

Running Head: PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP IN FOOTBALL

**A Phenomenological Interpretation of the Parent-Child Relationship in Elite Youth  
Football**

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### **Abstract**

Youth sport parenting research, in psychology, has methodologically prioritised individual level analysis of the behaviours, perceptions or needs of parents and young athletes. While this has contributed greatly to understanding the role of parents in sport, children's parenting preferences and the challenges of parenting in this unique setting, an exploration of parenting in youth sport from a dyadic, inter-individual perspective has received far less attention.

Accordingly, the purpose of this research was to explore parent's and children's experience of their interaction and relationship, in the context of elite youth football. Eight parent-player dyads, recruited from English professional football club youth academies, participated in phenomenological interviews. A two-stage analysis process was performed to explore individual parent and player experiences and examine how accounts related dyadically.

Findings present a detailed description and interpretation of the parent-player relationship; as one constituted by relations with other family members, an embodied sense of closeness, the temporal significance of football transitions, and gender relations. This research advocates the need for a view of parenting in youth sport that accounts for how interaction is experienced by both parents and children and highlights the importance of conceptualising parenting as an embodied, temporal process, constituted through interaction and the social context.

**Key words:** Parenting, dyadic, youth sport, soccer, qualitative.



26 therefore, has the capacity to further contribute to existing knowledge of parenting in youth  
27 sport. A focus on an exploration of the parent-child relationship in the context of youth sport,  
28 offers one such direction for research.

29         Social and contextual influences on the parenting process in youth sport have  
30 previously been highlighted. For example, Knight and Holt (2013) described how parents'  
31 experiences of watching junior tennis tournaments were affected by children's performances,  
32 on-court behaviours and emotional reactions to matches, alongside the focus on ranking  
33 points and organisation of tournaments. Similarly, from longitudinal research with four  
34 families over the first 15 months of a child's involvement in organised youth sport, Dorsch et  
35 al. (2015) illustrated how parents adjusted their behaviour in response to their child's  
36 participation. This interactive process was shaped by the characteristics of the parent, the  
37 reciprocal influence of the child and the social context, and supported the authors' previous  
38 recommendation; that the quality of the relationship and the sport context in which the  
39 relationship exists should be considered in future parenting research (Dorsch et al., 2009).  
40 Holt et al. (2009) also analysed interviews with parents and players from the same family,  
41 supported by participant observation, to explore the parenting styles and associated practices used  
42 by parents of under-12 and under-14 age group female football players. The findings suggested  
43 that children reciprocally influenced their parents' behaviours when they demonstrated  
44 responsibility, or challenged unsupportive comments for example. However, this study was  
45 limited by interviewing children for the purposes of triangulating parents' descriptions, rather  
46 than to represent children's perspectives of parenting. Although these studies have illustrated  
47 how the parent-child relationship is shaped by the social context, there is a tendency for  
48 findings of this nature to be located within a discussion of the determinants of parents'  
49 behaviours and/or associated child effects (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2015; Holt et al., 2009;  
50 Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn & Wall, 2008). This can isolate parenting from its situated,

51 interpersonal context and reduce parent-child relationships to a set of tasks to be achieved  
52 (Faircloth, Hoffman & Layne, 2013; Lee, 2014), if the reciprocal and flexible nature of  
53 parenting is not recognised. As Knight and Holt's (2014) grounded theory of parenting in  
54 youth tennis indicated, parents can adapt their involvement over time, dependent on their  
55 individual child's needs and goals. Also, the extent to which players perceived that parents  
56 understood their tennis journey, the challenges of competing and how sport fitted within their  
57 overall lives was a salient feature of children's experiences.

58         In addition to the reciprocal nature of parent-child relationships in sport, research  
59 using qualitative methods has also begun to describe aspects of these relationships (Clarke &  
60 Harwood, 2014; Dorsch et al., 2009; Kay, 2009; Lauer, Gould, Roman & Pierce, 2010a).  
61 Examining the extent to which fathers can fulfil contemporary expectations of parenting  
62 through youth sport, Kay (2009) highlighted that fathers perceived that their son's  
63 participation in junior grassroots football provided an opportunity to develop a shared interest  
64 and connect emotionally with their sons. Football was an activity through which fathers could  
65 become more involved with their son's lives and experience "male bonding" (p.114). As  
66 none of the participants had any prior direct involvement with football, Kay (2009)  
67 interpreted that fathers became involved through their desire to be a good parent and develop  
68 an involved and emotionally close relationship with their son – reflecting the prevalent  
69 societal expectations for fathering (Dermott, 2003; Jeanes & Magee, 2011). This illustrates  
70 the influence of cultural constructions of parenting on the meanings parents attach to their  
71 relationships with their child.

72         Supporting the finding that parent-child relationships have the potential to be  
73 enhanced through a shared experience of sport, Clarke and Harwood (2014) in their study of  
74 parenting experiences in elite youth football, described how the experience of being part of a  
75 professional club, sharing a passion for football and travelling to and from matches together

76 heightened parents' sense of closeness in their relationship with their son; highlighting the  
77 influence of the sport context on parent-child relationships. However, like Kay (2009), this  
78 study did not explore whether players had also experienced this increased closeness.

79         Although the parent-child relationship was not explicitly examined by Dorsch et al.,  
80 (2009), in group interviews parents described how their involvement in their child's  
81 organised team sport programme provided the opportunity for additional and enhanced  
82 communication, which led to a perceived higher quality parent-child relationship.  
83 Relationships were described as fluid and dynamic, as friction between parent and child could  
84 also be encountered. Similarly, in a retrospective interview study with parent-child dyads,  
85 Lauer et al. (2010a) identified that parents facilitated smooth, difficult or turbulent  
86 development pathways for elite young tennis players. Although many of the observations  
87 made by Lauer et al. focused on parenting behaviours and the impact of these on player  
88 outcomes, other findings reflected aspects of the parent-child relationship. For example, the  
89 presence of frequent or unresolved conflict (arising from parents' desire to control the tennis  
90 experience, or players failing to respond to parents' advice) led to strained relationships and  
91 regret in later years, with some players perceiving that parents' love and support were  
92 conditional on tennis success. This underlines the importance of understanding how  
93 interpersonal phenomena such as conflict is experienced and negotiated by *both* parents and  
94 players. Exploring parent-child interactions in the present, rather than retrospectively, may  
95 also contribute to extending knowledge of this relationship in sport.

96         In summary, the predominant focus on delineating parenting involvement and  
97 associated child outcomes in youth sport through analysis of individual-level constructs, has  
98 meant an understanding of parent-child relationships from a dyadic perspective remains a  
99 relatively unexplored but potentially fruitful avenue for research. Studies describing aspects  
100 of this relationship in sport have drawn attention to the dynamic and complex nature of

101 parent-child interactions, highlighting that relationship quality, the context in which  
102 interactions occur, and both parents' and players' experiences of interaction such as closeness  
103 and conflict should be considered in future research (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Dorsch et al.,  
104 2009; Kay, 2009; Lauer et al., 2010a) – yet an examination of the parent-child relationship in  
105 youth sport was not a specific aim of these studies. Therefore, there is a need firstly to  
106 describe the parent-child relationship in detail and to understand how interaction is  
107 experienced by both parents and children. Accordingly, the purpose of this research was to  
108 explore parent's and children's experience of their interaction and relationship, in the context  
109 of elite youth football.

110 English football offers a unique and useful setting in which to study parent-child  
111 relationships. Research has begun to illustrate some of the difficulties of parenting in this  
112 highly challenging, competitive culture (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Harwood, Drew &  
113 Knight, 2010). Becoming a professional footballer is a common aspiration among young  
114 players, yet few will progress to be offered a full-time playing contract (Cushion & Jones,  
115 2006). For parents, managing the time and financial commitment required for players to  
116 participate in elite training and competition programmes, together with the emotional  
117 demands of preparing their child for the potential of deselection, can be a stressful experience  
118 (Harwood et al., 2010). Parents of players identified as talented can also experience enhanced  
119 status and a heightened responsibility to fulfil societal expectations to facilitate their child's  
120 development (Clarke & Harwood, 2014). Therefore, the high risk high reward nature of elite  
121 youth sport can amplify the potential influence of the social context on parent-child  
122 relationships.

123 A phenomenological approach, which is concerned with describing subjective  
124 experience and understanding how this is shaped by the social context, offers much potential  
125 for exploring relational phenomena such as parent-child relationships, as it foregrounds the

126 assumption that meaning is constructed between a person and their world, rather than through  
127 a cognitive process, or as a response to behaviour (Langdrige, 2008). Furthermore, the  
128 phenomenological focus on how the social and material world is experienced *as lived* (by  
129 particular bodies, in particular places, at particular times) allows for an in-depth  
130 understanding of how interactions are interpreted by both parents and players. Previous  
131 phenomenological studies have described parenting as an embodied, intentional *pedagogic*  
132 *relation* in which parents orientate towards their child's future and their responsibility of care  
133 and children experience a fundamental sense of support and security that empowers them "to  
134 be and to become" (van Manen, 1990 p.59). The shared experience of lived time and space  
135 can be enriching for parents and children when their reciprocal influence is felt and  
136 recognised, but can also lead to vulnerability, when parents experience a lack of control or  
137 knowledge of how to act, or children feel parents are unresponsive (De Mol & Buysse, 2008).

138         This study endeavours to extend existing research by providing a detailed description  
139 and interpretation of the parent-child relationship in elite youth football. Specifically, an  
140 existential phenomenological approach was selected for this study, guided by Ashworth's  
141 lifeworld analysis (2003a; 2003b). A focus on the phenomenological lifeworld anchors  
142 research in understanding everyday lived-experience and explicitly attends to peoples'  
143 experiences of relations with others. In addition, this research was informed by van Manen's  
144 (1990) hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenological approach, to develop a richer  
145 understanding of the parent-child relationship. Drawing on Gadamer's (1975) position that  
146 "[t]hat which can be understood is language" (p.491), which proposes that being *pre-exists*  
147 language, but is *expressed through* language, van Manen's phenomenological project  
148 emphasises the role of language in constituting experience. As Langdrige (2007)  
149 summarises, "we always speak from somewhere, from a position dependent on our history  
150 and culture" (p.42); therefore a focus on language recognises that in dyadic research



151 interviews participants reflect upon their relations with others, and that this interpretative  
152 process is influenced by individuals' social, cultural and historical backgrounds.

## 153 **Methods**

### 154 **Research Context**

155 In England, the Premier League's youth football performance pathway is delivered by  
156 professional football clubs through their academy programmes. Academies provide  
157 programmes of coaching, games, sports science support and education for players across the  
158 performance pathway, to "create a fully integrated environment servicing all aspects of the  
159 players' development" (EPPP, 2011 p.18). The pathway comprises three distinct phases; the  
160 foundation phase (under-5 to under-11 age group players), the youth development phase  
161 (under-12 to under-16 age group players) and the professional development phase (under-17  
162 to under-21 age group players). Clubs can register up to a maximum of 30 players per age  
163 group, reducing to 20 in the under-15 and under-16 squads, and 15 in the professional  
164 development phase squads (The Football League, 2014).

165 Youth development phase football players, which this study focused upon, are  
166 provided with between 12 and 16 hours of evening coaching and weekend competitive  
167 matches per week. In addition, in 2011 a hybrid training model was introduced to the  
168 academy programme, where young players take time off school to attend daytime training.  
169 Players can stay within the academy system for a number of years requiring a significant  
170 commitment from players and parents alike. As academy players in the youth development  
171 phase can live up to a maximum of 90 minutes travel time from the training ground, parents  
172 have an important role to play in transporting their children to training and home matches.  
173 Aspiring footballers who successfully progress through the youth development phase will be  
174 offered a scholarship to train full-time at the academy for a further two years. At the end of  
175 this apprenticeship, a small number of players may be offered a professional playing contract.

176 The remaining players will be deselected or 'released' from the club. Currently, on average,  
177 nine new young players advance from the academy system into first team Premier League  
178 football each year (The Football Association, 2014).

### 179 **Participants**

180 Ethical approval was obtained from the university's ethics committee and all  
181 participants gave informed consent. Mothers, fathers and players from three English  
182 professional football club youth academies were purposively sampled (i.e., had experienced  
183 the phenomenon of interest), guided by maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002).  
184 Variation between participants allows similarities and differences in how a phenomena is  
185 experienced to be highlighted (Langdrige, 2007). Therefore, mothers and fathers from one  
186 and two-parent families across the youth development phase were recruited to enable a range  
187 of parent and player experiences to be examined. Eight parent-player dyads participated in  
188 this study; four mothers and four fathers aged between 40 and 49 years ( $M = 44.75$ ), of  
189 players aged between 12 and 17 years ( $M = 14$ ). Participants described their ethnicity as  
190 White British ( $n = 8$ ), Black African ( $n = 2$ ), African British ( $n = 1$ ), African Caribbean &  
191 Bengali Spanish ( $n = 1$ ), Spanish Bengali ( $n = 1$ ), White Asian ( $n = 1$ ), White & Black  
192 African ( $n = 1$ ) and White & Black Caribbean ( $n = 1$ ). Parents self-identified as the person  
193 most involved in their son's football participation.

### 194 **Data Collection**

195 Dyadic research offers a powerful method for understanding interaction and  
196 relationships and has been used extensively within family research (Morgan, Ataie, Carder &  
197 Hoffman, 2013; Wittenborn, Dolbin-MacNab & Keiley, 2013). Dyadic interviewing, where  
198 two people who share a relationship are interviewed separately, allows each person to discuss  
199 an experience from their own perspective and also reflect upon their relationship. Interview  
200 data can then be explored from an individual and a dyadic perspective, examining overlaps

201 and contrasts between accounts (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010). Using separate dyadic interviews  
202 enabled both parent and player experiences of academy football and interaction with the other  
203 to be collected.

204 Participants took part in a phenomenological semi-structured interview, held at  
205 parents' homes or at academy training grounds. Parent and player information sheets and  
206 consent forms were sent to participants explaining; the purpose of the research; the format of  
207 the interviews; issues pertaining to confidentiality and withdrawal; and how research findings  
208 would be used. To ensure players were able to give an informed indication of their  
209 willingness to participate, each interview was preceded by a discussion with the researcher to  
210 allow participants the opportunity to ask any questions they had. It was emphasised that there  
211 was no expectation for them to participate, that consent could be withdrawn at any time, and  
212 that participants should consider themselves experts on the research topic. Players were  
213 interviewed first, in rooms accessible to parents (or coaches) but where conversations could  
214 not be overheard. Four parents also participated in a follow up interview, at the request of the  
215 researcher, to discuss certain aspects of their experience more fully. Total interview time was  
216 between 33 and 182 minutes ( $M = 62$ ) for players and 40 and 237 minutes ( $M = 97$ ) for  
217 parents. The first stage of the player interviews was guided by questions which focused on  
218 participants' subjective experiences of playing academy football. The opening question; "tell  
219 me about your experience of playing football from when you first began to the present day",  
220 was designed to encourage players to reflect upon and share their experiences in their own  
221 words. Subsequent questions explored their present, everyday experiences of playing  
222 football. The second stage of the player interviews concentrated on players' experience of  
223 interaction with their parents. The purpose of these questions was to prompt players to reflect  
224 upon their relationship with their parent, in the context of football. Follow up questions were  
225 used to ask players to elaborate and provide more detailed descriptions. Parent interviews

226 followed a similar format, but rather focused firstly, on their experiences of being a parent of  
227 an elite youth footballer and secondly, on their experience of interaction with their son in  
228 relation to football. Both interview guides can be found in Appendix A. Interviews were  
229 audio recorded and all verbal talk transcribed. Pseudonyms were chosen for each participant  
230 and for any person or organisation referred to by name in the interviews to provide  
231 confidentiality.

### 232 **Data Analysis**

233 Analysis began by reflecting upon each interview directly after it had concluded and  
234 audio recording initial impressions and interpretations, which were later used as prompts to  
235 write research diary notes. These notes assisted in enhancing reflexivity – a process of  
236 “continually reflecting upon interpretations of both our own experience and the phenomena  
237 being studied” (Finlay, 2014 p.130) – by checking that initial, instinctive interpretations were  
238 not obscuring alternative understandings.

239 Interview transcripts were explored using the “selective” and “wholistic” reading  
240 approaches described by van Manen (1990 p.93), from within a phenomenological attitude,  
241 which seeks to set aside taken-for-granted assumptions about the world and remain open to  
242 seeing phenomena “afresh” (Finlay, 2014 p.122). Firstly, transcripts were read several times  
243 while listening to the respective audio recording, and sections of the text which seemed  
244 particularly essential to the participants’ individual experience were highlighted, creating  
245 meaning units in the data. Descriptive and interpretative notes for each meaning unit were  
246 entered into an analysis table, which differentiated between descriptions related to  
247 participants’ phenomenological lifeworld and to the parent-child relationship. An analysis  
248 extract is shown in Appendix B. Next, a wholistic reading of each transcript was used to  
249 understand the overall meaning of participants’ descriptions and ensure that idiosyncratic  
250 interpretations did not move beyond the data.

251           A two-stage analysis process was performed to examine how the individual parent  
252 and player accounts related dyadically. In the first stage, meaning units identified in each  
253 interview were interpreted in relation to the seven universal features or ‘fractions’ of the  
254 phenomenological lifeworld as described by Ashworth (2003a; 2003b), paying attention to  
255 links between them. This produced a set of thematic interpretations for each individual  
256 participant. The seven lifeworld fractions are:

- 257           • selfhood (what the phenomenon means for social identity, agency and voice);
- 258           • sociality (how the phenomenon affects relations with others);
- 259           • embodiment (the role of the body in experiencing the phenomenon, including gender  
260 and emotion);
- 261           • temporality (the lived-sense of past, present and future);
- 262           • spatiality (meanings of space and place in relation to the phenomenon);
- 263           • project (how the phenomenon affects people’s ability to pursue life activities); and
- 264           • discourse (how language is drawn upon to describe the phenomenon).

265           Secondly, parent and player themes were analysed together by undertaking a wholistic  
266 reading (van Manen, 1990) of both transcripts and searching for patterns in the data from a  
267 dyadic perspective. Informed by Eisikovits and Koren’s (2010) guidance for dyadic interview  
268 analysis, particular attention was paid to overlaps and contrasts in participants’ accounts. For  
269 example, were experiences described similarly but interpreted differently, or vice versa? In  
270 addition, how language was used to construct participants’ descriptions was examined closely  
271 (in recognition of the constitutive role of language) to avoid uncritically combining individual  
272 data and making conclusions about the parent-player relationship. Moving between the  
273 dyadic and individual analyses allowed for different interpretations of individual themes and  
274 unique relational themes to be constructed.

275           Drawing upon Gadamer’s (1975) concept that understanding is developed through

276 conversation in which we seek a *fusion of horizons* towards agreement, van Manen (1990)  
277 describes his phenomenological approach as a “conversational relation that the researcher  
278 develops with the notion he or she wishes to explore and understand” (p.97-98), and  
279 emphasises how transforming thematic statements into phenomenologically sensitive writing  
280 is a creative, hermeneutic process. Therefore, writing was embraced as an additional method  
281 of analysis, in which detailed descriptions of each parent-player relationship were produced  
282 from individual and dyadic themes. Extracts of this writing were shared with research peers  
283 experienced in qualitative research and knowledgeable of social psychological theories to  
284 facilitate further conversation and reflection upon analysis. Collaborators offered additional  
285 interpretative lenses which could be used to enhance understanding of participants’  
286 experiences. Finally, the writing and rewriting process (van Manen, 1990) assisted in the  
287 production of descriptions which present phenomenological accounts of the parent-player  
288 relationship and interprets how this shapes the parenting process.

### 289 **Findings and Discussion**

290 Analyses of the participants’ individual and relational experiences are drawn upon to  
291 consider the implications for understanding the phenomenology of parent-player relationships  
292 in elite youth football. In particular, the findings are interpreted using the phenomenological  
293 concepts of relationality, embodiment and temporality, as the lifeworld fractions that  
294 appeared most relevant to participants’ experiences (Ashworth, 2003a; 2003b; van Manen,  
295 1990). Although all eight parent-player dyads inform the findings, some more detailed  
296 examples are presented, to capture something of the complexity of participants’ experiences.  
297 The family context for each individual dyad is provided in Appendix C. The findings  
298 presented are not claimed to represent a ‘true’ version of reality and it is acknowledged that  
299 other readings of the data are possible and may offer alternative interpretations and  
300 understandings of the parent-player relationship.

**301 Embodiment: Closeness**

302           Across the parent-player dyads, football was a shared experience which shaped their  
303 relationships and was significant in their lives. Players described spending more time with, or  
304 feeling closer to their parent through football. This was reflected in parents' accounts,  
305 supporting previous findings that parents valued the opportunity to interact more with their  
306 child that sport provided (Dorsch et al., 2009; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). This closeness in  
307 parent-player relationships can be described as a key feature of participants' lived-  
308 experiences, which manifested in various embodied ways. For example, parents experienced  
309 excitement from the buzz of the Sunday morning pre-match routine, pride when players felt  
310 able to ask for feedback to be given in a different way and uncertainty about the fragility of  
311 their son's academy place. Players described feeling frustrated or embarrassed if they did not  
312 play well or were substituted when parents were watching, happy when parents gave them  
313 positive feedback, and a sense of security from the knowledge that their parent would be  
314 there for them if they were released by the club. These emotions can be described as part of  
315 the embodied experience of closeness in the parent-player relationship and - following  
316 Burkitt's (1999) interpretation of emotions – were constituted through social interaction and  
317 shaped by the elite, competitive culture of football academies.

318           For one non-resident father, the connection with his son that developed through  
319 football was particularly pertinent:

320           Rob: My relationship with him is extremely close we are very very close. And I think  
321 that's because we don't live together, you know so the time he spends with me is  
322 quality time only. I can't remember the last time I've told my son off, because the  
323 time I spend with him is quality time

324 Josh also reflected on the closeness he experienced in his relationship with his father:

325           Author: Do you think football has influenced your relationship with your dad at all?

326 Josh: Yeah. It's made us become a lot closer. And cos we both love football it's like  
327 we both know what to talk about if you get what I mean so like we have a lot to talk  
328 about

329 Author: In what way do you mean that it's sort of made you closer?

330 Josh: Well sometimes like cos I come up here a lot of times in the week, he like  
331 brings me up like every day, and like we've been with each other like the whole way  
332 basically. So yeah if I didn't really have football it wouldn't have- like we wouldn't  
333 have been like this close

334 The shared experience of football enabled Rob to participate in "involved fathering",  
335 even though he did not live with his son. In doing so, he met the societal expectations for  
336 fathers to have an active role in parenting and to develop open, close relationships with their  
337 children (Dermott, 2003; Jeanes & Magee, 2011). Having a high-quality father-child  
338 relationship has also been associated with lower psychological distress in non-resident fathers  
339 (Vogt Yuan, in press). This research, therefore, supports the claim that youth sport provides a  
340 setting where fathers can enact involved parenting (Coakley, 2006; Kay, 2009; Trussell &  
341 Shaw, 2012) and furthermore, that this can influence perceptions of relationship quality,  
342 which may be salient to non-resident fathers.

343 Extending this further, closeness was in part constituted through a shared  
344 understanding of how football influenced players' everyday subjective experience. Luke, who  
345 was in his first season of balancing playing football full-time with his education, described  
346 feeling closer to his father than his siblings were, because after his parents separated he  
347 continued to see him more at football. Football was something he and his father talked about  
348 frequently and had "always worked towards"; indicating that they shared a mutual  
349 understanding of Luke's goal of becoming a professional footballer. This influenced Luke's  
350 decision to move in with his father, as he found balancing his educational and football



351 commitments challenging and wanted to have someone there to push him to “stay on top of  
352 everything”. His father was uniquely positioned to be aware of and understand his life as a  
353 whole. Moreover, he reflected that he did not think he would be where he was right now if he  
354 did not live with his father. Similarly, his father recognised that he had spent more time with  
355 Luke than his other children due to football, but that this was justified because of Luke’s  
356 success, which he perceived he would not have been able to achieve without his support.

357 Mike: It has meant that I have spent a ridiculous amount of time with him as opposed  
358 to the other two. And I probably would have spent more time with the other two if I  
359 wasn’t dragged away all around the country with him. However he would have never  
360 have gotten the level of support he probably needs and needed had I have not been  
361 able to sacrifice the time to do that

362 Illustrating an overlap in their accounts, Mike constructed his involvement as unique,  
363 by suggesting that Luke would “never” have received this support otherwise, because of its  
364 sacrificial nature; and by emphasising the permanence and necessity of his support to meet  
365 his son’s needs. Likewise, Luke interpreted that his father “knows me better than anybody  
366 else”, in particular with regards to football, as whereas his coaches and teammates had  
367 changed, his father had been “the only person that’s been with me the whole time”. This  
368 reflects how a shared understanding of his everyday subjective experience was an important  
369 aspect of Luke’s relationship with his father, which contributed to the sense of closeness in  
370 the relationship.

371 This finding indicates that the elite culture of football academies, which demands high  
372 levels of commitment and involvement from players and parents over a prolonged period of  
373 time, can uniquely contribute to increased closeness in the parent-child relationship. The  
374 shared corporeal understanding of players’ football experience, and how this fits in with their  
375 lives, also enhanced this closeness and supports Knight and Holt’s (2014) postulation that

376 developing an understanding emotional climate is integral to parents enhancing their child's  
377 tennis journey. The experience of closeness enabled fathers to participate in involved  
378 fathering, however mothers described feeling closer to their son despite a perceived lack of  
379 football knowledge, and is described below.

### 380 **Embodiment: Gender**

381 Exploring both mother- and father-player dyads highlighted the gendered dimension  
382 of parent-child relationships. Professional football clubs are controlled and organised by men  
383 and permeated by dominant masculine norms and values (Roderick, 2006). Youth sport can  
384 provide a setting where fathers feel comfortable and competent to perform parenting, as  
385 men's knowledge and experience of sport are considered authoritative (Coakley, 2006;  
386 Willms, 2009). How mothers experience this subordination is unclear, yet mothers must also  
387 negotiate contemporary cultural expectations of intensive mothering (child-centred, expert-  
388 guided, emotionally absorbing and time and labour intensive) when supporting their son's  
389 sport participation (Hays, 1996; Trussell & Shaw, 2012). For example; Carla, a single mother  
390 to Ali, experienced uncertainty about the effectiveness of her feedback to her son. Feeling  
391 that she was "constantly on his case" to keep him motivated in football and in school meant  
392 she questioned the degree to which she pushed her son and the effectiveness of her advice as  
393 a mother.

394 Carla: I do push him, I do push him and I do try to keep him motivated and sometimes  
395 I do wonder you know am I just a nag, does he just think I'm a nag. [ ] A boy learns  
396 certain things from his father and if he's not there, and there isn't another man in the  
397 house, where does that come from? I mean I've been taking Ali to football since he  
398 was five years old it's always been me. And I've always been the one giving him the  
399 advice and everything, and I love football. I've been watching it- I watched it with my  
400 older brother since I was a young girl so I kind of know what I'm talking about! But

401 obviously you have the coaches teaching them whatever they teach them, and I have  
402 said to Woody and Wrighty in the meeting, sometimes I don't know whether what I  
403 say to him is a help or a hindrance

404 Despite this uncertainty, Ali praised his mother's parenting approach and described feeling  
405 closer to his mother than his father (who separated from his mother when he was very young)  
406 because of the time they had spent together through football.

407 Ali: She like helps me analyse the game after sometimes, she makes sure I'm not too  
408 hard on myself, like I don't beat myself up over mistakes, she always encourages me  
409 on the sideline tells me what I'm not doing enough of, stuff like that

410 Author: And is that helpful having that feedback from your mum?

411 Ali: Yeah it's quite good yeah so coz I can't watch myself, coz they record it but I  
412 don't- we don't get to see it, they just watch it. But yeah she just tells me what I do  
413 really, and if I can do better or anythin

414 In this extracts Ali describes how he accepts his mother's advice because he interprets  
415 that it has a positive impact on him. This is in contrast to Carla's anxiety that her guidance  
416 was construed as "nagging" by her son and represents a divergence in their individual  
417 accounts. Her embodied sense of interaction with his son – that her feedback as a mother was  
418 not effective – illustrates the gendered nature of parenting experiences. By positioning herself  
419 within this gender order – the pattern of power relations between men and women (Connell,  
420 1987) – Carla experienced greater uncertainty and questioned the value of her advice to her  
421 son in this setting, even though at other points in the interview she described her detailed  
422 knowledge of and love for football.

423 However, the value Ali placed on his mother's advice after football matches was in  
424 contrast to many of the players whose fathers were identified as the most involved in their  
425 football. Players often described their mother's role in limited terms because of a perceived

426 lack of football knowledge.

427 Author: Is your mum involved in football at all?

428 Josh: She's supportive, she's like, she don't know much about football at all. She just  
429 says like enjoy it and stuff, so she's not really like- she wouldn't watch football or  
430 like she wouldn't- she don't really know much about football basically heh. So it's  
431 hard to get something from her

432

433 Jason: My stepdad gets more sort of involved sort of thing than my mum because he  
434 knows a bit more about football than her, and like is more interested and stuff like that

435 Perceived lack or undervaluing of football knowledge was also reflected in the interviews  
436 with parents. Mothers described how their understanding of football developed a sense of  
437 closeness with their son, but typically downplayed their level of knowledge.

438 Steph: Because obviously I'm a female, being able to enjoy that with them has helped  
439 our relationship because he's so into it. I suppose I've got enough football knowledge  
440 and like of the game enough to you know to be able to enjoy that with him

441

442 Susan: I think if Jason hadn't have done the football in the way that he did I would  
443 struggle to have conversations with them about anything sometimes. It is a topic of  
444 conversation I can now join in, and not feel I don't know anything about it. I don't  
445 know as much as everybody else but I feel as though I'm part of it

446 These findings imply that knowledge and understanding of football was assumed and  
447 accepted with fathers or step-fathers, but not mothers, reflecting the dominant masculine  
448 norms and values of professional football (Roderick, 2006). This supports and extends Holt et  
449 al.'s (2008) finding that perceived knowledge and experience influenced parents'  
450 involvement at youth sport competitions, by highlighting how certain knowledge is

451 authoritative within sport cultures. Importantly, perceived knowledge also has the potential to  
452 contribute to an embodied sense of closeness in the parent-child relationship, which may be  
453 problematic for mothers who lack or devalue their experiential knowledge of football. In the  
454 above quotes, although mothers consistently downplayed their knowledge, they emphasised  
455 how this understanding enhanced their relationship and improved communication with their  
456 sons, highlighting a unique aspect of the parent-child relationship in this setting.

### 457 **Temporality and Transitions**

458         Interaction between parent and player was influenced by the temporal significance of  
459 the players' next transition in football. Transition points occurred towards the end of each  
460 season when a decision would be made by the club as to whether to extend players' contracts.  
461 Players described experiencing pressure to develop and impress coaches within a definitive  
462 timeframe, or else their academy status would be at risk. Likewise, parents recognised that  
463 their son's place in the academy was not secure and were aware of the restricted period of  
464 time in which their child had to meet expected performance standards.

465         At 15 years old, and playing in the under-16 squad, Harry would learn within the next  
466 month whether the club would offer him a scholarship to play full-time academy football.  
467 The imminent scholarship decision created a shared experience of uncertainty for father and  
468 son. Harry described feeling nervous about the impending decision but also a sense of  
469 assurance that he would be able to play at another club in a lower tier of English football if he  
470 was not offered a scholarship at his current academy. He described being unconcerned about  
471 looking for another club, as his aim was simply to play football. This was in contrast to his  
472 father Steve, who experienced increased anxiety about his son's future at the club and a  
473 desire for a resolution.

474         Steve: But yeah at the minute everybody's edgy, everybody's worried, this and that  
475         you know why is he playing half a game, who's this that's come in on trial, blah blah

476           blah. I've been quite laid back about the whole thing really over the years, now even  
477           I'm starting to feel it a little bit. I'm getting worried f' him if he has a bad game it's  
478           like ohh you know hope they're not gonna drop him. You do start getting like that. I  
479           just want it to be over really I just want to get him sorted

480           For Steve, success was judged by whether or not Harry was offered a professional  
481           contract. His concern that the club might "drop" his son and his desire to "get him sorted",  
482           alongside the prominence of football in his family's life; "football's just a life for us it's a  
483           lifestyle", implies that Steve's experience of pressure was constituted through his connection  
484           to his son's football participation, and that his identity was in part constructed through  
485           Harry's achievements in football. Furedi (2002 p.107) suggested that "adults do not simply  
486           live their lives through their children, but in part, develop their identity through them". In the  
487           sport domain, Smoll, Cumming and Smith (2011 p.16) termed this experience "reversed-  
488           dependency", where parents define their own self-worth in terms of their child's sporting  
489           successes or failures. Steve's shared football identity with his son meant that he was  
490           committed to supporting his son's pursuit of a professional football playing career. Smoll et  
491           al. (2011) assumed that reverse-dependency was accompanied with excessive parental  
492           pressure. However, this was not apparent in Harry's interpretation of his interaction with his  
493           father. He acknowledged his father's determination "to get him being a footballer", but rather  
494           than this expectation increasing the sense of pressure to succeed, he interpreted his parent's  
495           behaviours in relation to achieving his personal goal of playing professional football.

496           Author: And in what ways have they helped you

497           Harry: Well, took me training that's the main part. They tell me what I need to  
498           improve on, like in the nicest way and then they tell me like how I can improve it. So  
499           dad got me a personal trainer, which helped me a lot. I wouldn't have been able to get  
500           myself a personal trainer, so they get a lot of stuff like that

501 Author: And you say they tell you stuff in the nicest way what does that mean

502 Harry: Uhh they like, they just say ohh you need to work on your speed a little bit,

503 I've just seen like an example and then they give me an example of why and I'm like

504 yeah I do. And then they give me advice on how to do it, like my dad will take me out

505 training, speed training. So they don't just tell me 'yeah you need to work on your

506 speed or you won't get a scholarship'

507 Here, Harry described accepting feedback from his father (and grandfather) on how to

508 improve, explaining how it was delivered in a supportive way. By using "just" and "a little

509 bit" to describe how advice was typically given, he minimised the authoritarian nature of

510 their instruction. Instead, he constructed this feedback as based on evidence which he agreed

511 with, and further described how his father was then actively involved in helping him practise

512 at home. In doing so, Harry positioned himself as an active agent in the process of assessing

513 his weaknesses, as opposed to a passive recipient of evaluation and corrective instruction. His

514 reference to a failure to obtain a scholarship alluded to a shared understanding of the potential

515 negative consequence for not undertaking additional physical training, but dismissed that his

516 father used this as a way of exerting control.

517 However, whereas Steve interpreted Harry's enthusiasm for training to mean that he

518 was playing without the pressure he experienced so intensely himself, Harry described how

519 he completed additional training and fitness because "if the coaches know that you are doing

520 extra work they will like you a lot more because you are determined to get better", suggesting

521 that Harry was motivated to follow his father's instruction in order to increase his chances of

522 being offered a scholarship. Interpreting his interaction with his father in this way indicates

523 how the temporal significance of transition points in football influenced their relationship.

524 Similarly, across the dyads, this sense of lived-time in relation to their son's future

525 reinforced parents' commitment to facilitate their son's football development and was used to

526 justify certain practices, for example criticising performances. Criticism was legitimised as a  
527 practice necessary for preparing their son for a future in professional football:

528 Ade: It's good that I tell him already now and then I'm harsh with him and then  
529 because he wants to become professional footballer he's prepared to take whatever  
530 I'm going to throw to him, umm because I know after this it's gonna be tough. It's  
531 gonna be very bad

532 This reflects Jeanes and Magee's (2011) finding that parenting practices which contradict the  
533 orthodox expectations of involved fathering, such as aggressive or controlling behaviours,  
534 were rationalised by fathers (of 14-year-old academy players) as necessary for equipping  
535 their sons for the masculine, competitive, elite environment of professional football.

536 Although criticising performances was a strategy used by some fathers in the present  
537 study, in the face of temporal uncertainty parents also described complying with academy  
538 expectations (e.g., to attend additional training), proactively making contact with other clubs  
539 (a practice discouraged by the Premier League), and emphasising the importance of education  
540 to manage their son's approaching transition point.

541 Susan: We had an agreement that school was as important as football. As far as I'm  
542 concerned, it's more important. If the football works out that's fabulous and you  
543 know you're going to have plenty of money, that'd be great, but the likelihood is  
544 that's not going to happen. And you have got to do your schoolwork because this is  
545 your opportunity to get your schoolwork right

546  
547 Natasha: I don't want him to be broken hearted if he doesn't, because he might not fit  
548 in here but he might fit in somewhere else. There's other kids that have left that have  
549 fitted in other places so, we just try and say that to him and he's fine. And he even in  
550 the car he was saying about school, I heard him and his friend, 'you've gotta make



551           sure you do well at school because you've gotta have a backup plan.' I'm thinking  
552           good that's good because that's what we try and say make sure you do well at school  
553           because you could be injured, you could, anything could happen. You can't count on  
554           it

555 These findings indicate how the temporal nature of parenting experiences in football  
556 compelled parents to act in ways that accepted or resisted the academy's control, mirroring  
557 the experiences of parents of foundation phase academy players (Clarke & Harwood, 2014).  
558 This represents a unique aspect of parent-child relationships in this setting. As other  
559 phenomenological studies have illustrated, parents and children experience a shared sense of  
560 lived-time, in which parents are future-orientated and hopeful for their child's becoming (De  
561 Mol & Buysse, 2008; van Manen, 1990). In elite youth football, this temporality is  
562 experienced differently, as fixed timescales and arbitrary decisions for transition points  
563 threaten parents and players' shared identity, goals and future possibilities for relational  
564 experiences.

### 565 **Relations with Family**

566           The experiences of parents and players in this study highlight how parent-child  
567 interaction occurred within the context of wider, more complex family relationships. A  
568 variety of individual adults may be involved in the care of children including step-parents,  
569 grandparents, older siblings and other family members (Ribbens McCarthy & Edwards,  
570 2011). Each dyad in this study was part of a unique network of family relationships, which  
571 shaped their interaction in different ways. For example, Harry's grandfather was considerably  
572 involved in his football. He provided transport and technical advice to his grandson, and  
573 monitored his performance to pass on information to Harry's father. The regret that Harry's  
574 father experienced because his own father did not allow him to sign a contract with a  
575 professional club also influenced his decision to support Harry to play academy football. At

576 15 years of age he was offered a youth contract by the same club that his son now plays at,  
577 but was not allowed to sign it because his own father decided “it was too one-sided”. He  
578 regrets that he was denied the chance of playing higher level football and wonders what he  
579 could have achieved as a player if he had signed to the club. When his son started playing  
580 football he discussed with his father that if Harry was offered a similar opportunity he would  
581 let him sign a contract, highlighting how his parenting was influenced by his personal  
582 experiences with his father.

583 Parent-sibling relationships were often used as a comparison to describe and interpret  
584 players’ own relationship with their parent. For example, having two older brothers who had  
585 been through the academy system meant for Theo that he anticipated how his interaction with  
586 his father was likely to change:

587 Theo: I guarantee if I stay until the under 13s, he will talk a lot and a lot. He talks a lot  
588 to my brother, like just gives him a conversation for like an hour. For me he speaks  
589 like 20 minutes, but when I get older probably be an hour as well. It’s long.

590 His father Ade also acknowledged that his approach was influenced by his experience of  
591 supporting his other sons’ football participation. Describing professional football as “very  
592 ruthless and very cruel”, he had resolved to “never be laidback again” and instead, be more  
593 involved in facilitating opportunities for his youngest son to play and progress.

594 Ade: I’m really strict with him. So, what I tell him, if you want to become a  
595 professional footballer I know what it takes, what you need to have. So that’s the  
596 bottom line.

597 This finding exemplifies how parent-child relationships both shaped, and were shaped  
598 by, relations with other family members. Previous research has indicated that siblings can  
599 positively support the development of young athletes when brothers and sisters are  
600 cooperative rather than competitive (Côté, 1999), that parents can struggle balancing time



626 youth football. The findings present a detailed description and interpretation of the parent-  
627 player relationship; as one constituted by relations with other family members, an embodied  
628 sense of closeness, the temporal significance of football transitions, and gender relations. It is  
629 suggested that these experiential aspects may serve as a useful heuristic (although not  
630 foundational) guide for researchers and practitioners working with families to encourage  
631 reflection on current understandings of parent-child relationships and interaction in this  
632 context.

633         Uniquely to elite youth football, parents and players experienced increased closeness  
634 through the shared and embodied experience of academy football and a heightened sense of  
635 lived-time as families prepared for the player's next transition point and the potential  
636 consequences of academy decisions. The corporeal understanding of players' football  
637 experience and how this fitted in with children's lives, developed over time through  
638 interaction, was valued by players. However, the constitutive role of gender to the parent-  
639 child relationship represents an area which requires further exploration. As De Mol and  
640 Buysse (2008) highlighted, parents can experience vulnerability when they lack control or  
641 knowledge of how to act toward their child. Mothers in the male dominated environment of  
642 elite youth football frequently devalued or questioned their knowledge of the game. Further  
643 research which examines the power of gender relations to enable or restrict parenting  
644 experiences is required in order to challenge assumptions about what constitutes authoritative  
645 knowledge within sport cultures. In addition, the finding that parent-child relationships  
646 shaped, and were shaped by, relations with other family members has implications for future  
647 research; in particular that examining parent-child relationships in isolation from the family  
648 milieu may limit understanding of the parenting process. A limitation of the present study,  
649 therefore, was the focus on the experiences of biological parents, which may have excluded  
650 step-parents or grandparents who were actively involved in parenting and with players'

651 football.

652 By illustrating how players experienced agency in the parenting process, this research  
653 also emphasised how children mutually constitute their relationship with parents. For  
654 example, rather than the experience of reverse-dependency (where parents define their self-  
655 worth in terms of their child's sporting success or failure; Smoll et al., 2011) being  
656 interpreted as pressurising, players made sense of parenting behaviours in relation to  
657 achieving their personal goal of playing professional football, when they felt their aspirations  
658 were shared by their parent. This supports previous research that shared and communicated  
659 goals for youth sport can enhance parent-child interactions (Harwood & Knight, 2015;  
660 Knight & Holt, 2014) and advocates the need for a view of parenting that accounts for how  
661 relationships are experienced by parents *and* children, rather than a sole focus on explicating  
662 optimal parental involvement. Similarly, parents' lived-experience of developing and acting  
663 upon a shared understanding of their child's identity, goals and everyday experiences to  
664 effectively manage and negotiate transitions in sport, presents an alternative to the  
665 construction of parenting as a skill set which parents may benefit from learning. This shifts  
666 emphasis towards the self-development of parents, rather than the interpersonal relationship,  
667 and does not recognise how empathy with their child's lived experience may enable parents  
668 to provide social support which is valued by their child. Parents' recognition and  
669 understanding of their child's needs and their capacity to adapt to meet these has previously  
670 been reported (e.g. Dorsch et al., 2009; 2015), but is often overshadowed within wider  
671 discussions focusing on the determinants of parents' behaviours and/or associated child  
672 effects. For example, parents' empathy with their child has been framed as a contributory  
673 factor to parents' emotional reactions at competitions, and therefore, as a potential area for  
674 development (Holt et al., 2008; Knight & Holt, 2013). Considering the emphasis on the need  
675 for parent education in the sport psychology literature (e.g., Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes &

676 Pennisi, 2008; Knight et al., 2011; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008), further research to establish the  
677 circumstances in which expert advice in elite youth sport is legitimate and warranted, or  
678 when active support for parental instinct and judgement can be encouraged may therefore be  
679 useful. Furthermore, the temporal uncertainty experienced by parents and the constitutive role  
680 of transitions points to parent-child relationships suggest that parents' need for expert advice  
681 and/or active support may vary depending on their child's development stage in football.  
682 Academies and practitioners may wish to reflect upon how best to meet this need to ensure  
683 families are prepared to manage players' transitions.

684 In conclusion, by illustrating a fraction of the complex, dynamic nature of parent-  
685 child relationships in the context of youth football, this research has highlighted the  
686 importance of conceptualising parenting as embodied, temporal *process*, constituted through  
687 interaction and the social context. Further research which aims to achieve a detailed  
688 description of these relationships has the potential to contribute to a base of knowledge, from  
689 which researchers can build theory and attempt to explain this ubiquitous sporting  
690 phenomenon.

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