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Stress in youth sport: A developmental investigation of tennis parents

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Abstract

Objective

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

Design and method

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

Results and conclusion

Three general dimensions of parental stressor emerged: competition, organizational, and developmental. Competition stressors related to issues associated with their child's matches; organizational stressors included demands related to finance, time, training, and the national governing body; and developmental stressors centered on worries about education, tennis transitions, and future decision making. While sampling stage parents encountered fewer developmental stressors than later stage parents, competition stressors were highly prominent. Organizational stressors were particularly foremost for specializing and investment stage parents. Implications are discussed with reference to further research into the parental stress and coping process and to the importance of stage-specific tennis parent education and support initiatives.

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

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

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3 In March 2006, Christophe Fauviau, a 43 year old father of two French teenage
4 players was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to eight years in prison. Over the
5 preceding years he had spiked 28 of his son's opponent's drinks bottles with Temesta, an anti-
6 anxiety drug that caused severe dizziness and drowsiness on court. During his trial, Fauviau
7 explained that "I could no longer cope. I had come to hate the sport ... Every match became a
8 terrible anguish. I became convinced that I was being judged permanently by the success or
9 failure of my children" (cited in Lichfield, 2006). His arrest came after Fauviau had drugged
10 Alexandre Lagardere, one of his son's opponents, who was subsequently killed after losing
11 control of his car following his withdrawal from the match.

12 Fauviau's story is perhaps a tragic reminder of the stress and resulting long term
13 psychological and behavioral strain experienced by a father in his role as a tennis parent
14 (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006, 2008; Hellstedt, 1987; Lazarus, 2006). Indeed,
15 much of the research on sport parents tends to incorporate a negative view of parents, often
16 using the lens of coaches and athletes perceptions (DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997; Gould et
17 al., 2008; Hellstedt, 1990; Leff & Hoyle, 1995). However, whilst the study of personal,
18 competition, and organizational stressors faced by athletes and coaches has a well-developed
19 literature base (e.g., Hanton, Fletcher & Coughlan, 2005; Giacobbi, Foore & Weinberg, 2004;
20 Gould & Weinberg, 1985; Gould, Eklund & Jackson., 1993; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Kelley &
21 Gill, 1993; Woodman & Hardy, 2001), limited attention has been afforded to the range of
22 stressors experienced by parents as they support their child through their stages of sport
23 development (Côtè, 1999).

24 Parents play a critical role in children's socialization to sport and throughout their
25 sporting lives (Brustad, 1996; Wuerth, Lee & Alfermann, 2004). Fredricks and Eccles (2004)

1 noted that parents fulfill three fundamental roles in their child's sport experience. These are
2 firstly as 'provider' (e.g., of opportunities, finance, transport); as 'interpreter' of the sport
3 experience for their child (e.g., emotionally reacting to competition in adaptive manners); and
4 finally, as 'role model' (i.e., modeling the ideal attributes and behaviors in sport). The extent
5 to which these roles are fulfilled by parents influences a child's beliefs and values and in turn,
6 their motivated behaviors and performance.

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

13 In establishing a line of research into stress from a parental perspective, Harwood and
14 Knight (2008) investigated the stressors articulated by one hundred and twenty three British
15 tennis parents. The wide range of stressors emerging from their open-ended survey coalesced
16 into seven core themes of parental stress. These included stressors associated with attendance
17 at matches and tournaments; coaches behaviors and responsibilities, financial and time
18 demands placed upon the family; sibling resentment and unequal attention; inefficiencies and
19 inequalities attributed to tennis organizations; and developmental concerns related to
20 educational and future tennis transitions. Whilst this study provided a much needed insight
21 into the scope of stressors experienced in the sport-parent role, it lacked an in-depth analysis
22 of how such stressors may differ depending upon a child's stage of development (Côté, 1999).
23 Such insights would provide practitioners, coaches, and governing body organizations with a
24 deeper, evidence-based appreciation of the main issues and needs of parents across the key
25 transitional stages of their child's sport participation.

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

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

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

22 During the specializing stage, sport-specific skills develop through practice, with a
23 reduction in deliberate play (Côtè & Hay, 2002). Parents take a growing interest in their child
24 as an athlete and make an increasing financial and time commitment (Côtè, 1999; Durand-
25 Bush et al., 2005). The time commitment is such that other opportunities are often sacrificed

1 for a child's sport. Furthermore, there is a premium placed on a parent's nurturing role
2 alongside the provision of moral and socio-emotional support (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005;
3 Wuerth et al., 2004).

4 Finally, athletes reach the investment years. At this stage the child pursues the aim of
5 reaching an elite level in their chosen sport. Children increase the intensity of their
6 commitment to one sport and there is a substantial increase in deliberate practice (Côté &
7 Hay, 2002). Parents' levels of support and interest in their child-athlete may result in them
8 displaying different treatment toward their other children (Durand-Bush et al., 2005; Wuerth
9 et al., 2004). Nevertheless, during this stage, parents' actual requirements may begin to
10 decrease as coaches play a larger role.

11 Considering the differing emotional, financial, and logistical requirements of parents,
12 the experiences of athletes, and the changing competition and training demands associated
13 with each stage of development, it is conceivable that parental stressors may also vary.
14 Therefore, in extending the work of Harwood and Knight (2008), the purpose of this study
15 was to conduct an in-depth, comparative examination of the stressors perceived by British
16 tennis parents whose children were located within one of the three stages of sport
17 participation (Côté, 1999). The investigation formed part of a research and education
18 initiative supported by Great Britain's tennis governing body, the Lawn Tennis Association
19 (LTA). The overall aim was to develop a clearer understanding of stage-specific parental
20 stressors so that appropriate resources and support would enable parents towards positive
21 role-related influences on their children's talent development in the sport.

22 Method

23 *Participants*

24 The sample comprised 22 tennis parents: Nine mothers, five fathers, and four sets of
25 parents. The sample was divided into three groups: six parents of performance juniors, six

1 parents of top county/low national standard players, and ten parents of national and
2 international (academy) standard players. The performance juniors (three boys and two girls)
3 were aged between 9 and 11 and were classified as being in the sampling stage. The second
4 category accounted for parents of four boys and two girls aged from 11 to 16 and considered
5 as being in the specializing stage. The final group comprised parents of academy players,
6 aged 12 to 16. These players trained at national tennis academies and fulfilled the
7 characteristics of athletes in the investment stage. Six players resided full time at the
8 academies and two commuted daily, with all players on modified educational programs.

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

14 *Procedure*

15 A purposive sampling strategy highlighted 25 tennis parents who were available
16 and interested in engaging in this study. These parents were identified through
17 discussions with county officials, coaches, and clubs. Three parents subsequently
18 withdrew from the study due to personal commitments.

19 Semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate method of data
20 collection for this study because they allow in-depth information to be gained from
21 participants discussing their interpretation of the tennis experience and expressing
22 situations from their own point of view (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001; Denzin &
23 Lincoln, 2005). This was particularly important in the study considering the subjective
24 and individual nature of stress. (Lazarus, 2006).

25

1 *Data collection*

2 A semi-structured interview guide was developed based upon results of an open-
3 ended survey of British tennis parents (Harwood & Knight, 2008), the requirements of
4 sports parents, and potentially stressful areas highlighted in past research (e.g., Kirk et al.,
5 1997a, 1997b; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). The interview guide contained introductory
6 questions about the parent's general experiences of stress in tennis, followed by a focus
7 on several specific categories. These included matches and competitions; coaching and
8 training; finances; national governing body and other organizations; personal, social, and
9 family life; education and transitions; and final comments.

10 All interviews were conducted by a female interviewer, who was also a qualified
11 professional coach with a high level of tennis playing experience. This served to facilitate the
12 development of rapport with the participants and a closeness to the phenomena under
13 investigation. Prior to carrying out the interviews, two pilot interviews were completed with
14 parents of a sampling stage and a specializing stage junior. These lasted 45 and 52 minutes
15 respectively and were taped and reviewed with the co-author. Both pilot interviews allowed
16 the interviewer to rehearse and refine the interview procedure, including the efficient use of
17 elaboration and clarification probes. The pilot interviews resulted in the rewording of the
18 initial question, the inclusion of a general introductory question asking parents to list stressful
19 areas, the creation of a time and family life section and the addition of questions relating to
20 travel, and organization and timings of tournaments. The pilot process subsequently reduced
21 the potential for interviews to deviate through the course of study and to increase the
22 trustworthiness of the results (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Johnson, 1997).

23 Before each interview the participants were provided with a written and verbal
24 introduction. The introduction outlined the research, reassured confidentiality, and also
25 included definitions of stress and stressors (Lazarus, 2006). Participants were reminded that

1 they were free to discuss any issues they felt were relevant to the topic. Informed consent was
2 obtained and any questions were answered. The interviews lasted between 22 and 87 minutes,
3 ($M = 54.0$ mins).

4 *Data Analysis*

5 Each interview was taped and transcribed verbatim immediately following its
6 completion. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to ensure confidentiality
7 throughout the analysis process. The interviews were read and reread to ensure that the
8 researcher was fully immersed in the transcripts. Data was then analyzed through a process of
9 inductive content analysis following the method proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994).
10 Raw data meaning units were identified that represented the core stressors reported by
11 parents. Each meaning unit was then coded into a first order thematic category or essence
12 phrase that essentially represented a cluster of similar stressors (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).
13 This analytical process then progressed inductively to a higher thematic level (i.e., higher
14 order themes) culminating in a final set of general dimensions that represented the phenomena
15 of parental stress. To facilitate the comparative analysis of stage-specific parental stress,
16 meaning units and themes were identified for each participant individually, within each
17 category of parents, and in the overall sample. Data matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were
18 developed for each category of parents to allow for the comparison of the data between
19 themes. Furthermore, a frequency count of each sub-theme was also completed to provide
20 further evidence of differences between parents' experiences.

21 *Methodological Rigor*

22 A number of steps were introduced to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, and
23 their credibility and dependability in particular (Johnson, 1997). Firstly, engaging in pilot
24 interviews (and maintaining the same interviewer throughout) helped to maximize interview
25 consistency as well as encouraging a prolonged engagement with the parent population. The

1 experience of the interviewer as a player and coach also encouraged an affinity with this sub-
2 culture. Secondly, an audit trail was consistently maintained of the analytical decisions and
3 processes stemming from the raw data meaning units to the final interpretive dimensions.
4 This process also aided the researcher's reflexivity in forcing them to reflect on decisions
5 made with an eye to their personal assumptions or biases about the topic. Thirdly, all
6 interview transcripts and a summary of the results were returned to participants for member
7 checking and participant feedback (Cohen et al., 2001; Johnson, 1997). This allowed
8 participants to confirm whether the transcripts and results provided an accurate and valid
9 reflection of their experiences. Furthermore, they were provided with the opportunity to
10 further substantiate their experiences or provide additional information. All participants
11 confirmed their transcripts and validated the thematic frameworks. Two parents further
12 reinforced key points that had emerged through the data analysis.

13 Finally, and importantly, investigator triangulation was achieved with the first author
14 reading all of the transcripts and then independently identifying the raw data units for one
15 third of the parent sample from each category. This process led to a 90% agreement rate with
16 the second author's raw data interpretations. Following discussion and consensus at this stage,
17 the first author checked the interpretive allocation of the raw data into the first order sub-
18 themes and the labeling applied to each theme. This process of inductive verification between
19 the two authors continued until the final general dimensions were agreed and the frequencies
20 of stressor pertaining to each stage of development were intact and verifiable.

21 Results

22 Analysis of the interviews led to the identification of three general dimensions of
23 parental stressors: Competition, Organizational, and Developmental. These general
24 dimensions included 18 higher order themes, 71 first order sub-themes, and 253 raw data
25 themes. This section will explore each general dimension and higher order theme across the

1 three stages. Quotes will be utilized to illustrate raw data themes with keys denoting the stage
2 of development (i.e., Sa= Sampling; Sp=Specializing; In=Investment) alongside whether it
3 was a mother (M) or father (F) and their number in that stage (e.g., SpM3). In addition, a
4 frequency table illustrates the differences in stressors articulated by parents across the three
5 stages (see Table 1).

6 *General dimension one: Competition stressors*

7 Analysis of the interviews extracted 66 raw data themes concerning stressors
8 associated purely with a child's match. The subsequent general dimension, labeled
9 'Competition stressors' comprised eight higher order themes rendering it the most wide
10 ranging in the study (see Figure 1).

11 Firstly, a number of parents cited the stress of logistical and preparatory issues prior to
12 the match, and particularly the psychological readiness and focus of their child. Some parents
13 noted the difficulties of seeing their child nervous, feeling pressured or not focusing on the
14 upcoming match in the way they thought was necessary. One parent stated:

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

18 The majority of parents identified watching matches as a stressor, with many stating it
19 was the largest stressor they encountered (e.g. "The biggest stress for me I suppose is actually
20 watching her play" InM2). The child's performance, behavior, and the outcome of the match
21 were inextricably linked to this. One parent identified, "It's stressful as a parent because you
22 always want them [your child] to do well. (SpM2)" Furthermore, parents wanted their child
23 to be happy, and parental stress was enhanced when they saw their child distressed on court,
24 displaying bad behavior, or expressing disappointment following a match. As one parent
25 noted, "That's the worst when you see them get upset and you can't do anything. (SaF3)"

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

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

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

23 Competition stressors were identified across all three stages of sport participation,
 24 with little difference in the frequency of stressors expressed by parents. However, six of the

¹ * denotes that a pseudonym has been used

1 eight sub-themes were more frequently recalled by sampling parents than specializing or
2 investment parents. The greatest variation in the recall of stressors between stages was in
3 relation to other tennis parents, the child's opponent, and the outcome of the match.

4 In general, stressors associated with other parents appeared to reduce across the three
5 stages, (all the sampling parents expressed this stressors but only 80% of investment parents
6 did). Similarly, stressors associated with the outcome of the match were more frequently
7 recalled by sampling parents, then specializing parents, with only half of the investment
8 parents recounting this. Nearly all the sampling parents discussed the stressors associated with
9 their child's reaction to a loss, and not knowing exactly what to say or do. The following
10 quote was expressed throughout the sampling stage:

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

15 On the other hand, all investment stage parents, 83% of the specializing stage and only 67%
16 of the sampling parents recalled their child's opponent as a stressor.

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

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

4 Nevertheless, in both the specializing and investment stage, a small number of parents
5 perceived competition stressors to be greater than in the sampling stage because of the
6 increasing importance of match outcomes. One parent highlighted, “As kids tend to get better
7 the parents sort of become more involved and perhaps expectations get raised and it becomes
8 more stressful the better they get. (InF2)” Similar feelings were recalled in relation to
9 opponents because the impact of poor line calls may have greater implications than they did at
10 a younger age (e.g., on international selection).

11 *General dimension two: Organizational stressors*

12 One hundred and thirty seven raw data themes emerged in relation to organizational
13 issues These were characterized by stressors that parents perceived in relation to the logistical
14 environment and tennis systems within which they themselves operate. The general
15 dimension labeled ‘Organizational stressors’ encompassed six higher order themes and related
16 directly or indirectly to the Lawn Tennis Association (the national governing body for British
17 Tennis) and the structure of British Tennis (see Figure 2).

18 All of the participants recalled time as a stressor. The day-to-day time requirements
19 and organization required to enable participation and progression in tennis was perceived as a
20 notable stressor due to the impact it has upon a parent’s general lifestyle. One mother
21 recounted:

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

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

6 Investment stage parents whose children live away from home at tennis academies
7 acknowledged that time as a stressor was far reduced. Whilst time stressors still exist relating
8 to tournaments, the day-to-day time requirements were less. As one mother stated “I don’t
9 feel I have [stress] now because she’s away on a day to day basis. (InM5)”

10 Many parents in the specializing and investment stages recalled extensive financial
11 stressors. Parents in the sampling stage estimated costs between £2,000 and £3,500 a year on
12 tennis. However, in the specializing and investment stage this appeared to increase
13 enormously. As one mother stated, “It just spirals out of control. (InM3)” Parents with
14 children in the investment stage estimated spending between £15,000 and £20,000 per year on
15 tennis. One family declared, “We have been broke for eight years and that’s no exaggeration.
16 (InF1)” Another mother divulged, “I’ve already re-mortgaged twice and I’m thinking I might
17 have to do it again. (InM6)”

18 Due to the financial demands of tennis, parents often seek to obtain sponsorship when
19 their children are in or moving towards the investment stage. The stressors related to
20 obtaining sponsorship were experienced in contrasting ways. The following quotes highlight
21 two examples: a) “It is very very difficult with sponsorship because most companies do not
22 want to sponsor individuals they want to sponsor teams. (InM6)”; b) “I run sponsorship
23 deals... So I personally have additional stressors that some of the other parents don’t have to
24 endure... I have a commitment obviously to the sponsors in terms of what they want back out
25 of the deal. (SpF1)”

1 Allocation of funding was particularly pertinent to parents with players in the later two
2 stages and was one of many stressors parents expressed in relation to the National and County
3 Lawn Tennis Association. Parents perceived the lack of transparency of funding as a stressor.
4 As one mother highlighted, “It’s not transparent so you’re not sure whether... you’re getting
5 your correct allocation of funding support. (InM4)” Consequently, stressors relating to
6 perceived favoritism emerged:

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

10 (InM3)

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

20 Beyond the lack of information, parents professed a lack of respect from the
21 Lawn Tennis Association and coaches. This promoted both frustration and ill-feeling,
22 as the following quote summarizes:

23 You don’t get informed. They [national coaches] look at you, you know, you
24 send your child off on these [national training] camps somewhere and when

1 you say “Can you give me some feedback?”... “What you - the parent?!, What
2 right have you got to know? Oh no no no, we’ll tell the coach. (SpF1)”

3 Stressors perceived to be associated with the Lawn Tennis Association were not
4 limited to funding, information, and coaches. However these were far more frequently
5 recalled than other issues. Two further organizational issues that arose were injury and
6 tournaments, both with increasing frequency in the specializing and investment stage. The
7 lack of support provided for injured players was highlighted as a stressor by a number of
8 investment parents, as the following quote highlights:

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

14 Furthermore, injury was a long-term concern for parents, as one mother recounted:

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

18 Tournament stressors included organization, traveling, accommodation, and location.

19 Specifically, the location of the British Nationals in the summer caused problems for many
20 parents in the specializing and investment stages. As one mother explained:

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

24 Parents were also aggravated by the altered weekend tournament structure and the subsequent
25 impact this has on accommodation and finance amongst other aspects:

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

6 *General dimension three: Developmental stressors*

7 Fifty raw data themes reflected the stressors that parents experience associated with
8 their child's development. From these, four higher order themes comprised the general
9 dimension labeled, 'Developmental stressors' (see Figure 3). Parents with children in the
10 sampling stage recalled developmental stressors very infrequently. Parents indicated that this
11 was due to their child's age and recent introduction and commitment to tennis. Parents with
12 children in the specializing and investment stage, however, regularly recalled developmental
13 stressors.

14 The most commonly identified developmental stressor was education. No parents in
15 the sampling stage identified education as a stressor. In contrast, the majority of parents in the
16 other two stages did. As one investment parent explained, "The decisions regarding education
17 are huge. (InM4)". Education appeared to be a greater stressor for parents who perceived
18 their child was academically able and those who placed great importance on education for
19 their child's future achievement. Issues regarding education were exacerbated for some
20 parents due to a lack of support from their child's school. The following quote encapsulates
21 such stressors:

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

1 Additionally, the majority of parents in the specializing and investment stage
2 identified stressors in relation to their child's future. Parents in the sampling stage generally
3 did not recognize this as a stressor. However, one parent expressed stressors regarding future
4 financial costs of tennis involvement, "I mean if he was to go to Newquay and win the area
5 tournament they'd say "right, next week Leeds"... I'm pretty sure we wouldn't be able to do
6 that. (SaF3)"

7 Parents in the specializing stage recalled the future as a stressor more regularly than
8 parents in the investment stage. Parents in the specializing stage were unsure what their child
9 wished to achieve in tennis, or were concerned that they had high aspirations that were
10 unlikely to be fulfilled. As one parent commented, "He's at a point now where I think he's got
11 to be realistic that he's probably not going to be making a living from it [tennis]... But I'm
12 not brave enough to tell him that. (SpM1)" Such thoughts were confirmed by another mother,
13 who explained, "It does concern me because he has high hopes, and at the same time, you've
14 got to be realistic because there are so few that make it. (InM6)" In comparison, some parents
15 in the investment stage took a more carefree approach to the future, for example, one parent
16 acknowledged, "Things will change, but we just take a little chunk at a time. (InM4)"
17 However, for many investment parents the future was perceived as a large stressor because it
18 was more immediate and perceived to be of huge importance.

19 The third theme that emerged relating to developmental stressors was making
20 decisions necessary to enable their child's progression. Again, this was recalled only once in
21 the sampling stage, with the parent acknowledging, "It's the not knowing what's around the
22 corner and where to go next. (SaM1)" In the specializing stage, this stressor appeared more
23 often. For parents of players in the investment stage decision-making remained a worry and
24 this was particularly evident in relation to decisions to let children go to residential tennis
25 academies.

1 Over the three stages, a small number of parents acknowledged issues relating to other
2 sports or hobbies. However, in the early stages most children were able to participate as they
3 wished in other sports without additional stress. As they progress through the stages, parents
4 identified that other sports stopped.

5 Discussion

6 Stress is widely acknowledged as an inherent part of competitive sport and continues
7 to receive extensive research attention amongst athletes (Giacobbi et al., 2004; Hanton et al.,
8 2005; Holt & Hogg, 2004). This is ostensibly due to the role that the stress process plays in
9 the performance and psychological well-being of athletes. However, as noted by Harwood
10 and Knight (2008), if the realm of youth sport seeks to optimize the role of sport parents, then
11 there is a premium placed on understanding the inherent stressors that may impact on the
12 quality of their role with the child-athlete (see Gould et al., 2006, 2008). Therefore, in
13 advancing upon the research by Harwood and Knight, the aim of this study was to investigate
14 role-related parental stressors with more precise attention to three different stages of athlete
15 development (Côté, 1999).

16 From a conceptual perspective, researchers in the sport domain have started to make
17 the distinction between those stressors linked specifically to competition and competitive
18 performance (i.e., competition stress) with the stressors associated primarily and directly with
19 the organization within which the individual is operating (i.e., organizational stress; Hanton,
20 et al., 2005; Hanton & Fletcher, 2005; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). The overall results of this
21 study suggest that such dimensions of stress apply to sport-parent roles, and that parents'
22 experiences of stress in youth sport can be viewed through the lens offered by Hanton and
23 Fletcher's (2005) conceptualisation of organizational stress. By adapting Cooper, Dewe and
24 O'Driscoll's (2001) work in an organizational setting, Hanton and Fletcher (2005) forwarded
25 five dimensions of organizational stressor in sport: factors intrinsic to the sport; roles in the

1 sport organization; sport relationships and interpersonal demands; organizational structure
2 and climate of the sport; and athletic career and performance development issues.

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

15 Specializing parents also tended to report greater sport-family role conflict where the
16 role pressures of being a tennis parent conflicted with other family activities and
17 responsibilities (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Yet it was clear that a number of these later
18 stage parents felt a systematic lack of respect and communication from the national governing
19 body and coaches in terms of acknowledging their role in the organization of their child's
20 tennis experience. The vast majority of parents disclosed stressors associated with sport
21 relationships and interpersonal demands, mainly related to other tennis parents or to their own
22 child with respect to negative behaviors or dealing with the outcome of competitive matches.
23 Additionally, it was the specializing and investment parents who highlighted the greatest
24 stressors with respect to the organizational structure and climate of the sport. Issues related to
25 the transparency and equality of player funding, favoritism, tournament structures, injury

1 considerations, and the ratings system correlated with the increasing standard, time, and
2 investment that characterized the parent's and child's inputs and outputs.

3 Finally, the developmental stressors that emerged for parents in the present study were
4 closely representative of longer term concerns linked to the athlete career and performance
5 development dimension of organizational stress (Hanton & Fletcher, 2005). As Rotella and
6 Bunker (1987) acknowledge, "Parents of children who make a serious commitment to sport
7 face a difficult challenge: to raise a happy, healthy, and successful child" (p. 15). When
8 parents reached the specializing stage (and beyond), they appeared to enter a phase of
9 conflict, worry, and uncertainty around their child's education, their tennis development and
10 future prospects related to both domains. Sidebottom (2001) notes the stress experienced by
11 parents in relation to their expectation for their children to achieve. For child-athletes such
12 achievements may be in relation to both sporting and academic success, with parents needing
13 information and support on the most appropriate decisions and pathways. Parents in the
14 current sample worried about making incorrect decisions regarding their child's academic or
15 tennis future and felt enormous pressure to follow either the academic or tennis route and
16 hope that their child was successful in this. Parents with children in the sampling stage
17 generally perceived that such decisions were not pertinent at this time, and consequently
18 experienced far less developmental stress.

19 Whilst it was apparent through the interviews that parents in the latter two stages
20 encountered a greater range of organizational and developmental stressors, it was the
21 sampling stage parents who appeared particularly susceptible to the varying competition
22 stressors.

23 During the sampling stage the focus is upon fun and deliberate play (Côtè & Hay,
24 2002), with a limited emphasis upon competition. As such, one may anticipate that
25 competition stressors are minimal during this stage. However, even at the earliest stages of

1 participation, tennis players are encouraged to engage in competitions to supplement their
2 training. Whilst tournaments for children at this stage are supposed to be relaxed and often
3 team-based affairs, there are several factors inherent to tennis that fuel emotions and negate
4 temperance. The scoring system immediately punishes individual mistakes and brutally
5 exposes the competence of players in a highly public and evaluative manner. Moreover,
6 tennis is one of the few sports where players officiate themselves and young players are
7 responsible for calling their own lines and keeping score. These competition demands offer
8 many emotional challenges for young parents who essentially seek both a psychologically
9 safe and fair environment for their child. These stressors include unsporting opponent
10 behaviors, the evaluations of other parents and their potential match interference, the
11 performance and behavior of their own child, and their helplessness in being unable to
12 intervene and assist. For sampling stage parents, these were their first experiences of
13 watching tennis competitions and it was clear through the interviews that many found this to
14 be a highly stressful experience.

15 Ostensibly, as some investment parents noted, coping with these competition demands
16 comes with experience and there were some parents in these later stages who acknowledged
17 better coping mechanisms with respect to some of these competition stressors. Nevertheless,
18 the specializing and investment stage are both associated with an increase in competition
19 (Côté & Hay, 2002), thus the opportunities for athletes and parents to experience
20 disappointment and encounter stressors are enhanced. A number of parents indicated that they
21 had been unable to develop resources to cope with these stressors despite their past
22 experience. Indeed, the competition stressors associated with watching matches, other
23 parents' and opponents' behaviors, and their child's attitude and behavior were consistently
24 prevalent across stages. There are many pertinent explanations for this.

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

15 In summary, whilst a number of stressors were consistently recalled across all stages
16 of participation (Côté, 1999), there were certain competition, organizational, and
17 developmental stressors that were more prevalent at specific stages. It is worth reinforcing
18 that the overall findings corroborated the survey-based results of Harwood and Knight (2008).
19 In their study, before, during, and after match stressors associated with their child's behavior,
20 the opponent, other parents, and their own expectations were also foremost issues . Finance,
21 time, family, and other organizational issues were prominent, as were developmental concerns
22 related to educational and future tennis transitions. However, the current study offers a closer
23 appreciation of the key stressors and needs of parents as their child progresses from one stage
24 to the next.

25 *Limitations and implications*

1 There are a number of limitations and future directions that are important to
2 acknowledge in this study, as well as practical implications for sport psychologists, coaches,
3 and governing body organizations. Firstly, the allocation of children (and thus parents) to
4 stages was based on the characteristics of each stage (Côté, 1999), as opposed to a specified
5 age range. Thus, the specializing and investment stage incorporated a wide range of ages,
6 whereas the sampling stage included only children aged 9-11. Consequently, the stressors
7 experienced by parents may have been affected by the age of the child in addition to their
8 stage of tennis participation. In addition, the use of historical recall interviews with parents
9 who have been through the full system, in combination with these stage-specific interviews
10 may have provided further credibility to the results as a form of method triangulation. This
11 additional data may have substantiated the subjective perceptions of parents at each stage and
12 reinforced the prevalence of certain stressors more commonly shared by parents at different
13 time points. However, it is fair to note that investment stage parents who had naturally ‘lived
14 through’ the other two stages validated the overall results and insights during their member
15 check.

16 It is also appropriate to recognize that the study did not intentionally examine
17 psychological strain, or the methods of coping that parents employed to deal with the stressors
18 that they encountered (Lazarus, 2006). Whilst the interviews illustrated how some parents
19 lacked the resources to deal with particular stressors, and subsequently experienced negative
20 emotions, it would be worthwhile if future research paid closer attention to the full stress and
21 coping process in sport parents. For example, it would be interesting to investigate strain
22 from a quantitative perspective by examining the severity or frequency of parents’ negative
23 responses to a particular stressor. Secondly, accessing sport parents who have progressed
24 through the full talent development journey might enable a valuable investigation into
25 parental methods of coping with competition, organizational, and developmental stressors. It

1 would be worthwhile ascertaining whether parents who demonstrate successful coping
2 mechanisms and experience less stress and strain actually place less pressure upon their
3 children and influence the psychological development of their child in adaptive manners
4 (Gould et al., 2008). Such studies would continue to ameliorate the scientific knowledge base
5 of ‘sport-parent’ stress and coping and enable parents to be more effective in their roles as
6 provider, interpreter and role-model (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004).

7 Various practical implications can be drawn from this study that are of central
8 importance to practitioners, coaches, parents, and sporting organizations. Firstly, there is a
9 need to educate and empathize with all parents in relation to the psychological and emotional
10 demands of competition with a view to ensuring that they have the necessary cognitive,
11 behavioral, and motivational skills both to manage themselves and to influence the responses
12 of their child (Gould et al., 2008). This is a particularly important educational initiative for
13 sampling stage parents who are new to the sport and less aware of those factors that can
14 potentially make tennis an unpleasant early experience for child and parent. The provision of
15 materials or induction workshops at local tournaments for young parents would facilitate this
16 goal (see USTA, 2006). However, as competition frequency and standards increase into the
17 specializing and investment stages, this parent education needs to be maintained and tailored
18 towards the parent who experiences those stressors more associated with match outcomes and
19 expectations about their child’s performance.

20 Secondly, stage-specific stressors are likely to be reduced if parents of talented
21 athletes possess an advanced awareness of the financial, time, family, and education-related
22 issues that they may face as their child progresses through the sport. Parental perceptions of
23 the national governing body in relation to the respect they receive may be improved if greater
24 communication of feedback and information is provided. For specializing parents this might
25 include guidance on sponsorship and funding as well as preparatory information to assist

1 parents in their decision making about education, academies, and training program
2 requirements in readiness for any transition to the investment stage. Some of this work might
3 be the responsibility of their child's coach both in empathizing with logistical, family
4 demands, ensuring regular feedback, and advising parents with honesty and clarity on player
5 development options. Such initiatives are likely to enhance the roles, well-being, and stress
6 management of tennis parents and it is worth noting that the Lawn Tennis Association has
7 begun to disseminate this work throughout its organization and on their Level 5 coaching
8 qualification.

9 Conclusion

10 This study enabled British parents to articulate the stressors that they experienced in
11 their role as an integral supporter of their child's tennis development. While parents with
12 children in the sampling stage encountered fewer overall stressors than those with children in
13 the later two stages, early competition stressors were highly prominent. Specializing stage
14 parents shared the most stressors, presenting united perceptions of organizational issues such
15 as finance and time, as well as developmental concerns surrounding education and future
16 decision making. Many of these competition, organizational and developmental stressors
17 remained for parents in the investment stage. However, with greater experience of matches
18 and tournaments, and children residing away from home, some of these stressors were
19 reduced. The findings highlight the importance of not only supporting the roles of the sport-
20 parent, but empathizing with their demands and needs in terms of their effective execution of
21 such roles. In this respect, we may begin to optimize a child's sport experience and
22 development in conjunction with the work of coaches and governing body organizations.

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6

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1 Table 1 *Frequency of stressors recalled across the stages.*

2

General Dimension	Higher order themes	Sampling	Specializing	Investment
Competition				
	Having to watch matches	66.7%	83.3%	80%
	Other tennis parents	100%	83.3%	80%
	Child's behavior and attitude	100%	83.3%	100%
	Child's opponent	66.7%	83.3%	100%
	Child's performance	66.7%	50%	50%
	Preparation for matches	66.7%	66.7%	60%
	Outcome of the match	83.3%	66.7%	60%
	Psychological readiness	66.7%	50%	70%
Organizational				
	Financial stressors	50%	100%	90%
	Time stressors	100%	100%	100%*
	Stressors associated with the organizing bodies	66.7%	100%	100%
	Tournament stressors	83.3%	100%	100%
	Training stressors	100%	83.3%	90%
	Stressors associated with injuries	0%	83.3%	100%
Developmental				
	Child's education	0%	83.3%	90 %
	Child's future	16.7%	83.3%	50%
	Decisions regarding tennis	16.7%	83.3%	70%
	Impact on other hobbies	0%	50%	20%

3 * Whilst 100% of investment parents recognized these stressors they perceived them to be reduced compared to

4 the specializing stage.

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1 Figure Caption

2 *Figure 1. Competition stressors*

3 *Figure 2. Organizational stressors*

4 *Figure 3. Developmental stressors*

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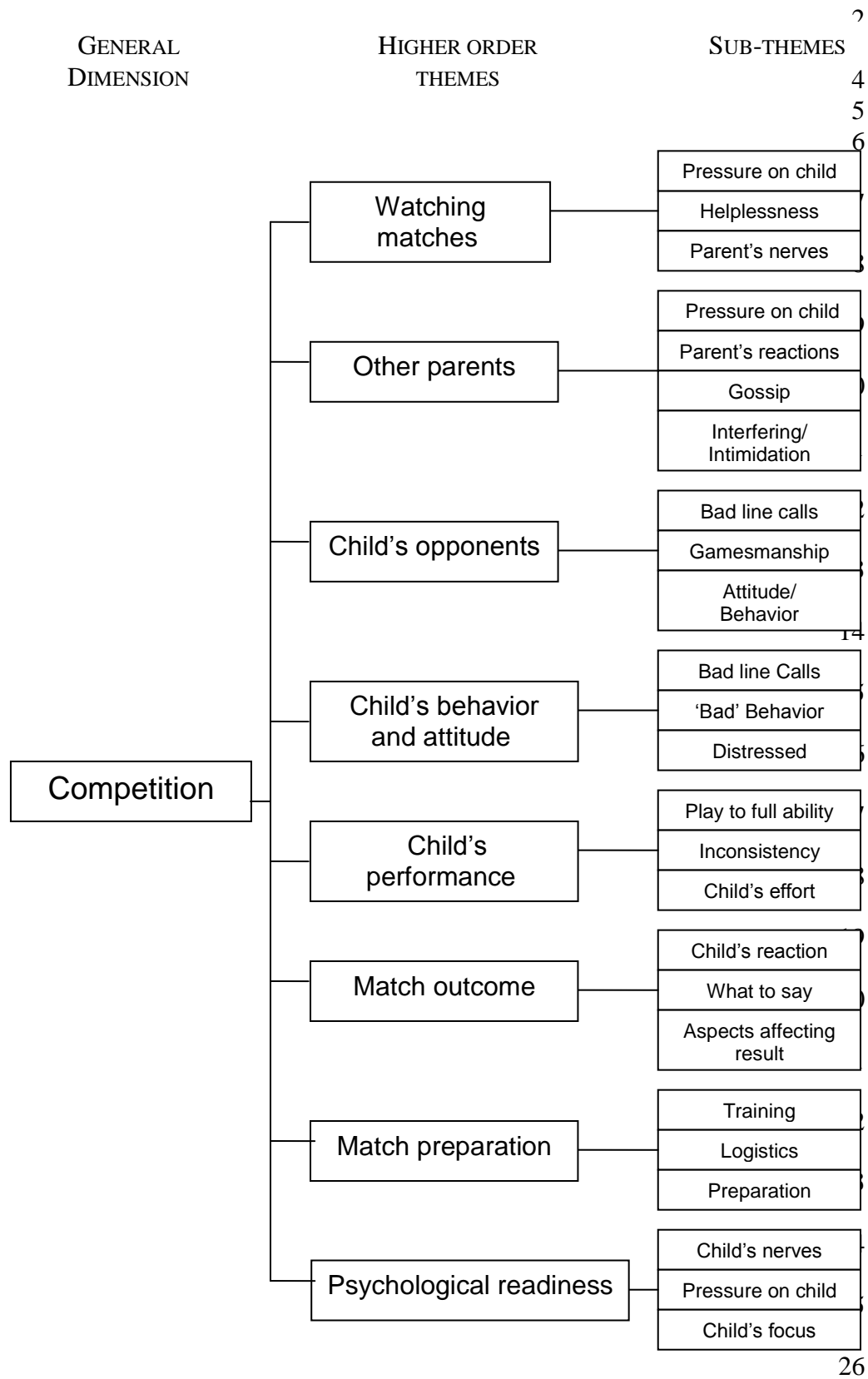
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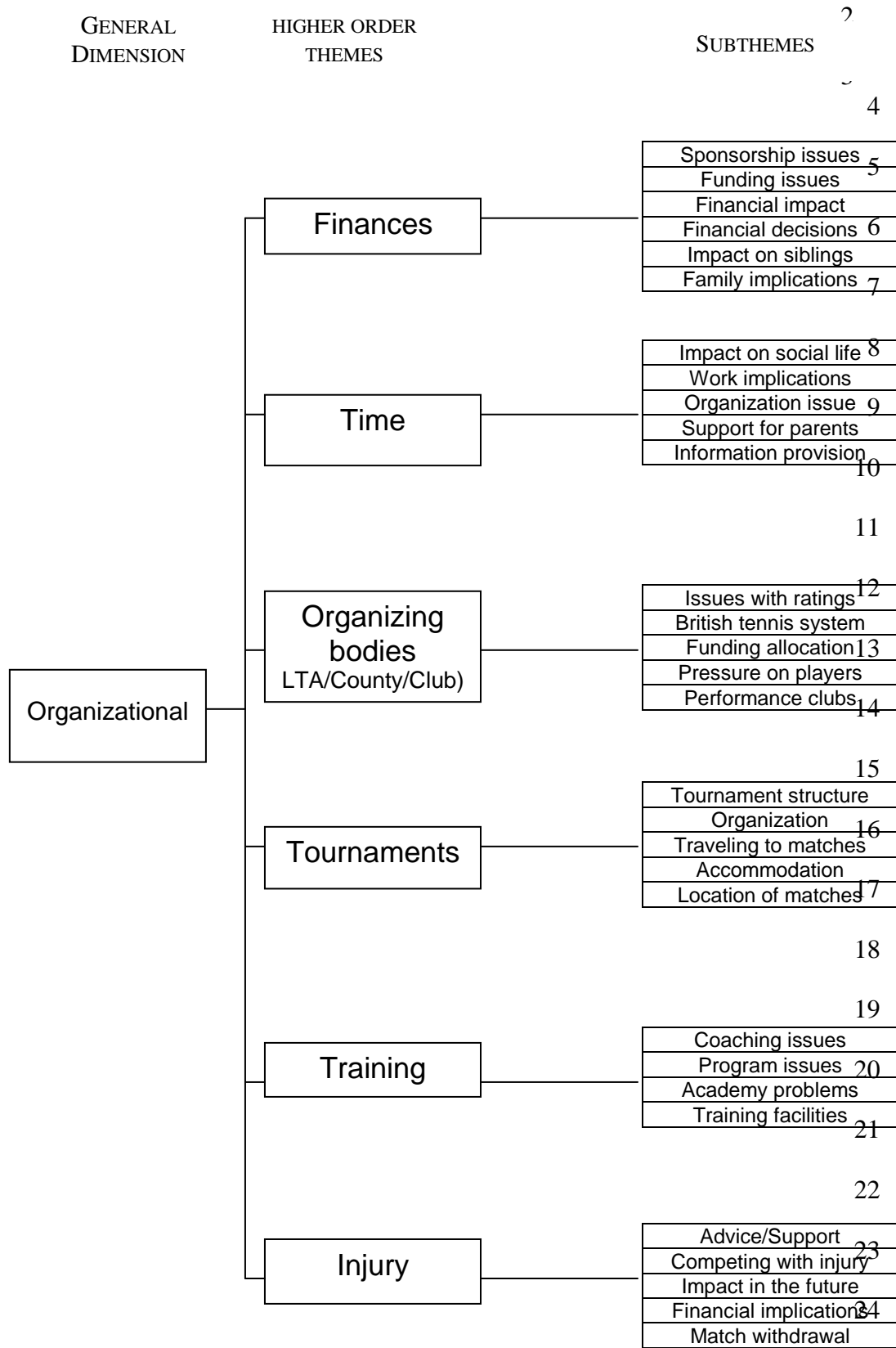
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1 *Figure 1.*



1 *Figure 2*



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1 *Figure 3*

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