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## PARENTING IN SLALOM CANOE

### Parental Involvement in Elite Junior Slalom Canoeing

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#### Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine elite youth athletes' views on parental involvement in training, competition, and at home. Eight canoeists were interviewed up to four times and completed written diaries over a 6-week period. Results indicated that parents were generally deemed to have a positive influence through domain specific and cross-domain behaviors. Positive behaviors included parents focusing on their children's holistic development at home, motivational and constructive evaluation at training, and limiting demands on athletes through the provision of practical support, reading and understanding the situation and their child, and supporting the development of growth mindset across all domains.

#### Keywords

positive parenting, youth sport, competition, parental involvement, canoe slalom

Parental involvement is a critical ingredient in the achievement of an elite status in youth sport (Holt & Knight, 2014). From tangible support in the form of transportation or supplying equipment to emotional support at competitions and advice regarding schooling, the roles parents fulfil to enable children to participate and excel in sport are extensive (Côté, 1999; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Some parents successfully meet the demand of these roles and positively influence children's sporting development (e.g., in tennis; see Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). However, some parents have detrimental influences (e.g., Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006, 2008; Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010a; 2010b; McMahon & Penney, 2015). As such, researchers have sought to identify the types of parental involvement that result in positive outcomes and increase the potential for children to enjoy sport while succeeding at the highest levels (e.g., Knight & Holt, 2014).

Much of our initial understanding of parental involvement and influence in sport has been obtained from studies exploring the development of elite athletes (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999). Combining insights from coaches, parents, and elite adult (18 years or older) athletes, these retrospective studies detailed the varied and critical role parents played throughout the sporting lives of athletes. For example, parents were shown to be important providers of tangible support, which was demonstrated through behaviours such as funding children's involvement and transporting children to training and competition. Further, parents were also critical sources of emotional support, providing athletes with comfort after losses and giving guidance as required. Overall, the findings illustrate the extensive influence parents' have upon athletes' development within sport and home contexts.

More recent studies have explicitly sought to uncover the positive and negative influence of parents on athletes' development (Gould et al., 2006, 2008; Lauer et al., 2010b; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005), and have further highlighted the varied roles and influence of parents in sport. For example, Gould and colleagues (Gould et al., 2006, 2008; Lauer et al., 2010b) conducted a three-part research project to explore the role of parents in tennis players' lives. Through a survey of 250 junior tennis coaches, focus groups with 24 high-level junior coaches, and interviews with nine elite adult players, eight parents, and eight coaches it was identified that, although the majority of parents had a positive influence on their children's development, numerous negative parental behaviors also existed. Negative behaviors included focusing too much on match outcomes rather than player development, interfering with training, demanding too much of coaches' time, and being too involved in their child's tennis. As with the earlier talent development studies, the findings from Gould et al.'s work provide a clear indication of the varying domains (e.g., driving home from competition, at training sessions) in which parents can exert an influence on children's sporting development.

The aforementioned studies provide pertinent insights into parental involvement and influence in sport. However, apart from certain exceptions (e.g., Wolfenden & Holt, 2005), these initial studies were seeking to examine parental influence across the entirety of athletes' development and thus relied on retrospective accounts from adult athletes, parents, and coaches rather than including children. The inclusion of children as participants within sport parenting research is important because children are actively involved in parent-child interactions, and it is children's interpretations of parental involvement that dictate how issues affect them (Mayall, 2002). Although retrospective accounts are useful for examining developmental experiences,

they are influenced by hindsight and reflection. Such accounts might not fully encapsulate the thoughts and feelings the athletes' experienced as a child.

Recognising the importance of including children within research, more recent parenting research (e.g., Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010; Knight, Neely, & Holt, 2011; Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2011) has explicitly sought to gain children's insights into parental involvement in sport. In one such study, Knight et al. (2010) conducted 11 focus groups with adolescent tennis players exploring their preferences for parental involvement at competitions. Knight et al. (2010) reported that athletes preferred parents to comment on effort and attitude rather than performance, and provide practical advice but to refrain from offering technical and tactical advice. In a follow-up study, Knight et al. (2011) conducted interviews with 36 adolescent female team sport athletes and identified several preferred parental behaviors in different temporal phases (i.e., before, during, and after competition). These findings demonstrate that children do have specific views regarding appropriate and inappropriate parental involvement at competitions.

However, such studies of children's preferences for parental involvement have generally relied upon one-off interviews or focus groups, which might have limited the amount and/or quality of the data obtained from the children (Knight et al., 2010). For example, given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, children might not have felt comfortable disclosing all the details regarding their parents' involvement in a one-off meeting with an unfamiliar researcher. The timing of data collection with respect to the proximity of a competition (e.g., a very recent competition experience might dominate responses or might be easier to recall than a

more distant experience) might also have influenced responses. Prolonged engagement with participants and the integration of multiple data collection points would be beneficial to overcome such limitations.

Further, studies explicitly examining children's preferences for parental involvement in sport have also focused exclusively upon the competition context (e.g., Knight et al., 2010, 2011; Omli & LaVoi, 2011). Due to their public and highly emotional environment, competitions provide excellent opportunities to examine parental involvement. But, as adult athletes, parents, and coaches have identified, parents also influence their children away from competitive situations (e.g., in and around training) and beyond the immediate sport context (e.g., at home) (Harwood & Knight, 2015). To further our understanding of the ways in which parents' influence children's sporting performance consideration must also be given to understanding children's thoughts regarding parental involvement across these various domains (Holt & Knight, 2014).

Some preliminary insights from children regarding the cross-domain influence of parents can be teased out of recent studies that have combined parents and children's views on parental involvement in sport (e.g., Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo & Fox, 2009; Knight & Holt, 2014). For example, Holt and colleagues (2009) examined parenting styles and practices in youth soccer through a season-long period, which comprised 56 interviews parents and an additional 34 interviews with the parents' female children. Holt and colleagues found that parents who adopted an autonomy-supportive parenting style were able to read their child's mood and engage in bidirectional communication, which influenced the timing and type of feedback they provided to their child. Children perceived these parenting practices, which penetrated all domains of the

children's sporting life, positively and indicated that these behaviors enhanced their sport experiences. However, Holt et al.'s (2009) study focused primarily upon the parent interviews, with the child interviews being used to create family profiles and help to identify similarities and differences between families. Consequently, children's views are unlikely to be fully explored in the findings.

The purpose of this study was to examine elite youth athletes' views on parental involvement in training contexts, competitive contexts, and at home, and to identify the influence different types of parental involvement across domains have on athletes' performance. Canoe slalom was chosen as an appropriate sport in which to conduct this study because it is a sport which demands high-levels of financial investment from parents, along with a substantial time commitment to transport children to training and competitions due to the limited numbers of facilities. Consequently, canoe slalom requires parents to be committed and involved. Additionally, the majority of parenting research to date has been conducted in "mainstream" sports, particularly tennis and football. One of the purported reasons for many of the negative parental behaviors in sport is parents' desire for their children to become professional athletes, and consequently earn large amounts of money and gain recognition (Holt & Knight, 2014). However, canoe slalom is a relatively young sport, which is not associated with large financial rewards or recognition for success. Thus, we were interested to see if differences would emerge in comparison to tennis and football, which are traditionally associated with fame and money. To address the purpose in this population, the following research questions were posed: 1) What behaviors do parents engage in at home, training, and competition relating to canoeing? And, 2)

How do parents' behaviors across different domains influence canoeists' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to their performance?

## Method

### Methodological Decisions and Philosophical Assumptions

To address the aims of this study, and ensure sufficient information would be gathered regarding the home, training, and competitive contexts, the decision was made to engage in data collection over a six-week period as the canoeists underwent a series of selection races for the Great Britain (GB) Junior Squad. During this six-week period, the squad of canoeists, from which the participants were selected, completed numerous training sessions together and travelled to various venues around the United Kingdom (UK) to engage in competition with and against each other. Thus, this period of time provided a unique opportunity for the research team to engage with all the participants on numerous occasions when they were training and competing. Specifically, the second author spent a total of 100 hours with the canoeists (at two competitions, two training weekends, and a week-long training camp), during which time he had ample opportunities to watch the participants' interactions with their parents (and other canoeists' and canoeists' parents) and also engage in informal chats with the participants. Through such engagement, the second author (who completed all the formal data collection) gained a greater understanding of the canoeing context, which facilitated the development of rapport with the participants and also aided his understanding of the experiences they were describing. A number of researchers have used such immersion in the field to gain deeper insights into different sports and cultures (Atkinson, 2012).



By developing such rapport with the participants and an understanding of the environment, in addition to observing canoeist-parent interactions, it was hoped that the participants would feel more comfortable or able to discuss both their positive and negative thoughts about their parents' involvement. Additionally, such engagement with the participants was sought to help the research team gain an in-depth understanding of each of the canoeists and their individual realities at the time of data collection. This study was approached from the interpretivist paradigm, adopting a relativist ontology and subjective or transactional epistemology (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). That is, the research team believes that there are no fixed realities, rather individuals experience different realities based upon their interpretations, which are influenced by their past experiences, personality, perceptions, interactions, and the social environment (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Thus, rather than seeking one “truth” we were interested in understanding the participants' experiences as they made sense to them at the time of data collect. Additionally, we recognise that our own values will influence and have influenced what is understood and thus we have played a role in co-creating the findings that are presented.

### **Participants**

British elite junior slalom canoeists ( $N = 8$ ; 7 male, 1 female;  $M = 15.30$  years old;  $SD = 0.98$ ) were purposefully sampled based on their levels and experiences in the sport and their presence at national selection camps. These eight athletes were selected from the small squad of canoeists located across the UK who were competing to represent Great Britain. All participants had competed at national levels for at least two years, and five of the canoeists had competed internationally for over a year.

## **Procedure**

Following receipt of institutional ethical approval, a member of the research team (who was working as a sport psychologist in canoe slalom) contacted a coach working for GB canoeing to facilitate the organization of the research project. The coach consented to members of the squad participating in the study. The coach supplied parents and athletes with letters detailing the study. Interested parents and athletes provided contact details to the research team and suitable times for initial interviews were arranged. In total, athletes participated in up to four interviews over a six-week period and completed a diary three days a week for the six-week period. This period included one week before, three weeks during, and two weeks after selection races for the GB Junior Squad.

### **Initial interviews.**

Prior to the first interview, all participants returned completed informed consent forms from their parents and provided informed assent to participate. The interview guide was also piloted before the first interviews. The pilot interviews were conducted with one international (male aged 16 years) and three national level youth sport participants (one male aged 16 years; two females, aged 14 years and 16 years) to assess whether questions elicited sufficient depth while also allowing the interviewer to practice his use of clarification and elaboration probes. Following the pilot interviews, several changes were made to the interview guide including the addition of questions to encourage greater reflection on parents' influences in participants' sport experience.

The final interview guide followed the format used in previous parenting research (e.g., Knight et al., 2010). It started with introductory questions then moved on to transition questions, followed by main questions, and finished with summary questions and recommendations. Introductory questions sought to identify pertinent demographic information, such as length of involvement in the sport and what led to their involvement. Transition questions focused on the involvement of each participant's parents in his or her sport. Participants were then asked about their parents' involvement in relation to training, competition, and at home. Participants were requested to identify the different behaviors their parents engaged in within these specific environments and to highlight the positive and negative consequences attributed to those behaviors. Finally, participants were asked to give recommendations regarding parental behaviors in each setting and summarize their general thoughts about their parents' involvement (see Appendix A for a copy of the interview guide). Following introductions and discussion regarding the purpose of the study, all initial interviews lasted between 25 and 66 minutes ( $M = 42$  minutes). All interviews were conducted in private and away from participants' parents.

### **Diaries and follow-up interviews.**

At the end of the initial interview, participants were provided with either paper diaries or a website address to access an online diary (depending on their preference) to complete over the six-week data-collection period (see Appendix B for an example of the diary questions). To ensure confidentiality, and to encourage participants to honestly disclose parental behaviors, if participants requested paper diaries they were given a separate diary (as an A5 booklet) for each day with an accompanying envelope. Participants were asked to complete their diary entries in

private and then seal them in the accompanying envelope immediately after completion. The participants then handed the sealed envelopes to the interviewer at scheduled meeting times.

Participants were asked to use the diaries to record specific types of parental behaviors they experienced along with the effect these behaviors had on their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Diaries were used to help guide the content of follow-up interviews, provide participants with opportunities to verbalize ongoing experiences, and to allow the research team to clarify any points that were unclear. After reviewing the diaries from each participant, follow-up interviews were conducted. These interviews sought to further explore the content of the diaries (which was often brief and limited in detail) and provide further opportunities for the participants to share their experience. A semi-structured interview guide was used to elicit the specific types of parental involvement in different contexts. These follow-up interviews varied in length from 12 to 45 minutes (depending on the extent to which participants wanted to elaborate on their diary entries).

## **Data Analysis**

Initial data analysis occurred throughout the process of data collection to ensure the interviewer remained immersed in the data and was able to ensure sufficient data was collected from the participants. Immediately following each interview, the audio files were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. These transcripts were then reviewed by the interviewer, who highlighted meaningful segments of data, identified areas for further exploration, and created memos identifying themes that appeared to be present. Following data collection, the

data (from diaries and interviews) from each participant were analysed by the first author following the steps proposed by Miles and Huberman (1992).

First the data set from each participant was coded, which occurred in three stages. Firstly, descriptive coding was conducted on each interview transcript and diary entry for one participant. During descriptive coding, raw data units that represented types of parental involvement the canoeist encountered and the influences of different behaviors were identified. For example, codes such as shouting encouragement, talking during run, giving congratulations after run, forgetting equipment, carrying boat were identified, along with consequences such as irritating, frustrating, happy, distracting, encouraging. The next step of coding, interpretive coding, involved the grouping of similar codes to allow for more abstract categories to be produced. For example, descriptive codes such as congratulations after a run, talking during run, and encouragement during a run were grouped together under the category of type and timing of feedback. Finally, pattern codes were identified to highlight the relationships between interpretive codes, with codes such as type and timing of feedback being grouped with reacting to child's emotions to create the code read and react to situations. Further, during pattern coding, the types of involvement and the consequences of involvement were linked to ensure that these were understood together.

Following coding, a data matrix for each participant was created based on the coded interview transcripts and diary entries. The initial matrix simply identified the pattern codes and associated descriptive and interpretive codes as described by the canoeists. This matrix was then expanded to provide an opportunity to examine the codes across contexts. In this instance the

matrix comprised a number of columns labelled with different domains (e.g., home, competition, and training). The pattern codes were then allocated within these different domains to provide a visual display of which behaviors were domain-specific and which behaviors occurred across domains.

The coding process and development of initial matrices was then repeated for each canoeist. Once individual matrices had been created for all the participants, these were compared and an overall matrix containing details of all the types of involvement and the consequences of involvement was created and the domains in which they occurred. These data were then transferred onto a time-ordered matrix to identify any temporal considerations in the data (e.g., was there a change in type of involvement over the six weeks?). Finally, the matrices were shared with the rest of the research team, who reviewed them and compared them to the interview transcripts and diary responses.

## **Methodological Rigor**

Steps taken to ensure the methodological rigor of this study were guided by Tracey's (2010) review of criteria underpinning "excellent qualitative work" (p.837). Specific criteria guiding this work included: rich rigor, achieved through the selection of an appropriate sample and multiple data collection techniques to gain meaningful data; credibility, demonstrated through continued engagement with the participants to gain their reflections on the developing finding and the integration of rich participant quotes and description; sincerity through the presentation of detailed information pertaining to each stage of method and the interviewer's continual engagement in self-reflection through journaling; and meaningful coherence through

the use of appropriate data collection methods to address the purpose of the study and integration with previous literature. For example, the interviewer spent considerable time in the canoeing environment to build rapport with the participants and to develop understanding of the canoeing culture. This immersion in the research environment, along with multiple contacts with participants in and around interviews, helped the interviewer in understanding the meaning of participants' words and phrases and to situate them in the context of parent-child interactions that occurred during the international squad selection phase. This prolonged engagement ensured that the data collected appropriately addressed the research aims, as well as provided detailed and abundant data.

## Results

Through the analyses of the data, it became apparent that participants desired or required certain types of parental involvement in each of the three different contexts. However, the canoeists also discussed types of involvement that they perceived to be positive across all the domains, and cross-domain involvement seemed to have the greatest influence on athletes' performances. In the following sections, types of parental involvement that influenced performance are presented under context headings; starting with the types of involvement that are desired across all contexts, the results then progress to types of involvement desired in two specific contexts, before ending with behaviours desired in only one context. A visual representation of the findings is presented in Figure 1.

When discussing their parents' involvement, participants were frequently asked to highlight behaviors that resulted in positive and negative performance consequences. However,

through the analysis process, it became apparent that there were certain types of involvement that were desired from the canoeists and were perceived to have a positive consequence on their performances. When these types of involvement were not adhered to or present, this was then deemed by the canoeists to have a negative consequence on their performance. Thus, rather than there being a clear distinction between positive behaviors and negative behaviors that parents displayed, it was the fulfilment or not desired involvement that appeared important. Thus, in the following sections, the types of involvement that were desired by the canoeists and perceived to have a positive influence on performance are presented. Examples of negative consequences arising when parents do not fulfil this type of involvement are provided within each of the categories.

## **Home-Training-Competition Involvement**

When discussing parental involvement, there were five types of involvement that were desired by canoeists across all three domains. These types of involvement appeared to transcend context, instead relating to the overall involvement and support parents provided to their children, which was perceived to influence their performances.

### **Allow athletes to focus on canoeing by providing practical support.**

When discussing the involvement of their parents across all three domains, participants continually returned to the importance of parents providing practical and logistical support to help the canoeists. Such support ranged from general parenting behaviour (e.g., cooking meals, washing clothes) to more sport-specific behaviors. Participant 3 said, “I see my mum and dad



generally there for support rather than performance enhancing... driving me to places.” Writing in his diary, Participant 1 explained:

At a competition, mum printed out a start list so I knew when my run was. It was reassuring because when I forget my run time I have to run round trying to find out when it is and potentially miss it. However, with the start list I always knew when my run was.

When considering the influence of such practical support on their performance, canoeists indicated that it was beneficial because it enabled them to focus their attention on training and competitive performances rather than other more menial tasks. For example, Participant 5 said about his mum providing him food for race day, “It’s really helpful and stuff, 'cause then I don’t have to... focus on err, like bothering about my food.”

### **Read and understand the situation and the athletes' response.**

Participants spent considerable time describing the different reactions they wanted and received from their parents in various situations (e.g., whether they had won, raced well, or raced poorly). For example, reflecting on a good run Participant 4 wrote in his diary, “My dad congratulated us on our first run, he said it was good and showed [us] how close we were to first place. This made me feel happy, it made me feel quite positive about my run.” In contrast, after a poor performance participants might desire different responses. As participant 8 explained:

If it’s [the performance] been good, like [they should] try to talk about it quite a bit like [say], “You've done really well” and like, be proud. But, if it’s been quite bad, then still try and talk a bit positive, but like erm...like just (pause) err understand how the athlete’s

feeling. Like, if they're not very happy, then... agree; like [say], “Oh, that weren't that good.” But then, be positive and say, “Ah, there's always next time.”

On examining these different explanations, it seemed that parents were deemed to have a positive influence on performance when they understood different situations and outcomes that arise in canoeing and tailor their comments and support to the athlete. For example, Participant 2 thought that his father was perceptive to his needs for space on race day, which he found helpful. He commented, “Sometimes I'm focused on the day, and sometimes I'm not. If I am, then he'll [dad] pick [up] on that and give me space... so I can focus.” By appropriately gauging athletes' emotions, parents helped to increase participants' perceptions of competence and motivation for canoeing. Participant 3 said:

Just seeing them recognise when you feel good about something that you've done, seeing that they think its good as well, just kinda gives you a bit of reassurance. ... I suppose it almost feels... good that you are impressing people in a way.

### **Developing a growth mindset through a task-involving climate.**

In addition to their desires for parents to react to their emotions, participants noted how parents helped them focus on opportunities to develop their skills. Participant 6 explained:

Well, usually my dad will come down and talk to me, and like tell me it was a good run, and I may have done this wrong, but I may have done this really well. And, I can easily do what I did wrong a lot better. So, the time [race outcome] might not mean so much.

By emphasising skill development, it seemed that parents helped the canoeists master their own performances while de-emphasizing comparisons with other competitors. For example Participant 6 said, “One thing he’s [dad] always said to me is, ‘Don’t worry about the outcome... what other people are doing.’ Which just helps ... which helps quite a lot.” He reiterated this point in his diary, writing, “[Dad] woke me up for training and again talked to me about making sure I was thinking just about my paddling [not comparing to others]. It is good to know he cares about my training even when he is ill.”

Canoeists discussed the positive influences such suggestions had on their motivation, pre-race anxiety, perceptions of pressure, and confidence. For example, Participant 7 outlined the pressure-reducing effects of her father’s comments:

I’ll be getting changed and he’ll [father] start saying, “You don’t need to be thinking about all the other people because it doesn’t matter what they’re doing because as long as you paddle your best... I don’t really care, and you’ll beat them anyway” and all this so ... it changes every time, but that’s the kind of basis of it. And, it takes away the pressure.

By consistently receiving the same message from her father that emphasized a task-involving environment, Participant 7 felt under less pressure to perform.

### **Value canoeing and understand the importance to canoeist.**

Whether discussing the home, training, or competitive environment, participants placed great value on their parents' presence and interest in their canoeing. Participant 3 wrote:

At the course, Paddle training. My mum asked how we got on in the session, positive. It happened when I got back to the cottage we were staying in. My mum, my dad, my brother and myself [were present]...err how it made me feel. It's good, it's nice that she takes an interest in how I do and how I feel that I do.

Participant 8 similarly liked the interest his father took in his canoeing, he said:

If there's a race on, and there is something else that they're [the family are] doing, he'll [father] come to watch me. Like, he always comes to watch me if I'm doing something like canoeing... he's given me priority. It's quite cool that like he puts me before other things.

Whether through their attendance or comments, demonstrating an interest in their canoeing and understanding how important it was to canoeists appeared central to increasing athletes' motivation and feelings of support. Participant 4 explained in his diary, "Positive. My dad said that if I don't warm up properly [at training] I will hurt myself. He has my best interest in mind. This happened after training. I felt supported; it showed he cares." However, one caveat to parents' interest was ensuring conversation was not overly focused on canoeing at home (see later section).

### **Willingness to adapt involvement.**

The final type of involvement participants' discussed across all three domains was that parents were flexible and able to adapt their involvement based on communication with athletes, coaches, or sport psychologists. Although athletes generally perceived their parents' current

involvement to be positive, several canoeists shared insights into how they or other members of their support team had worked to shape their parents' involvement. For example, when discussing his mother's post-race comments, Participant 5 commented, "All she would say is, 'You need to get on. Just like put it behind [you, and]... get on with your next run.'" When asked if these comments were ok, he continued to explain:

Yeah... it's good. I don't like her bothering about it because she's not my coach at the end of the day. Like, it's really annoying when your parents start trying to coach.... It happened last year a bit with my dad, but we sat him down, and we had a chat, and said like, "Right, you're not gonna coach me, like, at all. And, stay out of the way of coaching me. Don't be near me; don't give me any input." And he has done (pause) [The] same with my mum.

Other changes that canoeists requested related to specific types of involvement at competitions, such as their practical support or cheering during runs. For example, Participant 1 asked his mother for larger lunches on race days because he was always hungry. He said:

I have talked to my mum a bit about [having a bigger lunch].... We've organised what we're going to do differently about it.... I think it's good, like, that I can take an issue like that to my parents, and they'll listen, and try and do something about it.

Although participants' reasons for requesting changes differed, it seemed that by parents simply being open to and changing their involvement resulted in positive changes in canoeists' motivation, perceived competence, concentration, and anxiety levels. For example, Participant 5 explained that when competing he could hear his Dad's voice throughout the race and found it

difficult to concentrate on technically challenging sections. He told his Dad “to pipe down a bit and just [shout] like on the open bits,” so he was not distracted. On hearing his Dad shout at preferred times, He said, “it just made me go for it a bit more.”

## **Training-Competition Involvement**

In addition to the five types of involvement participants liked across all three domains, canoeists highlighted a further three types of involvement that they perceived to have a positive influence in the training and competition environment.

### **Match encouragement to canoeists' needs.**

Participants emphasized the encouragement their parents provided before, during, and after training and competition. For example, Participant 1 wrote in his diary, “Positive. Mum told me I was looking sharper as the week went on. In flat when I was packing my kit. It gave me confidence because selection is approaching and it is nice knowing I am improving going in to the race.” Canoeists perceived such support to positively influence their motivation, confidence, and perceived competence.

However, these benefits were only realised when the encouragement provided matched the participants' needs. For example, before runs in training or competition, some athletes highlighted the importance of parents providing simple consistent motivational comments. Participant 1 said, “Sometimes before a race or something, dad'll say these little phrases that he has, and they sort of get me into gear.” Such encouragement was deemed to help motivate and enhance his focus. However, other canoeists described a preference for silence and space before

runs, as Participant 3 said, “[parents should] just give someone else space when they need it.”

Similarly, during a run some canoeists perceived that any encouragement was satisfactory because they could block out the noise. For others, however, the timing of encouragement in relation to the difficulty of race sections largely dictated whether encouragement had beneficial or detrimental effect on performance. Participant 5 explained:

Well... its just like, “Oh, mum’s shouting at me!” And then I end up losing it... just lose a bit of focus. And, I end up clipping a gate or something like that, and getting a... two-second penalty or something like that. Just things like that. On the sprint, err it just kinda urges you on if you know... other people want you to win as well. And, it just really gives you that push.

### **Trust athletes to prepare.**

Although participants placed great value on the practical support they received from their parents across different domains, canoeists also wanted parents to trust them to be prepared for both training and competition. For example, when explaining why his father’s involvement was positive, Participant 6 commented:

My dad doesn’t make me do anything. I just say, “I’m gonna do this, this, and this.” And he’ll say, “Oh. Ok, that’s fine...”. As long as I’ve worked it out with my coach, he doesn’t take much notice. He’ll just make sure I know what I’m doing and that’s it.

By having parents place their trust in their athletes, canoeists felt that they were able to focus more successfully upon their performances.

In contrast, if athletes were not trusted to prepare and parents were nagging them or directing their preparation, athletes often appeared frustrated. Participant 2 said, “It happened earlier ‘cause he [dad] was like, 'Bring your kit down with you.’ But, I didn’t wanna because I wanted it to dry.... So, he was just trying to force me to move my kit.... It was a bit annoying.” He continued, “I just want to do my own thing rather than do what my dad wants me to do... I guess a little more sort of trust would be nice.” Similarly, Participant 4 wrote in his diary:

Negative. My dad persisted in nagging me to get ready and go to training. He kept on repeating that I was going to be late, even though I had lots of time. [It made me feel] Annoyed, angry, fed up. Let me get on with my own thing.

### **Understand canoeing is a social activity.**

The final consideration for parental involvement across training and competitive environments was providing athletes with opportunities to socialize with other canoeists. This desire was apparent when Participant 4 shared the following example of positive involvement from his father:

My dad was good yesterday... normally when they come they try to push me to get home sooner rather than later. But after our run yesterday we were hanging around and soaking it up... with [name of another athlete]. So, we were just talking and having a good time. He [dad] wasn’t pushing to try and get home or anything.

Throughout the interviews it became apparent that, although the participants were very focused in training and competitions, they also saw canoeing as a social activity and having opportunities



to relax increased enjoyment and helped them relax. For example, throughout his interviews Participant 3 frequently returned to this issue, explaining that he became frustrated when, “my dad wants to drive home and watch the soccer and just... trying to like rush me when I'm getting changed,” but that he appreciated when his dad let him, “talk to people afterwards... I don't really get the chance to talk to them before or during. So, it's like, I want to talk to a couple of people.”

## **Home-Competition Involvement**

Participants described two types of involvement that was desired in both the home and competition environments. These types of involvement, managing own anxiety and encouraging positive perspective taking, are discussed in the following sections.

### **Managing own anxiety.**

The canoeists explained that, at home, prior to competitions, and on arrival and throughout attendance at competitions, parents' managing their own anxiety and creating a relaxed environment was particularly important. For example, Participant 1 described the helpful interactions he and his parents had at home during the trials period:

It's been quite relaxed... quite chilled out I suppose. Just like as long as I'm in [back home] at the right times and stuff... Basically chilled out really. So, I can relax, lay back, and not have to think too much about the race at the weekend. So, I'm not building up the nerves and everything. So, (pause) it's been good.

By remaining calm and minimizing their own anxiety throughout the period, it seemed that parents were able to help their children remain relaxed, which was thought to help performance.

In contrast, canoeists explained that if parents were unable to maintain their anxiety at home or around the competition, their anxiety could be transferred to them. Participant 4 explained:

We'll drive there, and he gets quite stressed out in the morning 'cause I'm not very good at getting up like most teenagers. So, he gets pretty stressed out... especially at competition[s].... He's goin' [saying] "You're gonna be late! You're gonna be late!" He just sort of winds you [me] up a bit, but (pause) [Interviewer: So, what are you thinking or feeling?]. It's just like "We're not actually going to be late, so why are you messing like this? Just shut up!" I just try to blank it out because I need to do all this stuff before I go [leave the house], like prepare my kit, prepare myself.

### **Encouraging positive perspective taking.**

Participants shared several examples of the positive influences parents could have at home by helping them put poor performances in perspective. This was particularly important for Participant 4, who said the best involvement from his parents after competitions was that:

They'd be pretty sympathetic I guess erm... if you've had a bad run, normally they might just be sort of, "Ah well, it's only so and so... It's only one day." "It's only one race; it doesn't really matter." "Better luck next time" and then do something else.

However, if such comments were not appropriately timed, parents did frustrate or disappoint athletes. For example, when talking about his parents giving encouragement straight after a race, Participant 4 said:

If I've got off the water and we've had a bad run, a really bad run and I'm steaming [angry], you get off the water and you dread just going to them [parents], because whatever I'll say, they'll be like 'Ahh, that was alright wasn't it? That was good.' And, I was like, 'It wasn't really, that was crap!'... So, like, the positive bit annoys me.

Participant 4 continued, "Really what you want is a fight at the end of your [bad] run, because you just feel annoyed. And then, they're [parents] more the opposite. So, I guess you're thinking 'just shut up and leave me alone.'"

When parents appropriately timed their comments, their assurances had numerous benefits, such as reaffirming athletes' perceptions of competence and protecting their confidence. As Participant 1 explained:

I think overall it's just been reassurance I think. They did also tell me that I did some of the moves quite well... just messing up on other bits. And, I think they also like saying, "You know, it doesn't matter about the percentage. There's plenty more races at [name of venue] to achieve that."

For Participant 8, such perspective helped him to move on from his losses and look towards his next run (race):

If it was a really good run... and like they'll come down to the finish and, like, congratulate me and that, and say, "That was a good run." If not [it did not go well], then they'll just stand about as I'm coming up, and I'll just shake my head or something, and they'll be like, "Oh well, its not exactly important" something like that. "You've got another run...". So... I'd take that in from them and just take a bit of advice... it encourages me to forget about it really.

## **Training**

In addition to cross-domain influences, participants highlighted one specific type of involvement in training and another in the home environment that influenced their performance. Within training, canoeists placed a specific influence upon the provision of motivation and constructive evaluation.

### **Providing motivational and constructive feedback.**

The participants' shared many stories detailing their parents' active involvement in training. For example, it was common for parents to attend training, provide verbal support, and offer some feedback or evaluation after athletes had completed runs or sessions. When describing the feedback they received, canoeists discussed the important role motivational but constructive feedback played in enhancing self-confidence and perceived competence. This input stood out for Participant 5 who noted the following as positive involvement from his mum:

She said, like, as the week was going on, every session I was looking just that bit more sharper out of every gate; just speeding up faster every time. So, it's good. 'Cause coming

up to the important selection race you want to know that you're not getting slower at some rate, and it even helps to know that possibly you're getting just that bit faster.

Participant 1 shared similar experiences, explaining that she felt more confident when:

The other day I had a poor session and mum goes like, “Well, it wasn’t that good, but you've got to remember that you've done a load of other good sessions, and you're bound to have a bad session in the week.” So, I think that also made me feel better about doing the bad session, and it didn’t let it get to me before selection.

## **Home**

Finally, there was one type of involvement, attending to their holistic development, that was only discussed in relation to the home context.

### **Attending to holistic development.**

Participants indicated that they preferred their parents' involvement when the focus at home was not solely on canoeing. Participant 7 shared, “I think, because I spend quite a lot of my time doing canoeing, it’s almost good to have something else that you can think about. Say, for just an hour a day, not [to] think about canoeing.” Participant 3 further explained, “We'd just talk about how someone’s day went, like current events, anything really umm (pause), what’s happened on telly. Just random things; anything and everything.” When asked if this involvement was positive, he responded, “Yeah. Going from the racing atmosphere, and post-racing atmosphere, to sort of just like normal life, I guess is quite nice to have.” Such an approach appeared to ensure that participants could relax at home and canoeing was not all consuming. Athletes

particularly appreciated such an approach when canoeing was not going well, as Participant 1 commented, “I think it’s helpful when your parents -- say your having a bad time [canoeing] then your parents take your mind off it, and help you think about something else.”

In addition to helping to take participants' minds off canoeing, by focusing on the participants' upcoming exams and revision (which immediately followed the selection period), parents were also inadvertently (or perhaps intentionally) reducing the pressure the canoeists associated with their sport. For example, when talking about parental pressure accompanying his upcoming selection race, Participant 5 said:

I don’t think they've really said anything, because I've had quite a lot of exams over the last few weeks so. So, basically, I've been basically focusing on the exams, and they've just been telling me, “Ah, revise”, “go do some revision,” “stop playing on your Xbox™” (laugh). That’s all that’s said all week (laugh).

## Discussion

The purposes of this study were to examine eight elite youth canoeists' views on parental involvement across home, training, and competitive contexts and to identify how different types of involvement influenced athletes' performances. The participants discussed a various types of parental involvement that were displayed across all three domains. Athletes indicated that these different types of involvement were beneficial because they helped to enhance their confidence, motivation, and perceptions of competence; reduce feelings of anxiety or pressure; and facilitate required focus. Overall, the findings of this study shed light on the extensive influence parents had on lives of the eight canoeists beyond the competitive context and provides evidence that

parents, when involved appropriately, can positively influence youth athletes' sporting experiences.

Given the emphasis on positive parental involvement in this study of eight high-level canoeists, it is appropriate to compare these findings to Harwood and Knight's (2015) position paper on sport parenting expertise. Of particular interest is the extent to which the positive types of parental involvement identified in canoe slalom align with the six postulates Harwood and Knight presented based on studies conducted almost exclusively in soccer and tennis. In general, there are many similarities between the findings of this study and Harwood and Knight's postulates. For example, consistent with postulate one, which is supported by substantial research (e.g., Gould et al., 2006, 2008; Knight et al., 2010, 2011; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005), the parents in this study were appraised positively by their children because they provided appropriate types of social support. Specifically, for the athletes in this study, parents demonstrated suitable support by taking an interest in canoeing; providing practical support at home, training, and competition; and also by giving motivational and constructive evaluations during training. In line with Keegan, Spray, Harwood, and Lavalley's (2010) findings, by providing such support, parents positively influence their children's motivation, while also increasing perceptions of competence, confidence, and reducing anxiety.

Additionally, reinforcing the sentiments of tennis players (Knight et al., 2010; Knight & Holt, 2014) and other youth team athletes (Knight et al., 2011; Omli & Weise-Bjornstal, 2011), the participants discussed their positive view of cheering and encouragement during training and competition, when it was appropriately timed. Thus, rather than implementing wide sweeping

bans on parent communication (which are increasingly commonplace in youth sport), it would appear that positive outcomes may arise if coaches, practitioners, and organizers work with parents to ensure they understand the importance of appropriate timing and phrasing of comments during competitions. After all, if these athletes succeed on the international stage, they will likely compete in noisy and distracting environments and having opportunities to develop strategies to cope with such conditions early in their careers might help developing-athletes enhance their future performances.

Though there may be some benefit for athletes from learning to compete in noisy environments, it is well known that “inappropriate” parental comments can have hugely detrimental influences on youth athletes, particularly leading to perceptions of pressure and pre-competitive anxiety (e.g., Bois, Lalanne, & Delforge, 2009; Leff & Hoyle, 1997). Interestingly, in the current study, the main criticism of parents' comments was that they were distracting rather than pressuring. Thus, it appears that, at least for these athletes, the timing of comments rather than content was most important. Thus, addressing and reducing poorly timed or delivered comments should be a focus of interventions, but as is apparent in the current study, individual athletes' specific preferences and perceptions of parental encouragement differ. Specifically, it appeared that the athlete's own perception of his or her performance and the timing of the encouragement (in relation to a performance) influenced what encouragement they wanted from their parents. This finding provides further support for the importance of parents talking with their children to identify their specific wants and needs (Knight & Holt, 2014) and to communicate with them to assess perceptions of feedback and encouragement (Harwood & Knight, 2015).



Although canoeists spent time discussing the encouragement their parents' provided, they appeared to place greater emphasis on their parents' provision of practical and information support than emotional support. Researchers have previously identified the central and important role that parents have in providing youth athletes with emotional support, particularly in the form of comfort and commiseration if they have performed poorly (e.g., Knight et al., 2010, 2011; Lauer et al., 2010b; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). However, in the current study, rather than emphasizing the need for parents to provide comfort after a poor performance, participants spoke highly of their parents' ability to help them to contextualize and interpret their performances in a developmental or incremental manner. Specifically, by creating a task-involving climate and de-emphasising ego-involvement, parents encouraged their child to adopt a growth mindset (Dweck, 2008). Researchers have documented the benefits of both developing a growth mindset and adopting task-goals (through the support of a task-involving climate) across a variety of achievement domains (e.g. Dweck, 2008; Keegan et al., 2010), including the sport context (Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavalley, 2009; O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2012, 2014).

In this study, canoeists reported numerous psychological benefits to parents' effort-based, self-referent, and improvement-oriented evaluations and comments across the training, competition, and home contexts. Parents, acting as interpreters of their children's sport performances (through their words and actions; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004), seemed to increase participants' confidence, reduce canoeists' pre-race anxieties and perceptions of pressure, and help facilitate and maintain athletes' task-focused motivation. These findings, in combination with previous studies of parental involvement indicate that parents can have pervasive, positive

influences on children's sport performances and wellbeing, particularly when they shape athletes' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors through appropriate motivational climates and social support (Keegan et al., 2010; 2011; O'Rourke et al., 2012, 2014).

In the current study, the influence of parental involvement on children's sport experiences also appeared to be largely dictated by the extent to which it fulfilled canoeists' basic psychological needs (i.e., competence, autonomy, and relatedness) as conceptualized in self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). For example, parents facilitated athletes' competence through encouragement and appropriately timed feedback, autonomy by giving children time and space at competitions and trusting them to prepare, and relatedness by allowing social time with peers after races and training sessions. Athletes seemed to value parents helping them meet these needs because they reported numerous positive outcomes in response. Thus, encouraging such involvement from parents appears important. However, the suggestion of encouraging parental involvement likely runs counter to the desires of some coaches and organizations (cf. Holt & Knight, 2014) who prefer parents to have minimal involvement in their children's sport careers. However, this research is evidence of the central and positive influence parents can have when they are actively and appropriately involved in their children's sport lives.

Parenting style was not explicitly examined within this study. Nevertheless, when considering the current findings, it appears that many of the behaviors the canoeists enjoy would align with an autonomy-supportive parenting style. This parenting style has received some support within the sport parenting literature (Holt et al., 2009; Sapieja, Dunn, & Holt, 2011) and

was recommended by Harwood and Knight (2015) as a key component of sport parenting expertise. In this study, canoeists reported that parents who relinquished their control over their children in competitions and training by changing their involvement to align with their children's needs, trusting children to prepare, and, to a lesser extent, providing opportunity for athletes to socialize were thought to have a positive influence on performance. Such behaviors appear to fit with an autonomy-supportive parenting style, in which parents empower their children to make decisions, solve problems, and do not force them into actions (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Holt et al., 2009). By engaging in such behaviors, parents limited the extent to which they would frustrate or distract the athletes and helped to maintain athletes' motivation, enjoyment, and focus.

The most apparent manner in which parents could have a detrimental influence upon the canoeists' performances was when they were unable to manage their own anxiety. Such anxieties generally seemed to stem from parents feeling rushed or from worrying that their children would not arrive at the competition on time. Thus, while the parents appeared able to relinquish some control over their children, they also found themselves succumbing to some of the competition and organizational stressors (e.g., travel, planning, and logistics) that have previously been reported within the sport parenting literature (Harwood & Knight, 2009a; 2009b). Such findings may explain why parents asserted control over canoeists to organize them (e.g., nagging at home before training) and why parents seemed strict on time prior to and following competitions (e.g., to minimise or cope with parental stressors). This finding reinforces the need for parents to develop strategies to manage such stressors to be able to best support their children in sport (Postulate 5, Harwood & Knight, 2015).

## **Applied Implications**

The findings of this study provide valuable information for sport psychologists, coaches, and canoe associations in terms of facilitating positive parental involvement within elite canoeing. At an organisational level, the results provide an impetus for offering educational material to parents who are transitioning with their child into more specialized stages of commitment to the sport (Côté, 1999). The direct insights and voices of children present parents with empowering and informative parameters within which to support their child-athlete in various contextual roles. Sport psychologists working at a more local level with athletes and parents could use illustrations of optimal support, communication, and home-based behavior to help parents appreciate their holistic roles in assisting their child-athlete's personal, performance, and social needs. In the absence of, or in conjunction with, sport psychologists, coaches can also apply our findings in order to facilitate their relationships with parents, and help parents to understand how they can effectively navigate and contribute to the elite canoeing environment as a valued stakeholder.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

The results from the current study support many previous findings in soccer and tennis. Thus, as the body of evidence regarding parenting in sport grows it is increasingly apparent that although there are many idiosyncrasies in different sports, there are also many similarities. Nevertheless, the results of this study must be considered within both British and canoeing cultures, and researchers intending to apply these findings to develop parental support programs in other sports and cultures should bear this in mind. Although this study has expanded the types

of sport in which parental research has been conducted, the recommendation voiced by Gould et al. (2008) that there is a need to study parenting across more sports and cultures is still applicable.

The current research traced the experiences of elite junior slalom canoeists over six weeks using diaries and a multiple-interview protocol, which helped to ensure an in-depth understanding of parental involvement in this sport. However, the engagement of each of the participants varied across the six weeks, particularly with regards to the detail provided in diary entries. Thus, it is possible that participants did not disclose all pertinent information regarding to parental involvement. Further, it is possible that the canoeists did not feel that they could reveal details that might portray their parents in a negative light or they might have thought they had to provide specific answers, which may have resulted in the general positive tone of the responses. Extending the time spent with the participants to further facilitate the interviewer-participant relationship might be useful for future research to overcome this issue. Additionally, providing a completely anonymous means through which participants can share negative experiences (e.g., online with no identifying details) might also provide a more detailed understanding of negative experiences with parents.

Gaining an understanding of specific parental involvements across several contexts and during a highly pressurized time period could be valuable for coaches and sport psychologists who work within youth canoe slalom. Nevertheless, the specific focus on children's views in this study came at a cost of not understanding parents' beliefs and values, which shape their behaviors towards their children as well as the intra-family dynamics that provide meaning to

parental behaviors and parent-child interactions. Future research should seek to triangulate coaches' and athletes' views of positive and negative behaviors with parents' experiences of youth sport stressors to highlight areas in need of change at the individual (parenting behaviors, child's behaviors), group (training group practices), and organizational levels to improve youth sport participants' sport experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Eight elite slalom canoeists offered their views on parental involvement in their sport participation and the influence such involvement had on their performance. Canoeists identified context-specific and cross-context behaviors and associated influences that occurred in and around training, competition, and at home. Parents were reported to influence participants' perception of competence, confidence, anxiety, focus, and motivation, as well as being perceived to directly help (or hinder) performance. The results can aid the development of sport-specific parent education programmes for canoe slalom and offer insight for parents, sport psychologists, and coaches into factors that positively aid athletes' performance. The results indicate the need for youth sport parent researchers to extend their research efforts to consider the broader influences parents have in sport, beyond competition settings.

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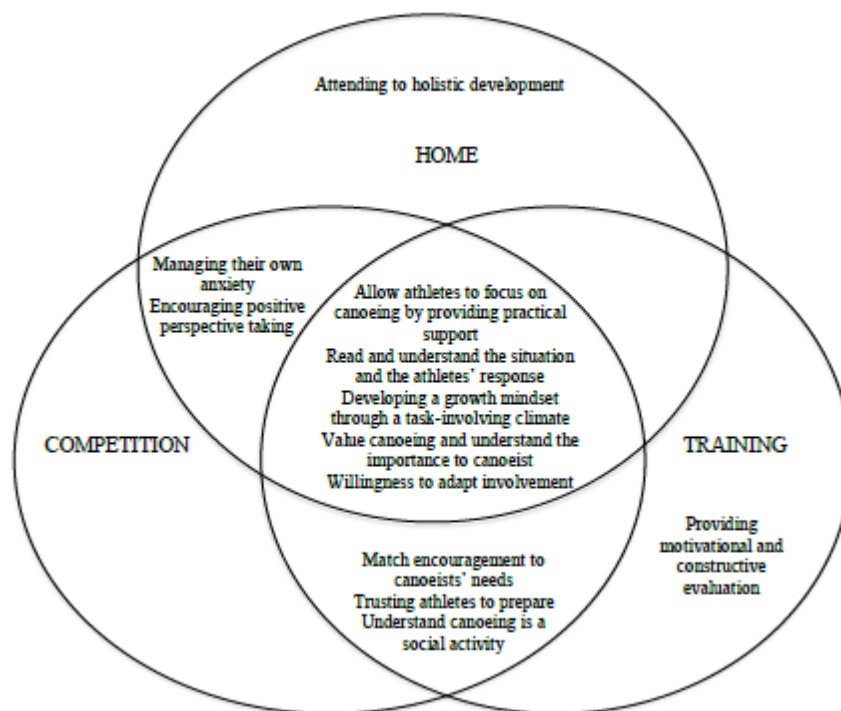


Figure 1. Positive parental involvement across domains