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

Accepted: Sport, Exercise and Performance Psychology

1 **Abstract**

2 Youth sport parenting research, in psychology, has methodologically prioritised individual
3 level analysis of the behaviours, perceptions or needs of parents and young athletes. While
4 this has contributed greatly to understanding the role of parents in sport, children's parenting
5 preferences and the challenges of parenting in this unique setting, an exploration of parenting
6 in youth sport from a dyadic, inter-individual perspective has received far less attention.
7 Accordingly, the purpose of this research was to explore parent's and children's experience
8 of their interaction and relationship, in the context of elite youth football. Eight parent-player
9 dyads, recruited from English professional football club youth academies, participated in
10 phenomenological interviews. A two-stage analysis process was performed to explore
11 individual parent and player experiences and examine how accounts related dyadically.
12 Findings present a detailed description and interpretation of the parent-player relationship; as
13 one constituted by relations with other family members, an embodied sense of closeness, the
14 temporal significance of football transitions, and gender relations. This research advocates
15 the need for a view of parenting in youth sport that accounts for how interaction is
16 experienced by both parents and children and highlights the importance of conceptualising
17 parenting as an embodied, temporal process, constituted through interaction and the social
18 context.

19

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

99 Although the parent-child relationship was not explicitly examined by Dorsch et al.,
100 (2009), in group interviews parents described how their involvement in their child's
101 organised team sport programme provided the opportunity for additional and enhanced
102 communication, which led to a perceived higher quality parent-child relationship.
103 Relationships were described as fluid and dynamic, as friction between parent and child could
104 also be encountered. Similarly, in a retrospective interview study with parent-child dyads,
105 Lauer et al. (2010a) identified that parents facilitated smooth, difficult or turbulent
106 development pathways for elite young tennis players. Although many of the observations
107 made by Lauer et al. focused on parenting behaviours and the impact of these on player
108 outcomes, other findings reflected aspects of the parent-child relationship. For example, the
109 presence of frequent or unresolved conflict (arising from parents' desire to control the tennis
110 experience, or players failing to respond to parents' advice) led to strained relationships and
111 regret in later years, with some players perceiving that parents' love and support were
112 conditional on tennis success. This underlines the importance of understanding how
113 interpersonal phenomena such as conflict is experienced and negotiated by *both* parents and
114 players. Exploring parent-child interactions in the present, rather than retrospectively, may
115 also contribute to extending knowledge of this relationship in sport.

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

121 parent-child interactions, highlighting that relationship quality, the context in which
122 interactions occur, and both parents' and players' experiences of interaction such as closeness
123 and conflict should be considered in future research (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Dorsch et al.,
124 2009; Kay, 2009; Lauer et al., 2010a) – yet an examination of the parent-child relationship in
125 youth sport was not a specific aim of these studies. Therefore, there is a need firstly to
126 describe the parent-child relationship in detail and to understand how interaction is
127 experienced by both parents and children. Accordingly, the purpose of this research was to
128 explore parent's and children's experience of their interaction and relationship, in the context
129 of elite youth football.

130 English football offers a unique and useful setting in which to study parent-child
131 relationships. Research has begun to illustrate some of the difficulties of parenting in this
132 highly challenging, competitive culture (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Harwood, Drew &
133 Knight, 2010). Becoming a professional footballer is a common aspiration among young
134 players, yet few will progress to be offered a full-time playing contract (Cushion & Jones,
135 2006). For parents, managing the time and financial commitment required for players to
136 participate in elite training and competition programmes, together with the emotional
137 demands of preparing their child for the potential of deselection, can be a stressful experience
138 (Harwood et al., 2010). Parents of players identified as talented can also experience enhanced
139 status and a heightened responsibility to fulfil societal expectations to facilitate their child's
140 development (Clarke & Harwood, 2014). Therefore, the high risk high reward nature of elite
141 youth sport can amplify the potential influence of the social context on parent-child
142 relationships.

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

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

158 This study endeavours to extend existing research by providing a detailed description
159 and interpretation of the parent-child relationship in elite youth football. Specifically, an
160 existential phenomenological approach was selected for this study, guided by Ashworth's
161 lifeworld analysis (2003a; 2003b). A focus on the phenomenological lifeworld anchors
162 research in understanding everyday lived-experience and explicitly attends to peoples'
163 experiences of relations with others. In addition, this research was informed by van Manen's
164 (1990) hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenological approach, to develop a richer
165 understanding of the parent-child relationship. Drawing on Gadamer's (1975) position that
166 "[t]hat which can be understood is language" (p.491), which proposes that being *pre-exists*
167 language, but is *expressed through* language, van Manen's phenomenological project
168 emphasises the role of language in constituting experience. As Langdrige (2007)
169 summarises, "we always speak from somewhere, from a position dependent on our history
170 and culture" (p.42); therefore a focus on language recognises that in dyadic research

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

173 **Methods**

174 **Research Context**

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

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

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

199 **Participants**

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

214 **Data Collection**

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

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

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

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

252 **Data Analysis**

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

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

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

- 277 • selfhood (what the phenomenon means for social identity, agency and voice);
- 278 • sociality (how the phenomenon affects relations with others);
- 279 • embodiment (the role of the body in experiencing the phenomenon, including gender
280 and emotion);
- 281 • temporality (the lived-sense of past, present and future);
- 282 • spatiality (meanings of space and place in relation to the phenomenon);
- 283 • project (how the phenomenon affects people’s ability to pursue life activities); and
- 284 • discourse (how language is drawn upon to describe the phenomenon).

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

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

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

309 **Findings and Discussion**

310 Analyses of the participants’ individual and relational experiences are drawn upon to
311 consider the implications for understanding the phenomenology of parent-player relationships
312 in elite youth football. In particular, the findings are interpreted using the phenomenological
313 concepts of relationality, embodiment and temporality, as the lifeworld fractions that
314 appeared most relevant to participants’ experiences (Ashworth, 2003a; 2003b; van Manen,
315 1990). Although all eight parent-player dyads inform the findings, some more detailed
316 examples are presented, to capture something of the complexity of participants’ experiences.
317 The family context for each individual dyad is provided in Appendix C. The findings
318 presented are not claimed to represent a ‘true’ version of reality and it is acknowledged that
319 other readings of the data are possible and may offer alternative interpretations and
320 understandings of the parent-player relationship.

321 Embodiment: Closeness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

400 **Embodiment: Gender**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

434 In this extracts Ali describes how he accepts his mother's advice because he interprets
435 that it has a positive impact on him. This is in contrast to Carla's anxiety that her guidance
436 was construed as "nagging" by her son and represents a divergence in their individual
437 accounts. Her embodied sense of interaction with his son – that her feedback as a mother was
438 not effective – illustrates the gendered nature of parenting experiences. By positioning herself
439 within this gender order – the pattern of power relations between men and women (Connell,
440 1987) – Carla experienced greater uncertainty and questioned the value of her advice to her
441 son in this setting, even though at other points in the interview she described her detailed
442 knowledge of and love for football.

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

446 lack of football knowledge.

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

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

452

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

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

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

461

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

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

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

477 **Temporality and Transitions**

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

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

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

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

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

516 Author: And in what ways have they helped you

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

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

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

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

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

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

526 speed or you won't get a scholarship'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

536 father used this as a way of exerting control.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

566

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

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

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

585 **Relations with Family**

586 The experiences of parents and players in this study highlight how parent-child
587 interaction occurred within the context of wider, more complex family relationships. A
588 variety of individual adults may be involved in the care of children including step-parents,
589 grandparents, older siblings and other family members (Ribbens McCarthy & Edwards,
590 2011). Each dyad in this study was part of a unique network of family relationships, which
591 shaped their interaction in different ways. For example, Harry's grandfather was considerably
592 involved in his football. He provided transport and technical advice to his grandson, and
593 monitored his performance to pass on information to Harry's father. The regret that Harry's
594 father experienced because his own father did not allow him to sign a contract with a
595 professional club also influenced his decision to support Harry to play academy football. At

596 15 years of age he was offered a youth contract by the same club that his son now plays at,
597 but was not allowed to sign it because his own father decided “it was too one-sided”. He
598 regrets that he was denied the chance of playing higher level football and wonders what he
599 could have achieved as a player if he had signed to the club. When his son started playing
600 football he discussed with his father that if Harry was offered a similar opportunity he would
601 let him sign a contract, highlighting how his parenting was influenced by his personal
602 experiences with his father.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

671 football.

672 By illustrating how players experienced agency in the parenting process, this research
673 also emphasised how children mutually constitute their relationship with parents. For
674 example, rather than the experience of reverse-dependency (where parents define their self-
675 worth in terms of their child's sporting success or failure; Smoll et al., 2011) being
676 interpreted as pressurising, players made sense of parenting behaviours in relation to
677 achieving their personal goal of playing professional football, when they felt their aspirations
678 were shared by their parent. This supports previous research that shared and communicated
679 goals for youth sport can enhance parent-child interactions (Harwood & Knight, 2015;
680 Knight & Holt, 2014) and advocates the need for a view of parenting that accounts for how
681 relationships are experienced by parents *and* children, rather than a sole focus on explicating
682 optimal parental involvement. Similarly, parents' lived-experience of developing and acting
683 upon a shared understanding of their child's identity, goals and everyday experiences to
684 effectively manage and negotiate transitions in sport, presents an alternative to the
685 construction of parenting as a skill set which parents must learn to be effective. Harwood and
686 Knight (2015, p.26) proposed that self-development to "learn the trade" of being a sport
687 parent is required for parents to be able to offer appropriate types of social support. This,
688 however, does not recognise parents' ability to empathise with their child's lived-experience
689 and that this understanding may enable parents to provide social support which is valued by
690 their child. Parents' recognition and understanding of their child's needs and their capacity to
691 adapt to meet these has previously been reported (e.g. Dorsch et al., 2009; 2015, but is often
692 overshadowed within wider discussions focusing on the determinants of parents' behaviours
693 and/or associated child effects. For example, parents' empathy with their child has been
694 framed as a contributory factor to parents' emotional reactions at competitions, and therefore,
695 as a potential area of development (Holt et al., 2008; Knight & Holt, 2013). Considering the

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