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Advancing the study of parental involvement to optimise the psychosocial development and experiences of young athletes

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to review and critique the literature in youth sport that specifically relates to parental influence on the experiences and psychosocial development of young athletes. First, we consider the literature examining the extent to which parental involvement in organised youth sport has been associated with psychosocial outcomes in young people. Within this critique, we draw upon what has been learned from the sport-based positive youth development (PYD) and life skills literature. Second, we address conceptual and methodological limitations of existing literature (e.g., homogeneity of samples, oversimplification of parenting in sport, studying parental involvement in isolation) and target key scientific gaps that exist in facilitating our understanding of optimal parental involvement (e.g., raising parental awareness and facilitating opportunities to support psychosocial development, improving coach education to facilitate parent-coach relationships, collaborating with coaches through well designed interventions, working on the “right” assets at the right time). Such gaps represent how parents appear to have been overlooked within the intentional process of psychosocial development. We offer concluding remarks about the future of youth sport in this area and provide specific recommendations to inspire future researchers and practitioners towards the challenge of empowering parents and more fully enabling their potential.

Key Words: Parenting, Youth Sport, Psychosocial development, Positive Youth Development

39 In a special issue of *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* in 2015, we (Harwood & Knight)
40 proposed that expertise in sport parenting was “demonstrated through parental
41 involvement that increases the chances for children to achieve their sporting potential,
42 have a positive psychosocial experience, and develop a range of positive developmental
43 outcomes” (p. 25). This statement was based upon the belief that success for children
44 and adolescents involved in youth sport cannot, and should not, be measured by athletic
45 performance alone. Rather, we believe that a ‘successful’ sport environment is one that
46 facilitates a child’s on-going involvement in sport and physical activity, supports
47 psychological wellbeing, and provides young people with opportunities to develop
48 transferable life skills.

49 Such aspirations for youth sport have also been reflected by international sport
50 organisations. For instance, in their position statement on youth athlete development,
51 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) expert panel referred to the importance of
52 a *commitment* to the psychological development of *resilient* and *adaptable* athletes
53 (Bergeron et al., 2015). Specifically, the authors articulated a clear, but multifaceted
54 goal for sport: “Develop healthy, capable and resilient young athletes, while attaining
55 widespread, inclusive, sustainable and enjoyable participation and success for all levels
56 of individual athletic achievement” (p. 834). The specific proposition *being* that sport
57 experiences should equip young people with appropriate coping skills and psychosocial
58 qualities regardless of sporting level/attainments. The panel admonished that “this is a
59 considerable challenge for all stakeholders in youth sports—parents, coaches,
60 administrators, sport governing bodies *and*, especially, youth athletes” (p. 834).

61 Recognizing the challenge and complexity of parental involvement that could
62 help to nurture such positive psychosocial outcomes, we previously posited that parents

63 must engage in a “consistent cycle of triangular responsibilities that revolve around
64 managing and supporting the needs of their child, managing themselves and their own
65 well-being, and managing their interactions with others in the youth sport environment”
66 (Harwood & Knight, 2015, p. 32). This interpretation was driven by an examination of
67 studies in organised youth sport. However, on reflection, we realise that we failed to
68 critically appraise the literature in terms of the balance between studies examining
69 parental influence upon ‘in situ’ experiential consequences (e.g., motivation, affective
70 responses, and sporting behaviour in youth sport situations) and *psychosocial*
71 *development* (i.e., the growth of social, cognitive, emotional and behavioural
72 skills/qualities through sport; Holt, 2016; Pierce, Gould, & Camiré, 2017). Although
73 these ‘consequences’ are likely linked, the latter aspiration, psychosocial development,
74 requires a more proactive and targeted approach from parents. Such aspirations are
75 reflective of the mission of sport-based positive youth development (PYD) and life
76 skills programs, where there exists a clear intentionality to use sporting activities to
77 help young people harness a wide range of internal and external assets (e.g., Bean,
78 Kramers, Forneris & Camiré, 2018; Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012; Holt et al., 2017;
79 Jacobs & Wright, 2018).

80 Given that every young person has a right to high quality, developmentally-rich
81 experiences *in* and *through* sport, we believe there is a responsibility on scholars not
82 only to understand and illustrate how parents can impact the ‘in situ’ sporting
83 experience of a young person (i.e., positive psychological states) but also how parents
84 can nurture more enduring psychosocial attributes as internal resources for adult life.
85 With these points in mind, the aims of this present article are threefold. First, we will
86 critically reflect upon literature examining the impact of parental involvement in

87 organised youth sport on young peoples' psychosocial outcomes; we consider the
88 impact on motivational, affective, social, behavioural, and developmental indices as
89 well as what has been learned from sport-based **PYD** and life skills literature. Second,
90 we aim to identify the conceptual and methodological limitations of existing literature,
91 with a particular emphasis on addressing scientific gaps that exist in facilitating our
92 understanding of optimal parental involvement. Third, we aim to inspire future
93 researchers and practitioners in this area by considering challenges and opportunities
94 that exist by empowering parents and their potential capabilities more fully.

95 **Parental involvement in organised youth sport settings**

96 Researchers have committed extensively to understanding how parents may
97 positively or negatively affect the quality of young people's experiences in sport
98 (Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017). When evaluating this body of work, a diversity
99 of what we will term 'psychosocial outcomes' emerges due to different types of
100 parental practices and involvement. Such outcomes range from motivational
101 regulations, affective responses, self-perceptions, moral behaviour, coping strategies,
102 and well-being consequences that have been reported or displayed by young athletes
103 through both quantitative and qualitative investigations (Berrow, Knight, & Hudson,
104 2018; Knight & Holt, 2014). Several elements of parental involvement have been found
105 to influence these psychosocial outcomes including; parenting style; parenting practices
106 **across contexts** (e.g., used at home, in relation to training, and those displayed at
107 competitions); and parental relationships and interactions with others in the sporting
108 environment. A brief overview of these three areas is provided below (a full review is
109 beyond the scope of this paper, Berrow et al. (2018) provide further details).

110 **Parenting style.** A growing number of studies (e.g., Holt, Tamminen, Black,
111 Mandigo, & Fox, 2009; Juntumma, Keskivaara, & Punamäki, 2005; Sapieja, Dunn, &
112 Holt, 2011) point to the influence of general parenting styles (defined as “a constellation
113 of attitudes toward the child that are communicated to the child and that, taken together,
114 create an emotional climate in which the parent’s behaviours are expressed” (Darling
115 & Steinberg, 1993, p. 488) on certain psychosocial outcomes in children. Specifically,
116 research indicates that autonomy-supportive or authoritative parenting positively
117 impacts on children, by reducing amotivation and increasing more self-determined
118 forms of motivation (e.g., Chew & Wang, 2010; Gagné, Ryan, & Bargmann, 2010).
119 Further, an authoritative parenting style is associated with enhanced sport satisfaction
120 (Juntumma et al., 2005) and higher rates of healthy and non-perfectionism (Sapieja et
121 al., 2011), while an autonomy supportive approach is associated with enhanced well-
122 being (Gagné et al., 2010). In contrast, controlling or authoritarian parenting styles have
123 been associated with reduced self-esteem and vitality (Gagné et al., 2010) as well as
124 increased likelihood for young athletes to engage in norm-breaking behaviours
125 (Juntumma et al., 2005).

126 **Parenting practices across contexts.** Researchers in youth sport have made a
127 frequent distinction between parental behaviours or practices that are perceived to be
128 supportive and those that are viewed as pressuring. Generally, positive psychosocial
129 outcomes are associated with supportive behaviours displayed at home, in training and
130 at competitions, while negative or detrimental psychosocial outcomes are associated
131 with pressure, particularly in relation to competitions (Knight et al., 2017). For
132 instance, the provision of tangible support, particularly in the form of money and time,
133 from parents is especially important (e.g., Baxter-Jones & Maffuli, 2003; Wuerth, Lee,

134 & Alfermann, 2004). Such tangible support is identified by athletes as a necessary
135 requirement to ensure children's participation and progression in sport (Knight, Boden,
136 & Holt, 2010; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005) and thus is the basis to subsequent
137 psychosocial development. The provision of tangible support from parents
138 demonstrates to children that they value their sporting involvement (Boiche, Guillet,
139 Bois, & Sazzarin, 2011), which can enhance feelings of enjoyment (Fraser-Thomas,
140 Côté, & Deakin, 2008), competence (Hassell, Sabiston, & Bloom, 2010), motivation
141 (Knight, Little, Harwood, & Goodger, 2016) and persistence (Dunn, Dorsch, King, &
142 Rothlisberger, 2016). However, athletes can become aware of their parents'
143 commitment and subsequently perceive pressure to "repay" their parents (Lauer,
144 Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010).

145 Recent research has shown a direct relationship between the amount of money
146 parents commit to their child's sport and subsequent perceptions of pressure reported
147 by child-athletes (Dunn et al., 2016). When children perceive pressure from parents, it
148 can impact on continued engagement in sport (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2009),
149 their sport enjoyment (Amado, Sanchez-Olivia, Gonzalez-Ponce, Pulido-Gonzalez, &
150 Sanchez-Miguel, 2015; Babkes & Weiss, 1999), anxiety levels (Power & Woolger,
151 1994; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986), and engagement in unsporting behaviours (Leo,
152 Sanchez-Miguel, Sanchez-Olivia, Amado, & García-Calvo, 2015). Further, **at**
153 **competitions**, if parents are focused on winning, punish children, or provide critical
154 feedback it can reduce children's perceptions of competence (Babkes & Weiss, 1999;
155 Knight, Dorsch, Osai, Haderlie, Sellars, 2016), and increase both anxiety (Bean,
156 Jeffery-Tosoni, Baker, & Fraser-Thomas, 2016; Elliott & Drummond, 2017) and fear
157 of failure (Sagar & Lavalley, 2010). It is also noteworthy that high parental expectations

158 and concerns about parental criticism is associated with unhealthy or negative forms of
159 perfectionism (Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Miller, 2006; Sagar & Stoeber, 2009).

160 In contrast, when children perceive their parents focus on effort, self-referenced
161 achievement, and personal improvement **at competitions and in relation to training**
162 (creating a parental task-involving/mastery climate) athletes report higher levels and
163 quality of motivation (Knight et al., 2016; McArdle & Duda, 2004), commitment
164 (D'Arripe-Longueville, Hars, Debois, & Calmels, 2009), perceived competence
165 (Atkins, Johnson, Force, & Petrie, 2013), enjoyment (Morris & Kavussanu, 2008),
166 effort (Gutiérrez, Caus, & Ruiz, 2005), self-esteem (O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, &
167 Cumming, 2014), and sporting behaviour (Davies, Babkes-Stellino, Nichols, &
168 Coleman, 2016). Further, praise and encouragement with constructive feedback after
169 **competitions** can facilitate motivation (Keegan, Spray, Harwood, & Lavalley, 2010;
170 Knight et al., 2016) and increase confidence and positive affect (Elliott & Drummond,
171 2017). Positive reinforcement can increase perceptions of competence and effort
172 (Babkes & Weiss, 1999) and help athletes rationalise their thoughts and feelings
173 (Connaughton, Wadey, Hanton, & Jones, 2008).

174 However, the impact of parental feedback on psychosocial outcomes,
175 **particularly the feedback provided at competitions**, appears to be influenced by
176 children's individual preferences and their perceptions of their parents' knowledge
177 (Knight et al., 2010; Knight et al., 2016). In general, children have reported that when
178 parents have appropriate knowledge about their sport (either as a result of playing or
179 coaching experience) or possess pertinent life or sport experiences, the provision of
180 sport-specific information **in relation to competitions** (i.e., tactical or technical
181 feedback) is positively received and enhances enjoyment, concentration, and

182 confidence. In contrast, unsolicited sport-specific feedback before or after competitions
183 from parents deemed to be lacking in the necessary knowledge or experience is
184 described to lead to feelings of confusion, frustration, or pressure (Knight et al., 2010;
185 Knight et al., 2016).

186 **Parental relationships and interactions with others.** Parents engage with
187 many other individuals within the youth sport environment (i.e., other parents, coaches,
188 and officials; Harwood & Knight, 2015). Although surprisingly limited in scope,
189 available research indicates that the quality of parental interactions with other
190 individuals impacts on children's sport experience (cf. Holt et al., 2009; Omli & LaVoi,
191 2011). For instance, when parents engage with other parents (either of children on the
192 same team, or opposing team) in a respectful and supportive manner, children report
193 that it enhances their enjoyment of sport (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009).
194 Similarly, children have explained that encouraging and congratulating other children
195 on their team and their opponents can also enhance their enjoyment, increase
196 motivation, and reduce embarrassment (Knight et al., 2010). In contrast, if parents
197 engage in angry exchanges with other parents it can lead to children feeling
198 embarrassed or anxious (Knight et al., 2010; Omli & LaVoi, 2011).

199 The way in which parents interact with their child's coach is also reported to
200 affect children's sport experience (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2009; Jowett & Timson-
201 Katchis, 2005). For instance, athletes and coaches have explained that if parents
202 question coaches or interfere with practices it can result in feelings of pressure or
203 anxiety for children (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2008; Lauer et al., 2010).
204 In contrast, open and honest relationships between parents and coaches can increase a
205 child's trust in their coach, help parents to learn about their child's sport and be more

206 optimally involved, and enable parents to help children to solve athlete-coach conflicts
207 (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005; Knight & Holt, 2014). Further, parents and coaches
208 can both actively influence the development of athlete's coping strategies (Tamminen
209 & Holt, 2012; Tamminen, McEwen, & Crocker, 2016) by questioning and reminding
210 athletes of previous coping attempts, sharing their own experiences, and initiating
211 conversations about coping. If coaches and parents work together to implement these
212 strategies, it is likely that athletes' development of coping strategies will be enhanced.

213 **Methodological caveats and limitations of the literature.** The body of
214 evidence reviewed above offers extensive insights into the types of parental
215 involvement that have been positively and negatively associated with a range of
216 psychosocial outcomes in child-athletes. However, there are several methodological
217 points that are important to share at this juncture. First, we would caution the reader
218 against simply concluding what is 'good or bad' sport parenting particularly given the
219 lack of research on certain areas. For instance, when considering the "best" parenting
220 style to use within youth sport there is tremendous homogeneity in the populations
221 being studied (Berrow et al., 2018; Harwood & Knight, 2015) and this limits our
222 understanding of cultural and developmental influences. Moreover, family structure is
223 seldom reported within existing literature which restricts our appreciation of the roles
224 or influence of parental involvement outside that of traditional heterosexual parenting.

225 Second, we are at great risk of oversimplifying parenting and parental
226 involvement in sport (cf. Knight et al., 2017) because behaviours within studies are
227 often broadly categorised as supportive or pressuring. The meaning of these terms is
228 often vague and can be applied to a range of individual practices from autonomy-
229 support, support of basic psychological needs, tangible, informational, and emotional

230 support, and positive-reinforcement (Berrow et al., 2018). Furthermore, distinct
231 concepts are occasionally conflated and labelled ‘support’, such as the facilitation of
232 sport participation and autonomy-support (Anderson, Funk, Elliott, & Smith, 2003).
233 Consequently, when we talk about pressure or support, we might actually be making
234 reference to a range of different practices that may make their own unique contribution
235 to children’s sport experiences and developmental outcomes.

236 The exact impact of different parental practices on children is further
237 complicated because how children perceive their parents’ behaviours appears to be
238 influenced by the timing of the behaviour (e.g., comments before competitions may
239 have a different impact to those after events; Elliott & Drummond, 2015, Knight et al.,
240 2010), the presence of others within the environment (e.g., the coach-created
241 motivational climate might mediate the impact that a parent-initiated climate has on a
242 child; Amorose, Anderson-Butcher, Newman, Fraina, & Iachini, 2016), and also
243 specific parent and child characteristics such as parent beliefs or goals regarding sport
244 involvement or the quality of the relationship between a parent and child (Knight et al.,
245 2017). Thus, when we consider parental involvement in isolation or devoid of
246 contextual information, we risk creating an incomplete and potentially misleading
247 picture of how parents influence young people.

248 Finally, perhaps the most predominant reflection of studies that have employed
249 parent and athlete samples from traditional, organised youth sport settings, is that few
250 have investigated the potential role of parents on the child’s perceived or actual
251 development of specific social, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural skills. The body
252 of literature is characterised by **quantitative** cross-sectional associations between
253 (perceived) **parental behaviours (generally situation-specific and negative) and**

254 consequences reported by athletes and qualitative (often one-off) interviews with
255 athletes reflecting upon parental involvement usually at competitions. Beyond
256 Tamminen's work on the development of adolescent coping skills (Tamminen & Holt,
257 2012; Tamminen et al., 2016), there appear to be few empirical investigations in these
258 traditional youth sport samples that have examined the parental involvement with a
259 specific focus upon how parents may facilitate the development or growth (perceived
260 or objective) of enduring psychosocial assets that are so important for development
261 (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000; Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005).

262 One potential reason for this is that although the general mission of traditional,
263 organised youth sport programs should be focused on a high quality, enriching
264 experience, the actual focus of youth sport imbalances maladaptively towards athlete
265 skill development and competition outcomes. Forneris, Camiré and Trudel (2012)
266 provide some empirical support for this proposition in their study of high school
267 coaches, parents, athletes, and administrators' perceptions of the youth sport mission,
268 experiences, and expectations. Their findings indicated lapses in awareness of the
269 broader mission of youth sport alongside discrepancies in what stakeholders expected
270 in terms of the integration of life skills and positive sport values compared to
271 perceptions of the degree to which these skills and values were actually being integrated
272 within their programme. As an alternative to youth sport programs that primarily focus
273 on sport skill development, sport-based PYD programs view young people as resources
274 to be developed and intentionally focus on developmentally-rich experiences through
275 their involvement in organised activities (Holt & Neely, 2011; Petitpas et al., 2005).
276 Importantly, parents and family are viewed as key external assets within PYD research
277 (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002) and so it is pertinent to

278 appraise what we know about parental involvement in the context of the sport-based
279 **PYD** literature.

280 **Parental involvement within sport-based PYD research**

281 A sport-based PYD approach can be applied to all forms of youth sport program
282 whether or not the primary focus is on intervention or prevention to reduce negative
283 adolescent behaviours, life skills development and transfer, or athletic potential and
284 sport skill acquisition (Petitpas et al., 2005). However, in noting the importance of the
285 context within which the activity occurs, the National Research Council and Institute
286 of Medicine (NRCIM, 2002) proposed eight necessary contextual features for
287 optimising development outcomes. These include a physically and psychologically safe
288 environment that has appropriate structure and supportive relationships, integrating
289 school, family, and the community where possible. There also needs to be opportunities
290 to belong and feel valued in order to develop confidence in addition to the presence of
291 positive social norms. Opportunities to build and develop new skills (e.g., both physical
292 and internal, psychosocial assets) must also be present (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, &
293 Deakin, 2005). Aligned with the NRCIM, Petitpas et al. (2005) specifically note:
294 “Parents and guardians who become involved in their children’s activities and
295 demonstrate a clear interest on a day-by-day basis without being intrusive, are in the
296 best position to reinforce appropriate behaviours and attitudes” (p. 70). Côté,
297 Turnnidge, and Evans’ (2014) Personal Assets Framework (PAF) for sport-based youth
298 development also pays attention to the role that parents play in providing appropriate
299 opportunities for young athletes to develop quality relationships that ultimately lead to
300 better psychosocial development (i.e., the 4Cs – confidence, connection, character, and
301 competence).

302 Most recently, Holt and colleagues (2017) used a meta-synthesis design to
303 systematically synthesise key findings from the qualitative PYD literature, resulting in
304 a grounded theory of **PYD** through sport. Consistent with earlier frameworks, their
305 theory emphasises the salient role of parents and proposes that: (1) distal ecological
306 systems (e.g., community, policy, culture) and individual factors influence PYD
307 through sport; (2) A PYD climate (based on relationships between athletes and peers,
308 parents, and other adults) can produce PYD outcomes (i.e., through implicit processes);
309 (3) PYD outcomes can be attained if a life skills program focus (involving life skill
310 building activities and transfer activities) is in place (i.e., through explicit processes)
311 and in the presence of a PYD climate; (4) The combined effects of a PYD climate and
312 a life skills focus will produce more PYD outcomes than a PYD climate alone, and; (5)
313 Gaining PYD outcomes in and through sport will facilitate transfer and enable youth to
314 thrive and contribute to their communities. The theory offers an important extension
315 and contribution to the literature, with its attempt to make a clear distinction between
316 the influence of implicit processes (i.e., intentional yet natural activities and interactions
317 that foster development) and the value of explicit life skill programs in supplementing
318 parent (coach and peer) initiated PYD climates (see Bean et al., 2018; Gould & Carson,
319 2008; Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Turnnidge, Côté, & Hancock, 2014 for reviews).

320 Although each of these latter models implicate parents (alongside coaches and
321 peers) in creating an appropriate social environment for promoting and reinforcing
322 psychosocial development, parents have actually received limited scientific attention in
323 the sport-based PYD literature. Specifically, in Holt and colleagues' (2017) meta-
324 synthesis only 9 (14%) of the 63 studies collected data from parents and very few of
325 these studies placed the parent as an active participant in their investigation (i.e.,

326 collected data on the parent's role-related behaviours and activities per se). The
327 majority of studies explored parents' perceptions of the benefits of sport and the role it
328 can play in their child's development (e.g., Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2009; Holt,
329 Kingsley, Tink, & Scherer, 2011; Light, 2010; Neely & Holt, 2014; Wiersma & Fifer,
330 2008) or their perceptions (alongside coaches and peers) of sport-based PYD program
331 quality (Hardcastle, Tye, Glassey, & Hagger, 2013; Hodge, Kanters, Forneris, Bocarro,
332 & Sayre-McCord, 2017; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2011).

333 Within many sport-based PYD intervention studies (including both implicit and
334 explicit development programs), the role of parents within the processes of
335 psychosocial development have been posited even when parents have not been part of
336 the intervention (see Camiré, Trudel, & Bernard, 2013; Hodge et al., 2017; Strachan,
337 Côté, & Deakin, 2011; Turnnidge, Vierimaa, & Côté, 2012). These studies position
338 parents as potential mechanisms for delivery and reinforcement in explicit PYD
339 programs particularly with regards to supporting key messages and facilitating life skill
340 transfer. For example, in one of the more targeted studies of the role of the family in a
341 sport-based life skills program, Hodge and colleagues (2017) found that parents used
342 specific events (e.g., car rides and dinnertime) as opportunities to recognise and
343 reinforce what children had learned and to ask how such insights could be applied
344 outside of the sporting context. Similarly, Neely and Holt (2014) highlighted how
345 parents seized upon 'teachable moments' around lessons learned through sport when
346 documenting the strategies they used to help facilitate **PYD**.

347 In conclusion, as Dorsch and Vierimaa (2017) surmised, although PYD
348 researchers have procured substantive knowledge on the pedagogical strategies and
349 activities enacted by model youth sport coaches to teach life skills (e.g., Camiré et al.,

350 2012; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007), much less is known about how sport
351 parents can facilitate psychosocial development as part of the youth sport experience.
352 This is largely due to (semi) structured parental involvement and intentional sport
353 parenting strategies (and importantly their impact) remaining absent from empirical
354 interventions.

355 **Addressing gaps in youth sport parenting research and practice**

356 From the outset of this article we have focused intentionally on young people's
357 right to high quality developmental experiences in and through sport, **a right that we**
358 **believe most, if not all, parents would endorse for their child's sporting experience.**
359 Such experiences are those that comprise positive 'in situ' psychological states and
360 social behaviour linked to the sport activity (e.g., recreational play, practice,
361 competition), and those that help to develop more enduring psychosocial attributes as
362 critical resources for adult life (Lerner et al., 2000). Our review of studies in more
363 traditional, organised youth sport suggests parents can influence children's experiences
364 through associations with motivational, cognitive, social, and affective responses.
365 However, the literature falls short of illustrating how parents can proactively and
366 intentionally contribute to their child's psychosocial development. Sport-based PYD
367 researchers have targeted psychosocial development in a range of settings and
368 populations (e.g., after-school, high school programs) through implicit and explicit
369 intervention processes (Bean et al., 2018; Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Turnnidge et al.,
370 2014), **yet parents remain 'peripheral' in these studies. Moreover, there is an absence**
371 **of research which has explicitly examined the impact that parents may have on the**
372 **effectiveness of psychosocial or life skill development interventions with young**
373 **athletes.**

374 The current **evidence base** presents opportunities in respect of research
375 questions that remain to be asked, and in more innovative applied research designs
376 incorporating parents. One justifiable question to consider is the degree to which
377 **coaches, organisations and governing bodies** should intentionally involve parents from
378 the outset **to facilitate** a youth sport **environment** and experience that prioritizes
379 children's psychosocial development (**both in and through sport**). We know from
380 research and personal experience as practitioners that parents **are often not** afforded this
381 opportunity, potentially limiting the benefits their child (and they) may gain from sport
382 participation. **Where an organisation's program focuses on sport skill or talent**
383 **development, coaches may be less inviting of parental involvement (Gould et al., 2008).**
384 Presently, as applied researchers **we are frustrated by** the underutilisation of parents as
385 a valuable resource to support coaches and other stakeholders for the betterment of
386 child-athletes. Interestingly, beyond Harwood and Swain (2002), we could not locate a
387 single, empirical intervention study where parents and coach(es) have intentionally
388 worked *in tandem* to influence or improve general or specific child-athlete psychosocial
389 factors. In addition, few studies exploring the processes and impact of parent-coach-
390 athlete relationships on athlete factors exist (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005; Smoll,
391 Cumming, & Smith, 2011), but none of these are intervention studies comprised of
392 empirical data from the athletes. From the position, therefore, of advancing more
393 proactive parental involvement to facilitate the development of their child, a number of
394 research avenues and designs emerge as clear opportunities.

395 **Raising parental awareness and facilitating opportunities to support**
396 **psychosocial development.** If one takes a humanistic perspective towards parents as
397 valued resources who are **well-intentioned** and capable of both learning from coaches

398 and offering insights into optimizing their child's experience, then it is important for
399 researchers to **raise parents' awareness of how** they can explicitly support their child's
400 psychosocial development **and facilitate opportunities for parents to engage in this**
401 **manner**. This may include intentionally educating or sensitising parents to the
402 psychosocial qualities and life skills that may be derived through sport (cf. Neely &
403 Holt, 2014), and gaining their perspective on how they can promote and support the
404 development of each attribute. **By encouraging sport support staff to work with parents**
405 **more proactively** to raise their awareness and facilitate opportunities for engagement,
406 we will also better understand any challenges they foresee in the implementation of
407 proposed strategies. Qualitative or mixed-methods research may afford scholars a
408 clearer insight into the prospect and feasibility of parents contributing to the
409 development of their child's psychosocial assets **in sport and across different settings**
410 (see Johnston, Harwood & Minniti, 2013).

411 **Improving coach education to facilitate parent-coach relationships.** We believe
412 that making parental involvement more **focused and targeted** towards facilitating
413 psychosocial development is largely dependent upon the philosophy of the coach or
414 organisation. In many respects, coaches are the 'gatekeepers' to a child-athlete
415 development program and our **experience** is that parents are often kept 'at arms length'
416 by coaches and National Governing Bodies. The limited study of the processes of
417 parents and coaches working together for the child-athlete is indicative evidence of this.
418 The **continual referral** to 'pushy', '**overinvolved**' and 'demanding' parents reflects a
419 **well-ingrained discourse** that still appears to irrationally dominate pockets of the youth
420 sport sector (Knight & Newport, 2017). Mindful of the implications of such negative
421 views, researchers could seek to better understand the landscape of coach education and

422 development in relation to a coach's understanding of the needs and skills of parents,
423 as well as the psychology of parent-coach relationships.

424 In reviewing the strategies employed by high school coaches to facilitate **PYD**
425 through sport, Camiré et al. (2012) noted that coaches developed a well-considered
426 coaching philosophy and presented it to parents and athletes to ensure everyone knew
427 the approach that the coach was going to take that year. Intentional planning of
428 developmental strategies into coaching activities and opportunities to practice life skills
429 in sport were also deliberate features. These coaches appeared educated to purposefully
430 offer the athlete **opportunities to facilitate their athletic/talent development** in tandem
431 with their psychosocial development (see Harwood & Johnston, 2016). **Integrating**
432 **parents within this process would therefore appear pertinent** and it is perhaps timely for
433 researchers to appraise how coach development, education, and qualification systems
434 prepare coaches (see Bean & Forneris, 2016) **to collaborate with parents to enhance**
435 **performance and psychosocial development**. Only by addressing how applied
436 researchers may influence coaches and coach development systems to inherently value
437 and enact a psychosocial approach (Bean & Forneris, 2016; Lacroix, Camiré, & Trudel,
438 2008; McAllister, Blinde & Weiss, 2000) will we 'open the door' for parents to **be fully**
439 **integrated into programs and recognised as valuable collaborators** (Strachan et al.,
440 2011).

441 **Collaborating with coaches through well designed interventions.** Research
442 indicates that the interactions parents have with others in youth sport contexts impacts
443 the child's experience (Gould, Pierce, Wright, Lauer, & Nalepa, 2016; Knight & Holt,
444 2013; Omli & LaVoi, 2011). However, little attention has been given to actually
445 understanding what underpins successful or effective coach-parent or parent-parent

446 relationships (Holt & Knight, 2014). As applied researchers, two of the most common
447 questions we are asked is how can coaches' work better with parents? And how can
448 parents develop better relationships with coaches? Yet there is a dearth of empirical
449 research that has explicitly examined relationship development and the subsequent
450 impact that improving these relationships might have on children's psychosocial
451 outcomes (Knight & Gould, 2016). Longitudinal, intervention designs serve as
452 promising mechanisms **to answer such questions**. For example, grounded in an elite
453 youth soccer academy, Harwood (2008) reported on the support roles of parents to
454 coaches and players in conjunction with a psychosocial coaching efficacy intervention.
455 The primary focus here was placed on educating and empowering coaches to more
456 explicitly integrate the psychosocial concepts of commitment, communication,
457 concentration, control, and confidence into soccer practice. Parents were sensitised to
458 the 5Cs in group workshops and supported the coaches in helping their sons to complete
459 training and match reflection journals focused on demonstrations of the 5Cs in soccer.
460 Findings over the three-month intervention supported improvements in coaching
461 efficacy to integrate the 5Cs as well as perceived developments in the squad. In
462 qualitative follow-up interviews, parents noted the value and perceived impacts of the
463 work, but no data on parent practices or behaviour was gathered.

464 The future direction here lies in attention to more sophisticated and novel designs.
465 Applied researchers and practitioners should look to incorporate parents more fully in
466 the psychosocial education and delivery process and seek to observe and examine the
467 combined effects of parent education, working in parallel with the coach / coach
468 education, on indices of psychosocial development in the athlete. Opportunities for
469 parent-coach collaborations exist for team and individual sports, and it would be

470 interesting to generate knowledge on different sport types and cultures in terms of
471 successful pedagogical strategies and challenges encountered.

472 **Working on the “right” assets at the right time.** A final, more advanced
473 consideration for applied researchers working in this field of youth sport is to achieve
474 a more detailed understanding of when and how parental involvement may most impact
475 on an athlete’s developmental assets. It is recognised that there are certain
476 developmental stages where parental influence upon the child is more salient (e.g.,
477 Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). However, our scientific appreciation of questions such
478 as: ‘Do mothers versus fathers have greater impact on helping adolescent daughter-
479 athletes to master their emotions?’; ‘At what age should parents encourage greater
480 ownership, organisational, and decision-making skills?’, or ‘Which life skills
481 introduced to adolescent athletes are particularly easy for parents to reinforce, and
482 which are most difficult?’ is empirically limited. It may be that parental influences
483 through facilitating child input, role modelling, feedback, support, and ‘teachable
484 moments’ are less impactful and salient than the parallel roles of coaches or peers at
485 different ages. However, we need data to arrive at any evidence-based conclusions.

486 **The Next 50 Years: Challenging Systems and Improving Policies**

487 **Acknowledging the 50 years of FEPSAC as the leading body in European Sport**
488 **and Exercise Psychology, it is fitting to provide some concluding remarks that reflect a**
489 **vision of what progressive research should be striving to achieve for incoming**
490 **generations.** Improving the study of parental involvement and, by definition, the
491 experience and development of young athletes means urging scholars towards research
492 initiatives that will raise the profile of parents within the fulfilment of youth sport
493 developmental goals. **This can involve** efforts to inform the policies and practice of

494 youth sport federations or governing bodies to more skilfully empower parents,
495 recognising that organizations often require or request guidance regarding how to best
496 integrate research into practice (Holt et al., 2018). To achieve this, researchers must
497 look beyond knowledge acquisition and consider knowledge translation and
498 dissemination when designing research studies to narrow the research-to-practice gap
499 and ensure findings make more of a contribution to practice in youth sport settings (see
500 Gould, 2016).

501 Our four priority areas of research conceptually challenge the functioning of
502 systems in which parents and athletes are stakeholders. Drawing from
503 Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological theory, it is clear that much of our research on
504 sport parents has existed within the ecological *microsystem* – the ecological niche or
505 context that is closest to directly influencing the child. However, microsystems
506 comprising coaching or parental attitudes and behaviour are influenced by a series of
507 more distal outer systems or contexts (see Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008)
508 including *mesosystems* and *exosystems* (e.g., restrictions on parental involvement due
509 to work pressures/culture; how a coach is evaluated in his/her job environment by an
510 employer; how parents are perceived by coaches and administrators within different
511 clubs and sports organisations; the coach education and qualification framework of a
512 national governing body; traditions regarding parental involvement). Notably, the
513 wider social, cultural, and political context within which these inner environments
514 operate is known as a *macrosystem* and this system sets the aims, operating standards,
515 and measures of effectiveness. Consequently, perhaps the most effective manner
516 through which we might see changes in our practices relating to sport parents is if a
517 change occurs within the macrosystem. For example, if governments and their funded

518 national sport federations adopted a stronger political stance on the duty of care,
519 psychosocial development, and well-being of young athletes (e.g., as requested by
520 DCMS, 2016), the criteria against which sport programs and coaches are judged would
521 start to change. Ideally this would translate into improved coach education, more
522 holistic philosophies, and a clearer parental engagement and empowerment strategy in
523 clubs and youth sport settings to ensure that all individuals within an athletes'
524 microsystem could successfully, effectively, and appropriately contribute to athletes'
525 psychosocial development and wellbeing. Such a chain of conditions and consequences
526 aligns with Holt and colleagues (2017) model – beginning with the most distal
527 ecological system.

528 With the ideal of macrosystem change in mind, we believe that researchers can
529 employ stronger designs in consideration of Bronfenbrenner's model that offer better
530 data on what improvements in child development are possible through youth sport with
531 more proactive parental engagement. Recent studies have illustrated the value of
532 delivering intentional group-based or online sport parent interventions (i.e., Dorsch,
533 King, Dunn, Osai, & Tulane, 2017; Thrower, Harwood, & Spray, 2018) through
534 improvements in parental confidence, task-orientated parent-child communication,
535 support, and warmth. However, although such initial findings are important in the
536 context of relational factors that underpin a PYD climate (Holt et al., 2017),
537 interventions with parents targeting specific 'in situ' (e.g., enjoyment, reduced anxiety,
538 focus) and long-term child developmental outcomes (e.g., enhanced confidence,
539 emotional regulation and coping skills, communication skills, self-awareness,
540 leadership) are necessary. Applied researchers interested in this area are encouraged to
541 draw upon the well-established, mainstream parent education and training literature

542 base (e.g., Breitenstein, Gross, & Christophersen, 2014; Kaminski, Valle, Filene, &
543 Boyle, 2008).

544 A diversity of research designs may serve as pertinent mechanisms for capturing
545 how more empowered parents can exert their capabilities in engaging with coaches and
546 the youth sport community in best practices to help their child's developmental growth
547 and overall experiences in and through sport. Longitudinal mixed methods approaches
548 with attention to education, relationship development, support, and reinforcement
549 practices, as well as targeted organisational and club change are perhaps most exciting
550 as they may combine intervention, observation, and participant reflection with multiple
551 stakeholders (e.g., parents, coaches, athletes, other parents, peers). We recognise that
552 such research may be time consuming and not without organisational, political and
553 cultural barriers (see Dorsch et al., in press). Nevertheless, the last 25 years of research
554 in sport psychology is characterised more by studies '*of parents*' opposed to '*with*
555 '*parents*'; it is timely that we more closely examine what parents are capable of as
556 opposed to studying them as incidental consumers and 'influencers' in environments
557 that can purposely limit their engagement with the research process and subsequent
558 practice.

559 In conclusion, we have adopted a vantage point in this **commemorative** article
560 that intentionally critiques and questions the health of sport parent research in terms of
561 its scientific contribution to the developmental goals of sport participation for young
562 people. In the United Kingdom, we are presently in the midst of a political discourse
563 characterised by cultural worries over a lack of duty of care, safeguarding, athlete
564 mental health, and inappropriate environments for young people involved in sport
565 (Knight, Harwood, & Gould, 2017). Such environments may foster delays and deficits

566 in life skills as opposed to progression, and may not be unique to the UK. We believe
567 that parents are more than capable, especially when equipped with the right support
568 from others in the youth sport environment to ensure more positive developmental
569 outcomes and sustained participation in youth sport, yet research has not examined the
570 facets of this proposition fully. We trust that researchers will engage the challenges
571 presented here.

572

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