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Parenting experiences in elite youth football: a phenomenological study

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Parenting Experiences in Elite Youth Football: A Phenomenological Study

Abstract

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of parents of elite specializing stage youth footballers.

Method: A descriptive phenomenological approach guided the study design. Data from interviews with five mothers and five fathers of youth players registered to English football academies were analysed using descriptive phenomenological analysis (Giorgi, 2009).

Findings: Three essences characterized the phenomenon of being a parent of an elite youth footballer: parent socialization into elite youth football culture; enhanced parental identity; and increased parental responsibility. Parents' socialization into the football academy culture was facilitated by their interaction with coaches and parent peers, highlighting the social nature of parenting. Being the parent of a child identified as talented meant that parents experienced enhanced status and a heightened responsibility to facilitate his development.

Although parents were compelled to support their son in football, their instinct to protect their child meant they experienced uncertainty regarding the commitment required to play at an academy, given the potential for negative consequences. Together, these findings illustrate that parents experienced a transition as their son progressed into the specialization stage of football. We postulate that formal recognition of a child as talented contributed to this transition, and that knowledge of sport and perception of the parent-child relationship shaped how parents adapted.

Conclusions: This study provides a new way of understanding the psychological phenomena of parenting in elite youth football. Implications for practitioners working with parents in sport are provided.

Key words: Parents, youth sport, soccer, qualitative, socialization, career transition.

26 **Parenting Experiences in Elite Youth Football: A Phenomenological Study**

27 The sport parenting literature to date has been dominated by research that has sought
28 to identify the “optimal” behaviours for parents that if adopted will result in positive child
29 outcomes such as higher enjoyment, reduced anxiety and successful progression in sport (e.g.
30 Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Bois, Lalanne & Delforge, 2009; O’Rourke, Smith, Smoll &
31 Cumming, 2011; Wuerth, Lee & Alfermann, 2004). A focus on parental behaviours has made
32 an important contribution to understanding the role of parents in youth sport, but has often
33 overlooked the social and cultural context in which these behaviours occur.

34 The influence of contextual factors on parents’ behaviours in sport has previously
35 been identified. For example, Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough (2009) illustrated that parents’
36 behaviour, cognition and affect changed in response to their child’s participation in sport,
37 through an interactive process involving the agency of the parent, the influence of the child
38 and the social context. The authors proposed that further research into how these features
39 interact, and specifically parents’ responsiveness to their child and the influence of the sport
40 setting, is required to enhance theoretical understanding of parents’ socialization experiences
41 in sport.

42 Qualitative methods are particularly suited to exploring the experiences of parents and
43 allow for the personal and contextual aspects of a phenomenon to be examined. However,
44 only a limited number of studies have thus far investigated parental experiences in sport,
45 meaning parents’ voices in research are currently underrepresented. As Knight and Holt
46 (2013) note, although it is important not to discount children’s experiences, understanding
47 how parents interpret and make sense of their child’s sport participation can identify ways in
48 which parents’ experiences can be enhanced. For example, in-depth descriptions of how a
49 parent experiences their role can encourage coaches and practitioners to empathize with the
50 demands of being a sport parent (Harwood, Drew & Knight, 2010; Harwood & Knight,

51 2009a, 2009b). Furthermore, Wiersma and Fifer (2008) recommended that theoretical links
52 between parent and child behaviours should be supplemented with research that seeks to
53 understand why or how parents adopt certain behaviours. Therefore, the purpose of the
54 present study was to explore the experiences of parents in elite youth football.

55 **Parental Experiences in Youth Sport**

56 In one of the few studies that cite giving parents a voice in the purpose of their
57 research, Wiersma and Fifer (2008) held focus group interviews to understand parental
58 involvement in youth sport from the parent's perspective. Parents described the satisfaction
59 they gained from the increased opportunity to interact with their child and the vicarious
60 experience of observing their child learning, enjoying, and being successful in sport. The
61 difficulties parents faced included providing effective support for their child in challenging
62 situations (such as dealing with injury or a lack of motivation) and helping young athletes
63 cope with the demands of their sport. This study highlighted how children can influence
64 parents' experiences in sport; a finding which has been supported by Knight and Holt (2013),
65 who identified that children's performances, on-court behaviours and emotional reactions to
66 matches affected parents' experiences of watching junior tennis tournaments, and were in fact
67 a source of stress for some parents (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b). These exploratory
68 studies point toward the significance of parent-child interactions in sport settings, but did not
69 explicitly examine parents' experiences of this relationship within the scope of their research.

70 Dorsch et al. (2009) described the parent-child relationship as fluid and dynamic,
71 because it can be enhanced from being in the sport environment, but also encounter friction.
72 Frequent or unresolved conflict between parents and young athletes can lead to strained
73 relationships and negative consequences in later years, such as perceived parental pressure
74 and conditional support (Lauer, Gould, Roman & Pierce, 2010a). Therefore, a better
75 understanding of parent-child relationships can help to identify ways to facilitate positive

76 experiences for all those involved. However, parent's experience of interaction and their
77 relationship with children in sport settings has to date received limited attention.

78 Watching a child participate in a sport event can be an emotional experience for
79 parents, increasingly so as parents invest more in their child's sport over time (Dorsch et al.,
80 2009). Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, and Wall (2008) observed that parents' emotions at
81 youth soccer matches were intensified by contextual factors including crowd segregation,
82 sideline disputes and the game situation, which in turn influenced the nature of their sideline
83 comments. Similarly, from an analysis of parents' accounts of "a time when you became
84 angry during a sport event that your child was participating in", Omlil and LaVoi (2012)
85 highlighted that parents (of athletes aged 5 to 19 years) experienced anger in situations when
86 behaviours of the coach, referee, athlete or other parents were perceived to be unjust,
87 uncaring or incompetent. These studies suggest that interaction with significant others and
88 situational triggers can influence parents' behaviour and emotions when watching their child
89 perform.

90 Moreover, the characteristics of the sport context can contribute to parents'
91 experience of stress. Parents of youth football and tennis players in the specializing and
92 investment stages of sport (Côté, 1999) described encountering organizational stressors such
93 as selection policies, competition formats and heavy time and financial demands (Harwood et
94 al., 2010; Harwood & Knight, 2009a). In contrast to grassroots sport, where the parent and
95 coach role may commonly overlap (Dorsch et al., 2009; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008), parents in
96 elite sport settings also experienced stress from a perceived lack of feedback, communication
97 and respect from coaches (Harwood et al., 2010; Harwood & Knight, 2009a). This illustrates
98 how parents' relationships with coaches can change as children progress in sport, and
99 demonstrates the need to understand parental experiences within specific cultures, given each
100 sport's uniqueness (Dorsch et al., 2009; Lauer et al., 2010a; Lauer, Gould, Roman & Pierce,

101 2010b).

102 Dorsch et al. (2009) recommended that future parenting research include the
103 community sport context within its focus. Although studies have highlighted contextual
104 influences on parents' experience of watching their child perform in competition (e.g. Holt et
105 al., 2008; Omli & LaVoi, 2012) and of stress (Harwood et al., 2010; Harwood & Knight,
106 2009a), a broader investigation of the influence of the sport setting on parents' experiences
107 presents a gap in the literature.

108 In order to address the limitations of the existing literature, and enhance
109 understanding of the influence of the social and cultural context on parenting in youth sport, a
110 phenomenological approach was employed in this study. Phenomenology rejects the subject-
111 object dualism that underpins traditional positivist and post-positivist research, and instead
112 seeks to explore experience and how the world appears to people through a focus on the
113 intentional relationship between a person's consciousness and the object to which it is
114 directed (Giorgi, 2009). In doing so, phenomenology places social interaction and the cultural
115 context at the heart of the research endeavour. Accordingly, this research aims to explore how
116 parental experiences are shaped by the personal, social and cultural context of elite youth
117 football.

118 **Methodology and Methods**

119 **The Sport Context**

120 The youth football talent development system in England is managed by a network of
121 professional football clubs, which offer intensive training and competition programmes to
122 male players aged 8 to 18 years who are identified as talented. These elite players will attend
123 a football academy; a training environment which aims to produce players for the
124 professional game (The Premier League Elite Player Performance Plan, 2011). Parents of
125 players in the initial phase of the specializing stage (aged 8 to 11 years; as defined in

126 Harwood et al., 2010) help players to manage the transition from grassroots to elite academy
127 level football, and are highly involved through the considerable weekly training and
128 competition commitment that academies demand. Players are expected to train between five
129 and eight hours per week, typically structured over two weekday evenings and both weekend
130 mornings (The Premier League Elite Player Performance Plan, 2011). As players can live up
131 to a maximum of one hour travel time from the football club, parents are responsible for
132 transporting their child to training and matches. Harwood et al. (2010) identified a range of
133 stressors that specializing stage parents in football described experiencing, arising from
134 academy expectations, practices and communication. Parents struggled to accept academy
135 practices which prioritized player development over winning, and felt that they received
136 inadequate feedback on their child's progress and limited appreciation of their role from
137 coaches. Given the significance of the transition to academy football for parents and players,
138 and the potential for parents to experience stress, the present study explored the experiences
139 of mothers and fathers of specializing stage footballers.

140 **Participants**

141 Parents of boys registered to an elite football academy aged between 8 and 11 were
142 recruited from three English professional football clubs. Five mothers and five fathers aged
143 between 38 and 56 participated in the research ($M = 43.8$). Three of the mothers were single-
144 parents; all other participants were in two-parent families. Parents described their ethnicity as
145 White British ($n = 8$), Black British ($n = 1$) and Spanish Bengali ($n = 1$). Parents had between
146 two and four years experience of their son playing at a professional football club academy.
147 Further demographic details can be found in the Supplementary Material.

148 **Research Design and Philosophical Assumptions**

149 A descriptive (or empirical) phenomenological research design was followed in this
150 study; a branch of phenomenology developed by Giorgi (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi & Giorgi,

151 2008a, 2008b). Rooted in the original philosophy by Husserl who called for ‘a return to
152 things themselves’, descriptive phenomenology seeks to provide rich, textured descriptions of
153 phenomena, to understand more about how the world is perceived and what it means to
154 people. Using this approach, we set out to describe participants’ lived-experiences (meaning
155 existence as it is experienced through the intentional relationship between a person’s
156 consciousness and phenomena) using first-person accounts. However we make no claims as
157 to whether these are a ‘true’ reflection of experience, adopting instead a relativist
158 epistemological position that assumes knowledge is constructed. This study commits to the
159 multiple and constructed nature of reality and assumes peoples’ experiences, and the
160 meanings people attach to those experiences, are individually interpreted and shaped by their
161 social, cultural and historical backgrounds.

162 **Methods**

163 To become familiar with academy context, the first author arranged ten visits to one
164 academy to talk to parents and coaches, and observe training sessions and match days. During
165 the visits, which were typically for two hours, the first author sat with parents in the cafeteria
166 area, engaging in informal conversations, and joined parents to watch players train or
167 compete from the side line. The role of an “observer as participant” was adopted, where the
168 researcher primarily observes without being directly involved, but participates in the setting
169 through their interaction with others (Gold, 1958). Observations were recorded in a research
170 diary and later used as a tool to reflect on any pre-conceptions that had formed as a result of
171 exposure to the setting.

172 Ethical approval was obtained from the university’s ethics committee and all
173 participants gave informed consent. Following initial information meetings held at the three
174 academies, parents interested in being involved were asked to contact the first author.

175 Selection was then guided by maximum variation sampling. Variation between participants is

176 beneficial in descriptive phenomenological work, as aspects of an experience that are
177 common to a group of people and those which are unique to individuals can be highlighted.
178 Accordingly, mothers and fathers, one and two-parent families and parents from the three
179 different academies were sampled, enabling a range of parental experiences to be captured.

180 Semi-structured phenomenological interviews were held with individual parents over
181 a three-month period. The purpose of a phenomenological interview is to gather “as complete
182 a description as possible of the experience that a participant has lived through” (Giorgi,
183 2009). In designing the interview schedule (see Supplementary Material), care was taken to
184 ensure the questions were open rather than directive, so to encourage the participants to
185 present their experience as it was relevant to them. Questions such as “can you describe a
186 typical week for you?”, “what is your role as a parent on match days?” and “what does being
187 a parent of a young footballer mean to you?” guided discussion, and probes were used to
188 encourage participants to provide more detailed descriptions. Participants were also able to
189 lead and shift the conversation, which meant that individuals could introduce topics that were
190 meaningful to them beyond those discussed through the interview guide. Pilot interviews
191 were held with three parents of youth footballers to trial the questions and technique.

192 Parents were interviewed once, by the first author. Interviews lasted between 68 and
193 106 minutes ($M = 85$) and were held at academy training grounds, parents’ houses and the
194 university. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the first author. O’Connell and
195 Kowal (1999) recommend that a transcription system should match the purpose for which it
196 is required, and that only those elements of interviews that will be analysed need to be
197 transcribed. Therefore, all verbal talk was transcribed verbatim into a play-script format. To
198 provide confidentiality to participants, culturally appropriate pseudonyms were chosen for
199 each parent and for any football club or person mentioned by name in the interviews.

200 **Data Analysis**

201 The analysis followed the steps outlined in Giorgi's (2009) descriptive
202 phenomenological approach, and employed the concepts of bracketing, reduction and a
203 search for essences. Throughout the research process, bracketing was used to set aside the
204 natural attitude (the everyday view and taken for granted assumptions about the world) and
205 remain open to things as they appeared. This entailed the first author being aware of, and
206 aiming to put aside as much as possible, presuppositions of scientific theories, knowledge and
207 explanations, and her personal views and experiences (Ashworth, 1996). Performing the
208 reduction enabled the first author to conduct analysis from within an open phenomenological
209 attitude, by staying meticulously close to data, treating all data with equal significance and
210 ensuring that participants' descriptions were still recognizable following any interpretation.

211 Interview transcripts were read and re-read to get a sense of the overall meaning of
212 participants' descriptions. The data was then attended to with a broad psychological lens and
213 "sensitivity to the implications of the data for the phenomenon being researched" (Giorgi,
214 2009 p.128). Next, meaning units were established, by marking the transcript each time the
215 researcher interpreted that a change in psychological meaning occurred, to help make the
216 lengthy descriptions more manageable. No data was omitted from this process in order to
217 avoid privileging some over others. An analysis matrix was completed for each participant to
218 make sense of the data and provide a trail of how meaning units were identified for the
219 second author. Each meaning unit was described in more neutral language so that by lifting
220 the data from the situation-specific details, the psychological significance could be clarified.
221 Units were then transformed into language representing the psychological meaning of the
222 data in order to "render the implicit explicit" (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008b p. 45). No explanations
223 for meanings were offered at this stage as the researcher sought to remain close to the
224 experience as the participants described it. An example analysis matrix is provided in the
225 Supplementary Material.

226 Each participant's fully transformed description of experience was analysed and
227 interpreted individually, before comparing to others to identify the essential, invariant
228 qualities of experience – or essences of the phenomenon, which “make a phenomenon what it
229 is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (van Manen, 1990, p.107).
230 Interview transcripts were explored further using the phenomenological technique of
231 imaginative variation (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). This involved actively considering
232 the data from different angles to identify essences which continued to have the same
233 psychological meaning, even when the context of the data was imagined to be different. For
234 example if the gender of a parent was imagined to be the opposite, did the meaning of the
235 experience change? Imagining variances in the data requires practice to fully exploit the
236 interpretative benefits; however the first author strived to use the technique to the best of their
237 ability. Individual structure statements were composed describing the meanings of
238 participants' experiences which assisted in the final step; presenting the overall general
239 structure and essences of the experience of being a parent of an elite specializing stage
240 footballer.

241 **Enhancing Research Quality**

242 Following a relativist approach to judging qualitative research, we used the
243 characteristics of sensitivity to context, reflexivity, rigor and coherence to enhance the quality
244 of our research (Sparkes & Smith, 2009; Tracy, 2010; Yardley, 2000). To achieve sensitivity
245 to the social and cultural context of academies, the first author spent time in the field,
246 observing participants, to become familiar with the day-to-day activities of an academy, the
247 idiosyncratic language of football, and the relationships between people within the setting. To
248 enhance reflexivity, the first author participated in a bracketing interview, conducted by a
249 colleague not involved in the research project itself but with experience of qualitative
250 investigations. The purpose of the 60 minute interview was to reveal any underlying biases or

251 opinions that could potentially influence the data collection and analysis process. Rather than
252 aim to remove these influences from the research process, the first author was able to
253 consciously check that these underlying suppositions were not directing the interviews or the
254 analysis in a particular direction. A research diary was also kept for the duration of the
255 project to record reactions to the interviews, reflections on the data analysis process and
256 initial interpretations. Many diary entries described ‘gut-instincts’ to the data being
257 transcribed or analysed. To assist in the bracketing process, these initial thoughts were set
258 aside and analysed interview transcripts were re-read to see if any alternative interpretations
259 could be formed.

260 Furthermore, the individual descriptions of participants’ experiences and the
261 psychological interpretations, as well as emerging themes and the structure of essences were
262 shared with the second author. Experienced in working in football as an applied sport
263 psychologist, parent/coach educator and researcher, the second author strengthened the
264 analysis process by offering additional and sometimes alternative meanings to the
265 descriptions of parents’ lived-experiences. Following guidance for evaluating
266 phenomenological projects (Cresswell, 2007; Norlyk & Harder, 2010) we have attempted to
267 articulate an understanding of the key theoretical tenets of phenomenological psychology and
268 how they have been implemented. Through doing so, it is hoped the reader can assess
269 whether this study achieves coherence; a meaningful fit between the research question,
270 methodology, analysis and interpretation of findings (Tracy, 2010; Yardley, 2000).

271 **Findings and Discussion**

272 From our interpretations, we suggest that the experience of being a parent of an elite
273 youth footballer constituted three essential features; parent socialization into the elite youth
274 football culture, enhanced parental identity and increased parental responsibility. Though the
275 essences (and the subthemes which support them) characterize the phenomena, there were

276 individual variations in the psychological meanings that parents attached to their experiences,
277 which are also outlined in order to give as full a description possible. In this sense, however,
278 it is perhaps more appropriate to view the findings as expressions of the nature of existence
279 rather than essential structures of being.

280 **Parent Socialization into Elite Youth Football Culture**

281 Jane: It's a big transition (.) For him and for me¹.

282 The parents in this study described the process of adjusting to the different social
283 norms and behavioural expectations associated with the academy football culture. The
284 demands on players to attend a higher amount of training meant that parents' overall
285 commitment to football increased. They were required to invest significant time and money,
286 and organize working hours, childcare and transport to enable their sons to play at an
287 academy. As a result, parents described their decision to support their son's football as "a life
288 choice for me" or "it's like my hobby now". However, their involvement in coaching and
289 matches decreased, as the professional status of the coaches in an academy emphasized that
290 parents should "let the coaches coach". This meant parents were expected to encourage but
291 not instruct players, remain quiet during matches and refrain from questioning coaching
292 decisions. Observing other parents reinforced that giving instructions from the sideline was
293 not an acceptable way of behaving and that parents would "look silly if you did". These
294 norms for sideline behaviours restricted parents from performing parenting in the way they
295 had previously at grassroots level. By conforming to new rules, parents' movement was
296 limited to certain spectator areas and their capacity to comment or gesture minimized. Before,
297 football had been a setting where parents could enact involved parenting, as one mother
298 reflected:

299 Jane: You go to those [grassroots] matches and, if the boys want to come over and

¹ Transcription notation: (.) indicates a pause; - indicates cut-off speech or self-interruption

300 have their shoe laces tied up they could run over and do that, and if you had the drink
301 they could come over to you. Here it's, no. Your job is to stand on that sideline and
302 not talk to the boys or interfere with the boys. Which is absolutely right (.) but it is
303 still a loss of control so (.) a bit difficult.

304 Limiting parenting to certain spaces meant parents experienced a diminished sense of agency
305 and, at times, frustration from not being able to give their son the technical advice they
306 believed would help him be successful.

307 Dorsch et al. (2009) has previously identified the community sport context as a
308 potential moderator of parent socialization into sport. Our findings suggest that it is
309 interaction with others within the sporting environment that can socialize parents into
310 particular roles. This essence reflects a central concept of phenomenology, that all experience
311 is relational (e.g. Husserl, 1931; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In academies, parents learnt about
312 what constituted appropriate behaviours in this setting through their interaction with coaches
313 and other parents, which facilitated parents' socialization into the elite football culture.
314 Although, how parents interpreted and responded to these expectations varied, and is
315 described below.

316 **Negotiating power and responsibility with coaches.** Coaches reinforced that player
317 development was their sole responsibility by limiting communication to parents once players
318 were signed to a club and offering less feedback on children's performances. Consequently,
319 approaching coaches to ask questions outside of formal appraisal meetings was construed as
320 “interfering” by parents. Parents had to adjust to coaches having responsibility for their son's
321 football development, but welcomed or resisted this transference of power to different
322 extents. Some parents were happy to relinquish responsibility as they saw coaches as experts,
323 trusted them and felt they were good role models for their son.

324 Peter: If I could sign a form to say you know, you have, for the hour and a half he's

325 here, three times a week, you have complete control over whatever you do with that
326 lad in terms of his coaching, discipline, everything else. I'd sign it and, you know, I
327 just don't think that parents should interfere. I think they should just leave it.

328 Parents began to experience pressure to comply with coach requests such as attending
329 extra training sessions during school holidays. Although these were optional, they felt that
330 non-attendance would be negatively perceived by coaches. At times, parents acquiesced to
331 the demands placed on players to gain approval from coaches and avoid jeopardizing their
332 son's place in the squad. However, other parents found letting go of their previous
333 involvement more difficult.

334 Andy: I think that is one of the hardest things you have to come to terms with when
335 you bring them here is that, all the things you believed in, and I'm saying this from
336 someone who knows about football is that, you've done your bit. And it's now for
337 somebody else to do it and, they've got to polish a rough diamond. And you probably
338 won't take any- you won't get any of the credit for quite a bit of the formative stuff.

339 You know, because although he's here on his own ability, if I'd have let him play the
340 PlayStation and done nothing with him then he wouldn't be here."

341 And some even challenged the coaches' role in player development. For example one father
342 rejected the authority of the academy staff, asserting his control of the situation by
343 maintaining that he – not the coaches – would decide when his son would leave the academy.

344 James: I just think people once they sign a contract think they're obliged. You know
345 they have to- No you don't! You have a choice you can always walk out.

346 Nicola: You do have a choice yeah.

347 James: Now one parent this year who walked out, they want compensation for him.
348 So they try and make it difficult for you. But, if I'm going, we can go at any time we
349 want, Academy A can't stand in my way. Because the power is with us. They make

350 you believe they've got the power. They don't! We can just say we stop, we don't
351 want to do it no more.

352 Parents who felt uneasy about the transference of responsibility to coaches described
353 how they were in the process of learning to trust the coaches' methods of developing players.
354 Often, it was fathers who had previous experience of coaching youth football who described
355 struggling to accept the coach's role the most and were more likely to question decisions.
356 Over time parents became more accepting of coaching practices, however some felt the
357 reduction in communication once players were signed prolonged this adjustment.

358 This finding is supported by Kerr and Stirling (2012) who found that relinquishing
359 control and being asked to trust coaches formed an early phase in parents' socialization into
360 elite youth sport culture. In youth football, parents accepted or contested the transference of
361 responsibility to coaches to different degrees, and our findings illustrate how parents can be
362 marginalized through a reduction in communication from coaches, a pressure to conform and
363 an increased sense of need for approval from coaches.

364 **Parent peer relationships.** Parents regularly interacted with other mothers and
365 fathers of youth footballers and these relationships performed several important functions.
366 Parents new to the academy setting were able to seek advice from peers whose sons had been
367 at the academy longer, as more experienced parents could explain what could be expected in
368 their first season, help interpret unfamiliar coaching practices and offer feedback on their
369 son's performances. Parents drew support from the friendships they made at academies as
370 other parents offered help with transport duties and an empathetic understanding of the stress
371 they experienced that friends outside of football could not provide. Yet the temporal nature of
372 these friendships was recognized, as parents anticipated that relationships would not continue
373 if their son no longer played at an academy.

374 Peter: I think that's one of the things that the parents probably fear a little bit –

375 because it is a nice atmosphere here and because you all get on – you knowing that
376 actually it's like a group of friends you're gonna lose.

377 Parent peers also provided a target for social comparison. Parents were judged
378 positively by others when they were realistic about their son's chances of becoming a
379 professional, knowledgeable about football development and seen not to push their sons. In
380 contrast, parents were compared less favourably when they expressed ambitions for their sons
381 to "make it", were seen to pressure their child to play, or were viewed as parents of less
382 talented players. Comparing themselves and their sons to others in an academy helped to
383 affirm parents' own identity as a realistic parent, who knew how best to support their son's
384 development.

385 James: You sort of get rated as a parent as well. If your kid's up there, you're one of
386 the good parents you know and one of the parents- honestly! Your, your kids down
387 here, you know you see the parents' body language, slinks a bit and you know (.) god
388 streuth yeah, it's pretty sad.

389 Phil: I think as parents you learn, erm, certainly you have to learn by your mistakes
390 along the way about maybe how you behave at the side of a pitch, how you behave in
391 the car. And I watch other parents and quite often I'll look at 'em and think 'crikey, I
392 can't believe that used to be me'.

393 Relationships with parent peers have been identified as a common feature of youth
394 sport parenting experiences and previous research has highlighted that parents valued the
395 support and social networking offered by peers, but could experience feelings of exclusion
396 when cliques form (Dorsch et al., 2009; Knight & Holt, 2013). The findings in our study
397 extend existing knowledge by describing how these relationships not only functioned as
398 supportive, but helped to socialize parents into the sport culture by providing advice in the
399 absence of information from the academy. In addition, peers were used by parents to evaluate

400 their own parenting effectiveness. This may in part explain Knight and Holt's (2013 p. 8)
401 finding that cliques could develop in youth tennis between "parents of the better players".

402 **Enhanced Parental Identity**

403 Parents felt that their child's identification as a talented footballer reflected positively
404 on their own identity as a parent. Many recounted how they were the first to recognize that
405 their son had potential in sport; a view that was reinforced when parents started to be
406 approached by professional club scouts and coaches. Players often received multiple offers to
407 join academies before committing to one club, and their football ability was praised highly in
408 the process. Having a child that was good at football meant that parents felt they had been
409 successful in parenting.

410 Sarah: I'm just really proud because I think umm (.) I've done it all myself and that's
411 because when I (.) I've been a single parent for a long time and it was me, I feel like it
412 was me that got Tyler involved in all of his football. Even though I'm not a football
413 person, I arranged the meeting, I got in touch with somebody and I was taking him-
414 his dad only takes him to his matches, he doesn't get involved with any of the
415 training. So I've sort of nurtured him and encouraged him and I feel as though I've
416 done a good job and it makes me proud. I'm proud of him and I'm proud of myself
417 because I've done it myself.

418 The more intensive schedule and greater emphasis on football in their lives enhanced
419 parents' relationships with their sons. The experience of being part of a professional club,
420 sharing a passion for football and travelling to and from training and matches together,
421 increased the sense of closeness in the relationship.

422 Tom: It is very interesting how the club in some ways intensifies the relationship with
423 your child. I suppose we're together so much, we travel so much, we talk so much,
424 we, and when we're not here, we're watching the first team. We even go to away

425 games. We're very tight.

426 Peter: He does really appreciate me taking him here and he can't thank me enough,
427 you know, all the time. So he does, so me and Joe really are close because of it.

428 Experiencing closeness with their son through football meant that parents shared in
429 his successes and failures. For example, parents experienced apprehension before coach
430 assessments and reflected glory from their child's achievements, often referring to "when we
431 got signed" or "when we played United". Coakley (2006) has suggested that the public,
432 measurable nature of youth sport means that the moral worth of parents can be symbolized
433 through their child's sporting success. Certainly, the parents in this study experienced
434 enhanced status from their child's selection to an academy. Consequently we propose that the
435 identification and labelling of young children as talented in sport amplifies the extent to
436 which parents' identity and personal worth are reflected in their children's achievements.

437 Parents had learnt that success in academies was measured not by matches won and
438 trophies awarded, but by individual effort and improvement. Often their child who was the
439 superstar in their local team, stood out far less in the academy. Eager to see him succeed in a
440 more challenging environment, their son's performance in football became increasingly more
441 important.

442 Phil: Because it's football it seems to be life or death, whereas everything else, you
443 know if I had a bad review here for football I'd probably be gutted. But if he had a
444 bad parents evening I'd probably just let it go over me head. And that's completely
445 wrong you know. But it's taken me time to learn that and understand that.

446 Andy: It's not the be all and end all . . . it just feels like that sometimes.

447 This connection to their son's sporting identity led some parents to anticipate experiencing
448 identity disruption if their child was deselected and no longer played at an academy.

449 Helen: There is immense pride that my children play for Academy B and Academy D.

450 But with that there comes a fear that if they didn't play at Academy B would you feel
451 that they had failed all of a sudden if they didn't get taken on, or they couldn't play at
452 Academy B and you had to say they played at their local club. And I think, if I'm
453 entirely honest, that might be an issue for me.

454 Transition out of elite sport that is sudden or involuntary can be an emotionally turbulent and
455 disruptive experience for athletes (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Wippert & Wippert, 2010). Our
456 findings suggest that parents may also experience identity loss following a child's unexpected
457 exit from sport, and highlights an area worthy of further investigation.

458 **Increased Parental Responsibility**

459 In addition to an enhanced identity, parents experienced an increased sense of
460 responsibility toward their son and drew on societal expectations for parenting to make sense
461 of this responsibility, adjusting their behaviours accordingly (in various ways, described
462 below). This was not, however, a straight forward adjustment, as although parents wanted to
463 help their sons succeed in football, they were also acutely aware of the potential for negative
464 consequences of playing in an elite academy environment. This inherent tension between
465 supporting and protecting their child meant that parents experienced uncertainty and at times,
466 interpreted the meaning of academy football differently.

467 **Duty to facilitate development.** Being the parent of a child recognized as talented in
468 sport meant that parents experienced a heightened sense of responsibility to facilitate their
469 son's development in football and help him realize his potential.

470 Hannah: I've stressed to Lucas (.) I, I do this for you, this is an investment, and I don't
471 mind doing this because if you have a talent it's my duty to kind of let you see if you
472 can do something with that talent. . . . I will do for him exactly what I'll do for my
473 daughter as well. If they have a talent, I will do everything I can for them to succeed
474 at what they enjoy in life or what they're good at in life.

475 Yet parents had to manage this additional responsibility in line with the expectation to be a
476 realistic football parent, which they learnt about through comparisons to their peers. This
477 meant negotiating a balance between supporting, but not pushing, their child to succeed.

478 In fulfilling this responsibility, parents often adjusted their own behaviours in
479 response to their child, such as waiting until their son was ready to discuss matches
480 afterwards and recognizing that certain technical feedback was better received by players if it
481 came from coaches. They were keen to follow dietary guidance for players provided by
482 sports nutritionists and closely monitored their child's mood to respond to his needs. Mothers
483 described placing their child's needs above their own; sacrificing their free time and personal
484 relationships in order to support their son's football commitments. This aligns with
485 Wolfenden and Holt's (2005) finding that mothers were happy to give up their social lives
486 and support their child's increasing tennis commitments, in order to ensure their child had
487 access to the best opportunities. However, when mothers lacked experience of football, they
488 experienced uncertainty over the degree to which they should be encouraging their son to
489 practice and focus more on the sport.

490 Helen: I think because I'm a Mum, I have a, I think I have a slightly different attitude.
491 If he was a girl playing netball, I think I would be a lot more pushy, umm because that
492 was my sport, and I think I'd know a lot more.

493 Conversely, fathers who had experience of playing or coaching football, explained that they
494 understood the standards required from players at different stages, would recognize whether
495 their son was achieving them and if not, provide instructions on how to improve. Holt et al.
496 (2008) previously demonstrated that knowledge and prior experience of sport affected
497 parents' verbal reactions to their child's performance. In youth football, fathers saw their
498 knowledge as enabling them to fulfil their parental responsibility – to help their child achieve
499 his potential.

500 These findings lend support to the emerging literature that has demonstrated the
501 reciprocal nature of the parent-child relationship, and that parents adjust their behaviours in
502 response to their child's temperament, performance and behaviour (e.g. Dorsch et al., 2009;
503 Holt et al., 2008; Knight & Holt, 2013). Developing this further, when parents in academies
504 found it difficult to read and understand their child's feelings, the intensity of the football
505 experience highlighted this shortcoming, as one father described upon learning that his son
506 was not enjoying football.

507 Phil: I felt it upset me more than it probably upset him in that somebody else has had
508 to tell me that your son's not enjoying it. And that was his granddad. My dad pulled
509 me to one side and said "do you know how unhappy your lad is?" and I've just been
510 on the crest of a wave thinking oh he's enjoying it and he's going to Academy X and
511 Academy Y, and I'm thinking he's loving it. But then when he's going to his
512 grandparents in the week he's saying "I don't like this and I don't like that". When I
513 found out about it I think you feel a bit (.) a bit of a failure to be honest as a dad that
514 you've not recognized it before. And upset that he's not been able to come to me.

515 This quote highlights how parents can feel they have failed in parenting when they do not
516 meet societal ideas of what constitutes "good parenting" – in this case, the expectation for
517 fathers to develop open and close relationships with their children (Dermott, 2003; Henwood
518 & Procter, 2003). The social construction of parenting and the influence this has on parent-
519 child relationships has received limited attention in sport psychology, despite authors such as
520 Coakley (2006) and Kay (2009) describing how societal expectations for parents can be lived
521 out in a sport context, and offers a potential direction for future research.

522 **Fulfilling responsibility but protecting child.** All parents wished to ensure that they
523 were giving their son the best chance of succeeding, as they recognized academies as offering
524 the best opportunity for players to improve and as part of the journey to becoming a

525 professional adult footballer. This perception compelled parents to continue to support their
526 son in football, to help him reach his full potential. However, if parents reflected that it was
527 unlikely that he would ever be offered a professional contract, their instinct to protect their
528 son meant they questioned whether the commitment required at such a young age to play at
529 an academy was worth it, given the potential for negative experiences. For example, players
530 had less time to socialize with friends outside of football and were often tired from late nights
531 travelling home after training.

532 Phil: We leave home at 4.00pm to beat the traffic and we usually get down here for
533 about 5:15pm, and it's dark when we leave, it's dark when we get home. He's asleep
534 for most of the journey home. We get in at 8:45pm. There's times when I've carried
535 him from the car straight to bed and I'm thinking 'what am I doing putting him
536 through this?' It's madness.

537 Players were also exposed to the potential disappointment of de-selection or "release"
538 from academy squads. Being released was seen as a constant threat to player's well-being and
539 future in football, as all parents had heard stories of other players and parents who had not
540 coped well with release, or had not expected it. Parents talked about academies as being cut-
541 throat, competitive and ruthless, where only the good enough survive. Consequently parents
542 were torn between the concern that the professional club environment was inappropriate for
543 young children and the perception that academies were the best place to develop players.

544 James: I'm really mixed and ambivalent on academies. You know, because I- I just
545 think it's too early. Telling a kid you're not good enough at nine or ten is unnecessary.
546 They don't need to face the sharp end of the world at that age, you know. It doesn't
547 need to be that at nine or ten. There's no place in the world for that. But if I took
548 Harry out and put him back in the youth team, he really won't have anyone to play
549 with, because the talent's diluted. If I leave him in here he's got to deal with the

550 pressures that come with this. So they've put you in this either or position, which is
551 poor.

552 By focusing instead on the meaning of academy football as an opportunity for their son to
553 play in fantastic facilities and learn skills such as discipline, respect and teamwork, parents
554 resolved to carry on taking their son to the academy as long as he was enjoying playing and
555 improving in football. In addition, to try and ensure their son remained realistic and kept
556 football in perspective, parents emphasized the importance of education and encouraged their
557 sons to take part in a variety of sports, recognizing that the numbers of players who would
558 ever become professionals were small.

559 James: I've gone and educated myself. I've looked at the numbers. I've looked at the
560 stats of how many make it and how many don't. So if I know that and I pull my kid
561 up and tell him all these lies about being a footballer, knowing that actual statistical
562 numbers, that would be a mistake on my part. So I've gotta keep him realistic.

563 Parents regulated the temptation to look ahead to their son's potential future in football by
564 trying to focus on being in the present and enjoying the experience for as long as it lasted,
565 downplaying the meaning of academy football as a potential route into the professional game.

566 Peter: If he can stay here until he's at least 14 and learn about life, being a footballer
567 then I'll be very happy. If he's beyond that then I'll be, I'll be ecstatic and that's how
568 I look at it because you can't (.) I don't think you can get too hung up about saying
569 well you gotta get to you're 16 because then you've got this and then you can have
570 that. I think you're setting yourself up for a big fall if you do that if I'm honest
571 because there's only a very small percentage that actually make it . . . I think, keep
572 your feet on the ground and just enjoy the experience while it's happening.

573 Uncertainty about a child's future in sport has been cited as a common stressor among
574 sport parents (Harwood et al., 2010; Harwood & Knight, 2009a). By reorienting towards the

575 present and their son's short-term enjoyment from football, parents suppressed their concerns
576 and resolved to help their son as long as he was progressing. This finding demonstrates how
577 parents coped with uncertainty and reflects the temporal dimension of being a parent of an
578 elite youth footballer, often lost in retrospective accounts.

579 **Conclusions**

580 **Phenomenological Interpretations**

581 Using a phenomenological approach as the theoretical lens for this research – which
582 differs from a traditional cognitive or behavioural view of psychology (Langdrige, 2007) –
583 has provided a new way of understanding the psychological phenomena of parenting in elite
584 youth football. The essences which together constituted parents' experiences: socialization
585 into the elite youth football culture; enhanced parental identity; and increased parental
586 responsibility, can be described in phenomenological terms as reflecting fundamental aspects
587 of lived-experience (Ashworth, 2003; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In particular: relationality (the
588 experience of social relations as lived); selfhood (what the phenomenon means for identity
589 and agency); embodiment (the role of the body in experiencing a phenomenon including
590 emotions); and temporality (the lived-sense of past, present and future).

591 The significance of relations with coaches and peers to parents' socialization
592 experiences and behaviours in this study illustrates the social nature of parenting. Yet current
593 theorizations of parental influence in sport do not account for social interaction in their
594 explanations. Fredricks and Eccles' (2004) model, used extensively to underpin sport
595 parenting research (e.g. Bhalla & Weiss, 2010; Bois et al., 2009; Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes
596 & Pennisi, 2008), identifies a number of social and cultural demographics that affect parental
597 influence, but does not recognize the influence of relationships or the sport environment. By
598 theoretically conceptualizing parenting as a social process and considering issues of
599 relationality alongside individual characteristics, a more complex understanding of parental

600 influence may be produced. In particular, the relationship and interaction between parents and
601 children, coaches and peers should be considered in theories which seek to account for
602 parental behaviours in sport.

603 Parents' relationship with their child was an essential feature of their experience, and
604 being part of the elite youth football culture shaped this relationship. Through their son's
605 selection to an academy, parents' identity was enhanced and became closely linked to his
606 football participation. Rather than seeing the self as residing within the individual,
607 phenomenology constructs identity as something which is developed through social
608 interaction. As Merleau-Ponty (1962, p.122) explains; "we are literally what others think of
609 us and what our world is". For the participants in this study, their identity as a parent was
610 formed through their relationship and interaction with their child in the football setting.

611 The embodied aspect of parenting has previously not been explored in sport contexts.
612 Our findings highlight how parents felt restricted when they were unable to perform
613 parenting in the same way they had at grassroots level, as the responsibility for player
614 development shifted to coaches. The tension between the embodied instinct to protect their
615 son from negative experiences, and the desire to ensure their child had access to the best
616 opportunities to develop and improve, meant parents experienced uncertainty. Following
617 Merleau-Ponty's perspective that "we perceive the world with our body" (1962, p.239) and
618 that "it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another" (1962, p.412), we can
619 view embodied parent-child relationships as a key feature of what it means to be a parent.
620 Exploring the implications of club policies which may restrict parents from parenting is an
621 important area for future research.

622 Finally, the temporal dimension of being a parent of an elite youth footballer was
623 reflected in how parents recognized the transient nature of their friendships with peers, and
624 how they coped with uncertainty about their child's future in football. By focusing on being

625 in the present and their son's short-term enjoyment from football, despite the temptation to
626 project to a possible future in which their son becomes a professional player, parents
627 suppressed their concerns. These findings provide insight into parents' experiences, often
628 overlooked in retrospective studies.

629 **Parent Transitions in Sport**

630 Together, the findings of this study suggest that parents experienced a transition as
631 their son progressed into the specialization stage of football. Much has been written
632 concerning young athlete's career transitions in sport and the changing roles and involvement
633 of parents across an athlete's sport career (e.g. Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Côté, 1999;
634 Lauer et al., 2010b), and yet parents' own adaptation to these transitions remains relatively
635 unexplored. In football, parents' transition into the specialization stage was associated with a
636 change in identity and an increased sense of responsibility to facilitate their son's
637 development. We postulate that formal recognition of a child as talented contributed to these
638 changes, and that knowledge and previous experience of sport, together with perception of
639 the parent-child relationship shaped how parents adapted. Further studies are required to
640 understand how transitions in sport are experienced by parents and what constrains or enables
641 parents to adapt successfully. For example, Lally and Kerr (2008) interviewed parents three
642 to five years after their daughters had retired from elite gymnastics, and described how
643 parents experienced a sense of being "lost" in their relationships with their daughter, their
644 partner and their parent peers following the end of their daughter's sporting career, and that
645 most parents were ill-prepared for the transition. Understanding how parental identity
646 changes following a child's exit from sport may therefore be of interest, given the potential
647 for identity disruption.

648 Our study also emphasizes the need to provide support and communication when
649 parents transition into elite youth sport environments. In the absence of clear guidance and

650 faced with an increased sense of responsibility for their son's development, the parents in our
651 study relied upon societal constructions of parenting and subjective comparisons to peers to
652 make decisions and judge whether they were parenting effectively. Informing parents about
653 player development pathways (including exit routes) and expected performance and practice
654 levels across different stages is essential. In sports where performance criteria are not clearly
655 defined, explaining how young athletes will be judged may help to reduce uncertainty around
656 children's future in sport. We would advise however that in elite settings, parents are
657 encouraged to measure their child's success in terms wider than just whether their child keeps
658 a place on a particular squad or team. The coach's role in this communication to parents is
659 imperative, although our findings question the extent to which coaches are aware of their role
660 in shaping the experiences of parents.

661 In consideration of the differences between the experiences of mothers and fathers,
662 we suggest that parents may benefit from more individualized advice and guidance. Fathers
663 experiencing difficulty adjusting to a reduction in responsibility for their child's football
664 development, or mothers with a lack of access to experiential knowledge of playing men's
665 football may require different forms of support. The latter need for support is particularly
666 pertinent given the number of single mothers in our sample. Other parents who can empathize
667 with the emotional experience of parenting in youth sport may be best placed to explain to
668 newer parents how they adapted to the different culture.

669 **Limitations**

670 The unique context of English youth football, where a professional contract is highly
671 coveted and academy squads are assessed regularly by coaches by performance standards that
672 are not clearly articulated to parents, means that caution should be taken with applying our
673 findings to other sports. Perhaps coach evaluations of children's performances would be less
674 important to parents in a sport where young athletes' progress can be tangibly measured

675 through grades or ranking points, although this system comes with its own challenges, such
676 as increasing the emphasis on winning (Knight & Holt, 2013). This study may also be limited
677 in that despite seeking variation in our sample, the participants all volunteered to take part in
678 interviews and may share common characteristics different to those parents who declined or
679 did not respond to research invitations. More research in different populations of parents of
680 elite youth footballers may help to further delineate the essences of experience. Finally, this
681 study did not seek to understand how individual variations in parental experience influenced
682 child outcomes. In order to comprehensively understand parental influence in sport,
683 children’s perceptions, interpretations and experiences of being parented must also not be
684 forgotten in research.

685 Phenomenological research in other contexts may further contribute to our
686 understanding of the complex nature of parent-child relationships in sport and encourage this
687 vital area of research to move beyond defining parents by a checklist of positive and negative
688 behaviours, and instead highlight how practitioners can understand parents and help them to
689 adjust to the demands of being a sport parent.

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