, the findings illustrate the complexity of the football academy parent journey and the importance of those providing support to understand parents’ journeys and tailor support to their specific needs.

Keywords: culture; education; parenting journey, support, youth sport
Parents are an important part of the youth sport journey, fulfilling numerous important roles (Gledhill and Harwood 2014; Holt and Dunn 2004). For instance, parents provide financial and logistical support to enable children to participate (Harwood, Drew, and Knight 2010) and offer emotional support throughout competitions (Elliott and Drummond 2017). Additionally, parents must develop relationships with coaches and other parents, manage their reactions when watching their children compete, and cope with various sport-related demands (Hayward, Knight, and Mellalieu 2017; Pynn, Dunn, and Holt 2019). The extent to which parents ‘appropriately’ carry out these roles may impact upon whether children achieve their sporting potential, have a positive psychosocial experience, and experience positive developmental outcomes (Harwood and Knight 2015).

Numerous personal, relational, and environmental or socio-cultural factors influence how parents fulfil the aforementioned roles. For instance, at a personal level, parents’ concerns regarding their own behaviour can lead them to regulate the manner in which they are involved in their child’s sport (Knight et al. 2016). At a relational level, the quality of the relationship parents have with their child’s coach, as well as other parents, may influence the comments they make, the questions they ask, and their active engagement in coaching their own child (cf. Clarke and Harwood 2014). Finally, cultural ideals perpetuated by specific sports or the broader youth sport culture may influence parents’ sideline comments and behaviours (Dorsch et al. 2015; McMahon and Penney 2014). Clearly, how parents are involved in their child’s sport is complex. Thus, understanding their experiences is important to ensure appropriate guidance and support can be provided (Harwood and Knight 2016). Some initial work has been conducted in this area. For instance, a number of studies have considered the stressors that parents’ experience when supporting their child in various sports (e.g., Burgess, Knight, and Mellalieu 2016; Harwood and Knight 2009a, 2009b; Harwood et al. 2019; Lienhart et al. 2019). Overall, this literature
has indicated a plethora of stressors related to competition, organisational, and developmental concerns. Moreover, it has been recognised that the types of stressors that parents may experience will likely change through the course of their child’s sporting involvement (Harwood, Drew, and Knight 2010; Harwood and Knight 2009a), although further studies considering such changes are needed (Knight 2019).

Extending beyond parenting stressors, more general considerations of parents’ experiences have also been conducted (e.g., Clarke and Harwood 2014; Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough 2015; Dorsch et al. 2015; Wiersma and Fifer 2008). For instance, Clarke and Harwood (2014) conducted interviews with five mothers and five fathers to understand the experience of parenting children during their initial four years at a football academy. Using a phenomenological approach, they identified that being a parent of an elite youth footballer was characterised by; socialisation into the culture, enhanced identity, and increased responsibility. Specifically, parents had to adjust to the transfer of power and increased involvement of coaches, as well as how they personally identified regarding their child’s footballing status and what was expected of them. One specific expectation parents’ discussed was regarding their involvement on the sidelines. As an emotionally laden aspect of youth sport parenting, competitions have often drawn researchers’ attention, with insights being gained into how parents behave, as well as factors that can influence behaviour (e.g., Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough 2015; Holt et al. 2010; Knight and Holt 2013a; Omli and LaVoi 2012). Such research has indicated that parents’ can find it hard to manage the emotions they experience when watching their children compete (Knight and Holt, 2013; Omli and LaVoi, 2012), which can influence both their and their child’s experience (Knight et al., 2016).

Given the challenges parents can encounter when supporting their child in youth sport, researchers have recognised the need to identify the types of support, strategies or
information they may find beneficial to enhance their and their child’s experience (Dorsch et al., 2018; Knight, 2019). Some insights have been gained from parents themselves, who have indicated that, through trial and error, past experiences, or simply over time, they developed and implemented a range of strategies to best manage their and their child’s experiences in youth sport. These strategies included, conducting personal research, developing and drawing upon a broad support network, developing good quality relationships with coaches, and implementing various emotional regulation strategies (Burgess et al. 2016; Knight and Holt 2013; Lienhart et al. 2019). Unfortunately, however, although such insights are interesting and give some suggestions of what parents are currently doing, parents have indicated these may not always be effective or address all of their needs (Knight and Holt 2013a). As such, research explicitly identifying parents’ support needs and developing strategies to address these are pertinent.

Some insights into parents’ support needs have been gained within British Tennis (Thrower, Harwood, and Spray 2016). Based on interviews with 29 participants (five parents of children aged 5-10 years, eight parents of children aged 11-14 years, 12 coaches, and four ex-youth national and international players), Thrower and colleagues identified that, during childhood/mini-tennis, parents need support to appreciate the financial and time demands they will encounter, understand the benefits of engaging in tennis, develop a basic understanding of the sport of tennis, and how to provide organisational, developmental, and competition support to their child. These needs changed as children moved into early adolescence, with parents subsequently requiring information on supporting their child to transition through different levels, as well as understanding the impact of growth on performance and how to balance education and make career choices. Reinforcing the change in needs of parents over time, suggestions from parents, coaches, and administrators in the
US also highlighted that parents require education on developmentally appropriate parenting approaches as well as specific technical knowledge (Dorsch et al. 2018).

Unfortunately, despite the recognition of the changing experiences and needs of parents over time (e.g., Dorsch et al., 2018; Harwood & Knight, 2009a; Thrower et al., 2016), most studies examining parents’ experiences of supporting their children in sport focus only on one time point (Wiersma and Fifer 2008; Omli and LaVoI 2012) or a small part of the parent/child journey (e.g., starting out or transitioning to academies; Clarke and Harwood 2014; Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough 2015). Consequently, although we can attempt to piece together parents’ experiences, a full and complete understanding of how parents’ (positive and negative) experiences may change as their children progress from childhood throughout adolescence is limited. Similarly, aside from the distinction between childhood and early adolescence within Thrower and colleagues (2016) study, little consideration has been given to how the support or guidance parents might need changes in relation to a child’s sporting development (Knight 2019). In addition, despite research indicating that parents’ experiences may be influenced by environmental and socio-cultural factors (e.g., McMahon and Penney 2014), to the best of our knowledge, studies seeking to identify the guidance or support parents need has focused exclusively on what can be given to parents, rather than what could be changed or altered in the environment to help parents.

To this end, the first aim of the current study was to understand the experience of parents across the lifespan of an academy footballer. Specifically, we sought to understand the experiences of parents with children aged from 8 - 16 years. The second aim of this study was to develop recommendations for supporting parents at different stages of their child’s sporting journey, considering both individual and cultural factors. Recognising that parents do not know what they do not know (Thrower, Harwood, and Spray 2016), and that parents’ involvement in their children’s sport does not happen in isolation (Knight et al. 2017) to fully
address the second aim, this study drew on the perspectives of parents, coaches, and support staff.

**Method**

**Methodology and philosophical assumptions**

This study was conducted using an interpretive philosophical paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln 2018), drawing on a constructivist epistemology and relativist ontology. A constructivist epistemology is the belief that knowledge is based upon our experiences and perspectives, with no knowledge being devoid of human construction. A relativist ontology recognises there is no one common reality and that each interpretation varies in value based upon their credibility and utility. A case study approach was chosen for the current study as it aligned with these philosophical assumptions, while also addressing the aims of the study. Specifically, a case study design was congruent with the interpretivist paradigm because it utilises multiple perspectives to gain an in-depth understanding of complex multi-faceted social phenomenon (e.g., person, group, project, event, programme, or organisation), while retaining the characteristics of the everyday context in which it was studied (Crowe et al. 2011; Yin 2018). As such, a case study design allowed for an appreciation of the parents’ coaches’, and support staffs’ individual thoughts, beliefs, and experiences, within the specific context of academy football (cf., Schwandt, 2000). Moreover, an understanding of the parent experience and the development of recommendations for supporting parents could be co-constructed using the multiple perspectives and lead researcher’s interpretations.

There are various types of case studies (e.g., instrumental, intrinsic, and collective) and for the current study, an instrumental case study was used. An instrumental case study uses one particular case to gain a broad understanding of a phenomenon (Hodge and Sharp 2016). For this study, an instrumental case study provided the foundations for an exploration of parenting within academy football, drawing upon the experiences of parents and
perspectives of other stakeholders within one specific academy as the case (c.f. Stake 1995). Beyond enabling a detailed insight into the phenomenon of being a parent of an academy footballer, a case study was deemed useful for this study because gave a voice to those whose voices are less heard (Schwandt and Gates 2018). Although there is an ever growing body of evidence pertaining to sport parents, within sporting environments parents’ voices are often not heard or acknowledged as the culture dictates that parents relinquish control over to their child’s coach and stay in the background (Kerr and Stirling 2012; Jacobs, Smits, and Knoppers 2017). Additionally, parents are often deeply immersed within the sporting culture and live the role of a sports parent, so do not question the sporting culture (McMahon and Penney 2014). This is particularly true within the football academy environments where parents often have limited input due to the cultural expectations and codes of conduct restricting their involvement (Clarke and Harwood 2014). As such, a case study approach was seen as a beneficial approach to ensure that parents’ voices could be acknowledged within a naturalistic football academy environment.

An important element within a case study is defining the case and going through a process of “casing,” where the boundaries of time and place are set (Crowe et al. 2011). For an instrumental case study, where the social phenomenon within the case is the focus, a “typical” case can work well (Crowe et al. 2011; Yin 2018). Thus, for the current study, this particular football academy was chosen for being a typical example, and consequently hopefully offering access to a broad understanding of the parent experience. The case was a Category 1\(^1\) British boys youth football academy, which was seen as “typical” of other football academies due to the strict regulations imposed by the national governing body. The

\(^1\) A category 1 academy is the highest status awarded to a British football academy by the Premier League for a high level of facilities and quality coaching.
children train for eight to 12 hours per week and can travel for up to 90 minutes to attend training. They engage in regular home and away matches, tournaments, and festivals throughout the year. Children aged 10 years and older have the option to take part in the hybrid programme, where they attend the academy instead of school for one day per week (completing compulsory education alongside their training). Within the academy there are full and part-time professional coaches with a range of playing and coaching experiences. Additionally, there are numerous support staff including an academy manager, education officer, welfare officer, medical staff, physiotherapists, and strength and conditioning coaches. The training venue contains a gym, classrooms, office space, and a mixture of grass, 3G, and indoor pitches. There is also a parents’ lounge where parents may spend their time during training sessions. The boundaries of the case were set as the foundation (under-9 to 12) and youth development phase (under-13 to 16), studied over a period of eight months.

Participants

The participants in this study included parents, coaches, and support staff. Based on the aims, parents, coaches, and support staff were purposefully sampled to capture a range of experiences from across the age groups within the youth football academy. The sampling criterion was: 1) being a parent, guardian, or carer of at least one boy within the youth football academy, and; 2) their son trained and played matches for the under-9 to under-16 teams. The sampling criterion for the coaches and support staff was; 1) be a full or part-time member of staff within the youth football academy, and; 2) to work with the under-9 to under-16 age group teams.

Informal data was obtained through the lead researcher’s fieldwork in the form of observations, informal conversations, and group discussions were collected over an eight-month period. The researcher’s role within the environment was that of a sport psychology practitioner-researcher who, alongside the research for this case study, delivered monthly
parent meetings and a psychology programme to the players aged under-9 to under-16. This
data was supplemented with formal data collected through semi-structured interviews and
focus groups. The formal data collection occurred with 36 participants; 26 parents (three
parents took part in an interview and focus group), five coaches, and five support staff. The
parents were aged between 30 and 60 years, of children aged 9 to 15 years old, and 72%
described their ethnicity as White-British\(^2\). A sample size of 36 was chosen to ensure parents
from each of the eight age groups across the academy were represented, to enable
experiences and recommendations for support to be understood developmentally. Coaches
and support staff were aged 20 to 60+ years (see Tables 1 and 2 for further details).

**Procedure**

Following University Ethics Board approval, a football academy was approached to
identify their interest in participating in this study. Following agreement, an information
sharing event was held for parents, players, coaches, and support staff to explain initial
research plans. At this session, parents were informed of the purpose of the study, the
combination of informal and formal data collection methods. A brief open-ended
questionnaire was also handed out to parents to gain their initial thoughts on support that may
be beneficial and their experiences. One example of the questions included was, “please
indicate the key areas in which you think you need support or guidance as a parent of a child
at the football academy.” The foundation phase session was attended by 58 parents and the
youth development phase session by 42 parents.

Following the introductory session, it was decided that, as part of the practitioner-
researcher role, the lead researcher would deliver monthly parent meetings. These meetings

\(^2\) Due to the small number of Category 1 academies in the UK, and the relatively small numbers of
parents associated with the academy, there were concerns regarding protecting the anonymity of the
participants. The collection of any further demographic information (e.g., family structure, parental
employment, household income) relating to each parent was deemed to threaten their anonymity and
thus was not collected.
were introduced to enable parents to share their experiences, learn from each other, and seek information from the researcher that may enhance their or their son’s football experience. These meetings played an important role in the data collection process, providing a ‘real-life’ opportunity to identify the types of support parents needed and wanted. These meetings were also important in ensuring that rather than only using participants for their insights, the research team were able to provide immediate feedback and information to parents, enabling them to benefit directly from their involvement. This mutually beneficial arrangement facilitated the development of relationships, enabled both the participants and the research team to have their needs met, and provided an opportunity for parents to reflect on information they were provided with and subsequently indicate if this information did/did not address their needs. Attendance at these meetings was voluntary, with attendance ranging from one - 58 each month.

Data collection

Observations and fieldwork

The lead researcher was embedded at the academy for eight months to gain an in-depth understanding of the academy environment and culture, carrying out 1120 hours of fieldwork. Parents, players, coaches, and support staff were informed, at the aforementioned information sharing event, that observations would be taking place as part of this study. All individuals were told that if they did not want to be included in any observations, they could contact the lead researcher at any time. Additionally, prior to each observation, the researcher would greet those present and make them aware that she was observing, which allowed anyone who did not want to be observed to explicitly indicate this to the researcher or move away if they wished. Following each observation, the researcher thanked and said goodbye to those present to provide a clear ending to the observation.
The observations and subsequent fieldnotes were guided by Thorpe and Olive’s (2016) suggestions regarding when, how, and where to observe. The researcher observed parents, coaches, and support staff at training sessions and matches, during player signings, at performance review meetings, and parent meetings. Observations pertaining to parent behaviours, discussions with parents, discussions about parents, the information that was provided to parents, and the academy culture in relation to parents were recorded.

Informal conversations

A conversational approach was used to gain rich, naturalistic data from parents, players, coaches, and support staff throughout the data collection period. These were free flowing conversations that took place in a variety of locations, including at home and away matches, the parents’ lounge, office space, and in the canteen. The details were recorded as field notes and within the researcher’s reflexive diary. Informal conversations included discussions around the tangible support parents were provided, coaches engagement with parents, and the emotions parents experienced on match days.

Formal interviews

Twenty nine participants took part in formal semi-structured interviews. Interviews were arranged for a mutually convenient time and took place in a semi-private room. The interviews started after the lead researcher had been embedded in the academy for three months. The interview guide was based upon previous research examining parent experiences and support (Clarke and Harwood 2014; Harwood, Drew, and Knight 2010; Thrower, Harwood, and Spray 2016). Initial questions focused on participants’ history and experiences within football (e.g., “what has been your experience as a football parent this season so far?”). These were followed by the main questions that focused upon the transition from grassroots to academy level football, perceptions of the current parent support provided, and recommendations for future parent support. There were further specific questions for parents
for example, their beliefs on providing support to their son and relationships with coaches/support staff (e.g., “how would you describe your relationship with your child’s coach?”). Coaches and support staff also discussed their relationship with parents (e.g., “what has been your experience of coach-athlete-parent relationships?”). Interviews concluded with summary questions and an opportunity for participants to provide any further information (e.g., “overall, summarise your experience of being a football parent this season”). Interviews ranged from 15 to 113 minutes (M = 38 min, SD = 21 min), with additional time spent before and after the interview discussing ideas more informally. To minimise additional pressures for parents, interviews took place while their son was training. However, this resulted in parents, on occasions, being called away unexpectedly to support their child (i.e., when injured) and interviews were cut short. Despite the short length of these interviews they still provided valuable insights, especially when combined with the other data.

Focus groups

Three focus groups were conducted with 10 parents, of which three also completed an individual interview. Focus groups ranged from 43 to 77 minutes (M = 46 min, SD = 18 min) and were conducted to enable group discussion among parents to facilitate more explicit identification of similarities and differences in parents’ experiences and recommendations for support. Focus groups began with parents detailing their background and experiences within football, followed by discussions regarding their relationship with the coaches and support staff, their experiences of attending their sons’ matches, the support they felt was currently available, and the support they may benefit from. These topics were selected based on the earlier interviews and observations.

Data analysis

The lead researcher analysed all data using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2018, 2019, 2020; Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016). Reflexive thematic analysis is a
flexible process in which a researcher creatively identifies patterns of meaning within a dataset relating to the research questions through reflexive and thoughtful connection with the data (Braun and Clarke 2018, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen for the current study as it enabled insights into each participant’s individual thoughts, beliefs, and experiences to be identified, which aligned with the lead researcher’s philosophical approach. Moreover, this analysis approach recognises the researcher’s role in constructing the findings from the information shared by the participants.

To conduct the analysis, the lead researcher first became immersed in the interview and focus group data by listening back to the audio files and reading through the transcripts several times. Alongside, she also re-familiarised herself with her fieldnotes, informal conversations, and notes recorded in her reflexive diary. Throughout this process, the lead researcher reflected on her reading of the data and documented her reflections in a notebook. Initial thoughts were shared with critical friends the help her expand her thoughts and reflections by questioning her understanding. She subsequently spent time contemplating the data, before writing further reflections and considering how it would have felt to be a parent of an academy footballer in order to fully immerse herself within the detailed experiences.

Next, the lead researcher generated initial codes from all the data based upon recognised features to give basic meaning to the data. Themes were developed by collating the codes generated and grouping them together. A mind map was used to combine the raw themes together and integrate data into main themes and subthemes. For example, data relating to parents’ initial experiences, transitioning into the academy, excitement experienced, the professionalism of the environment, and amazement of the opportunity, were coded under the sub themes of *amazement of the opportunity* and *overwhelmed with excitement*. Following this, the main themes were refined, reviewed, and reflected upon and subsequently defined and named. For instance, a main theme was *excited and amazed with*
To enhance the researcher’s reflexivity, other members of the research team continued to serve as critical friends to provide an alternative perspective and encourage enhancement of thought (Smith and McGannon 2017). As the data were being interpreted and the themes developed, the lead researcher wrote analytical notes as preliminary ideas for the final themes. She spent some time going through a process of contemplating the themes, spending time away, and then returning to revise and edit as appropriate. Finally, the themes were organised in relation to the research questions and a coherent account of parents’ experiences and recommendations for support were detailed. The process detailed helped the lead researcher to identify not just the overt themes on the surface of the data, but also the implicit meaning behind the detail within the data.

**Methodological rigour**

Aligned with a relativist approach for judging rigour (Sparkes and Smith 2009), the specific criteria for evaluating case studies was considered and applied throughout this study (Stake 2005). The first criterion is to clearly identify a unique case where maximum learning can occur. In an attempt to fulfil this criterion, the unique case of a British Category 1 boys youth football academy where the parent experience and support recommendations would be explored was selected and a detailed description provided. To create maximum learning from a variety of perspectives this study included the triangulation of multiple views by using interviews, focus groups, observations, informal conversations, and the lead researcher’s reflexive diary. Stake’s second criterion is to study a small number of cases at length. This was fulfilled by the lead researcher focusing on one particular case in the form of one football academy, which was then studied in-depth over an eight-month period. The third criterion is
the appropriateness of the chosen case. Given the purpose of this study was to examine parents’ experiences and support recommendations in academy football, an established top level academy was selected. The final criterion is to what extent the researcher will advocate their position and be themselves within the research process. To fulfil this final criterion the researcher kept a reflexive diary before and during the data collection process, and throughout the data analysis. Within the diary the lead researcher reflected on their previous experiences and their perceptions of the current case. In addition, the second author was used as a critical friend to provide an alternative perspective, thus challenging and developing the lead researcher’s interpretations of the data.

Results

The purpose of this study was to understand parents’ experiences and offer recommendations for supporting parents within youth academy football. Two specific aims were forwarded: 1) to understand the experience of parents across the lifespan of an academy footballer, and 2) to develop recommendations for supporting parents at different stages of their child’s sporting journey. With regards to the first aim, it appeared that parents’ experience an ever-changing journey in the academy, comprising four distinct phases, accompanied by two overarching themes (see Figure 1). In relation to aim two, the development of a parent supportive culture, alongside the delivery of specific parents’ support sessions appeared to be particularly beneficial.
Figure 1. The factors within the parent journey through youth academy football.

The football parent journey

Excited and amazed

Players usually join the academy system at eight years of age (under-9 team), but they can be recruited after this. The excitement that parents experienced as their son completed their initial signing with the academy was evident throughout this study. Parents described being proud of their son achieving something other children had not and potentially having a successful football career ahead of them. Parents entered the environment amazed by the facilities that were available and the opportunities provided, such as professional coaching up to five nights per week, large amounts of free kit, and national and international travel. One under-9 father shared during an interview:

It was amazing. Still is amazing. Like I still can’t get over it. You want to slow time down, because it’s already January… I thoroughly enjoy it. I come down here with a smile on my face. You go and see where he’s training. The facilities he’s using. The people he’s playing with. The people he’s met. Where he’s travelling… it’s really incredible.
While a member of the support staff added in their interview, “what you tend to find is the parents initially they’re all excited, they’re all buzzing to come in here to see what we’ve got, to see what’s on offer.”

However, the academy environment is very different to parents’ and players’ previous football experiences. So, although the parents were excited by the opportunity their son had, they also appeared to be somewhat amazed by the professional nature of the environment and the need for both them and their son to adapt their behaviours to align with this. One under-10 mother commented on this transition during an interview:

Obviously, there is a big jump from grassroots to academy in the way that everything is run… especially with physio, if they’re injured and obviously they get looked after. With grassroots I suppose it is, you have to look at getting aftercare for them if they are injured… the standard of football is [also] much higher.

Dawning of reality

Once children had been at the academy for around two years, the demands and expectations of being involved appeared to become draining. In an interview one member of the support staff said:

The expectations of the number of training sessions, the expectations of transporting them to and from games, the commitment mum and dad have to give in terms of having to bring them back and forth to the academy on their night, if they’ve got other children its difficult, I couldn’t do it.

When joining the academy, parents had recognised the need to be committed, but the extent of support required exceeded expectations. In addition to the day-to-day support needed to maintain their son’s place, parents described encountering numerous unexpected demands.

These included, for example, completing online tasks, encouraging children to watch video clips, and facilitating additional training sessions. As one under-11 mother shared during a focus group, “we didn’t realise what kind of commitments it involved, it’s not that you don’t
know you’re coming to training three times a week, but you don’t realise now with the add-
ons, with the extras involved in it.” The lead researcher had also described such frustrations
in her reflexive diary following an informal conversation with some coaches:

During a monthly meeting I had with the U11 and U12 parents, they appeared to be frustrated.
They do not feel they are being listened to, their views are not being heard and have become
frustrated by the system. My view is that the system needs to change rather than this
continuous frustration from both sides and continually arranging individual meetings to
‘problem’ manage.

Combined with the additional demands, parents also described becoming increasingly
aware and anxious of the review and release system. Parents started to discuss their concerns
with each other, the coaches, and the research team. They explained that being out of control,
and unable to influence the decision regarding their son’s future was particularly hard.
Parents’ concerns regarding their son being released was made more difficult because they
were unsure how to provide the necessary emotional support. In an interview one under-11
father described:

The hardest part of being a parent in the academy, is trying to prepare them for that [review].
Because you never know, every review they go to, you don’t know whether they are going to
say this is the last game you’re playing… or not, so it’s quite difficult to try and juggle that as
well as trying to keep their moral quite high as well… it just seems really cutthroat for
children so young.

Accepting and rationalising

After around four years at the academy, parents seemed to have accepted the
sacrifices and commitment needed to support their son. Parents became accustomed to the
culture and developed strategies to manage the demands; they made changes to their lifestyle

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3 There are two times during each season (usually mid-season and towards the end of the season) when players may be released from the academy.
to maximise their time and reduce the impact on their careers and family life. Parents described actively reducing their social life and focusing on gaining social support from other parents within the academy. Such changes were made because parents accepted that they were necessary if their son was to progress. As one under-13 mother described in an interview:

…it’s the acceptance of, actually, if you want to support your son through this process you have got to give things up. So, it’s either, we carry on as normal and [son] loses out on the opportunity, or your friends change. Your friends become the other parents of the academy boys.

Accepting the demands of supporting their son, combined with their son becoming more independent, resulted in parents feeling that the ‘football parenting experience’ was now less demanding. For instance, their sons could now prepare their own food and kit before training reducing organisational demands, as one under-14 mother described in an interview:

It’s easier now that he’s getting older and he can come home from school and he can get himself ready and get his own food ready. But those earlier years were tough, because the academy are putting their sessions on earlier because they’re younger, but it’s that logistic of picking them up from school and getting them fed and getting them to [training venue].

**Focusing on the future**

Finally, as the children approached the end of compulsory education (age 15/16 years), parents appeared to become more aware of the pressures that their son was under at school and the need to perform in football to secure a scholar contract. Parents wanted their sons to have a backup plan in case they did not get a contract, but this was as parents were often unsure of the available options. Consequently, parents relied on their social support

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4 The scholar contract is the first contract a player receives that involves being paid to play football. As a scholar, players will attend the academy daily, while also completing some educational qualifications.
network to provide their sons with the informational support needed, as one under-15 mother said during a focus group:

The child then has to make a decision really whether it’s a football career that they want, at this stage, or whether they want to continue on with A Levels? So, say, my son was absolutely academically graded, A-Star grade in Maths and English and Science, and he wanted to be a doctor,… then he would have to follow that route and football wouldn’t necessarily be the way forward for him.

Parents also indicated that providing emotional support to their son during this stage was particularly hard. They wanted to help their son manage the pressures of football and school, but struggled to communicate with them, often asking for advice on the adolescent brain. Numerous fieldnotes were recorded on this topic, such as, “today parents raised concerns about their lack of communication with their son. They described how they try to engage in conversation, but he just grunts. They know he thinks deeply yet can’t get any information from him.”

Enjoyment, opportunity, and development

Throughout the process of navigating the aforementioned individual phases, parents described feelings of enjoyment arising from seeing their son’s enjoyment and development. The mutual enjoyment of football between parents and sons created a shared passion and was one of the main reasons parents continued to support their son’s involvement. Describing such enjoyment, one under-10 father shared in an interview:

It is a journey, my son’s journey that he’s taking me on. I’m just happy to be part of it. The hours have gone up massively, but so has the joy. I love watching him play. I’m the one that will just stand and watch him and enjoy watching him play, and he loves the training.

Additionally, parents enjoyed supporting their son in the academy because they believed they had an opportunity to gain more than just football skills. They recognised that it was unlikely their son would become a professional footballer, but they thought the life skills their son
gained were equally, if not more, important. For instance, explaining why she supported her son’s involvement, an under-13 mother recalled during an interview:

He [her son] said “the academy has taught me so much”. That was coming from his words and I thought, the confidence, the comradery, what I really like is the respect he has for the coaches; the shaking of the hands, the high fives. He takes that into his everyday life, he has confidence to go up to anyone of our friends and shake hands whereas a lot of boys their age don’t like that or are uncomfortable.

Similarly, parents described the value they placed on the opportunities their sons had to attend tournaments and festivals, which provided them with their first opportunities to stay away from home and travel abroad. Parents particularly valued these opportunities because they knew they were not available to many children.

*Sacrifice, commitment, and consequences.*

Although parents experienced continual enjoyment, they also experienced a continuing sense of sacrifice and commitment, which had negative consequences for them and their sons. Particularly, parents were concerned by the sacrifices their sons made to be part of the academy, as one under-10 father shared in an interview:

Knowing what I know now I may have held him back from the whole academy structure and kept him playing with his friends longer…I would say he’s lost a lot of the friendships through school and sleepovers on a Saturday night. He can’t have them now, it’s gone.

Parents also encountered their own sacrifices, which a coach recognised during his interview:

The amount of time the parents spend driving their kids, picking them up, driving them quite a number of days of the week plus on a Sunday morning when it is a very early start, supporting them in that is massive, the mileage on their cars must be unbelievable.

These sacrifices had personal consequences for parents. For example, parents described limits to their career progression due to the time they had to commit to football, an under-10 father shared in an interview, “it’s probably held [me] back a little bit […]because I would say up
until [son] started with the [academy] football I … was thought of really highly but I’ve had to take more of a back seat because I need to get him to training.” Beyond their career progression, the hardest thing for parents was sacrificing time with other children and family members. One under-14 mother described during a focus group, “it does sometimes make me feel guilty about my other kids, because they’re obviously left alone… sometimes I do feel, well I’m leaving them there on their own again.”

**Recommendations for supporting parents**

As outlined above, parents experience an exciting but challenging journey as their son progresses through a football academy. Based on the lead researcher’s observations, informal conversations, and interpretation of the parent, coach, and support staff interviews it appears that a combination of two key considerations are likely to have the greatest positive influence on parents through this journey: The creation of a “parent supportive culture” alongside the embedding of a “programme of support”.

**Creating a parent supportive culture**

Observations and informal conversations indicated that the experience of parents is largely influenced by the culture that is created within the academy. A parent supportive culture, created through small day-to-day actions, may help promote a positive culture regarding parents, which increases the support they perceive and receive. Particularly, it appears that the creation of a parent-positive culture, in which parents feel welcomed, respected, and valued as a positive member of their son’s support team, rather than a problem to be dealt with, may lead to parents feeling better equipped to manage the academy parent journey.

*Facilitate an environment that is welcoming for parents.* An academy environment where parents receive a friendly greeting and are included as part of their son’s learning and development appears valuable because, as highlighted above, when entering the academy
environment, parents are excited and amazed before they enter the dawning of reality phase.

Creating a welcoming atmosphere may help parents adjust to the academy structure more quickly and experience a smoother transition from grassroots to academy football. One member of the support staff suggested during an interview that parents could be welcomed into the academy by:

   Coaches could do a session saying this is what we’ve been working on with the players, philosophy of the club, how we work, and what we want the end product to be. Parents would get a better understanding of what we’re trying to do, as they need to know what’s happening to their child.

Moreover, if parents feel welcome in the academy, they will likely spend more time there, engage with the support provided, and get to know other parents. Subsequently they can access valuable information which will help them understand their son’s experience, develop coping strategies, and create a support network with other parents, all of which may be useful as they enter the second phase of the journey. One under-13 mother commented during an interview:

   The parental support, having this building and the room upstairs is a big one, there’s only so much shopping that anyone can do. It’s nice to be able to come up here and you can have a chat, sort of find out what other information or confirming whatever was in an email or stuff like that.

Overall, one member of support staff summed up, “it’s important to embrace them [parents] as much as we can, because they’re an integral part of what we do.”

**Respect and appreciate parents’ commitment.** Throughout their child’s footballing journey, parents commit much time, money, and emotion, and make sacrifices in other areas of their lives. These sacrifices and commitments are ever present, but particularly exacerbated during the second stage of their journey. To support parents and help them to cope with the
sacrifices they are making it appears important to recognise their commitment and ensure that parents are treated with respect. As a member of the support staff said in an interview:

You’ve got to respect the amount of time, financial commitment, effort, parents put in and you have to respect that and you can’t be blasé about it. Because when they’re here 4 or 5 times a week and they’re travelling distances, you’ve got to give them that respect, you’ve got to really appreciate what they do.

Such respect is important as it demonstrates to parents empathy and understanding of the challenges, stress, and pressure they experience. Overall, providing parents with respect may be beneficial through all phases of the parent journey, but particularly useful to aid parents transition into the acceptance and rationalising phase. It was noted within the researcher’s reflexive diary, “respect and support from the academy may help parents to feel more supported and enhance the development of coping mechanisms.”

Numerous strategies to demonstrate respect for parents are available. For instance, recognising the organisational demands that parents may be facing and ensuring information, particularly regarding changes to training or matches, is communicated in advance. As one coach recognised, “[parents] need to know what is going on because they put a lot of time in, so keep them informed about what we do.” It was further noted in the researcher’s fieldnotes, that “when parents aren’t communicated with they feel pushed out and that the academy does not appreciate their commitment and the sacrifices they make.” Thanking parents for their time and commitment may also be an easy way to enhance parents’ feelings of respect, as one under-11 father shared during an interview, “that’s all we want is just more respect. Sometimes we feel like there’s no understanding there about what we’ve actually got to go through to make this happen.”

Finally, recognising the challenging decisions that parents and players are having to make during the final stages of the journey (focusing on the future) and respecting parents’ concerns and decisions relating to the educational offerings that are made available within
and beyond the academy seems valuable. Within the lead researcher’s fieldnotes it was recorded, “for some the academy has a positive impact on their education, as it gives them motivation and focus. However, for others they appear to have a tough time combining education and then find it challenging making career choices at 16.” Thus, working with parents to try and accommodate individual desires to study specific courses or qualifications may be useful.

**Value input and feedback from parents.** To maximise parents’, and subsequently players’ experiences, the final consideration within the culture that appears important is ensuring parents are valued. Valuing parents for their role within their son’s footballing development is important, especially as parents’ transition into the academy. Parents are excited that their child has been chosen as one of the best youth footballers in the area and want to support their son to maximise the opportunity. During a focus group a father of an under-10 said:

> I say to him “okay perhaps you need to have a look at this,” but I’m not sure what they [the coaches] are telling them in the training session, what they need to work on,… I’d like to know the answer…personally I get frustrated that I can’t help [my son].

It appears that demonstrating that the feedback parents provide is valued and acted upon can help parents to feel more involved in their son’s development. For instance, one support staff member suggested during an interview:

> Everyone can learn from feedback…If parents do suggest things, then it’s taken on board and one person might not be giving you the right information, but I hope that it is taken on board and we can learn from that kind of feedback that we get and improve and implement different things.

Similarly, parents shared during informal discussions that open lines of communication between parents and coaches, with formal and informal opportunities to provide feedback and suggestions for improvement, would help them feel heard. This may subsequently minimise
some of the frustrations parents encountered, particularly during the second and fourth stages of their journey. The lead researcher recorded from the under-11/under-12 monthly meeting:

The parents erupted into an explosion of emotion, they had kept all of these frustrations to themselves for quite some time as there was limited opportunity to express their feelings or have their voice heard. Therefore, offering them an opportunity have these feelings heard on a regular basis may help to reduce this built up emotion.

Additionally, getting to know the parents individually and understanding their experiences may help coaches and support staff to build strong relationships with parents and show that the academy values their involvement. For instance, one support staff member recommended in an interview, “parents have only got the coaches to work with every six weeks. Having a structure where there’s constant and regular opportunity to discuss what’s going on with people other than the coaches, is important.” This genuine interest in parents could help to minimise the challenges experienced throughout the journey, but particularly during the dawning of reality phase because parents may perceive themselves as valued and supported and subsequently more capable of managing the demands they encounter. One coach recalled in an interview the challenges that one family faced:

From past experience of working with boys who have nothing, they tend to be the ones that the parents will do anything to get them here… one lad used to get a train in on his own. Fifteen and he would cycle from the train station up to the training ground and cycle back. We found out the kid had nothing, he had no money, the parents used to let other siblings of his go without just to give him money to come on the train.

By understanding this child’s family circumstances, the coaching staff could provide more tailored support both to him and his parents to help enhance their experience at the academy.

Deliver a programme of support

In addition to cultural considerations, the provision of a formal programme of support, tailored to different stages of the parent and child’s journey, was deemed valuable by
parents, coaches, and support staff. One under-13 mother recommended during an interview, “help us be more supportive of our children that is conducive to their success,… anything that the academy can give me to help me be a better parent to support him through the process would be more than welcome.” The provision of a parent support programme may help parents to anticipate the next phase of the journey and the upcoming demands. When considering the development of such a programme, focusing upon tailored content with a flexible and creative delivery approach, seemed most important as an informal conversation with a coach illustrated, “some element of the delivery will need to be through informal drop-in sessions or other resources to allow parents the opportunity to come in at a time that suits them, rather than putting extra demand on parents.”

Provide developmentally tailored content. At the first phase of the journey (excited and amazed phase), offering parents a formal induction can be beneficial. For first time academy parents, a formal induction may be particularly beneficial because, as parents enter excited and amazed, they may inadvertently increase the pressure children feel to succeed. In an interview one coach suggested:

The biggest one for me is the parent’s expectations and managing them. You know because the minute that their son steps over the gate to sign, the majority of parents think that their son’s going to be a world beater and he’s going to be a multi-millionaire in a few years and the stats back up that that’s not going to happen.

Helping parents to manage their expectations from the outset of the journey by, for instance, offering parents realistic prospects of their son becoming a professional footballer may be particularly valuable. One member of the support staff recommended during an interview:

I think it’s just educating them when they come in on the way we do things and why we do things the way we do. Because a lot of parents don’t understand it, they come in here and see us. They see the facilities and a lot of them can’t grasp the idea that their son might not be ready to be here when they think they are.
Additionally, helping parents to understand the range of psychosocial benefits and life skills their son will be gaining at the academy may provide parents with a better perspective of the upcoming journey. The lead researcher noted within her fieldnotes, “the under-9s and under-10s were keen to learn more about the journey ahead as they were unsure of what to expect.”

Beyond the initial induction event, ongoing support sessions that comprise key information and guidance tailored to parents’ and players’ current phase may help parents manage their own experiences and provide more optimal support to their son. For instance, when parents are approaching or in the dawning of reality phase, it may be useful to have support sessions tailored to them offloading their demands, normalising their experiences, and developing coping strategies. Plus, increasing their awareness of the performance review process and increasing their feelings of being in control of the retain/release process. It was recommended by a support staff member during an interview, “understanding the review process, release process and how the decisions have arisen… have workshops where the parents actually put themselves in our shoes and they understand what it’s like to sit at the table and give a review.”

Leading into and during the acceptance and rationalising phase parents may find support focused upon enhancing the effectiveness of their coping strategies, plus guidance and information on the psychological and social development that occurs during the teenage years helpful. Additionally, parents suggested that information to help them support their child through injuries and becoming more independent may be useful at this time. It was noted in the fieldnotes from the first monthly meeting, “the parents of the under-15 and under-16 players wanted support to help them with the teenage years and overcoming challenges, such as injuries and losing.”
Finally, leading up to and during the *focusing on the future* phase it may be helpful for parents to be provided with more information regarding the scholarship process, expectations, and their son’s education options should they be provided with a scholarship. Parents may also benefit from guidance regarding providing emotional support to their son during particularly pressurised football and schooling phases. It was noted in the lead researcher’s fieldnotes, “managing the pressure on their children and the emotional demands of football was a prominent stressor for parents.”

**Adopt a flexible delivery approach to meet parents’ needs.** As illustrated, providing parents with various information and support through different sessions may be useful. However, these sessions will only be useful if the delivery accounts for parents’ competing demands and interests. The lead researcher recorded in her reflexive diary, “the demands and stressors on parents appears to be all consuming, so even though they want the support, engagement is challenging.” Thus, considering the best way to deliver such sessions to minimise additional demands is important. For instance, face-to-face sessions (which appeared to be most desirable within this academy) can be particularly beneficial because they provide an opportunity to get to know parents and understand their background (e.g., education levels, football experience, work demands etc), which is useful to help guide the specific information they need and how they would like to receive it (e.g., through formal PowerPoint presentations, informal discussions, Q & A sessions etc). One under-14 mother suggested during an interview, “dynamic, interactive, a classic group sort of thing. You could get loads of flowing discussion…sit round a table discussing and debating…come away thinking about all of those things.” However, attendance at face-to-face sessions may be an issue, as one under-12 mother said during an interview:

> It’s the time factor, because you have already got the traveling, getting them to training…that’s my time that has gone. Whereas if it was delivered in a different way, or it
was online, through newsletters or information, something interactive I could do that any time.

Thus, scheduling sessions to coincide with training but also offering catch-up or drop-in sessions that parents can attend around their busy schedule could facilitate maximum engagement from parents within all phases. To minimise demands and increase attendance, it might also be beneficial for parents to be able to bring other children or for other family members (e.g., grandparents) to attend in their place. By encouraging parents to bring other children and making sessions family-friendly, it may reduce parents’ guilt. A coach recommended in an interview, “when the sisters and brothers can come, the kids and the siblings have got an activity to do. It could be some multisport thing, someone who did face paints, some balloon making, like that type of thing.”

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to understand parents’ experiences and offer recommendations for supporting parents within youth academy football. In support of Côté’s (1999) work, it was evident that parents experience a complex journey with their sons and the support parents may benefit from changes in line with both their and their son’s development. Given such complexity, simply educating parents regarding “appropriate” behaviours or involvement is insufficient. Rather, the findings of this study offer recommendations for support taking into consideration the experiences of parents across the developmental phases (Knight and Holt 2013b; Thrower, Harwood, and Spray 2016). Moreover, the findings point to the importance of not only targeting support to parents through formal education or support programmes, but also addressing the broader culture to enhance the overall sport parenting experience (cf. Knight and Newport 2017; Knight 2019).

Within this study, the first phase that parents’ experience supports previous research suggestions that parents go through a transition when entering a new sporting environment, such as a football academy, which requires parents to adapt to different relationships,
expectations, and experiences (Clarke and Harwood 2014; Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough 2015). It is important to consider this first phase when developing support for parents, as parents’ level of excitement may need managing to prevent it from inadvertently adding increased pressure on to their son. As Anderson, Funk, Elliot, and Smith (2003) highlighted, parents may start off providing support with good intentions, but even well meant support can result in adding pressure to a child and reducing their enjoyment. The current study provides further evidence of the importance of managing parents’ expectations and helping them to prepare for the journey ahead.

As found in other research (e.g., Burgess, Knight, and Mellalieu 2016; Knight and Holt 2013b), although parents may learn the information as they progress through the journey they would benefit from being provided with guidance and information upon entering the academy. When they enter an environment parents may appear challenging and difficult to manage, but they are often mis-informed and time should be spent providing them with information and facilitating relationships (Gould et al. 2016). Given that parents may unintentionally add pressure to their children, it is recommended that parents are provided with an induction meeting early in their journey to help manage their excitement, and establish realistic prospects for their child. In addition, creating a culture where parents feel welcomed may help to maximise attendance and seek information from coaches and support staff when required.

After a phase of excitement, the realities of being an academy football parent appear to become apparent and the effects of the demands start to weigh heavily on parents. This second phase aligns with the competitive, organisational, and developmental stressors previously identified in football and tennis (Harwood, Drew, and Knight 2010; Harwood and Knight 2009a; 2009b). These demands can have a negative impact on the parent experience (e.g., Wiersma and Fifer 2008) and are often mutually shared between parent and child
(Hayward, Knight, and Mellalieu 2017). In addition, unique to academy set ups, parents experience stress from the review and potential release process. Such stress may arise due to parents having adjusted their identity and increased their sense of responsibility for their son’s football development (Clarke and Harwood 2014). Thus, providing a support programme to inform and guide parents on how to support their child, cope with their own emotions, and manage the organisational demands was understandably seen as important in the current study. Furthermore, treating parents with respect and appreciating the commitment that they give to supporting their child will go a long way in creating a supportive culture for parents and potentially reduce the demands they encounter.

Although parents experience a number of stressors and demands, after becoming accustomed to the culture and commitment required, they develop coping mechanisms such as acceptance and rationalisation. The suggested strategies align with previous research (e.g., Burgess, Knight, and Mellalieu 2016; Harwood et al. 2019), particularly recognising that parents learn through trial and error, and past experiences. Previous research has however, raised concerns about parents learning through trial and error (e.g., Burgess, Knight, and Mellalieu 2016) because this will likely result in parents making mistakes before the learning can occur, which could have a negative impact on their son’s enjoyment and development. Additionally, the current study suggested that it could take up to four years of being an academy parent before parents’ learn to manage the demands. This is four years in which their and their son’s experiences may be muted or diminished. Thus, actively creating a culture that seeks to understand and minimise demands on parents could reduce the emphasis on learning through trial and error, while also maximising parents’ chances of providing optimal support to their son (Knight, 2019). However, not all the stressors and demands on parents can be reduced or avoided. Therefore, as highlighted in the current study,
combin
ing a parent positive culture with an evidence based programme of support is
important (Lienhart et al. 2019).

In line with previous literature (e.g., Harwood and Knight 2009b; Lauer et al. 2010),
as players aged and approached the end of their compulsory schooling, the parents in this
study started to become increasingly concerned about their son’s future. Parents wanted more
information on how to support their son to make career choices, as well as providing
teenagers with the emotional support to manage the increased sport investment and
educational demands (Elliott, Drummond, and Knight 2018). The findings indicate that
parents did not feel they had the necessary information or skills to provide the appropriate
emotional and information support to their son. Thrower, Harwood, and Spray (2017)
previously demonstrated that educating parents can go some way to overcome this limitation,
but the suggestion from the current study is that a parent positive culture, combined with an
education or support programme, would likely be more effective.

Running throughout the parent journey was a sense of enjoyment, opportunity, and
development as well as sacrifice, commitment, and consequences for parents and their sons.
This sense of enjoyment arising from seeing their son succeed and enjoy their sport, as well
as recognising the opportunities they were gaining supports previous research (e.g., Holt,
Kingsley, Tink, and Scherer 2011; Wiersma and Fifer 2008). Although such positive
emotions and experiences will hopefully have a positive influence upon children, ensuring
that these are not inadvertently interpreted as a source of pressure is important. Moreover,
given the strength of parents’ own emotions, as they progress along their journey, ensuring
their goals and reasons for encouraging their child to participate align with their child’s
motives seems particularly important (cf., Knight and Holt 2014).

Countering their enjoyment, the parents within the current study shared numerous
concerns regarding not only their own sacrifices and commitments, but also those of their
sons. Such concerns echo previous literature pertaining to parenting stressors (e.g., Harwood and Knight 2009a, 2009b), but also illustrate parents’ awareness of the demands being placed upon their sons. Parents are often unaware of, or in some instances, actively encourage, their children to engage in overly demanding training schedules at the expense of other areas of their lives. However, this study clearly suggests that this is a concern for parents and one which may require further consideration when developing schedules and also sharing them (and their underpinning rationale) with parents.

Limitations and future directions

The findings of the current study are based on eight months of observations, informal and formal interviews and group discussions, and extensive reflections. Nevertheless, the findings should be considered within certain study limitations. Firstly, this study is a case study and although these findings can be transferred to other environments, it is recognised that this study was carried out in one academy and may not apply to all academies. There may be cultural and contextual variations, for example the extent of the travel demands and ethnicity of the parents, as the majority of the participants identified themselves as White-British, so this may need consideration. Alongside this the family structures of the participants within the case study are not known and as such may not be representative of a diverse range of family arrangements. Consequently, it is recognised that future research would benefit from exploring parent experiences within youth academy football across a range of family structures and arrangements. Further, although this research provides suggestions and an insight into the support that parents may find beneficial it does not provide evidence on the effectiveness of the suggestions made or the practicalities of their application. Future research examining the effectiveness of the parent support suggestions and practicalities of implementing creative support methods would be useful. Furthermore,
the content of the support sessions requires identification and testing to provide guidance on
the topics that may be beneficial for parents.

Conclusion

Overall, this study demonstrates the complexity of the parent experience within
academy football, along with recommendations for ways in which parents can be provided
with support. It has clearly illustrated that the parent experience is not the same for all parents
and that there are numerous changes that occur as children develop and progress through an
academy. Parents progress from feelings of excitement and amazement, to a period of stress
and challenge, followed by an acceptance of the experience before finally progressing to
care concerns regarding their son’s future and development. Given such ever changing
experiences, it is important that coaches, practitioners, and support staff spend time
developing relationships with parents to understand their current experience and subsequently
provide tailored support programmes within a supportive culture in which parents feel
welcomed, valued, and respected.
References


Table 1. Parent descriptive information.

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<th>Children’s years in football</th>
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<td>U15</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
<td>7 yrs.</td>
<td>20 mins.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Child was previously at the academy, but was released at a younger age.
Table 2. Coach and support staff descriptive information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Time involved in football</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White - British</td>
<td>1.5 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White - British</td>
<td>12 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White - British</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mixed White and Asian - British</td>
<td>20 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White - British</td>
<td>30 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61 +</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White - British/ Australian</td>
<td>61 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White - British</td>
<td>5 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61 +</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White - British</td>
<td>50 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White - British</td>
<td>6 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White - British</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White - British</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>