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Understanding the Behaviours Employed by Parents to Support the Psychological Development of Elite Youth Tennis Players in England

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20 **Abstract**

21 The current study had two objectives: (1) to explore which psychological skills (e.g., self-talk
22 and imagery) and characteristics (e.g., motivation and focus) (PSCs) parents deemed important
23 for their children's development, and (2) to investigate and understand the parental behaviours
24 that supported the growth or development of these PSCs. A nine-month qualitative study
25 comprising observations of and semi-structured interviews with 15 parents of 11 British male
26 elite youth tennis players (8-15 years of age) took place. Results suggested that parents were
27 sceptical of the development of psychological skills due to (1) a perceived inability to support
28 the development effectively, (2) a misconception of psychological skills, and (3) concerns about
29 unnecessary pressure. Despite this, parents reported the use of four behaviours in an effort to
30 develop psychological characteristics within their children, including (1) talking about valuable
31 psychological characteristics, (2) intentionally creating learning opportunities, (3) enabling
32 athletes to go the extra mile, and (4) fostering developmentally beneficial peer relationships.
33 Although well intended, these behaviours were usually informed by intermittent self-education,
34 sometimes resulting in unwanted consequences such as the establishment of performance
35 orientated climates. The results of this study add to the youth sport literature by providing insight
36 into sport parents' perceptions of PSCs, as well as the behaviours they employed to support their
37 children's psychological development. Additionally, it reinforces the need for more formalised
38 parental education opportunities to support parents' positive involvement in their children's
39 sporting lives.

40 **Keywords:** Critical Realism; Sport Parenting; Talent Development; Youth Sport

41 Understanding the Behaviours Employed by Parents to Support the Psychological Development
42 of Elite Youth Tennis Players in England

43 The importance of athletes' psychological development, specifically psychological skills
44 and characteristics (PSCs), in determining and maintaining elite athletic performance has long
45 been evidenced through empirical research (Holt et al., 2017; Orlick & Partington, 1998). In fact,
46 extensive research has affirmed the supposition that well-developed PSCs distinguish successful
47 from less successful athletes (e.g., Gould et al., 2002; Van Yperen, 2009). Informed by a
48 systematic review of the talent development literature, Dohme et al. (2017) defined
49 psychological characteristics (PCs), such as self-confidence, independence, and resilience as
50 trait-like dispositions that can be regulated or enhanced through systematic development, while
51 psychological skills (PSs), such as relaxation, performance routines, and goal-setting were
52 defined as athletes' ability to use learned methods to regulate or enhance their PCs.

53 In the last decade, studies have investigated the importance of PSCs for the successful
54 and holistic development of youth athletes (e.g., Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; MacNamara et al.,
55 2010a). Developing youth athlete's PSCs is particularly important given they are often striving to
56 excel in school and sport (i.e., maintain a dual career). Despite the European Union suggesting
57 that efforts should be made to provide specific support to dual career athletes (Stambulova &
58 Wylleman, 2019), this means that these athletes are often faced with competing demands that can
59 be challenging to balance (Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015). Such demands are particularly
60 enhanced during periods of transition, such as when athletes are moving from one age group to
61 another in sport or changing schools, and occur concurrently with changes in psychological,
62 psychosocial, and financial developments (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). If athletes cannot
63 successfully manage or appropriately prioritise their competing demands, it can result in early

64 dropout, burnout, athlete overload, and increased injury risk (e.g., McCormack & Walseth, 2013;
65 Stambulova et al., 2015; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019).

66 To limit these negative consequences and instead harness a wide range of positive
67 internal and external assets (e.g., Bean et al., 2018; Holt et al., 2017), research highlights the
68 importance of preparing youth athletes for anticipated future challenges (MacNamara, et al.,
69 2010a). One approach is by proactively equipping youth athletes with PSCs (MacNamara et al.,
70 2010b). Despite vast amounts of research supporting this contention (e.g., Cook et al., 2014;
71 Harwood, 2008), a degree of divergence regarding the specific PSCs that should be developed
72 exists. Such divergence limits the accessibility and practical application of this information for
73 individuals aiming to provide high quality, developmentally rich experiences to children in and
74 through sport. In an effort to overcome this limitation, Dohme et al. (2019) conducted a second
75 systematic review of the talent development literature aiming to identify which PSCs should be
76 developed to facilitate youth athletes' development. In total, eight PSs (goal-setting, imagery,
77 relaxation, (pre-) performance routines, realistic self-evaluation, social support seeking,
78 maintaining a sense of balance, and self-talk) and 11 PCs (self-confidence, a hard-work ethic,
79 emotional control, interpersonal competencies, independence, sport intelligence, motivation,
80 competitiveness, positivity, resilience, and focus) were identified.

81 Literature examining PSCs within youth athletes clearly highlights the importance of
82 their early and systematic development to increase youth athletes' likelihood to overcome
83 challenges and, subsequently, achieve athletic and personal excellence and welfare (MacNamara,
84 et al., 2010a). It is widely accepted that PSCs are not fixed, but instead malleable and affected by
85 environmental and social influences (Gould et al., 2002). For instance, Gould et al. (2002) noted
86 that athletes' psychological development was shaped by a number of environmental and social
87 factors including the community, family, non-sport personnel (e.g., friends and teachers), sport

88 environment personnel (e.g., coaches and teammates), and the sport process (e.g., competitions
89 and sport organisations). In particular, coaches and parents have been identified as most
90 influential on athletes' psychological development (Holt, 2016).

91 Recognising the influence coaches can have, vast amounts of research have investigated
92 coaches' behaviours aimed at fostering youth sport participants' psychological development
93 (e.g., Bean et al., 2018; Falcão et al., 2019; Koh et al., 2017). In contrast, far less attention has
94 been given to parents' role in children's psychological development. This is despite an
95 understanding that sport parenting expertise increases "the chances for children to achieve their
96 sporting potential, have a positive psychological experience, and *develop a range of positive*
97 *developmental outcomes*" (Harwood & Knight, 2015, p. 25, emphasis added). Particularly, little
98 attention has been given to understanding how specific parental behaviours might influence
99 children's psychological development (Harwood et al., 2019). In this instance, behaviours are
100 defined "as intentional yet natural activities and interactions that foster development" (Harwood
101 et al., 2019, p. 4).

102 One known exception to this is Tamminen and Holt's (2012) work on the development of
103 adolescent coping skills, which highlighted that parents provided coping support strategies aimed
104 at guiding athletes' attitudes and consequent behaviours. These strategies included behaviours
105 such as providing perspective, dosing the experience of stress, and questioning to encourage
106 reflection. Additionally, a study of elite British canoeists highlighted the positive and negative
107 impact that different parental behaviours displayed at home, in training, and at competitions had
108 upon athletes' PSCs (Knight et al., 2016). For instance, by creating a task-focused climate,
109 displaying trust in athletes, and encouraging positive perspective taking, parents could influence
110 canoeist's focus, motivation, confidence, perceptions of competence, and a growth mindset

135 The current study comprises one part of a larger research project that was designed to
136 understand elite youth tennis players' psychological development in England, prior to enhancing
137 it through an athlete-informed mental skills training programme (cf., Dohme, Bloom, Piggott, &
138 Backhouse, in press). As athletes' psychological development is embedded in a complex social
139 system, the philosophical assumptions of ontological critical realism and epistemological
140 constructionism were followed to investigate this topic (Ronkainen et al., 2019). The primary
141 objective of critical realism is to develop an understanding of phenomena by researching the
142 contexts (i.e., specific settings, such as a tennis club) and mechanisms (i.e., processes, such as
143 parents' behaviours) that interact with one another to produce certain outcomes (e.g., PSCs). The
144 current study was embedded in one private English tennis club that focused on developing young
145 players aspiring to higher levels of competition. In total, 170 (120 male, 50 female) athletes,
146 ranging from 3 to 15 years of age, trained regularly at the club. From these 170 athletes, 11
147 British male players, including two sets of brothers, were classified as potential elites due to their
148 current ranking in the top 15 of their respective age groups in the country (Swann et al., 2015).
149 These players regularly competed at county, national, and regional competitions. Despite various
150 contextual factors influencing these athletes' psychological development, the current study
151 explored the behaviours athletes' parents employed to support their psychological development.
152 Engaging in this process was fundamental before developing, implementing, and evaluating the
153 athlete-informed mental skills training programme.

154 **Participants**

155 Participants were 15 parents (7 mothers, 8 fathers, $M_{\text{age}} = 48$, $SD = 6.16$) of the
156 aforementioned elite athletes. Except for three athletes, both mother and father participated.
157 Thirteen parents were British and two Polish. Apart from two parents, all had completed
158 University degrees in subjects such as law, finance, and medicine; and, apart from one mother,

159 had been exposed to competitive performance environments during their youth in contexts such
160 as tennis, squash, equestrian, athletics, and music.

161 Given that qualitative research is a subjective process and considering the embeddedness
162 of the first author within the club environment, it is important to note that she has extensive
163 tennis experience herself, competing nationally from the ages of 4 to 20 and qualifying as a
164 tennis coach. She has also led international coach and athlete education programs that were
165 informed and evaluated through qualitative research methods. The second author holds
166 considerable experience conducting research on and has coached youth sport for over 15 years.
167 The third author has conducted vast amounts of qualitative research on youth sport parents and
168 also has extensive tennis experience, growing up playing competitive tennis and coaching tennis
169 for 15 years.

170 **Procedure**

171 Following approval by the University's ethics committee, the performance coach of the
172 researched club was contacted as he had agreed to serve as the gatekeeper for this study. He
173 informed the athletes and their parents about the purpose of the study and disseminated
174 information and consent form packages that included parent and athlete information sheets,
175 parent consent forms, and athlete assent forms. Parents whose signed consent and assent forms
176 were returned prior to the researcher's time at the club were included in the study.

177 **Data Collection**

178 Data were collected over a nine-month period through observations and semi-structured
179 interviews. During the first four months, the first author spent every Wednesday and Thursday
180 afternoon at the club acting as a 'participant-as-observer' to establish authentic relationships with
181 the participants (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Specifically, she functioned as a hitting partner of the
182 group, allowing for frequent informal conversations with parents before, during, and after

183 training sessions, as well as ‘in situ’ observations. Despite fostering rapport with the parents,
184 being a ‘participant-as-observer’ limited the researcher’s ability to make fully conscious
185 observations, as well as record them in great depth. Consequently, an ‘observer-as-participant’
186 approach was adopted for the final five months of this study, allowing the researcher to engage
187 in sustained dialogue with the parents while moving around the researched environment more
188 freely (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Over the nine-months, the researcher spent 172.5 hours in the
189 club environment and 13 hours at tournaments that were accompanied by parents. In total, this
190 yielded 38 pages of field notes, within which the researcher recorded parental behaviours that
191 were perceived to have the potential to develop or grow any of the 19 PSCs identified in Dohme
192 et al. (2019).

193 In addition to observing parents and engaging them in informal conversations, each
194 parent (n = 15) took part in a semi-structured interview that was audio recorded and transcribed
195 verbatim. Interviewing commenced after the first four months of this study to ensure rapport
196 between the researcher and parents had been established. On average interviews lasted 72
197 minutes (SD = 18 minutes), yielding 485 pages of interview transcripts that were stored using the
198 computer software NVivo10. Each interview consisted of open-ended questions and basic tasks.
199 Specifically, after easing participants into the interview process by asking them about their
200 personal background, parents were encouraged to share their perceptions about the importance of
201 mental qualities (i.e., PSCs) in light of children’s athletic and personal development. All parents
202 believed that “the mental side of the game” was important for the attainment and maintenance of
203 athletic and personal success, as well as athletes’ welfare. Following, parents were asked to
204 outline which PSCs they deemed important for the development of youth tennis players. The
205 named PSCs were recorded on post-it notes and discussed to establish a shared understanding
206 (e.g., “What does ‘focus’ mean to you? What does a ‘focused’ athlete look like?”).

207 After participants were given the opportunity to speak freely and without bias about the
208 PSCs they valued, they were provided with a copy of Dohme et al.'s (2019) diagram outlining
209 the 19 PSCs believed to be facilitative of youth athletes' development. The PSCs were then
210 compared to the PSCs identified by parents and any additional PSCs discussed. Following the
211 establishment of a shared understanding of all PSCs, participants were asked to highlight PSCs
212 they explicitly sought to develop in green, implicitly or unconsciously developed in yellow, and
213 did not seek to develop in red. Afterwards, parents were encouraged to explain how they
214 developed the PSCs highlighted in green and yellow (e.g., "You outlined that you aim to instil a
215 hard-work ethic in your child. Could you explain to me how you go about this?) and why they
216 did not develop the PSCs highlighted in red (e.g., "You indicated that you are not necessarily
217 trying to instil emotional control in your child. Why is this the case?").

218 **Data Analysis**

219 Data were analysed following the procedures suggested by Miles et al. (2014), utilising a
220 combination of deductive and inductive coding. The first author began this process by using
221 descriptive coding, which involved identifying raw data units that related to parents' perceptions
222 of PSCs, strategies they used to develop them, and their sources of information. Next,
223 interpretive coding, which involved grouping similar raw data units together into more abstract
224 categories occurred. For instance, similar types of parental behaviours were grouped together to
225 create specific categories. All codes and categories were presented to the co-authors, who
226 functioned as critical friends, and discussed any discrepancies until consensus was reached.
227 Finally, the first author examined the different interpretive categories and identified pattern
228 codes. These pattern codes indicated relationships between the interpretive codes, enabling
229 interpretive codes to be integrated and understood together. For example, all behaviours relating
230 to talking to their child, such as encouraging reflection and providing feedback were grouped

231 together in the category of “talking about valuable PCs”. As previously noted, the pattern codes
232 were discussed until agreement between all authors occurred. Having coded each transcript, the
233 data from each participant were entered into tables that enabled comparison across the
234 participants facilitating an understanding of similarities and differences in perceptions and
235 experiences.

236 **Quality Standards**

237 Several methods were employed in the current study to ensure the rigor, authenticity, and
238 trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For
239 instance, the first author embedded herself into the researched club for a total of nine months to
240 establish authentic relationships with parents prior to collecting observational and interview data,
241 as well as engage parents in sustained dialogues during which additional data was collected and
242 other data discussed (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Specifically, the
243 researcher would pose questions such as “The other day, I observed that you told your son to
244 work hard and stay cool before he went off to training. Could you give me some insight into
245 what you aimed to achieve by telling him this?”. Additionally, the first author was immersed in
246 an interdisciplinary research community that included academics from disciplines such as
247 coaching, youth sport development, and sport psychology. This afforded her the opportunity to
248 frequently discuss and reflect upon her findings, as well as the research process (Smith &
249 McGannon, 2018). Finally, meetings including all authors were held weekly during the data
250 analysis phase to critically reflect upon and discuss each stage of the data analysis process. This
251 was important to ensure that the codes being developed were an appropriate reflection of the data
252 that had been collected.

253

Results

254 The current study had two objectives: (1) to explore which PSCs parents deemed
255 important for their children’s development, and (2) to investigate and understand the parental
256 behaviours that supported the growth or development of these PSCs. The results are illustrated
257 using quotes and field notes; pseudonyms have been assigned to protect participants’ anonymity.

258 **Psychological Skills and Characteristics Perceived as Important for Youth Athletes’**

259 **Development**

260 Parents’ collective aim was for their children to grow into “happy, healthy, and well-
261 rounded” (Leanne) individuals who are ready to face the “tough real world” (Mark).
262 Consequently, parents were solicitous to instil values such as hard work ethic, commitment,
263 competitiveness, self-confidence, resilience, independence, and positivity. Jeremy stated: “Hard
264 work definitely, that's a general one throughout life. I am trying to instil that in them for
265 everything. If they don't work hard then they don't progress; it's that simple.” Parents also valued
266 characteristics such as focus and emotional control, but felt that these were “too hard to develop”
267 (Jeremy) or developed “when they [children] matured, that just comes with time” (Stephen).

268 Despite parents’ intention to develop some PCs, parents were sceptical about and
269 sometimes reluctant to consider the intentional development of PSs due to (1) a perceived
270 inability to support the development of PSs effectively, (2) a misconception of PSs, and (3)
271 concerns about the intentional development of PSs adding unwanted pressure to their children’s
272 development. Focusing on performance routines as an example, parents frequently referred to the
273 skill as a “twitch” (Jeremy), “obsessive compulsive disorder” (Kaitlin), and “dangerous when it
274 comes undone” (Stephen); painting a relatively negative picture of the skill. Concerns of added
275 pressure were commonly expressed when talking about the intentional use of goal-setting: “We
276 could set them goals, but... it only adds pressure. And if they don’t get there, is it then
277 disappointment?!” (Jessica).

278 Additionally, most parents articulated an awareness of the positive effects of PSs, yet
279 reported and were observed feeling ill-equipped to develop these skills within their children:

280 I am sure top athletes will use things such as proper relaxation or meditation before big
281 events and probably imagery. Like picturing themselves crossing the line first and doing all
282 of that. I know this stuff exists and can work, but I wouldn't know, or dare to even try to
283 teach that to my child. (Piper)

284 Parents frequently tell their children to "keep it together" (Michael), "stick with it and
285 graft" (Mark), or "bounce back from that mistake and focus on the next one" (Melanie).

286 Yet, they don't seem to tell their children how to actually do that, meaning they are
287 encouraging PCs without providing their children with the tools (i.e., PSs) needed to
288 regulate them. (Field note, November 25, 2015)

289 In sum, parents valued the development of most PSCs in their children and hoped tennis
290 would help prepare them for a tough and competitive real world. Parents described the
291 development of PCs as "value" development and deemed it "normal parenting" (Kaitlin) or
292 "simply part of bringing my children up" (Maria). Nevertheless, despite the positive attitude
293 towards PCs, parents felt less prepared and able to support athletes' effective use of PSs.

294 **Parental Behaviours Employed to Support Athletes' Psychological Development**

295 Parents reported the use of four behaviours to support the development of PCs within
296 their children, including: (1) talking about valuable PCs; (2) intentionally creating learning
297 opportunities; (3) enabling athletes to go the extra mile, and (4) fostering developmentally
298 beneficial peer relationships.

299 **Talking about valuable psychological characteristics.** "We just talk about it" (Adam,
300 Mark, & Melanie) was one of the most common responses parents provided when being asked
301 how they tried to foster PCs within their children. Commonly, "talking about valuable PCs"

302 happened informally and took place “all the time, when going to school and back, when going to
303 bed, before a tournament, after a tournament, when we sit on the sofa watching TV, all the time”
304 (Maria). More specifically, the behaviour targeted all PCs and entailed (1) questioning athletes to
305 help them reflect on or prepare for matches; (2) reminding athletes of behaviours agreed upon in
306 previous conversations (e.g., “Remember what we chatted about... I don’t care if you lose, as
307 long as you are working hard.” Piper); (3) providing perspective to help athletes evaluate their
308 performances and behaviours realistically; (4) sharing experiences through examples, stories, or
309 metaphors; and (5) providing instructions (e.g., “No cheating. We win and lose fair and square”
310 Jessica). For instance, Frankie explained that he reflected with his son on performances to help
311 him stay committed and motivated: “We just chat about the game, I guess, afterwards. What
312 went right, what went wrong? I try to help him reflect, put things into perspective and pull out
313 some key messages, things for the future.” Similarly, John and Maria reported “putting things
314 into perspective” to help their sons cope with their emotions, stay committed, and develop
315 resilience, particularly after experiencing losses:

316 Learning to cope with disappointment. When he [son] is knocked out of a tournament, we
317 will quite often see some tears. I try and talk to him to put it into context and say “It’s a
318 journey you are on and it doesn’t matter about what’s happening in these competitions”.

319 It’s about how good he can be in 5 years’ time, these are building blocks towards being a
320 better tennis player in the future, and there is no such thing as a wasted tournament. (John)

321 It was also observed that some parents used metaphors or stories to explain values, such as
322 competitiveness and self-confidence:

323 I am at a tournament. One of the youngsters just completed an easy win and behaved
324 suboptimal, arrogant and boisterous. He proudly walked over to his dad (Adam) who
325 hugged him and sat him down on his lap. After praising him for winning, he told him a

326 story: “You know my friend Bob, the one who owns the Ferrari. The other day you asked
327 me why Bob doesn’t always drive his Ferrari. Well, the answer is that when he is at his
328 place of work he doesn’t want to rub everyone’s nose into the fact that he is a successful
329 guy and that’s why he is well liked at his place of work. The same applies to winning... If
330 you win, you win well and you don't rub people's noses in it. Today you did and that
331 wasn’t very nice.” (Field note, July 18, 2015)

332 **Intentionally creating learning opportunities.** Parents were also solicitous to provide
333 their children with ample learning opportunities during which PCs could be observed, talked
334 about, developed, or challenged. In fact, several parents explained that they had intentionally
335 chosen the sport of tennis for their children, as they believed that it fostered the development of
336 valuable characteristics, including independence, competitiveness, and resilience:

337 We are at training. One of the youngsters was upset as he felt that his opponent made a bad
338 line call. He turned around and looked at his dad (Michael), who said “Don’t look at me.
339 What you gonna do about it? If you are not happy with the call, stand your ground.” I
340 walked over to Michael to follow up on what had just been said. He stated: “Well, this is
341 exactly one of the reasons why my son is playing tennis. It’s one of the easier sports that
342 can teach you to stand your ground and make independent decisions. After all, it’s just you
343 on the court. No teammates to rely on or hide behind.” (Field note, September 23, 2015)

344 In addition, parents reported entering their children into competitions of varying difficulty to
345 develop PCs such as self-confidence and motivation, but also resilience and commitment. David
346 explained: “Sometimes I enter him into something I am pretty sure he is going to win, just to
347 help him feel more confident.” Mark on the other hand reported doing the opposite to ensure that
348 his son’s confidence would not exceed a certain level:

349 He sometimes gets a bit cocky, so you have to bring him back down. I talked to him this
350 morning and said “I would like to book you into this tournament. There are some big
351 players coming from all over the country. You may win a couple but you may lose quite a
352 few. Are you comfortable in going to that?” and he said “Yeah I am”. So I entered him and
353 I think it is good because you have got to bring him down a little bit sometimes and I think
354 entering him into this competition will do just that. Put him in his place.

355 Generally, parents supported Mark’s point of view, highlighting that competitions provided an
356 environment in which children could experience “what it is like to win and lose and how to cope
357 with that” (Michael) and “go almost into a dark place, some kind of internal frustration and
358 anger, before coming out on the other side and being stronger, more resilient” (Jessica).

359 Parents also outlined intentionally exposing their children to certain individuals or role
360 models, such as elite performers, who visibly exerted desirable PCs, as well as live or televised
361 competitions to use critical moments of games to reinforce PCs. John explained: “I really enjoy
362 watching sports with my children. I feel it teaches them this stuff (PCs). I am also taking them to
363 the O2 [Arena] for the ATP (Association of Tennis Professionals) tour finals, hoping they will
364 feel inspired and motivated”. Mark also felt that his son gained a lot from watching live sports,
365 frequently using these events as a platform to trigger discussions about PCs:

366 We watch sports and he gets a lot from it. He sees how hard people work and how much
367 they focus and grind. He also sees how people react on court and sometimes it is not very
368 helpful. We discuss that with him so that he learns the good traits and hopefully avoids the
369 bad ones.

370 **Enabling athletes to go the extra mile.** Despite being solicitous to develop PCs, one of
371 parents’ greatest fears was being perceived as pushy. As a result, they frequently refrained from
372 suggesting additional activities that could have the potential to foster the development of PCs:

373 I like him to be motivated and competitive, but if my son doesn't want to go out in the
374 morning to do a half an hour with the ball machine, I am not going to force him. My belief
375 is that it has to come from themselves, from within, not a pushy parent. (Jessica)
376 However, if children suggested engaging in such activities themselves, parents supported and
377 enabled their children to do so. For instance, Mark reported relishing opportunities in which he
378 could support his son when choosing to work harder than expected of him:

379 I want him to work hard, take risks and challenge himself. At the same time, I don't want
380 to push too hard... So when he suggests things to do with working hard, harder than others,
381 and going the extra mile, I will support it. Do you know Wozniacki? There was an article
382 about her in the Sunday Times talking about what she had to do to get big. My son read it
383 and she was doing 6am starts, so suddenly he wanted to do 6am starts on tennis. So in the
384 summer we used to go to the courts at 6am quite a lot. I wasn't pushing him, he wanted to
385 do that, so I supported it because I feel it obviously develops his tennis, but also his head.
386 If he is hungry, I will feed him, but it's important that it comes from him.

387 Similarly, despite being sceptical, Stephen explained supporting his son's decision of playing a
388 tournament grade up¹. He appreciated that taking on this challenge could help his son develop
389 PCs such as resilience and focus; yet he worried that if his son was unsuccessful, this challenge
390 could have detrimental effects, such as a decrease in confidence and motivation:

391 He [son] was like, 'get me on to a grade 2 [tournament], I want to see what it's like, I want
392 to see if I can compete at grade 2'. I wasn't too sure. I mean there are some good guys

¹ In the UK tournaments are graded from 8 (lowest grade) to 1 (highest grade) based on the standard of players who will be attending. Entrance to different grade tournaments is dictated by players' county and national rankings.

393 there and what if he loses badly, like a few time? Will he then lose his confidence or not
394 been keen anymore? But there is one [grade 2 tournament] coming up in Manchester and
395 after asking him again, I entered him. He was pumped. But he has taken on this challenge,
396 he wants to play up there, so I help him do that. It's his choosing and I think he can learn a
397 lot from it, so I want to support it.

398 Supporting their children in "going the extra mile" was also enabled in other domains, such as
399 academia. Parents hoped that this would not only make for a better student, but also player, as
400 this informal conversation with Alicia highlighted:

401 Sometimes he [son] asks me if I can help him with his "extra" homework, like another
402 level of schoolwork the kids don't have to do, but can if they want to challenge themselves.
403 I mean, it's not like they aren't already doing enough at school, right?! [Sarcasms]
404 Anyways, when he is up for it and suggests it himself, I help him. We try and do a little
405 extra by colouring stuff in or writing neatly, and I feel it translates into his tennis and
406 makes him a better person. Like it motivates him to do bit extra in all areas of life, like
407 fight a bit harder to win a game [in tennis] for example. (Field note, October 8, 2015)

408 **Fostering developmentally beneficial peer relationships.** Parents thought they
409 significantly affected their children's psychological development, yet acknowledged that peers
410 were also important. Consequently, parents were mindful of their children "hanging around with
411 the right people" (Adam). Alicia explained:

412 I don't like my children playing with "the wrong" children, because the group can change
413 people. They are listening to me now, but there will be a time when I will not be their idol
414 anymore and friends become more important. So, I like to expose my children to the right
415 group of friends who have parents with the same values as us.

416 As a result, parents intentionally encouraged friendships with individuals or groups perceived as
417 having a positive influence upon their children's development. Stephen outlined:

418 One of the guys here [at the club] has such a nice way about him and my son can learn
419 from that. He turns and says "good shot, well done, good shot" and is positive, always
420 smiling. He says it so often that it sinks in with my son and he then starts to say it too. We
421 have been trying to get him to do that for a long time. But often he doesn't even pass the
422 bloody balls, he gets that competitive! It is only when I saw him playing with this lad that I
423 saw a slightly better behaved and positive boy, so I am encouraging them playing together.

424 Likewise, Mark explained that being embedded in a competitive tennis peer group, instilled
425 valuable characteristics within his son, such as motivation:

426 I don't know if that is the norm in different clubs, but he has a very competitive peer group
427 here, very competitive. So, I think he is getting pushed a lot by his peers, which is good
428 because as parents you can only push so far, but if he feels it from his peers that is a good
429 thing. We just need to make sure that he keeps hanging out with people that drive him.

430 Parents' efforts to foster developmentally beneficial friendships were also observed:

431 Rather than attending training today, I am hanging around the club café, where some of the
432 parents spend time.... Leanne and Maria invited me to join their conversation. We chatted
433 about weekend plans. Leanne stated: "Me and Nick [son] are actually going over to Maria
434 and Stephen's this weekend. We can have a glass of wine while the boys hang out with
435 each other. Talk tennis and what not. Win win!" (Field note, December 10, 2015)

436 Taken together, it is encouraging to see that parents invested thought, time, and effort into
437 intentionally developing PCs within their children. Nevertheless, it was also noticed that
438 stereotypical beliefs around PSs existed and that parents relied significantly on "talking things

439 through” after they had happened, making their efforts to foster children’s psychological
440 development reactive rather than proactive and systematic.

441 **Resources Informing Parental Behaviours**

442 The behaviours parents employed to support their children’s psychological development
443 were informed by educational resources, including books, documentaries, and online materials.
444 Specifically, parents explained seeking resources that provided insights into how to “raise a
445 happy and healthy tennis player” (Leanne) or “better support my son with the stresses and strains
446 of playing tournaments, because so far I found it very stressful, he has found it stressful, and I
447 would like to be able to help him” (John). Consequently, parents sought books communicating
448 popular psychological beliefs, documentaries of excellent performers, podcasts, and YouTube
449 tutorials to educate themselves. Focusing on books, parents reported reading a wide range of
450 resources, including for example ‘Mindset’ (Dweck, 2006), ‘The Chimp Paradox’ (Peters, 2012),
451 and ‘Bounce’ (Syed, 2011). In addition to learning from these books, parents frequently shared
452 the lessons learnt with their children:

453 To help him cope with his emotions... Have you read the Chimp Paradox? I read it
454 because I used to be anxious on court myself and talked about all the things explained in
455 the book with the kids. I talk to them about the Chimp and anxiety, saying things such as
456 “anxiety is important sometimes, because of the fight and flight thing. If you don’t have
457 anxiety you might not do well anyway. But there is good and bad anxiety. Maybe try to
458 leave the Chimp behind or shut him up in some instances.” I do talk about that to help
459 them get rid of things like anxiety. (Leanne)

460 Self-confidence... I talk quite a lot about the direct relationship between the numbers of
461 hours doing something and how good you can get. You know the 10,000 hour rule?! I have
462 read a couple of books around that and tried to share some of that understanding with them

463 [the children], because I am a big believer in that. The Bounce book for example is all
464 about, can you train somebody, and is it about a skill that you are born with or can it be
465 trained? So there are lessons in there for me, but I make sure I speak to my kids about that
466 and leave them in no doubt. (John)

467 Additionally, some parents reported seeking inspiration with their children from documentaries
468 and autobiographies providing insight into elite performers' lives. Maria explained: "We have
469 read Murray's, Nadal's and Federer's autobiography. So we read a lot of normal tennis stuff that
470 inspires the boys, not the kind of self-help psychology things." Similarly, Leanne reported:

471 We watch things like 'The Short Game' or the Venus and Serena documentary. We watch
472 things like this because he [my son] really likes watching things about champions and
473 understanding how to get there. That comes in with the sport intelligence and commitment
474 to working hard. How Federer for example went from being okay at a sport to being the
475 champion. There is a massive road to climb and these films help to communicate that.

476 Others, such as Stephen, preferred the use of YouTube tutorials: "I watched some videos and
477 listen to David Sammel who talks about 'locker room power'. It is to do with the mental
478 preparation of tennis players" or podcasts, like David: "I drive a lot, so I have downloaded a
479 bunch of podcast about motivation, drive, and successful people. I listen to that and try to apply
480 it to my children".

481 In sum, parents expressed a deep rooting desire to support their children's positive
482 development, which led them to engage in intermittent self-education. The messages elicited
483 from the resources accessed were frequently shared with children or used to inform parental
484 behaviours. Despite well intended, the informal and unguided nature of this type of education,
485 sometimes led parents to reinforce messages that prioritised winning over fun, as well as early
486 specialisation. Occasionally this fostered unwanted consequences, as described by Jessica:

487 My son sometimes lies about who he has beaten at tennis, but I realised that that is
488 probably my fault. After training I would often ask “Did you win tonight?!” He wants to
489 please so he says, “Yes I have won all my matches.” For us it was just a way of asking,
490 “Did you have a good time?”... When I figured that he was lying, we had a big discussion
491 about it and [Jessica starts crying] he actually thought that if he wins I would love him
492 more!!! I just said “For god sake, I love you if you lose, everything! All I want is for you to
493 be happy.” He really did for a while think that it mattered to me if he won, just because of
494 how I worded my question... It was important that we clarified that that is not the case.

495 Discussion

496 In response to recent calls within the literature (Harwood et al., 2019, Knight et al.,
497 2016), this study sought to further our understanding of the PSCs parents wanted their children to
498 develop through sport and the behaviours they intentionally employed to support the
499 development of said PSCs. Overall, it was clear that parents appreciated the benefits of well-
500 developed PSCs within youth athletes, yet were concerned about their role in helping their
501 children develop them. Despite their reservations, data highlighted that parents engaged in four
502 specific behaviours to facilitate the development of PCs within their children. However, parents
503 had not received formal support guiding their behaviours and thus relied significantly upon
504 independent learning, sometimes resulting in unintended negative consequences, such as
505 athletes’ perceptions that parents valued winning over enjoyment and growth.

506 Over the last decade, the importance of guiding or supporting parents in optimising their
507 involvement in their children’s sporting lives has increasingly been recognised by researchers,
508 practitioners, and sports organisations (Harwood et al., 2019). Interestingly, however, with the
509 odd exception (e.g., Harwood, 2008), very little of this attention has focused upon the positive
510 role parents can play in supporting children’s psychological development. Rather, much focus

511 has been placed upon trying to “educate” parents to correct perceived negative or inappropriate
512 behaviours; thus considering parents as problems to be fixed rather than assets to work with
513 (Dorsch et al., 2018; Knight et al., 2017). Given this focus, combined with the negative attention
514 sport parents receive in the print and social media, it is little wonder that parents often feel ill-
515 prepared to support their children’s dual responsibilities (i.e., sport & academia), are concerned
516 about engaging in the “wrong behaviours” that may place unwanted pressure upon their children,
517 and rely upon self-education for support (e.g., Burgess et al., 2016; Knight & Holt, 2013).

518 Unfortunately, if parents feel unprepared to support their children’s psychological
519 development, or their self-taught strategies are ineffective or at worst detrimental, important
520 opportunities to maximise athletes’ development and transfer of PSCs are missed (cf., Bean et
521 al., 2018; Koh et al., 2017; MacNamara et al., 2010b). The value of sport in teaching and
522 developing PSCs is heralded across the globe (see Holt, 2016 for a review), yet it is widely
523 recognised that PSCs do not automatically develop through participation in sport (Fraser-Thomas
524 et al., 2005). Rather, they must actively be taught and their transfer from sport into other life
525 domains explicitly supported (Dohme et al., 2019; Falcão et al., 2019). As such, the importance
526 of parents taking a proactive and explicit role in supporting the development and transfer of
527 PSCs cannot be underestimated. Thus, although it was positive to see that parents in the current
528 study took active steps to utilise sport as a vehicle to help them facilitate their children’s
529 psychological development, efforts were often reactive, implicit, and inconsistent despite self-
530 education. If parents are to optimise their involvement within youth sport contexts they clearly
531 require greater guidance. This guidance should remove itself from trying to correct perceived
532 negative parental behaviours and instead encourage parents to discuss their existing
533 understanding of the benefits well-developed PSCs can have upon children’s development.
534 Additionally, parents should be made aware of their ability to foster PSCs through their

535 behaviours and provided with strategies that empower them to proactively, explicitly, and
536 consistently support the development and transfer of their children's PSCs.

537 Two types of parental behaviours have previously been discussed within the talent and
538 positive youth development literature: 'talking about valuable PCs' (e.g., Hodge et al., 2017;
539 Tamminen & Holt, 2012) and 'intentionally creating learning opportunities' (e.g., Fraser-Thomas
540 et al., 2005; Neely & Holt, 2014). Importantly, the current methodology helped to extend those
541 findings by providing insights into how parents sought to implement these behaviours in
542 practice. Through these observations it became apparent that, while on the surface, talking about
543 PSCs and facilitating learning opportunities may appear appropriate and relatively harmless, they
544 are not without their challenges. For instance, it was apparent that at times parents sought
545 opportunities to talk with good intent, but subsequently did not achieve the outcome that was
546 hoped for. This complexity again highlights the importance of providing parents with evidence-
547 based guidance upon which they can ground their behaviours.

548 Beyond talking about PCs and intentionally providing learning opportunities, the current
549 results identified two additional parental behaviours aimed at developing PCs; 'enabling athletes
550 to go the extra mile' and 'fostering developmentally beneficial peer relationships'. The
551 behaviour 'enabling athletes to go the extra mile' corroborates with recent suggestions regarding
552 the importance of parents adopting an authoritative or autonomy-supportive parenting style to
553 optimise their involvement in sport (Harwood & Knight, 2015), as well as recommendations
554 encouraging parents to frequently communicate perceptions of and preferences for parental
555 involvement with their children (Knight et al., 2017). From a theoretical perspective, such an
556 approach should have a positive influence upon children's development of PSCs, as autonomy-
557 supportive parenting is associated with increases in intrinsic motivation (Harwood et al., 2019).
558 Indeed, the positive effects of experiencing feelings of autonomy have been recognised across

559 cultures and life domains, suggesting that the satisfaction of individuals' need for autonomy
560 facilitates persistence, performance, healthy development, and vitality (Deci & Ryan, 2008).
561 Nevertheless, participants reported challenges regarding the provision of autonomy-supportive
562 parenting styles, as they feared that this approach could cause their children to experience
563 disappointment or hardship when making decisions about their level of involvement within
564 sports, such as playing an age group up within a competition. Given the evidence supporting the
565 benefits of autonomy-supportive behaviours, combined with parents' reports of attempting to
566 satisfy their children's needs for autonomy, tailored advice regarding autonomy-supportive
567 parenting could help reduce parents' uncertainties and enhance their confidence in this approach.

568 Although not having received direct research attention, evidence supporting the value of
569 the parental behaviour 'fostering developmentally beneficial peer relationships' upon youth
570 athletes' psychological development can also be found within the talent development literature.
571 For instance, in a series of case studies examining successful talent development environments,
572 Henriksen and colleagues (2010a, 2010b, 2011) identified that excellence can be facilitated
573 through close cooperation and openness between athletes of all ages and stages, as these
574 relationships have the potential to develop fundamental technical, tactical, and PSs. Specifically,
575 within all environments, close training relationships and friendships between current and former
576 elite athletes, prospects, and younger athletes were the norm. Despite such findings, research
577 investigating the effects of parents harnessing positive peer relationships between athletes has
578 been lacking prior to this study (Harwood & Knight, 2015). The current findings suggest that
579 harnessing developmentally rich peer relationships might be a useful mechanism for parents
580 allowing them to proactively foster their children's psychological development while remaining
581 in the background, subsequently reducing parents' concerns about being perceived as
582 overinvolved or pushy. However, considering the limited amount of direct research on the

583 composition, process, skills, and challenges of establishing and maintaining parent-facilitated
584 peer relationships, further research is warranted.

585 **Limitations**

586 Despite the strengths of the present study, limitations exist. First, it was situated in a
587 single high-level youth sport environment in England. As outlined by Dorsch et al. (2018),
588 parents' sport involvement is likely linked to contextual factors such as individual, community,
589 and societal goals, wherefore it is unlikely that we captured the workings of all sport families
590 having focussed on one specific youth sport environment. Nevertheless, we hope that
591 transferability and naturalistic generalizability were achieved through the study's thick
592 contextual description, as well as rich interpretations painting a relatable picture for parents
593 embedded within various youth sport environments (Smith, 2018). Second, the present sample
594 was somewhat monolithic, identifying as largely European, upper middle class, and educated. As
595 sport experiences are commonly influenced by demographic factors (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004),
596 future research should aim to understand parents' experiences from more ethnically diverse, as
597 well a range of socioeconomic and geopolitical backgrounds. Finally, the present study is among
598 the first to investigate the behaviours sport parents intentionally employed to support their
599 children's psychological development. More research is needed to gain a better understanding of
600 sport parents' existing knowledge about youth athletes' positive psychological development and
601 their educational needs to support this process more proactively and effectively.

602 **Conclusion**

603 Overall, the current results suggest that parents should not be viewed through a deficit lens,
604 but instead as valued resources that are well-intentioned and often willing to learn how to
605 support their children's positive development more effectively. Second, the current findings
606 point towards the need to better support sport parents regarding the behaviours they can

607 proactively employ to prepare their children for sport and life. To date, no scientific evaluations
608 of such programmes are available. To enable the provision of such programmes, coaches, youth
609 sport federations, and governing bodies are encouraged to more skilfully integrate parents into
610 the developmental processes of youth athletes (Dorsch et al., 2018; Harwood et al., 2019).
611 Recognising that this undertaking may require guidance, future research studies should focus not
612 only upon knowledge acquisition, but also knowledge translation and dissemination to ensure
613 findings can contribute more readily to practices within youth sport settings (Holt et al., 2018).
614

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