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## Stress in youth sport: a developmental investigation of tennis parents

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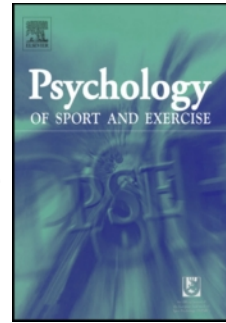
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Stress in youth sport: A developmental investigation of tennis parents

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Running Head: PARENTAL STRESS IN YOUTH SPORT

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1 Abstract

2 *Objective*

3 This study investigated the stage-specific stressors experienced by British tennis  
4 parents whose children were situated either in the sampling, specializing or investment stages  
5 of participation in the sport (Côté, 1999).

6 *Design and method*

7 A qualitative design was employed with semi-structured interviews conducted with  
8 twenty two British tennis parents; six parents representing each of the first two stages of  
9 sports participation and ten representing the investment stage. Data was analyzed through a  
10 process of inductive content analysis following the method proposed by Miles and Huberman  
11 (1994). Data matrices were developed for each category of parent to allow for the comparison  
12 of the data between themes.

13 *Results and conclusion*

14 Three general dimensions of parental stressor emerged: Organizational, Competitive  
15 and Developmental. Organizational stressors included demands related to finance, time,  
16 training and coaching, and governing body systems; competitive stressors related to behavior,  
17 performance and morality-related issues associated with their child's matches; and  
18 developmental stressors centered on educational issues, uncertainty of tennis transitions, and  
19 future decision making. While sampling stage parents encountered few developmental  
20 stressors compared to later stage parents, a range of competitive stressors were highly  
21 prominent. Organizational stressors were particularly foremost for specializing and  
22 investment stage parents. Implications are discussed with reference to further research into the  
23 parental stress process and to the importance of stage-specific parent education initiatives.

24

25 Key words: parent, tennis, stress, developmental, youth sport

26

1           Stress in youth sport: A developmental investigation of tennis parents

2

3           By the very nature of its participants, research into the domain of competitive youth  
4 sport focuses as much on the influential roles and behaviors of coaches, parents and peers as it  
5 does on the experiences and responses of the young athlete (e.g. Côtè & Hay, 2002). For  
6 example, when we consider the social psychological research on sport-parents, they are often  
7 portrayed in a more negative than positive light and through the lens of coaches and athletes'  
8 reported perceptions (see DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997; Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, &  
9 Pennisi, 2006, 2008; Hellstedt, 1990; Leff & Hoyle, 1995). Youth tennis is one sport  
10 subculture that tends to attract this research attention due to problematic parental behavior  
11 that is frequently reported in the media (see Lichfield, 2006). However, very few studies have  
12 investigated parental perceptions and experiences of youth sport from the parents' own  
13 perspectives (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn & Wall, 2008).

14           The recent prosecution of Christophe Fauviau, the father of two French teenage  
15 players found guilty of manslaughter after drugging his son's opponent, offers a reminder of  
16 the sometimes irrational human investment that parents may place in their child's sporting  
17 development. However, at a more rational level, it speaks to the taxing nature of youth sport  
18 and the stressors experienced by parents within their sport-parent roles (Hellstedt, 1987;  
19 Lazarus, 2006). Unfortunately, whilst the study of personal, competition, and organizational  
20 stressors faced by athletes and coaches has a well-developed literature base (e.g., Hanton,  
21 Fletcher & Coughlan, 2005; Giacobbi, Foore & Weinberg, 2004; Gould, Eklund & Jackson,  
22 1993; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Thelwell, Greenlees & Hutchings, 2008; Woodman & Hardy,  
23 2001), limited attention has been afforded to the range of stressors experienced by parents as  
24 they support their child through their stages of sport development (Côtè, 1999). Therein lies  
25 the precise focus for this current investigation.

1 Parents play a critical role in children's socialization to sport and throughout their  
2 sporting lives (Brustad, 1996; Wuerth, Lee & Alfermann, 2004). Fredricks and Eccles (2004)  
3 noted that parents fulfill three fundamental roles in their child's sport experience. These are  
4 firstly as 'provider' (e.g., of opportunities, finance, transport); as 'interpreter' of the sport  
5 experience for their child (e.g., emotionally reacting to competition in adaptive manners); and  
6 finally, as 'role model' (i.e., modeling the ideal attributes and behaviors in sport). The extent  
7 to which these roles are fulfilled by parents influences a child's beliefs and values and in turn,  
8 their motivated behaviors and performance.

9 Nevertheless, the extensive emotional, financial, and logistical support that parents  
10 prioritize for their children (see Baxter-Jones & Maffuli, 2003; Kirk et al., 1997a; Kirk et al.,  
11 1997b; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005) may come at a cost with respect to the stress that they  
12 experience. Indeed, like Fauviau, the negative influence and impact of parents often reported  
13 by coaches and athletes anecdotally, and in youth sport research, is potentially related to  
14 stressors that they experience in their parental roles.

15 In establishing a line of research into stress from a parental perspective, Harwood and  
16 Knight (in press) investigated the stressors articulated by 123 British tennis parents. The wide  
17 range of stressors emerging from their open-ended survey coalesced into seven core themes of  
18 parental stress. These included stressors associated with attendance at matches and  
19 tournaments; coaches behaviors and responsibilities, financial and time demands placed upon  
20 the family; sibling resentment and unequal attention; inefficiencies and inequalities attributed  
21 to tennis organizations; and developmental concerns related to educational and future tennis  
22 transitions. Whilst this study provided a much needed insight into the scope of stressors  
23 experienced in the sport-parent role, it lacked an in-depth understanding of how such stressors  
24 may differ depending upon a child's stage of development (Côtè, 1999). Such insights would  
25 provide practitioners, coaches, and governing body organizations with a deeper, evidence-

1 based appreciation of the main issues and needs of parents across the key transitional stages  
2 of their child's sport participation.

3 A number of researchers have identified stages that athletes pass through during their  
4 sports career or involvement (e.g., Balyi, 2000; Bloom, 1985; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).  
5 Côtè's (1999) stages of sport participation model is frequently adopted because it is sport  
6 specific and sensitive to the developmental transitions children experience (Wolfenden &  
7 Holt, 2005). Within the context of this study, Côtè's model is of interest because it focuses on  
8 the first eighteen years of an athlete's development, when parental requirements are likely to  
9 be at their greatest.

10 Côtè (1999) identified four stages of participation: sampling, specializing, investment,  
11 and recreation; the first three of which are relevant to the current study. His model traces sport  
12 participation from early childhood to late adolescence and identifies differences in the  
13 experiences and requirements of athletes during each stage. The role and requirements of  
14 parents have also been noted to change throughout these stages (see Côtè, 1999; Côtè & Hay,  
15 2002; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).

16 In the sampling years, families play a central role in the athlete's development. Family  
17 time is devoted to a number of activities, but much time is devoted to sport. Parents play clear  
18 'provider' roles and are responsible for initiating sports activities and ensuring transportation  
19 and access (Durand-Bush, Salmela & Thomson, 2004). Parents are required to be highly  
20 committed to their child's sport, displayed through altered family routines as well as  
21 emotional and financial support (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). During this stage, however, fun is  
22 of utmost importance to athletes, emphasizing deliberate play rather than intense training  
23 (Côtè & Hay, 2002).

24 During the specializing stage, sport-specific skills develop through practice, with a  
25 reduction in deliberate play (Côtè & Hay, 2002). Parents take a growing interest in their child  
26 as an athlete and make an increasing financial and time commitment (Côtè, 1999; Durand-



1 Bush et al., 2004). The time commitment is such that other opportunities are often sacrificed  
2 for a child's sport. Furthermore, there is a premium placed on a parent's nurturing role  
3 alongside the provision of moral and socio-emotional support (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005;  
4 Wuerth et al., 2004).

5 Finally, athletes reach the investment years. At this stage the child pursues the aim of  
6 reaching an elite level in their chosen sport. Children increase the intensity of their  
7 commitment to one sport and there is a substantial increase in deliberate practice (Côté &  
8 Hay, 2002). Parents' levels of support and interest in their child-athlete may result in them  
9 displaying different treatment toward their other children (Durand-Bush et al., 2004; Wuerth  
10 et al., 2004). Nevertheless, during this stage, parents' actual requirements may begin to  
11 decrease as coaches play a larger role.

12 Considering the differing emotional, financial, and logistical requirements of parents,  
13 the experiences of athletes, and the changing competition and training demands associated  
14 with each stage of development, it is conceivable that parental stressors may also vary.  
15 Therefore, in extending the work of Harwood and Knight (in press), the purpose of this study  
16 was to conduct an in-depth, comparative examination of the stressors perceived by tennis  
17 parents whose children were located within one of the three stages of sport participation  
18 (Côté, 1999). The investigation formed part of a research initiative supported by Great  
19 Britain's tennis governing body, the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA). The overall aim was to  
20 develop a clearer understanding of stage-specific parental stressors so that appropriate  
21 resources and support would enable parents towards positive role-related influences on their  
22 children's talent development in the sport.

23

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## 1 Method

2 *Participants*

3 The sample comprised 22 tennis parents: Nine mothers, five fathers, and four sets of  
4 parents who were interviewed together. The sample was divided into three groups: six parents  
5 of performance juniors, six parents of top county/low national standard players, and ten  
6 parents of national and international (academy) standard players. The performance juniors  
7 (three boys and two girls) were aged between 9 and 11 and were classified as being in the  
8 sampling stage. The second category accounted for parents of four boys and two girls aged  
9 from 11 to 16 and considered as being in the specializing stage. The final group comprised  
10 parents of academy players, aged 12 to 16. These players trained at national tennis academies  
11 and fulfilled the characteristics of athletes in the investment stage. Six players resided full  
12 time at the academies and two commuted daily, with all players on modified educational  
13 programs.

14 The classification of players to stages utilized Côté and Hay's (2002) criteria as  
15 closely as possible and occurred through discussion with the players' parents and coaches.  
16 These discussions revolved around (a) the current focus of training sessions (deliberate play  
17 or deliberate practice), (b) players involvement in other sports, and (c) the emphasis placed  
18 upon general motor skill development compared to tennis-specific skills training.

19 *Procedure*

20 A purposive sampling strategy highlighted 25 tennis parents who were available  
21 and interested in engaging in this study. These parents were identified through  
22 discussions with county officials, coaches, and clubs. Three parents subsequently  
23 withdrew from the study due to personal commitments and scheduling problems.

24 Semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate method of data  
25 collection for this study because they allow in-depth information to be gained from  
26 participants discussing their interpretation of the tennis experience and expressing

1 situations from their own point of view (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001; Denzin &  
2 Lincoln, 2005). This was particularly important in the study considering the subjective  
3 and individual nature of stress. (Lazarus, 2006).

#### 4 *Data collection*

5 A semi-structured interview guide was developed based upon results of an open-  
6 ended survey of British tennis parents (Harwood & Knight, in press), the requirements of  
7 sports parents, and potentially stressful areas highlighted in past research (e.g., Kirk et al.,  
8 1997a, 1997b; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Care was taken by the interviewer not to lead  
9 participants' responses by commencing with introductory questions about the parents'  
10 general experiences of stress in tennis. Using the nature and depth of these initial  
11 responses, the guide allowed the interviewer to probe these responses in more detail  
12 assisted by broad areas of interest that could be covered according to the varying flow of  
13 the interview. These included: matches and competitions; coaching and training; finances;  
14 national governing body and other organizations; personal, social, and family life; and  
15 education and transitions. Therefore, as opposed to asking specific, structured (and  
16 potentially confirmatory) questions, the interviewer used these broad areas to probe a  
17 parent's response further or to assist in the recollection of their contextual experiences.  
18 Further, a final comments section was also important in picking up any additional  
19 stressors that parents felt that they had not articulated. This section was important given  
20 that parent(s), by this stage in the interview, had become fully immersed in the topic.

21 All interviews were conducted by a female interviewer, who was also a qualified  
22 professional coach with a high level of tennis playing experience. This served to facilitate the  
23 development of rapport with the participants and a closeness to the phenomena under  
24 investigation. Prior to carrying out the interviews, two pilot interviews were completed with  
25 parents of a sampling stage and a specializing stage junior. These lasted 45 and 52 minutes  
26 respectively and were taped and reviewed with the co-author. Both pilot interviews allowed

1 the interviewer to rehearse and refine the interview procedure, including the efficient use of  
2 elaboration and clarification probes. The pilot process subsequently reduced the potential for  
3 interviews to deviate through the course of study and to increase the trustworthiness of the  
4 results (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Johnson, 1997).

5 Before each interview the participants were provided with a written and verbal  
6 introduction. The introduction outlined the research, reassured confidentiality, and also  
7 included definitions of stress and stressors (Lazarus, 2006). Participants were reminded that  
8 they were free to discuss any issues they felt were relevant to the topic. Informed consent was  
9 obtained and any questions were answered. Both parents in the tennis family were initially  
10 approached and where parents were interviewed together about their experiences, questions  
11 were directed separately to each parent to enable disclosure of their own individual and  
12 personal perceptions. This assisted the interviewer in gaining independent perceptions of  
13 stressors. Where interviews involved only the dominant/most involved parent, this was  
14 deemed satisfactory given that they were likely to be the parent of greatest interest and  
15 relevance. The interviews lasted between 22 and 87 minutes ( $M = 54.0$  mins).

#### 16 *Data Analysis*

17 Each interview was taped and transcribed verbatim immediately following its  
18 completion. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to ensure confidentiality  
19 throughout the analysis process. The interviews were read and reread to ensure that the  
20 researcher was fully immersed in the transcripts. Data was then analyzed through a process of  
21 inductive content analysis following the method proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994).  
22 Raw data meaning units were identified that represented the core stressors reported by  
23 parents. Each meaning unit was then coded into a first order thematic category or essence  
24 phrase that essentially represented a cluster of similar stressors (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).  
25 This analytical process then progressed inductively to a higher thematic level (i.e., higher  
26 order themes) culminating in a final set of general dimensions that represented the phenomena

1 of parental stress. To facilitate the comparative analysis of stage-specific parental stress,  
2 meaning units and themes were identified for each participant individually, within each  
3 category of parents, and in the overall sample. Data matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were  
4 developed for each category of parents to allow for the comparison of the data between  
5 themes. In sum, the percentage of parents within each stage that articulated stressors within  
6 each sub-theme and subsequent higher order theme provided evidence of the similarities and  
7 differences between parents' experiences across the three stages.

#### 8 *Methodological Rigor*

9 A number of steps were introduced to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, and  
10 their credibility and dependability in particular (Johnson, 1997). Firstly, engaging in pilot  
11 interviews (and maintaining the same interviewer throughout) helped to maximize interview  
12 consistency as well as encouraging a prolonged engagement with the parent population. The  
13 experience of the interviewer as a player and coach also encouraged an affinity with this sub-  
14 culture. Secondly, an audit trail was consistently maintained of the analytical decisions and  
15 processes stemming from the raw data meaning units to the final interpretive dimensions.  
16 This process also aided the researcher's reflexivity in forcing them to reflect on decisions  
17 made with an eye to their personal assumptions or biases about the topic. Thirdly, all  
18 interview transcripts and a summary of the results were returned to participants for member  
19 checking and participant feedback (Cohen et al., 2001; Johnson, 1997). This allowed  
20 participants to confirm whether the transcripts and results provided an accurate and valid  
21 reflection of their experiences. Furthermore, they were provided with the opportunity to  
22 further substantiate their experiences or provide additional information. All participants  
23 confirmed their transcripts and validated the thematic frameworks. Two parents further  
24 reinforced key points that had emerged through the data analysis.

25 Finally, and importantly, investigator triangulation was achieved with the first author  
26 reading all of the transcripts and then independently identifying the raw data units for one

1 third of the parent sample from each category. This process led to a 90% agreement rate with  
2 the second author's raw data interpretations. Following discussion and consensus at this stage,  
3 the first author checked the interpretive allocation of the raw data into the first order sub-  
4 themes and the labeling applied to each theme. This process of inductive verification between  
5 the two authors continued until the final general dimensions were agreed and the percentages  
6 of parents citing stressors in each stage of development were intact and verifiable.

## 7 Results

8 Analysis of the interviews led to the identification of three general dimensions of  
9 parental stressors: Organizational, Competitive, and Developmental (see Tables 1, 2 and 3).  
10 These general dimensions included 18 higher order themes, 62 sub-themes, and 253 raw data  
11 themes. This section will explore each general dimension and higher order theme across the  
12 three stages. Quotes will be utilized to illustrate examples of raw data and sub-themes with  
13 keys denoting the stage of development (i.e., Sa= Sampling; Sp=Specializing; In=Investment)  
14 alongside whether it was a mother (M) or father (F) and their participant number in that stage  
15 (e.g., SpM3). The table for each general dimension illustrates the percentage of parents in that  
16 stage who cited stressors within each sub-theme and higher order theme.

### 17 *General dimension one: Organizational stressors*

18 Six higher order themes, 27 sub-themes and 137 raw data themes emerged in relation  
19 to organizational stressors rendering it as the most diverse dimension in the study. This  
20 dimension was characterized by stressors that parents perceived in relation to the logistical  
21 environment, personal investments and tennis systems within which they themselves operate  
22 (see Table 1).

23 Time emerged as a prominent stressor for all participants. The day-to-day time  
24 requirements and organization required to enable participation and progression in tennis  
25 impacted upon a parent's general lifestyle, family routines and obligations. One mother  
26 recounted:

1 I think probably you get so tired sometimes when you are just doing all the traveling,  
2 all the training, running a home, and all the other stuff with other members of the  
3 family as well on top of everything else ...you feel a bit stressed out then. (InM5)

4 Furthermore, as one father stated, "That is my life: work, tennis, bed!" (SaF1). Parents with  
5 other children described feelings of guilt and worry in response to the stressors that arise  
6 because of the unequal time they spend with one child compared to other siblings. As one  
7 mother said, "You know at some point you will be reminded that you've spent 10 weekends  
8 in a row going to one child's tournaments" (InM8).

9 Whilst all sampling stage parents cited varying time stressors, work and social role  
10 conflicts alongside tennis administration tasks were particularly prevalent in specializing  
11 stage parents. These issues continued into the investment stage. However, parents in this stage  
12 whose children lived away from home at tennis academies acknowledged that whilst time  
13 stressors still existed relating to tournaments, the day-to-day time requirements were less. As  
14 one mother stated "I don't feel I have [stress] now because she's away on a day to day basis"  
15 (InM5).

16 Many parents in the specializing and investment stages recalled extensive financial  
17 stressors. Parents in the sampling stage estimated costs between £2,000 and £3,500 a year on  
18 tennis with one parent expressing stressors regarding future financial costs of tennis  
19 involvement: "I mean if he was to go to Newquay and win the area tournament they'd say  
20 "right, next week Leeds"... I'm pretty sure we wouldn't be able to do that" (SaF3). However,  
21 in the specializing and investment stage the burden appeared to increase enormously. As one  
22 mother stated, "It just spirals out of control" (InM3). Parents with children in the investment  
23 stage estimated spending between £15,000 and £20,000 per year on tennis. One family  
24 declared, "We have been broke for eight years and that's no exaggeration" (InF1). Another  
25 mother divulged, "I've already re-mortgaged twice and I'm thinking I might have to do it  
26 again" (InM6).

1           Due to the financial demands of tennis, specializing and investment stage parents often  
2 sought to obtain sponsorship, with related stressors experienced in contrasting ways. The  
3 following quotes highlight two examples: a) “It is very, very difficult with sponsorship  
4 because most companies do not want to sponsor individuals they want to sponsor teams”  
5 (InM6); b) “I run sponsorship deals... So I personally have additional stressors that some of  
6 the other parents don’t have to endure... I have a commitment obviously to the sponsors in  
7 terms of what they want back out of the deal” (SpF1).

8           Allocation of funding was pertinent to parents with players in the latter stages and was  
9 one of many stressors parents expressed in relation to the National and County Tennis  
10 Associations. All investment stage parents perceived the lack of transparency of funding as a  
11 stressor. As one mother highlighted, “It’s not transparent so you’re not sure whether... you’re  
12 getting your correct allocation of funding support” (InM4). Consequently, stressors relating  
13 to perceived favoritism emerged:

14           It used to be very unequal, how they would deal with players, offering opportunities  
15 around... You could see that a group of four, right at the top, would get everything and  
16 that little trailing group [would get nothing]. It wasn’t spread widely enough across  
17 (InM3).

18           The most substantial stressor that parents recounted, across all three stages, in relation  
19 to the governing body was a lack of information, support and guidance. Parents with children  
20 in the sampling and specializing stages were unaware of the best course of action to help their  
21 child progress. As one mother highlighted, “There are people in positions [of power] that  
22 oversee who could say, ‘[your child] shouldn’t be there now, move on’. But they’re not  
23 prepared to do that openly” (SpM1). The lack of information and guidance also led to  
24 stressors arising in the investment stage, as one father explained, “International tournaments  
25 abroad are quite stressful in getting those organized. There’s not enough help really from the  
26 LTA in that respect” (InF3).



1           Beyond the lack of information, parents across each stage professed a received  
2 lack of respect from the national/county associations and coaches. This promoted both  
3 frustration and ill-feeling, as the following quote summarizes:

4           You don't get informed. They [national coaches] look at you, you know, you  
5 send your child off on these [national training] camps somewhere and when  
6 you say "Can you give me some feedback?"... "What you - the parent?!, What  
7 right have you got to know? Oh no no no, we'll tell the coach. (SpF1)

8           Stressors perceived to be associated with the national governing body were not limited  
9 to funding, information, and coaches. However these were far more frequently recalled than  
10 other issues. Two further organizational themes that arose related to injury and tournaments,  
11 both with increasing frequency in the specializing and investment stage. The impact of injury  
12 on playing form and lack of support provided for injured players was highlighted as a stressor  
13 by a number of investment parents, as the following quote highlights:

14           My son was injured and we were given no advice from the LTA. We had to find a  
15 physio and do it all ourselves. The LTA then requested he played in a tournament,  
16 against the physio's advice...when he returned [to competition] they wouldn't give  
17 him a wild card into an event, he had to qualify in pain and reinjured himself. You  
18 know it's just ridiculous. (InM4)

19           Furthermore, injury and health gradually became longer-term concerns for parents compared  
20 to the absence of such issues in sampling stage. One mother recounted:

21           She went through a phase when she had a lot of injuries and that does worry me for the  
22 long term. I think they have wonderfully healthy heart and lungs, but I do worry about  
23 their joints, they are going to suffer when they are older. (SpM4)

24           Tournament stressors included organization, traveling, accommodation, and location.  
25 Specifically, the location of the British Nationals in the summer caused accommodation

1 problems for many parents in the specializing and investment stages. As one mother  
2 explained:

3 Bournemouth in August, let's face it, that is the most crazy place to go for something  
4 like the Nationals when you may not even know that you are going [to be accepted into  
5 the draw] right until the last minute. (InM6)

6 Later stage parents were also aggravated by the altered weekend tournament structure and the  
7 subsequent impact this has on accommodation and finance amongst other aspects:

8 If you don't win on the first day you go home. When we go away we stay at Travel  
9 Inn's and Travelodge's. They used to have a cancellation policy where you could  
10 cancel up to 4pm. But now it's 1pm! Well, you've often not even gone on court for  
11 your second match by then so you could pay hundreds of pounds on  
12 accommodation...and then the rooms aren't used. (InM4)

### 13 *General dimension two: Competitive stressors*

14 Analysis of the interviews extracted 66 raw data themes that formed 24 sub-themes  
15 and eight higher order themes associated purely with a child's competitive matches (see Table  
16 2). Firstly, a number of parents across all stages cited the stress of logistical and preparatory  
17 issues prior to the match, and particularly the psychological readiness and focus of their child.  
18 Some parents noted the difficulties of seeing their child nervous, feeling pressured or not  
19 focusing on the upcoming match in the way they thought was necessary. One parent stated:

20 The major stress comes from my son playing matches and there's not a lot you can do  
21 about that. You need the coach to help him stop showing disappointment and stress  
22 because then it will be less stressful for me. (SaF1).

23 The majority of parents identified watching matches as a stressor, with many stating it  
24 was the largest stressor they encountered (e.g. "The biggest stress for me I suppose is actually  
25 watching her play" InM2). The child's performance, behavior, and the outcome of the match  
26 were inextricably linked to this. One parent identified, "It's stressful as a parent because you

1 always want them [your child] to do well” (SpM2). Furthermore, parents wanted their child  
2 to be happy, and parental stress was enhanced when they saw their child distressed on court,  
3 displaying bad behavior, or expressing disappointment following a match. As one parent  
4 noted, “That’s the worst when you see them get upset and you can’t do anything. (SaF3)”

5 The stress of being powerless to do anything to help their child was exacerbated when  
6 they perceived their child to be performing below their ability. As one mother described, “It’s  
7 like watching them sit a maths exam isn’t it... and watching them put all the wrong answers  
8 in really” (InM5). Additionally, this feeling of helplessness occurred in parents when their  
9 child suffered problems with their opponent. One father explained the predicament:

10 I’ve had two or three incidents where... we had one where you can only describe it as  
11 bullying, you know my child was being bullied...being threatened aggressively on  
12 court in front of me...your powerless as a parents...it’s not my job to do anything.  
13 (SpF1)

14 Many aspects relating to opponents and other parents were expressed as stressors, with  
15 extensive examples being provided. Their child’s opponent was perceived as a stressor due to  
16 their behavior, (poor) line calls, and gamesmanship. As one mother articulated, “There was a  
17 particular boy...who was very well renowned for his absolutely horrendous tactics which  
18 dogged us for a couple of years...in some ways it taught Matthew\*<sup>1</sup> very valuable lessons. At  
19 other times, it was absolutely beyond the pale” (InM7). In relation to other parents, witnessing  
20 them putting pressure on their children was acknowledged by some parents as a stressor, as the  
21 following quote explores, “Parents can actually shock me because they get so angry with their  
22 children or so stressed out with their children” (SpF1). Additionally, a number of participants  
23 cited the stress and resulting embarrassment when they felt other parents were evaluating their  
24 child’s performance and behavior. As one parent highlighted, “I don’t want him to do it [throw  
25 his racquet] ... I think it’s bad behavior, other people see, and you become embarrassed”  
26 (InM6).

1 Competitive stressors were prevalent across all three stages of sport participation.  
2 However, the majority of the higher order themes and underpinning sub-themes were  
3 populated more prominently with sampling stage parents. Sub-themes associated with other  
4 tennis parents, the child's behavior and performance, and the outcome of the match were  
5 examples of this trend.

6 In general, stressors associated with other parents appeared to reduce across the three  
7 stages with less threatening, interfering and intimidating behaviors observed by investment  
8 stage parents. However, many of these parents still appeared to be affected by the perceived  
9 gossip and back-biting culture of other parents in this later stage. Similarly, stressors  
10 associated with the outcome of the match were more prominent in sampling parents. Nearly  
11 all sampling parents discussed the stressors associated either with their child's reaction to a  
12 loss, or not knowing exactly what to say or do. The following quote was expressed throughout  
13 the sampling stage:

14 It's when you want to talk on the way home that gets stressful, that's the worst, the  
15 journey home after is the stressful part. If they've had a good day it's not a problem  
16 because they want to talk about everything they've done.... when they've had a bad  
17 day they don't want to talk about it and I don't know what to say. (SaF3)

18 In the sampling stage, competitive stressors appeared to be enhanced due to the age of  
19 the children, as one father explained, "I think maybe [I need to have] experienced more of this  
20 ... I'm hoping that the younger age, because kids are still misbehaving and cheating and  
21 parents are interfering, [is more stressful]" (SaF2). Furthermore, parents appeared new to the  
22 situations and to the process of coping with the stressors they experience. All specializing and  
23 investment parents acknowledged that competitive stressors still existed, however, many  
24 explained that they used to be far worse. The following quote summarizes such sentiments, "I  
25 think things have changed. ... I think when you first start out and you think 'what's all this  
26 about?' and then you probably become more stressed, but then you deal with it [and] it

1 becomes less stressful perhaps” (SpF1). Similar thoughts were echoed by another parent who  
2 stated, “I think when we first started I watched every point and was quite conscious of where  
3 things were going. Now I try to be a little bit more laid back about it. (InM8)”

4           Nevertheless, in both the specializing and investment stage, a small number of parents  
5 perceived competitive stressors to be greater than in the sampling stage because of the  
6 increasing importance of match outcomes. One parent highlighted, “As kids tend to get better  
7 the parents sort of become more involved and perhaps expectations get raised and it becomes  
8 more stressful the better they get” (InF2). These feelings were reflected in sub-themes  
9 related to poor line calls and opponent behavior, the child’s maintenance of focus in  
10 competition and performing to their full ability. All of these sub-themes remained elevated  
11 and indicative of the clear impact and implications that they would have at this stage (e.g., on  
12 international/academy selection; rankings).

### 13 *General dimension three: Developmental stressors*

14           Fifty raw data themes that coalesced into 11 sub-themes and four higher order themes  
15 represented parental experiences of stressors associated with their child’s development (see  
16 Table 3). Few parents with children in the sampling stage reported any developmental  
17 stressors whatsoever. Parents indicated that this was due to their child’s age and recent  
18 introduction and commitment to tennis. However, developmental stressors were highly  
19 prominent within parents in the specializing and investment stage; the most common of these  
20 being their child’s education.

21           As one investment parent reinforced, “The decisions regarding education are huge”  
22 (InM4). Education appeared to be a greater stressor for those parents who perceived their  
23 child was academically able and who placed great value and importance on education for their  
24 child’s future achievement. Issues regarding education were exacerbated for some parents due  
25 to conflict and a lack of support from their child’s school. The following quote encapsulates  
26 such stressors:

1 I did fight very hard for them to understand that he needed to come out of school, he  
2 needed to miss lessons...the headmistress just didn't understand and the local authority  
3 who had to give permission...they didn't understand either. (InM6)

4 Uncertainties around the child's future emerged as stressors for a majority of parents  
5 in the specializing stage. Many were unsure what their child wished to achieve in tennis, or  
6 were concerned that they had high aspirations that were unlikely to be fulfilled. As one parent  
7 commented, "He's at a point now where I think he's got to be realistic that he's probably not  
8 going to be making a living from it [tennis]... But I'm not brave enough to tell him that"  
9 (SpM1). Such thoughts were confirmed by another mother in the investment stage, who  
10 explained, "It does concern me because he has high hopes, and at the same time, you've got to  
11 be realistic because there are so few that make it" (InM6). A few investment stage parents  
12 perceived the future as their largest current and immediate stressor. One family explained  
13 such a situation:

14 "That is...at the moment... it's becoming stressful because we'll know in the next  
15 month what is going to happen with Amy\*. Whether they select her to go down to the  
16 National Tennis Centre or whatever. Because if she doesn't go, then she'll have to  
17 decide what she's going to do. (InF1)

18 In comparison, other investment parents took a more carefree approach to the future, for  
19 example, one parent acknowledged, "Things will change, but we just take a little chunk at a  
20 time" (InM4).

21 The third theme that emerged relating to developmental stressors was making  
22 decisions necessary to enable their child's progression in tennis. Again, this was recalled only  
23 once in the sampling stage, with the parent acknowledging, "It's the not knowing what's  
24 around the corner and where to go next" (SaM1). In the specializing stage, this stressor  
25 appeared more often, as one parent described, "It's more of a worry, am I doing the right  
26 thing for him? Is he with the right coach?" (SpM1). For parents of players in the investment

1 stage decision-making remained a worry and this was particularly evident in relation to  
2 decisions to let children go to residential tennis academies. One mother recalled that making  
3 the decision caused, “A week of sleepless nights” (InM5).

4 Over the later stages, a small number of parents acknowledged issues relating to other  
5 sports or hobbies. Reasons for this stress included letting other people down or their child  
6 missing out on other sports. In the sampling stage, most children were able to participate as  
7 they wished in other sports without additional stress. As they progressed through the stages,  
8 parents identified that other sports stopped. Nonetheless, because it was their child’s decision,  
9 few parents noted this as stressful.

#### 10 Discussion

11 Stress is widely acknowledged as an inherent part of competitive sport and continues  
12 to receive extensive research attention amongst athletes and coaches (Giacobbi et al., 2004;  
13 Hanton et al., 2005; Thelwell et al., 2008). However, if the realm of youth sport seeks to  
14 optimize the role related performance and psychological well being of sport parents, then  
15 there is a premium placed on understanding the inherent stressors that may impact on the  
16 quality of their role with the child-athlete (see Gould et al., 2006, 2008).

17 The overall findings of the study served to corroborate the initial survey-based  
18 research of Harwood and Knight (in press). In their study, before, during, and after match  
19 stressors associated with their child’s behavior, the opponent, other parents, and their own  
20 expectations were reported as foremost issues. Finance, time, family, and other organizational  
21 issues were also prominent, as were developmental concerns related to educational and future  
22 tennis transitions. However, the current results offered a closer appreciation of the key  
23 stressors as their child progresses from one stage of participation to the next.

24 The findings also conceptually support the distinction that researchers are now making  
25 between those stressors linked specifically to competition and competitive performance (i.e.,  
26 competitive stress) with the stressors associated primarily and directly with the organization

1 within which the individual is operating (i.e., organizational stress; Hanton, et al., 2005;  
2 Hanton & Fletcher, 2005; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Such dimensions of stress apply to  
3 sport-parent roles, and parents' experiences of stress in youth sport can be viewed through the  
4 lens offered by Hanton and Fletcher's (2005) conceptualization of organizational stress. By  
5 adapting Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll's (2001) work in an organizational setting, Hanton  
6 and Fletcher (2005) forwarded five dimensions of organizational stressor in sport: factors  
7 intrinsic to the sport; roles in the sport organization; sport relationships and interpersonal  
8 demands; organizational structure and climate of the sport; and athletic career and  
9 performance development issues.

10 Factors intrinsic to the sport of tennis including stressors associated with time,  
11 finances, travel, accommodation, training, injury and tournament schedules were particularly  
12 prominent amongst specializing and investment stage parents (Kirk et al., 1997a; Wolfenden  
13 & Holt, 2005). The time commitment required from tennis parents has been identified to  
14 increase as children moved from the sampling stage to the specializing stage and then  
15 decrease as parents take a step back during the investment stage (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).  
16 This pattern was largely supported in the current study. Parents in the specializing stage  
17 experienced greater time and family-related stressors than those in the sampling stage due to  
18 the increase in training and competition load. Investment parents with the highest standard  
19 children who lived away from home at academies acknowledged reduced time stress  
20 compared to their previous specializing phase because of the lesser 'everyday' burden of their  
21 child's regime at home.

22 Specializing parents also tended to report greater sport-family role conflict where the  
23 role pressures of being an 'organised' tennis parent conflicted with other family activities and  
24 responsibilities (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Yet it was clear that a number of these later  
25 stage parents felt a systematic lack of respect and communication from the national governing  
26 body and coaches in terms of acknowledging their role in the organization of their child's



1 tennis experience. The vast majority of parents disclosed stressors associated with sport  
2 relationships and interpersonal demands, mainly related to other tennis parents or to their own  
3 child with respect to negative behaviors or dealing with the outcome of competitive matches.  
4 Additionally, it was the specializing and investment parents who highlighted the greatest  
5 stressors with respect to the organizational structure and climate of the sport. Issues related to  
6 the transparency and equality of player funding, favoritism, tournament structures, injury  
7 considerations, and the ratings system correlated with the increasing standard, time, and  
8 investment that characterized the parent's and child's inputs and outputs.

9       Finally, the developmental stressors that emerged for parents in the present study were  
10 closely representative of longer term concerns linked to the athlete career and performance  
11 development dimension of organizational stress (Hanton & Fletcher, 2005). As Rotella and  
12 Bunker (1987) acknowledge, "Parents of children who make a serious commitment to sport  
13 face a difficult challenge: to raise a happy, healthy, and successful child" (p. 15). When  
14 parents reached the specializing stage (and beyond), they appeared to enter a phase of  
15 conflict, worry, and uncertainty around their child's education, their tennis development and  
16 future prospects related to both domains. Sidebotham (2001) notes the stress experienced by  
17 parents in relation to their expectation for their children to achieve. For child-athletes such  
18 achievements may be in relation to both sporting and academic success, with parents needing  
19 information and support on the most appropriate decisions and pathways. Parents in the  
20 current sample worried about making incorrect decisions regarding their child's academic or  
21 tennis future and felt enormous pressure to follow *either* the academic *or* tennis route and  
22 hope that their child was successful in this. Parents with children in the sampling stage  
23 generally perceived that such decisions were not pertinent at this time, and consequently  
24 experienced far less developmental stress. It is also interesting to note that while some later  
25 stage parents did cite stressors associated with long term health and injury, few referred to  
26 developmental issues around the cessation of other activities or peer relationships and

1 friendships that can often suffer through investments into one sport.

2       Whilst it was apparent through the interviews that parents in the latter two stages  
3 encountered a greater range of organizational and developmental stressors, it was the  
4 sampling stage parents who appeared particularly susceptible to the varying competitive  
5 stressors. During the sampling stage, the focus is upon fun and deliberate play (Côté & Hay,  
6 2002), with a limited emphasis upon competition. As such, one may anticipate that  
7 competitive stressors are minimal during this stage. However, even at the earliest stages of  
8 participation, tennis players are encouraged to engage in competitions to supplement their  
9 training. Whilst tournaments for children at this stage are supposed to be relaxed and often  
10 team-based affairs, there are several factors inherent to tennis that fuel emotions and negate  
11 temperance. The scoring system immediately punishes individual mistakes and brutally  
12 exposes the competence of players in a highly public and evaluative manner (see Harwood &  
13 Swain, 2001). Moreover, tennis is one of the few sports where young players officiate their  
14 matches and are responsible for calling their own lines and keeping score. These competition  
15 demands offer many emotional challenges for young parents who essentially seek both a  
16 psychologically safe and fair environment for their child. Factors such as unsporting opponent  
17 behaviors, the evaluations, interference and intimidation of other parents, the performance and  
18 behavior of their own child, and their helplessness in being unable to intervene and assist  
19 were widely representative of this stage. In sum, it was clear through the interviews that  
20 many sampling parents found their initial and current experiences of watching tennis  
21 competitions to be highly stressful.

22       Not surprisingly, as some investment parents qualified, coping with these competitive  
23 demands comes with experience and there were some parents in these later stages who  
24 acknowledged better coping mechanisms with respect to some of these match-related  
25 stressors. Nevertheless, the specializing and investment stage are both associated with an  
26 increase in competition (Côté & Hay, 2002), and a number of parents indicated that they had

1 been unable to develop resources to cope with these stressors despite their past experience.  
2 Indeed, the competitive stressors associated with watching matches, other parents' and  
3 opponents' behaviors, and their child's attitude and behavior were generally consistent across  
4 stages. There are many pertinent explanations for this.

5       Firstly, as athletes progress, the financial, time, and emotional investment from  
6 parents and athletes themselves increases in parallel (cf. Gould et al., 2008; Wolfenden &  
7 Holt, 2005). Competitive matches carry more important and meaningful consequences;  
8 positive behavioral expectations are greater for all concerned as is the demand for accuracy  
9 and fairness in terms of line calling. Additionally, in the absence of coaches at tournaments, it  
10 is parents who are the sole providers of preparation and support before, during, and after  
11 matches. Independent of a child's age or standard, all parents identify with their children and  
12 want them to be happy and successful (Rotella & Bunker, 1987; Smoll, 2001). Consequently,  
13 within this integral support role at competitions, any situation that may cause children distress  
14 or disappointment is likely to be difficult and potentially stressful for parents. In addition,  
15 Coakley (2006) observed that children's sporting excellence is often attributed to parents,  
16 especially fathers and in this sample some parents disclosed the stress associated with  
17 preserving their own public image and avoiding embarrassment through their child's on court  
18 behavior (see Gould et al., 2008).

#### 19 *Limitations, future directions and applied implications*

20       There are a number of limitations and future directions that are important to  
21 acknowledge in this study, as well as practical implications for sport psychologists, coaches,  
22 and governing body organizations. Firstly, the allocation of children (and thus parents) to  
23 stages was based on the characteristics of each stage (Côté, 1999), as opposed to a specified  
24 age range. Thus, the specializing and investment stage incorporated a wide range of ages,  
25 whereas the sampling stage included only children aged 9-11. Consequently, the stressors  
26 experienced by parents may have been affected by the age of the child in addition to their

1 stage of tennis participation. In addition, the use of interviews with parents who have been  
2 through the full system, in combination with these stage-specific interviews may have  
3 provided further credibility to the results as a form of method triangulation. This additional  
4 data may have substantiated the subjective perceptions of parents at each stage and reinforced  
5 the prevalence of certain stressors more commonly shared by parents at different time points.  
6 However, it is fair to note that investment stage parents who had naturally 'lived through' the  
7 other two stages validated the overall results and insights during their member check.

8         It is also appropriate to recognize that the study did not intentionally examine  
9 psychological strain, or the methods of coping that parents employed to deal with the stressors  
10 that they encountered (Lazarus, 2006). Whilst the interviews illustrated how some parents  
11 lacked the resources to deal with particular stressors, and subsequently experienced negative  
12 emotions, it would be worthwhile if future research paid closer attention to the full stress and  
13 coping process in sport parents. A key extension of this research is to ascertain if and how  
14 parental stressors (and parental coping) influence successful versus unsuccessful athlete  
15 career development. In light of the current investigation, for example, does a parent who  
16 experiences a range of competitive stressors have a sub-optimal impact on players in their  
17 formative sampling years? Similarly, do parents who fail to manage certain organizational  
18 and developmental stressors in the specializing and investment phases negatively influence  
19 the decision-making and transitions of their child (Gould et al., 2008). Such studies would  
20 continue to ameliorate the scientific knowledge base of the 'sport-parent' and enable parents  
21 to be more effective in their roles as provider, interpreter and role-model (Fredricks & Eccles,  
22 2004).

23         Various practical implications can be drawn from this study that are of central  
24 importance to practitioners, coaches, parents, and sporting organizations. First, there is a need  
25 to educate and empathize with all parents in relation to the psychological and emotional  
26 demands of competition with a view to ensuring that they have the necessary cognitive,

1 behavioral, and motivational skills both to manage themselves and to influence the responses  
2 of their child (Gould et al., 2008; Harwood & Knight, in press). This is a particularly  
3 important initiative for sampling stage parents who are new to the sport and less aware of  
4 those factors that can potentially make tennis an unpleasant early experience for child and  
5 parent. The provision of materials or induction workshops at local tournaments for young  
6 parents would facilitate this goal (see USTA, 2006). However, as competition frequency and  
7 standards increase into the specializing and investment stages, this parent education should be  
8 tailored towards the parent who experiences those stressors more associated with match  
9 outcomes and expectations about their child's performance.

10 Secondly, stage-specific stressors are likely to be reduced if parents of talented  
11 athletes possess an advanced awareness of the financial, time, family, and education-related  
12 issues that they may face as their child progresses through the sport. Improved  
13 communication, feedback and information from governing bodies might include guidance on  
14 sponsorship and funding as well as preparatory information to assist parents in their decision  
15 making about education, academies, and training program requirements. Some of this  
16 responsibility should lie with their child's coach both in empathizing with family demands,  
17 ensuring regular feedback, and advising parents with honesty and clarity on player  
18 development options. Such initiatives are likely to enhance the roles, well-being, and stress  
19 management of tennis parents and it is worth noting that the Lawn Tennis Association has  
20 begun to disseminate this work throughout its organization and within its coaching  
21 qualifications.

22

23

### Conclusion

24 This study enabled parents to articulate the stressors that they experienced in their role  
25 as an integral supporter of their child's tennis development. While parents with children in the  
26 sampling stage encountered fewer overall stressors than those with children in the later two

1 stages, competitive stressors were highly prominent. Specializing stage parents shared the  
2 most stressors, presenting united perceptions of organizational issues such as finance and  
3 time, as well as developmental concerns surrounding education and future decision making.  
4 Many of these competitive, organizational and developmental stressors remained for parents  
5 in the investment stage. However, with greater experience of matches and tournaments, and  
6 children residing away from home, some of these stressors were reduced. The findings  
7 highlight the importance of not only supporting the roles of the sport-parent, but empathizing  
8 with their demands and needs in terms of their effective execution of such roles. In this  
9 respect, we may begin to optimize a child's sport experience and development in conjunction  
10 with the work of coaches and governing body organizations.



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18 \*<sup>1</sup> denotes that a pseudonym has been used  
19

20 \* Whilst 100% of investment parents recognized these stressors, they perceived them to be reduced compared to  
21 their experience of the specializing stage.  
22

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25 like to acknowledge the support of staff at the National Tennis Centre. London.

26

27

Table 1

*A comparative analysis of organizational stressors reported by parents across the sampling, specializing and investment years*

Higher Order Theme	Sampling	Specializing	Investment %
Subthemes			
Time	100	100	100*
Impact on social life	67	83	90
Work-Tennis role conflict	50	83	60
Organization and administration of tennis	33	100	80
Lack of sibling attention including sibling resentment	67	83	50
Lack of family and partner time	50	83	90
Finances	50	100	90
Sponsorship organisation and commitments	0	67	50
Lack of player funding	0	17	40
Financial impact on family and siblings	50	100	90
Financial decisions around coaching and tournaments	33	67	30
Organizing bodies (national /county and club)	67	100	100
Lack of information, feedback and guidance	67	100	90
Pressures of the player ratings system	33	83	50
Support and respect from the British tennis system	50	67	70
Transparency and equality of funding	0	50	100
Tournaments	83	100	100
Tournament structures, draw and seedings	17	67	60
Inefficient tournament organization	83	83	80
Travelling to matches	17	67	90
Accommodation issues and decisions	0	33	90
Geographical location and selection	17	33	30
Training and Coaching	100	83	90
Feedback, respect and commitment of coaches	67	50	80
Quality and scheduling of training programme	50	50	70
Problems associated with academy programmes	0	0	70
Access to training facilities	0	50	40
Injury	0	83	100
Insufficient advice and support	0	33	60
Loss of play impact on form, skills and rating	0	67	90
Long term impact on tennis and health	0	33	40
Costs of treatment and rehabilitation	0	17	0
Process and penalties of match withdrawal	0	17	0

Table 2

*A comparative analysis of competitive stressors reported by parents across the sampling, specializing and investment years*

Higher Order Theme	Sampling	Specializing	Investment %
Subthemes			
Watching matches	67	83	80
Avoiding placing pressure on child	50	50	60
Helplessness to deal with 'during-match' issues	50	67	70
Wanting child to succeed/win	67	67	70
Other tennis parents	100	83	80
Seeing parents pressurizing their child	50	33	30
Threatening behavior due to result	67	50	30
Gossip, back biting and cliqueness	67	83	70
Interfering and intimidation during match	83	67	30
Child's behavior and attitude	100	83	100
Bad line calls and cheating	50	33	50
Bad physical and verbal behavior	67	67	60
Player distress and lack of coping	83	50	50
Child's opponent	67	83	100
Bad line calls and cheating	67	67	80
Bullying, swearing and gamesmanship	50	67	60
Preparation for matches	67	67	60
Sufficiency and quality of training	33	50	30
Logistical arrangements	50	50	50
Physical and dietary readiness	50	50	40
Child's performance	67	50	50
Performing to their full ability	50	33	50
Inconsistency of play and momentum changes	50	50	40
Level of child's effort	50	33	10
Outcome of the match	83	67	60
The child's reaction to the match	67	50	40
Talking/consoling child following defeat	67	33	30
Dealing with negative behavior (by either player)	50	33	30
Child's psychological readiness	67	50	70
Child's nervousness before matches	50	33	20
Pressure/expectations that child places on themselves	33	50	40
Child maintaining focus during the match	50	33	60

Table 3

*A comparative analysis of developmental stressors reported by parents across the sampling, specializing and investment years*

Higher Order Theme	Sampling	Specializing	Investment %
Subthemes			
Child's education	0	83	90
Value placed on academic achievement	0	83	90
Coaches beliefs in tennis over education	0	17	10
Managing conflicts with school	0	33	40
Child's future	17	83	50
Uncertainties of the future within tennis	17	83	40
Knowledge of what opportunities are available	0	17	20
Uncertainty of impact on child's general life	0	33	20
Making appropriate decisions regarding tennis	17	83	70
Selection of correct coach for progression	17	67	50
Tournament-related decisions	0	67	60
Amounts/type of training specific to individual child	17	33	50
Impact on other hobbies	0	50	20
Child missing out on other sports	0	50	20
Letting other people down	0	33	0