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# 'Engage me!' A multi-sport investigation of club interactions with parents at the beginning of the sporting season

Sam Elliott ⓘ[a], G. Fernandes[a], O. Anthoney[a], M. Drummond ⓘ[a] and C. J. Knight ⓘ[b,c]

[a]SHAPE Research, Flinders University, Bedford Park, Australia; [b]Swansea University, Swansea, Wales; [c]Department of Physical Education and Sport Science, University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway

**ABSTRACT**

To better prepare parents for negotiating the complex and challenging nature of the youth sporting season, more attention is warranted around how clubs 'onboard' and support parents from the beginning of their involvement. This study utilised a multi-sport, rapid ethnography approach to examine how sport clubs engage parents at the beginning of the season and the impact of these interactions on the broader sport experience. Across four competitive youth sport settings (Australian football, netball, swimming and tennis), data were collected through 320 hours of covert field observations and 41 collaborative interviews with parents, coaches, and club leaders. Reflexive thematic analysis led to the development of three themes: (1) personalising the onboarding experience, (2) thanks and recognition, and (3) chats, check-ins, and consultations. The themes highlighted inconsistencies in club communication and onboarding practices, often leaving parents feeling dismissed, misunderstood, or undervalued. The findings emphasise the importance of prioritising meaningful and early engagement efforts with parents, which can potentially strengthen parental support, volunteerism, and contribute to a safer and more inclusive parent-supportive sport environment. Suggestions for clubs, sporting organisations, and policy makers are provided.

## Introduction

Academic interest in youth sport and parental involvement has garnered significant attention over the past 20 years (Dorsch et al., 2021). Parents are identified as a vital 'gear' in a broader youth sport system (Dorsch et al., 2022), fulfilling critical roles such as provider (e.g. logistical and transportation support), interpreter (e.g. emotional support), and role model of sport experiences (Cahill & MacNamara, 2025; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). Moreover and beyond offering encouragement, availability, and responsiveness (Elliott & Drummond, 2013; Mårs et al., 2024), parents also fulfil important roles behind the scene by sharing their child's goals (Knight & Holt, 2014), offering constructive, developmentally focussed feedback (Elliott et al., 2018; Elliott et al., 2020), and providing support that demonstrates love and matches their child's goals and needs (Rouquette et al., 2021). However, parents can also undermine positive sporting experiences by interfering with coaches (Gould et al., 2016), criticising their child on the car ride home (Elliott & Drummond, 2017) and displaying aggressive, defensive and interrogative behaviour toward their child (Knight & Harwood,

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**CONTACT** Sam Elliott ✉ sam.elliott@flinders.edu.au

2009; Liu et al., 2024). Clearly parenting in youth sport can be a complex and emotionally laden experience for children as well as parents themselves (Knight, 2019; Lienhart et al., 2020).

To simultaneously address the challenges parents can create and maximise their positive contributions, many sporting clubs have adopted a range of punitive (e.g. fines), restrictive (e.g. limiting attendance), or contractual (e.g. code of behaviour) measures (Elliott, 2021). Though widely adopted, these measures have been criticised for their lack of effectiveness and utilisation as a convenient 'quick fix' solution for problematic parenting behaviours (Elliott, 2021; Elliott & Drummond, 2015). Correspondingly, there has been a stronger emphasis on working *with* parents through educational workshops and the provision of informational resources to enhance parenting experiences and quality of involvement in organised sport (for review, see Burke et al., 2021). For instance, parent education programs have been found to improve parents display of more supportive and less pressuring behaviour, more warmth, and less conflict across the season (Dorsch et al., 2017). Similarly, a parent education programme involving the delivery of six-workshops was found to be effective in improving parents' understanding about their child's psychosocial needs, capacity for reflection, and perceived confidence and empowerment to respond to their child's concerns (Thrower et al., 2017).

The emergence of educational support is timely given that parents do not always know how to (a) improve interactions with coaches (O'Donnell et al., 2022), (b) positively support their child's psychosocial development (Kramers et al., 2023), or (c) manage the competitive, organisational, and developmental stressors they may encounter along the sporting journey (Burgess et al., 2016). In this way, educational approaches comprise a promising avenue for enhancing parental involvement in organised youth sport. However, fostering broader engagement with educational programs remains an elusive challenge (Knight & Newport, 2017). Attendance at face-to-face workshops can be difficult to maintain (Dorsch et al., 2019) and it is unknown if certain demographic groups (e.g. by socioeconomic status, ethnicity, single or dual-parent families) are more or less likely to engage in educational initiatives (Thrower et al., 2023). Further, many educational resources offer non-specific advice which does not necessarily 'connect' with parents actual experiences in organised youth sport (Kwon et al., 2020). Even the most flexible, self-paced educational programs using accessible, web-based delivery methods cannot guarantee ongoing parental participation (Thrower et al., 2019), emphasising the view that parental educational support alone is insufficient to enhance the quality of parents' involvement in youth sport.

So where do we go from here? While educational support can be a valuable resource for parents, it is crucial to also consider the broader club environment shaping their contributions to youth sport (Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough, 2015). Parental involvement is often described as a 'trial and error' experience (Burgess et al., 2016; Knight et al., 2017), with clubs often leaving parents' influence on child psychosocial and developmental outcomes 'to chance' (Elliott et al., 2023). To better prepare parents for negotiating the complex and challenging nature of the sporting season, more attention is therefore warranted around how clubs 'onboard' and support parents from the beginning of their involvement (Dorsch, Smith, Wilson, et al., 2015; Thrower et al., 2017). Understanding how sporting clubs engage with parents from the outset of a sporting season therefore offers an important contribution to the current stock of knowledge (Dorsch et al., 2021; Elliott & Drummond, 2015). To achieve this will require an understanding of the sociocultural environment that influences parental involvement (Knight, 2019).

To date, only a few studies have sought to meaningfully examine how clubs engage parents from the beginning of the sporting season. Clarke and Harwood (2014) explored the experiences of British parents transitioning into academy level football and found that parents were socialised into the academy football journey through their interactions with other coaches and parents. Over a 3-month period, they also found that parents experienced a diminished sense of agency owing to reduced access to certain spaces where their child prepared and competed. Furthermore, their findings indicated that parents had to 'adjust' expectations and adapt to limited coach-parent communication within academy settings. Similarly, Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough (2015) conducted a

longitudinal case study of US parents' experiences of their child's organised sport participation. They illuminated the repeated and increasingly complex social processes of initial sport socialisation and the ways in which parents made sense of their new and emerging roles in organised sport. Importantly, the findings focussed on the first 15-months of children's sport involvement, providing a 'brief glimpse' of what can become several years of consecutive involvement (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2015).

The other noteworthy study on club engagement practices with parents from the beginning of the sporting journey is Newport and colleagues' (2021) case study of parenting within a British academy football program. They proposed four key phases of the sport parenting journey, thematically described as excited and amazed, dawning of reality, accepting and rationalising, and focusing on the future. Given the complex experiences parents encounter through their child's involvement in organised sport, Newport and colleagues advocate for tailored parent support programs within a supportive culture in which parents feel 'welcomed, valued and respected'. This cannot be understated because parenting experiences vary from parent to parent and indeed across diverse cultures and contexts (Knight et al., 2022).

Building on this line of inquiry, and in response to calls for a broader range of methodologies to provide more intricate insights into the phenomenon and experience of sport parenting (Dorsch et al., 2021; Knight, 2019), the current study utilised a rapid-ethnography approach to explore how organised youth sporting clubs engage parents from the beginning the sporting season. Two research questions guided the study: (1) What is the observed nature of club and parent interactions from the beginning of the sporting season? and (2) How do parents, coaches, and club leaders describe the nature of their involvement with each other from the beginning of the sporting season? Addressing these research questions is vital for working toward enhanced early interactions between parents, coaches and the broader club environment which can potentially align expectations and reduce the chances of issues arising across the season (Knight et al., 2022; Knight & Holt, 2014).

## Methodology

This study was situated within a broader social constructionist, interpretive research paradigm. Social constructionism assumes that knowledge is socially, culturally, and historically constructed through the existence of multiple, subjective, individual realities (Burr & Dick, 2017). Social constructionism posits the belief that social meaning is not discovered but constructed in different ways through 'an active, cooperative enterprise' of social interaction (Gergen, 1985, p. 267) and intimately tied to power relations, language, cultural and historical specificity, and forms of discourse and disciplinary power (Burr & Dick, 2017). This theoretical positioning comprised a logical 'undercarriage' for the utility of ethnographic research which is concerned with understanding, translating, and conceptually explaining cultural practices (Atkinson, 2016). Consequently, and in addition to calls for further ethnographic research about parenting experiences in youth sport (Dorsch et al., 2021; Knight, 2019), the current study employed a multi-sport, rapid ethnography methodology.

Ethnographic research usually involves participant observation, which enables one to 'juxtapose what people say they are up to against what they actually do' (Burawoy, 1991, p. 2), permitting greater analytic depth and complexity. Rapid ethnography is a specific form of multi-method ethnography involving data collection within a condensed timeline to explore a cultural context or phenomenon (Baines & Cunningham, 2013; Reeves et al., 2013). Rapid ethnography enables a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of a particular group and their attitudes and values within a naturally occurring context (Ranabahu, 2017). While traditional ethnographic work often focuses on singular contexts or settings, rapid ethnography can be employed across multiple settings to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Halme et al., 2016). Subsequently, the rapid ethnography used in this study involved in-situ observations across four

**Table 1.** Summary of multi-sport contexts subjected to covert field observations.

| Sport | Gatekeeper permission | Club pseudonym | Rationale for recruitment | IRSAD score | Registered participants | Age groups observed | Training frequency/time (per team) | Training duration (minutes) | Competition frequency/time (per team) | Competition duration (minutes) | Field observations (total hours) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Australian football | General Manager; Projects, Funding & Government Relations Manager | Blessing Football Club | • Top 10 most popular youth sport<br>• Team sport<br>• Located in affluent suburb<br>• Award-winning club culture<br>• Low number of behavioural incident reports | Quintile 5 (most advantaged) | Approx. 600 players | U10s U12s U14s | Two times per week | 30–50 | Once per week | 60 | 31 |
| | | Seaside Football Club | • Top 10 most popular youth sport<br>• Historically masculinised context<br>• Located in disadvantaged suburb<br>• High number of behavioural incident reports | Quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) | Approx. 150 players | U10s U12s U14s | Two times per week | 40–60 | Once per week | 60 | 30 |
| Swimming | Chief Executive Officer; Athlete and Coach Performance Officer; | Thames Swimming Club | • Top 10 most popular youth sport<br>• Individual sport<br>• Located in middle-class suburb<br>• Located in world-class facility | Quintile 4 | Approx. 40 athletes | 11–12 years 13–14 years | Three times per week | 60 | Seasonal (State meets and carnivals) | 180 | 32 |
| | | Northeast Swimming Club | • Top 10 most popular youth sport | Quintile 5 | Approx. 30 athletes | 11–12 years 13–14 years | Three times per week | 60 | Seasonal (State meets and carnivals) | 180 | 42 |

| Sport | Role | Club | Characteristics | | Number of players | Age | Frequency | Duration (min) | Frequency | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | • Individual sport<br>• Located in affluent suburb<br>• Located in community-grade facility | | | | | | | | |
| Tennis | Head of Tournaments and competitions; Officiating Development Coordinator; | Bass Tennis Club | • Top 10 most popular youth sport<br>• Individual sport<br>• Located in regional area<br>• Low number of behavioural incident reports | Quintile 5 | | Juniors 11–17 years | Twice per week | 40–60 | Twice per week | 180 | 40 |
| | | Rowland Tennis Club | • Top 10 most popular youth sport<br>• Individual sport<br>• Located in metropolitan area<br>• High number of behavioural incident reports | Quintile 5 | | Juniors 11–17 years | Twice per week | 40–60 | Twice per week | 180 | 47 |
| Netball | General Manager; | Argo Netball Club | • Top 10 most popular youth sport<br>• Team sport<br>• Located in metropolitan area | Quintile 1 | Approx. 130 players | Early adolescence (11-14 years) | Twice per week | 60–90 | 15 evenings from 7pm | 60 | 53 |
| | | Central Netball Club | • Top 10 most popular youth sport<br>• Team sport<br>• Located in metropolitan area | Quintile 4 | Approx. 300 players | Early adolescence (11-14 years) | Twice per week | 60–90 | 15 evenings from 5pm | 60 | 45 |

competitive sport settings: Australian football, swimming, tennis, and netball (see Table 1 for details).

## Procedure

Following receipt of ethics project approval (project number #4632), four state sporting organisations (netball, Australian football, tennis and swimming) in South Australia were contacted via email seeking support for the study. The sporting organisations agreed to (a) help identify specific sporting club environments suitable for the study and (b) approve the use of covert observations in the field as well as follow-up interviews with parents, coaches, and club leaders. Importantly, the use of 'insider information' from the state sporting organisations was vital for optimising fieldwork (Ranabahu, 2017) involving eight-weeks of covert observations, field notes, reflexive journaling as well as collaborative interviews. State sporting organisations provided advice to inform the timing of observations, information about accessing each setting (e.g. where to stand or sit), how to move through the spaces as a covert observer (e.g. what to wear, how to behave during training versus competition). The nominated club settings represented both positive and challenging club cultures based on behavioural incident report logs (e.g. local data about 'sideline' behaviour), reputation (e.g. clubs identified as 'role model' organisations, recognition through honours and awards), and/or membership size (e.g. small or large membership/participation base) (see Table 1).

## Covert observations

We (Authors 1 and 2) used 'covert' observations to enable the observed settings to be free from the specifications and (anticipated) expectations of the field researchers (Podschuweit, 2021). Observations are particularly useful for identifying inequalities, injustices, and normalised cultural practices within sport that participants may not be able or willing to acknowledge, admit seeing, or partake in (Thorpe & Olive, 2016). To overcome the difficulty of achieving and maintaining concealment, it was imperative to adopt strategies to avoid attracting attention (Petticrew et al., 2007). We developed an ethics-approved 'cover story' to support concealment, allowing two researchers to immerse themselves within the sport settings without disturbing the way in which social interactions between parents and the sporting club environment naturally occur. At the time of data collection, public health policies surrounding the COVID-19 virus had relaxed, precipitating a cautious return to community sport participation. Within this context, the researchers adopted a guise in agreement with the state sporting organisation to act as a club-appointed volunteer for auditing 'COVID-19 compliance practices' to conceal their sudden presence within the sport settings. This 'cover' was necessary to legitimise the visibility of an unfamiliar adult observing trainings and competition. There were very few encounters with other parents or club officials questioning the researcher's role. In these situations, the cover story provided a legitimate means for managing conversations in a way that maintained the covert nature of field observations.

In total, 320 hours of covert field observations were conducted over an eight-week period: 98 hours in netball settings, 74 hours in swimming settings, 61 hours in Australian football settings, and 87 hours in tennis settings (see Table 1). Following each field observation, the researchers systematically generated field note entries ($N = 72$) to materialise observations as well as reflexive journal entries to promote reflection and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Ranabahu, 2017).

## Co-interviews

Following the covert observational period, the researchers recruited 41 participants (club-leaders, coaches, and parents) (for full demographic profile of participants, see Table 2) from within the same sporting clubs to take part in an individual, online, semi-structured co-interview. Co-interviews,

**Table 2.** Demographic table of co-interview participants.

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Ethnicity | Relationship status | Number of children | Employment status | Current sporting role | Child/ren's primary sport | Children's age group |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Halle | 41 | F | Australian | Married | 2 | Employed, part-time | Parent | Tennis | Juniors (11–17 years) |
| Juliet | 45 | F | Australian | Separated | 1 | Employed, full-time | Parent | Netball | U13s |
| Alex | 46 | M | Australian | Married | 2 | Employed, full-time | Parent and coach | Australian football | U14s |
| Harry | 44 | M | Australian | Married | 2 | Employed, full-time | Parent and coach | Netball | U13s |
| George | 44 | M | Australian | Married | 3 | Employed, full-time | Parent and club leader | Netball | U13s |
| Jasmine | 36 | F | Australian | Separated | 1 | Employed, full-time | Parent | Swimming | 11–12 years |
| Sally | 58 | F | Australian | Unknown | Unknown | Employed, part-time | Coach | Swimming | 11–12 years |
| Adam | 49 | M | Italian | Married | 1 | Employed, full-time | Parent | Tennis | Juniors (11–17 years) |
| Emma | 43 | F | Australian | Separated | 2 | Unknown | Parent | Tennis | Juniors (11–17 years) |
| Irma | 45 | F | German | Married | 2 | Employed, full-time | Parent | Australian football | U14s |
| Candice | 40 | F | Australian | Married | 3 | Employed, full-time | Parent, coach and club leader | Australian football | U12s |
| Bel | 39 | F | Australian | Married | Unknown | Employed, full-time | Parent | Tennis | Juniors (11–17 years) |
| Christina | 44 | F | Australian | Married | 4 | Unknown | Parent | Swimming | 11–12 years |
| Alan | 30 | M | Australian | Single | 0 | Employed, full-time | Coach | Australian football | U12s |
| Rawena | 37 | F | American | In a relationship | 1 | Employed, full-time | Parent | Swimming | 13–14 years |
| Joey | 39 | M | American | In a relationship | 1 | Employed, full-time | Parent | Swimming | 13–14 years |
| Katherine | 34 | F | Australian | Married | 2 | Employed, part-time | Parent | Netball | U13s |
| Riley | 19 | M | Australian | Single | 0 | Study, full-time | Coach | Australian football | U10s |
| Terry | 37 | M | Greek | Single | 0 | Employed, full-time | Coach | Swimming | Juniors (11–17 years) |
| Jessie | 40 | F | Australian | Married | 1 | Employed, full-time | Parent | Netball | U11s |
| Fran | 41 | F | Australian | Separated | 1 | Employed, full-time | Club leader | Netball | U11s |
| Ray | 56 | M | Australian | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown | Club leader | Australian football | U14s |
| Mark | 34 | M | Australian | Married | 3 | Employed, full-time | Parent | Netball | U13s |
| Kerryn | 48 | F | Australian | Married | 2 | Employed, full-time | Parent and coach | Netball | U11s |
| Dylan | 41 | M | Australian | Married | 3 | Employed, full-time | Parent | Tennis | Juniors (11–17 years) |
| Sonya | Unknown | F | Australian | Unknown | 2 | Unknown | Parent and club leader | Swimming | 13–14 years |
| Claire | 52 | F | Australian | Married | 2 | Employed, full-time | Parent and coach | Swimming | 13–14 years |
| Eka | 41 | F | Indonesian | Married | 4 | Unknown | Parent | Swimming | 13–14 years |
| Cade | 40 | M | Australian | Married | 2 | Employed-full-time | Parent | Australian football | U10s |
| Ethan | 52 | M | Italian | Married | 3 | Employed, full-time | Parent and Club leader | Australian football | U14s |

*(Continued)*

**Table 2.** Continued.

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Ethnicity | Relationship status | Number of children | Employment status | Current sporting role | Child/ren's primary sport | Children's age group |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ben | 55 | M | Australian | Married | 2 | Employed, full-time | Parent | Netball | U11s |
| Annie | 45 | M | Australian | Married | 2 | Employed, full-time | Parent | Australian football | U14s |
| Bella | 39 | F | Australian | Single | 1 | Studying, full-time | Parent | Australian football | U14s |
| Preston | Unknown | M | Indian | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown | Club leader | Tennis | Juniors (11–17 years) |
| Mackenzee | 35 | F | Australian | Separated | 3 | Employed, part-time | Parent | Netball | U11s |
| Liam | 36 | M | Australian | In a relationship | 0 | Employed, full-time | Coach | Australian football | U14s |
| Amy | 35 | F | Australian | Married | 3 | Employed, part-time | Parent | Australian football | U14s |
| Jenny | 46 | F | Australian | Married | 2 | Employed, full-time | Parent and coach | Netball | U13s |
| Abbey | 40 | F | Canadian | In a relationship | 1 | Employed, full-time | Parent | Swimming | 11–12 years |
| Kaiden | 31 | M | Australian | In a relationship | 0 | Employed, full-time | Coach | Tennis | Juniors (11–17 years) |
| Tiana | Unknown | F | Australian | Married | 2 | Employed, part-time | Parent | Tennis | Juniors (11–17 years) |

F = Female; M = Male; Australian = Caucasian/Australian; Canadian = Caucasian/Canadian; Married = Married or de facto; Separated = Separated or divorced; In a relationship = In a relationship but not married; Single = Not in a relationship.

involving two researchers interviewing one interviewee, were employed because they can enrich the interview experience, allow for active debriefing, promote social support, and enhance learning and connection between the researchers and participants (Velardo & Elliott, 2021). Co-interviewing allowed the researchers to adopt 'insider' (e.g. parenting experience) and 'outsider' (no parenting experience) roles that enabled them to probe both 'obvious' and nuanced ideas and topics (Velardo & Elliott, 2021). To recruit participants, the observed clubs were invited to share a recruitment flyer via electronic direct mail and social media promotion. Interested participants emailed the research team to indicate their interest in volunteering for the study. An information sheet about the study and consent form was emailed to prospective participants and signed and returned by individuals who were willing to participate.

Each co-interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes in duration (Mean = 52 minutes). Semi-structured interview guides were developed for parents and coaches based on covert field observation data and key knowledge gaps identified in the literature (e.g. Dorsch et al., 2021) pertaining to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of parents' early involvement in youth sport. The interview guides comprised 27 questions/topics including icebreaker questions, transition questions and main questions (see Appendix A). At the conclusion of each co-interview, each participant was offered a $$20 gift card to recognise their time and contribution to the research. The recorded interview files were then transcribed by a third-party transcribing service.

## Data analysis

The field notes and co-interview transcripts were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach as described by (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis offers flexibility to use inductive and deductive methods when coding interview transcripts and ethnographic field notes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Our application of reflexive thematic analysis was a recursive process involving 18-months of actively constructing meaning from our theoretical assumptions, disciplinary knowledge, and content of the observational and qualitative data (Braun et al., 2016). Initially, all field notes and individual co-interviews were read by the authors (1, 2 and 3) to facilitate familiarisation. Taking the time to 'relive' fieldnotes was an important phase of the analysis to sensitise our appreciation for, and inclinations about the context in which parents interacted with the surrounding club environment. A concept-by-concept coding technique was used to further our analysis of the field notes and interview data. This phase was supported by the additional use of a mind-mapping technique and the use of NVIVO to organise datasets and begin to develop initial impressions about the data. The mind-mapping strategy prompted us to consider potential candidate themes earlier than anticipated given the rich and abundant nature of the data. At the same time, we also took comfort in the notion that there is no 'stop point' for coding, but rather a commitment to richly and thoroughly identifying semantic and latent meaning (Braun et al., 2016). In this way, initial coding and development of preliminary themes were inextricably linked as part of an iterative, reflexive process.

The next phase of analysis involved the utility of further mind-mapping to visually strengthen our active and evolving interpretations of the data. This process was characterised using a critical friend technique whereby one of the authors (1) acted as a sounding board to prompt broader consideration about different concepts and ideas to mature the development of themes. Furthermore, timely opportunities to present a preliminary analysis at local conferences and forums prompted reflection and revision about the substantiveness and robustness of the proposed themes. To illustrate this, the preliminary analysis led to the development of six candidate themes which have since been reworked and renamed in the current paper following reflection on the feedback received from critical friends, conference attendees, and internal discussions among the research team. Finally, the analysis involved substantive report writing in three forms. First, one of the co-authors utilised two data sets from netball and football as the basis for an undergraduate Honours dissertation.

Second, a comprehensive report was written for the state government funding agency. Third, report writing also included this scholarly paper.

### Rigour

Drawing on the merits of developing 'list-like' rigour criteria (Smith & McGannon, 2018) and given the nature of ethnographic research, we offer open-ended criterion for judging this research including worthy topic, credibility, meaningful contribution of the work, sincerity, and rich rigour. The project underpinning this paper is indeed a *worthy topic* given that it is funded by a state government body, emphasising its social and political significance. Further, the current research is timely and relevant given recent calls for more diverse (C. G. Harwood, Knight, et al., 2019) and ethnographic (Dorsch et al., 2021) studies with parents in youth sport. The study utilised several methods to practice *credibility* including thick description and concrete detail and multivocality in illustrating the findings (see results). In terms of *meaningful contribution*, we contend the work provides a significant contribution methodologically given the lack of published rapid ethnographies in the field of organised youth sport. The current study is both practically and conceptually significant given that the findings shed light on the way in which clubs may be able to enhance parent engagement practices across the first eight weeks of the sporting season – a valuable insight for clubs and organisations seeking to rebuild a volunteer workforce in organised youth sport (Elliott et al., 2021; 2023). Moreover, *sincerity* was practiced by utilising reflexive methods throughout the project including the use of a critical friend during the analysis, the use of a co-interviewing technique which included collaborative and active debriefing, and the use of a reflexive journal during the phase of covert field observations. These methods ensured that different researcher identities (e.g. male/female, parent/coach, parent/non-parent perspectives) enacted on each analytical and interpretive phase, from framing language, organising the overall story of the data, and (re)visiting assumptions which influenced theme generation. Finally, we argue that we have maintained *rich rigour* throughout the research by spending a deep and meaningful amount of time in the field, collecting interview data from stakeholders who have been immersed in these settings, and demonstrated an abundant, sufficient, and complex process of data collection and analysis.

## Results

### Personalising the onboarding experience

> Parents of juniors are scarce, but present. When they are without their children it is hard to distinguish them from the public. The session goes on and as my window for observation closes, parents amble into the car park to pick up their kids. There have been no interactions between parent and coach so far … but it's only the start of the season – let's wait and see. (Field note, swimming)

The theme 'personalising the onboarding experience' developed from the ways in which participants described their preference for being integrated into and familiarised with the sport setting, and from the observed nature of social interactions in organised sport. This period, encompassing both the pre-season and early competitive season, is pivotal in fostering strong and meaningful connections between parents and the immediate sporting environment.

*Building personal relationships*. A consistent expectation among parents is the establishment of mutually respectful and personalised relationships with coaches. Parents appreciate when coaches move beyond transactional interactions (i.e. collecting email addresses and phone numbers) and instead engage in face-to-face conversations to build rapport. As one parent shared:

> I do expect that the coaches do form relationships with parents. I do expect that they have all parents contact phone number and contact email and I do also expect that the coaches form that personal relationship of that face-to-face conversation. And then I also expect like from a communication side that if a coach needs to adjust training, or cancel it or move it, that the coach directly communicate with the parents about it. (Halle, tennis parent)

However, interactions between parents and the club can be superficial, robotic, and transaction-like. In these settings, building personal relationships is not a priority in favour of time efficiency (e.g. communicate information without being held up). One parent reflected on their most recent sporting season:

> Aside from that piece of paper telling me who the coaches were and what the fees were, it was just me reaching out saying 'hey, how do I get this registration through?'. So aside from that there was no correspondence, there was no smile, there was no conversation, there was nothing. There was just that email. (Juliet, netball parent)

*Personalised communication*. Effective onboarding involves personalised communication strategies. Some clubs excel in this regard, providing consistent, tailored information about the season's expectations including training schedules, game-day logistics, and volunteer opportunities. The transfer of information therefore has the potential to be impactful if it is personalised, accessible, and inclusive:

> From a coach's perspective, what it means is trying to get to know the parents. So, at the start of the season when a new parent comes, I would say 'Hey Sam, I'm Alex, I'm the coach. If you've got any questions you know, here's my number, put it in your phone; you're going to see weekly communication; if you ever want to come down and volunteer, make sure you feel a part of it'. I do that as well as Steve the assistant coach, and Kerry, my wife and team manager, we've done that to try get to know the parents so they feel welcome. (Alex, Australian football coach)

The theme *personalised communication* also developed from interpretive work surrounding 'depersonalised communication'. Harry, a netball parent and coach, noted concerns about generic communication messages: 'You don't make relationships via an email or a text message … it doesn't have a lot of guts to it, it's just you tick a box and here we go, we're done'. Indeed, field observations provide some context to this perspective, indicating that most parents embark on the competitive sporting season with little face-to-face interactions with the club, normalising social isolation and uncertainty among parents.

*Understanding individual needs*. Personalised onboarding experiences extend to recognising the unique circumstances and needs of each family. Coaches and club officials who invest time in understanding each family's support needs – such as a child's specific developmental need, family dynamics, or health considerations – creates a supportive environment conducive for sharing information and communicating in partnership with one another.

> This was quite a personal exchange, but one mother felt it was relevant [to say] that her daughter had endometriosis and that that would affect her ability to play sometimes and be very active. So I appreciated that because that didn't have to be disclosed but as you know, people with that condition they go through severe pain so I had to then keep an extra eye on that child going forward. (George, netball parent and club volunteer)

Understanding individual needs also relates to how clubs understand parents' needs as they embark on the competitive season. Observations suggest that the beginning of the season is an information-heavy phase of youth sport and clubs can overlook the parental difficulties associated with joining various communication channels (e.g. creating new accounts to register/join club chat) and following updates:

> You know, some information about who is responsible for certain things, what the plan would be for trainings; how they would operate, you know, any of that sort of written information, emails, Facebook, whatever they choose, whatever format; I'm not the only parent who has found that confusing and difficult to follow. (Jasmine, swimming parent)

The significance of tailored engagement strategies with parents at the beginning of the competitive season cannot be underestimated. By prioritising communication with parents to establish mutually respectful relationships, personalising communication, and understanding individual needs, clubs can take an initial step in supporting families navigate a dynamic and intricate youth sport setting.

### Thanks and recognition

> On arrival, the courts are packed with junior members. Most of the adults present are coaches, with a small smattering of parents around. The parents are either on their phone waiting, or as observed as I parked, in their cars waiting for training to end. Not as many parents, relatives or spectators at training when compared to competition nights. Most parents are opting to drop off and wait in their cars or go elsewhere during practice. Parents are not really involved in the training process. (Field observations, netball)

The theme 'thanks and recognition' refer to the critical role that acknowledgment and appreciation play in fostering positive early interactions between clubs, coaches, parents, and players from the outset of the sporting season. This theme is underpinned by preferred expressions of gratitude through valuing parental contributions, formally acknowledging practices, and recognising invisible work – practices that were not readily observed through covert field observations due to the lack of parents attending trainings and games.

*Valuing parental contributions*. Parents logistical and emotional support is crucial for enabling youth sport participation and valuing these parental contributions can rapidly strengthen interactions between parents and the club. Recognising these efforts, even in a simple form, can have a significant impact on how parents perceive the club environment and the subsequent level of their engagement:

> It's important that parents are recognised and appreciated for the work that they put in. Even if it is just getting their kids there really, even if it is just driving them and dropping them off … it's so important and appreciated. (Sally, swimming coach)

However, field observations indicate that the absence of interactions between parents and coaches or club officials are rare, limiting the potential to meaningfully and personably engage parents in the youth sporting journey. One parent, Adam, described his recent reflections on the tennis season:

> I can't think of a time where there's been a coach that's been outgoing and has reached out the other way and initiated contact with me as a parent … I'm thinking of a few conversations at the training courts or at the game, at the start of training or at the end of training or at the start of a game or the end of the game. You know, 'Hey Sam, great game today, it was unlucky we didn't get the win and you're doing a great job', just general conversation. (Adam, tennis parent)

*Formal acknowledgement practices*. Some organised sports such as Netball and Swimming embed formal practices of appreciation to construct a culture where parents and volunteers feel valued. Organised events such as information nights, social gatherings, and registration days comprise timely opportunities to express gratitude publicly. Reflective of several participant perspectives, one coach noted: 'Having an information night to bring everyone together … [is an opportunity to say] thank-you for choosing our club and trusting us to provide your child with a great experience'. Further, post-training breakfasts and post-match awards often involve moments where team captains or coaches formally acknowledge the effort and compromises parents' make to support their child's involvement: 'Every time there's a gathering … one of the captains will be asked to thank the parents and carers'.

*Recognising invisible work*. Field observations suggested that club personnel rarely engaged with parents before, during, or after training and competition. Subsequently, opportunities for clubs to recognise the invisible work of being a sport parent were missed. Parents described the exciting yet challenging nature of providing children with uniforms, equipment, and transportation, as well as coordinating work schedules to compliment sport. However, clubs can do better to recognise this taken-for-granted work to create a parent positive culture. One parent involved in tennis articulated this view when discussing how clubs could improve their early season engagement practices with parents:

> Perhaps some recognition for work that goes in behind the scenes, trying to make sure that there's child's there, they're on time, you've got all the balls and the equipment, and the kid's happy, they know what they're doing – that's hard work! (Emma, tennis parent)

Similar sentiments were shared from parents involved in Australian football:

> … it's important that parents are recognised and appreciated for the work that they put in. Even if it is just getting their kids there … at least they're bringing their kids there … It's so important for the children that whatever support that parents have or give are both ways of helping and it's so important and appreciated. (Irma, Australian football parent)

Failing to recognise the often-invisible efforts of parents can create barriers to engaging them in volunteer roles. As such, acknowledging parents' contributions may foster a sense of belonging and encourage greater involvement. A field note from the Australian football context highlights the consequences of overlooking these efforts:

> Eight weeks into the season there are still parents who haven't volunteered to score or volunteered at all. There's a general bit of apprehension in the body language of parents that are new to the environment even though their kids have been playing in the team for a while now. (Field note, Australian football)

Through such observations, the importance of proactively acknowledging and valuing parents' roles within the youth sport setting is evident. By fostering a culture where parents feel seen and appreciated during the early onset of the competitive season, clubs may create an inclusive environment that encourages early parental interest and involvement in volunteering.

### *Chats, check-ins, and consultations*

A commonly observed practice across all sports involves using the information evening or 'season launch' event to disseminate information and meet with families as a preparatory step toward the competitive season. Within this setting, coaches and club officials can take advantage of the opportunity to have a quick 'drive-by chat' with parents:

> From the club, our secretary would send out information as well about sort of the opening days where you can you know come and try; so even though our kids are experienced, we got all the information to say come along to our kind of beginning of the season session, meet other parents and other family members and sort of get to see who you might be in a team with and things like that really. (Candice, Australian football coach and volunteer)

One of the identified issues with quick chats is that while clubs may perceive that they effectively communicate information through these interactions, parents often feel rushed, dismissed, or unheard:

> He [club official] just really gave me the brush off and said, 'just go online, Tennis SA and just look it up yourself – there's a calendar and just pick what you want go into'. Little did I know there's different coloured tournaments which have different Australian rankings and different meanings; I had to source all of that myself. Even the state organisation wasn't really helpful. (Bel, tennis parent)

Alternatively, parents appreciate clear and varied communication methods with clubs following their first interaction (e.g. first week) with the club, including informal conversations, weekly 'check-ins' and scheduled consultations. The need for ongoing dialogue is especially important at the start of the season to enhance parents' understandings about club processes and expectations, their child's development, and in some sports, available pathways.

> I actually just really would have liked a designated hour of his time, and I was even happy to pay for that time, just so that someone could sit down with me and say, look, if your son is really interested in taking it to the next level, these are the options that are available. These are the avenues that you can take. (Christina, swimming parent)

However, parental preferences for check-ins were discussed in juxtaposition to their experiences of infrequent communication with team coaches:

> It is so random. We have had coaches that will provide an email to each individual child after every game outlining how they went, things to improve on, their goal shooting percentage and so on. There will be other

coaches that don't ever put anything out and will never address the parents other than to say, 'court 12 at 7.30'. So it's very much luck of the draw who you get, and I don't think the clubs sort of enforce or even ask coaches to provide that sort of feedback because, you know, they're all volunteers. (Katherine, netball parent)

For many parents, inconsistent communication created a barrier to understanding their child's progress, with some expressing a desire for more structured opportunities to engage with coaches and club officials:

As a parent, I expect there to be quite a bit of transparency between the coach and what they can support – how they can support your child and how they can nurture their development. And I think there is a bit of … there is lacking there in terms of opportunity to discuss individual support. (Rawena, swimming parent)

Given the perceived challenges and inconsistencies surrounding face-to-face conversations during busy social events, game days and training sessions, parents suggested clubs offer more structured mid-season consultations or surveys to capture their feedback:

I guess it depends on how parents are feeling. Like, it might be worth sending out something midway through the season to say, 'We just want to check in and see how your children are going and if there's any issues coming up in the sport that you're noticing'. Or checking in a little bit more often, like the parent-teacher interview in schools. (Joey, swimming parent)

Structured opportunities for parents to meet with coaches and club officials are potentially important as their absence can lead to feelings of frustration and uncertainty about who to approach to address questions and seek advice. As one Australian football coach, Alan, described: 'the feedback that I have from parents and also my view of what happens is that the lack of communication is a really big barrier for parents'.

Overall, parents did not expect a high level of engagement but wanted clubs to be more proactive in opening opportunities to interact. Providing multiple ways through casual chats, structured check-ins, or more formal consultations may therefore help parents feel supported and strengthen the dynamic relationship between parents, coaches, and club officials. In doing so, the following observation may become less common:

Arrived at netball stadium 15 minutes before official start time, but the parking lot was already packed with large numbers of parents and juniors filing into the stadium. Before the game began, I walked around a bit to familiarized myself with the venue … No obvious interactions between parents and coaches, umpires, coordinators, or stadium staff. None. (Field note, Netball)

## Discussion

This study aimed to address two research questions: (1) What is the observed nature of club and parent interactions from the beginning of the sporting season? and (2) How do parents, coaches and club leaders describe the nature of their involvement with each other from the beginning of the sporting season? The findings emphasise the importance of early and ongoing engagement between parents and club stakeholders (e.g. coaches, club leaders, team managers) in youth sport. Parents naturally play a vital role in enabling their child's sport participation but the nature of their early interactions with the club vary significantly. Inconsistencies in communication, onboarding practices, and sociocultural norms that can comprise sources of parental frustration and potential disengagement. At the same time, the themes offer insights into how clubs can foster an inclusive and parent-supportive environment for meaningfully onboarding families into the competitive season by complying with orientation checklists and developing and enacting communication plans.

Previous literature has provided some insights into the initial stages of the youth sporting journey for parents. Newport et al. (2021) highlighted the excitement and amazement parents experienced from the moment their child 'signed' with an academy football team. In contrast, Clarke and Harwood (2014) found that parents transitioning into academy-level football often experience a

diminished sense of agency and must adapt to limited interactions with coaches. Building on these perspectives, the current study makes a novel contribution to the sport parenting literature by offering naturalistic perspectives on how clubs engage parents within community-based, grassroots youth sport environments. Specifically, the resultant themes emphasise the importance of (a) early engagement and personalised onboarding practices, (b) recognising parents as crucial partners in the youth sporting journey, and (c) enhancing communication quality, consistency, and modes to support stronger parental engagement. Crucially, these themes provide an important basis for improving the way that clubs introduce and support families, especially those who are engaging in organised sport for the first time.

Our field observations revealed a noticeable absence of parents at most trainings and games early in the season. While it remains unclear whether these families were newly enrolled in, transferring back into, or continuing in sport (Kay et al., 2024), their limited visibility highlights the need for clubs to better understand parents' needs and differentiate engagement strategies. Parental absence may be a consequence of previous negative experiences with the club or from children requesting their parents not attend – both plausible explanations that underscores the complex and elusive challenge for clubs seeking to support and engage families (Elliott et al., 2023). Parents may also feel compelled to take a 'backward' step because of broader social discourses which privilege the role of the coach in youth sport, while casting parents are a potentially negative influence (Yabe et al., 2021). To redress this and simultaneously encourage more tangible, volunteer support, clubs must move beyond assumptions that parental absence or disengagement is attributed to 'laziness' or apathy and instead reflect critically on how early season experiences and interactions are shaping parents' subsequent involvement. A useful starting point for clubs is to regard parents' contribution and involvement as important as coaches (C. G. Harwood, Caglar, et al., 2019). Additionally, and based on the themes presented in this paper, early interactions must be positive, inclusive, and welcoming, creating the basis for meaningful interactions, effective information communication, building rapport, and potentially recruiting volunteers.

These suggestions extend recently published recommendations for improving parent-coach interactions in youth sport (see review by Santos et al., 2024) because club engagement practices with parents are not solely the responsibility of coaches. Club leaders (e.g. presidents), club coordinators, and team managers/administrators can all play a vital role in setting up parents with the requisite skills and knowledge to support their involvement in organised sport, within a parent-supportive climate (Newport et al., 2021). A proactive approach to supporting parents cannot be underestimated given that parents often experience stress because of ambiguous expectations placed on them (C. Harwood & Knight, 2009). For instance, clubs inherently understand that parenting in youth sport is a matter of 'common sense' (Elliott & Drummond, 2015) and yet many parents are unsure how to behave during competition (Knight et al., 2011). To contend with these views, clubs could improve the nature, quality and frequency of interactions with parents during the initial weeks of the pre-season and/or competitive season, which will also support clubs pursuit of a culture where parents are recognised and valued (Newport et al., 2021).

This study is not without limitations. There are differences in the interdependent persons (families, teams, athletes) and contexts (e.g. organisations, communities, societies) within a broader ecosystem of youth sport (Dorsch et al., 2022) which can influence attitudes, expectations and behaviours, emphasising the need to interpret the themes within the context of the study. Although the study employed perspectives and observations from across multiple sports, the themes may not fully reflect the experiences of parents and club stakeholders across all youth sports, particularly those outside of the selected settings (Australian football, netball, tennis, and swimming). Additionally, the parents, coaches and club leaders who participated in co-interviewing may represent those who have strong opinions about the topic or are more engaged in youth sport. As such, it is possible that the perspectives of disengaged parents – who may face different barriers to club engagement and communication from the beginning of the season – are underrepresented within the qualitative data presented in this study.

A further potential limitation surrounds the use of covert observations, particularly given the emotional burden placed on the observer to ensure that their researcher identity be concealed during data collection. While several steps were taken to address this risk, including the careful employment of a research assistant with a strong background in psychology, self-care, and emotional regulation to navigate dual identities, it must be noted that the emotional toll can potentially have impacted observer consistency. Moreover, while the study spans masculinised and feminised sports, a gender-based analysis of interactions or onboarding strategies was not undertaken in the present study. While this offers an avenue for future secondary analysis, its absence should be acknowledged as a potential limitation. In addition, the study did not collect data on participants' socioeconomic status, which may have shaped their experiences and perspectives. This is an important limitation because familial attitudes, behaviours and expectations, as well as those of club leaders, coaches, and other sport providers, are inextricably linked with the broader social, political, and economic contexts in which youth sport operates.

Ultimately, while timely informational and educational support is essential for effective parental involvement in organised youth sport (Elliott et al., 2023; Newport et al., 2021), aspects of the broader club environment – such as communication structure, cultural norms, and early interactions with coaches and leaders – can also shape how parents engage, perceive their role, and experience their involvement (Elliott & Drummond, 2017; Knight, 2019). As such, a focus on how clubs engage families from the beginning of their seasonal involvement in youth sport is crucially important (Dorsch, Smith, Wilson, et al., 2015; Thrower et al., 2017). By engaging in more frequent interactions with parents, personalising communication messages, and understanding individual needs, clubs can enhance the transmission of information to parents and optimise their potential involvement. To achieve this, policy makers and sport providers should develop orientation/induction checklists, online educational resources and communication templates for clubs to (a) support meaningful interactions with families from the beginning of the competitive season, (b) strengthen communication messaging, and (c) mutually understand expectations and preferences surrounding organised sport involvement. This is particularly salient given current policy emphasis on strengthening the community sport volunteer workforce (e.g. Australian Sports Commission, n.d.; Sport England, n.d.). Scholars, policy makers, and sport providers can utilise these findings as the basis for further examining the daily practices and social norms which occupy the spaces, contexts, and settings in which parents and club personnel interact, which is crucial for optimising parent and familial involvement in organised sport.

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## ORCID

Sam Elliott  http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5348-3999
M. Drummond  http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2321-6803
C. J. Knight  http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5806-6887

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# APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PARENTS, COACHES AND/OR CLUB LEADERS

Icebreakers (discuss in a conversational manner)

- What is your name and how old are you?
- What do you do for a living?
- How many children do you have?
- How often does your child/do your children train and compete [in chosen sport]?
- Which parent is most involved in sport?

Transition Questions: How do sporting clubs set you up for a successful season as a parent/coach?
*First, I would like you to talk generally about your experiences as a parent from day one of this season.*

- At the beginning of the season, what information and advice did you receive from the club about the upcoming season?
- What are/were the clubs' expectations about your involvement this season?
- What are/were your expectations of the club in supporting you this season?
- How does this compare to other sports you have been involved with?
- What are/were the coaches' expectations about your involvement this season?
- What are/were your expectations of the coaches' in supporting you this season?
- Can you describe the nature of communication between you and the coaches and club at the beginning of the season? (Probe: Who initiated discussions and how? How did you feel after these conversations about your involvement in the upcoming season?)

*Now I want you to talk more specifically about your current experiences during training and games. First, some short questions:*

- How do you feel about watching your child train and compete? (Probe: What do you enjoy most/least about watching? Would you like anything to be different?)
- Does your child look at you when they are training/competing?
- Do they listen to what you say when they are competing?
- What kind of things do you say to them? (Probe: how do you react if you are ignored?)

Main Questions: Parental interactions with parents/coaches/club across the season

- How would you describe your interactions with the coach at present? (Probe: Does this meet your needs as a parent?)
- How difficult or easy is it to communicate your ideas/concerns/comments?
- What things would you like to see happen differently regarding coach and club interactions and communication with parents?
- What are the barriers to getting information from clubs/coaches about your child's sport development?
- What aspect of your involvement might benefit from greater clarity and support from the coach/club?
- What are your expectations of clubs/coaches regarding communicating with parents?
- If you are not getting sufficient information from the club/coach, where else do you seek information? (Probe: How reliable is your information source/s?)
- Can you describe your interactions with the club/coach at the beginning of the season? (Probe: How does this compare to the middle and end of the season?)
- How do you engage with the club/coach if your child has a concern? (Probe: How might you engage a coach if you had a concern?)
- When is the best time to approach the club/coach to discuss? Why?
- What information do you need at the start of the season to support your involvement as a parent in sport? (Probe: What about during the season? What about at the end of the season?)