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A Developmental Investigation

by

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Exploring Parent-Related Coaching Stressors in British Tennis: A Developmental Investigation

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ABSTRACT

In order to explore the stressors that tennis coaches' associate with parents and examine how such stressors may differ depending upon a player's developmental stage of participation, seventeen focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 70 coaches; 28 coaches of sampling stage players, 24 coaches of specializing stage players, and 18 coaches of investment stage players. Content analysis of the focus group data revealed three general dimensions of stressors: direct coaching stressors, player-related stressors, and external and system-based stressors. Sampling-stage coaches reported many stressors relating to parents' understanding of tennis and development. Specializing-stage coaches highlighted multiple stressors concerning parental pressure and involvement. Investment-stage coaches replicated many of the specializing stage stressors, but also highlighted various methods to reduce parent-related stressors. Results are discussed in relation to previous research. Practical implications to reduce the stressors British tennis coaches encounter are provided.

Key words: Coaches, Parents, Stress, Tennis

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to explore the stressors that tennis coaches' associate with parents. It also examined how such stressors may differ depending upon a player's developmental stage of participation [1]. Parents and coaches both play an important role in the lives of young athletes, but the parent-coach relationship is often associated with difficulties [2]. Notably, parents have been cited as one reason coaches would stop coaching and as a "problem" for coaches to deal with [3, 4]. However, despite such evidence, little attention has

been given to understanding the specific stressors that coaches associate with parents.

Prolonged exposure to stressors can impact coaches' motivation, satisfaction, and enjoyment in their personal and professional lives [5]. This may, in turn, lead to coaches leaving the profession or burning out [6-8]. Further, if coaches perceive parents as stressors it may cause problems within the parent-coach relationship. Such problems can impact the development and enjoyment of the child-athlete [4] and the coach-athlete relationship [9]. As such, identifying the stressors coaches associate with parents is important to help prevent any negative effects for coaches, parents, or child-athletes.

Lazarus [10] explained that stress might arise whenever people are working closely together or have close relationships. The emotional labor associated with social interactions has been identified as a stressor in a variety of service occupations [11]. Coaching is a service business that necessitates continual social interactions [12-13]. As such, there are multiple opportunities for coaches to experience stressors. Stressors arising from social interactions consistently emerge in the coaching stress literature [e.g., 7- 8, 13-14]. Coaches interact with a range of people from fans and the media, to athletic directors, other professionals (e.g., trainers, managers), and athletes. For coaches working within youth sport, the parents of athletes are one of the most significant populations they interact with [15]. Parents are key stakeholders within youth-sport settings and are required to commit extensive amounts of their time, money, and emotional energy to support their children in sport [16-17]. As such, parents spend considerable time in sports environments and there are frequent opportunities for parents and coaches to interact.

Unfortunately, parents have been identified as one of the stressors that coaches encounter [12, 18]. For example, Scantling and Lackey [19-22] examined high-school coaches' stressors over four decades. Parents were reported as the main stressor for these coaches in three of the four decades [22]. The identification of parents as coaching stressors has, generally, occurred through quantitative studies. Such studies have aimed to examine a broad range of coaching stressors, but specific information regarding why parents are perceived as stressors remains unknown.

Recently, there has been a focus upon developing a more in-depth understanding of coaching stress in college and adult sport through the use of qualitative methods [7, 14]. Such qualitative studies have not been conducted with youth-sport coaches, thus parents have not been discussed. However, these qualitative studies have highlighted the complexity of coaching stressors and the importance of understanding coaches' perceptions of their stressors as opposed to simply obtaining a list of demands related to their profession [7].

Although our understanding of parent-related stressors is limited, some insight can be gained from examining the means through which parents may cause coaches problems. Specific problems that parents can create for coaches have emerged from both qualitative and quantitative studies. Such problems have included: parents interfering with tactics, technique, and training schedules [2, 4]; demanding too much of the coach's time [5]; constant phone calls [2]; an inappropriate emphasis upon winning [18]; and a lack of game knowledge [23]. Coaches have also recalled conflict with parents, often arising due to communication problems, power struggles, or varying levels of parental involvement [2, 24]. The problems listed above have generally emerged from studies on youth sport that have not focused specifically upon coaching stressors or parents' behaviors. Consequently, it is unlikely that such studies have provided a full account of the problems experienced in the parent-coach relationship. Nevertheless, the numbers of problems within the parent-coach relationship that have emerged throughout the literature provide some indication of the extent of this issue and the need to fully explore and understand it.

Recently, Gould and colleagues [3, 25] conducted an extensive study of perceived effective and ineffective parent behaviors with respect to facilitating junior tennis success. This research occurred in three phases, consisting of focus groups with coaches, a national survey of coaches, and 25 interviews with tennis players, their coach, and parents. Gould and colleagues' [3, 25] findings spoke to instances of parents interfering with coach-player interactions, inhibiting practice, as well as the conflict of goals held by the coach and parent for the child's tennis development. Coaches cited feeling undermined by parents who lived through their child's tennis, and often felt that parents did not support coaches in helping players to take responsibility.

The relatively consistent evidence of parent-related issues for coaches in youth sport suggests an ever present need for parent education. However, bespoke educational resources are more likely to have a sustained impact on parents if there is a rigorous, academic understanding of specific parental and coaching issues. In light of this need, the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) of Great Britain recently supported a three-stage research program to understand specific stressors faced by parents and coaches within their junior tennis system.

In stage one of the project, Harwood and Knight [26] investigated parental stressors via an open-ended survey of 123 active tennis parents. The wide range of stressors coalesced into seven core themes of parental stressors, accounting for competitive, organizational, and developmental stressors. Coaches emerged as one particularly pertinent stressor for these parents. Approximately 50% of the sample expressed stressors relating to coaches' behaviors or attitude. Stage two of the research incorporated in-depth interviews of tennis parents whose children were located within the sampling, specializing, and investment stages of Côté's [1, 27] Developmental Model of Sport Participation [28]. Côté's [1] model identifies stages athletes move through during their continued involvement in sport. In the sampling stage the emphasis is upon fun and play, with children engaging in multiple sports. Parents are hugely important in initiating involvement and providing emotional support, while the coach's role is minimal. As children move into the specializing stage, they begin to focus their attention upon just one or two sports. Coaches become more prominent as training is increasingly important. However, parents still play a large role and increasingly commit time and money to their child's sport. In the investment stage, children make a commitment to achieve an elite level in one sport and engage in extensive training. Parents often begin to play a less direct role, with the coach becoming the main focus [1, 27].

Harwood and Knight's [28] results reinforced the competitive, organizational, and developmental stressors faced by parents, but also distinguished the nature and prominence of stressors at different time points. For example, sampling-stage parents encountered a range of competitive stressors and few developmental stressors. Organizational and developmental stressors were highly prominent for specializing- and investment-stage parents. The differentiation between stages was valuable for coaches and the governing body in terms of providing appropriate education and practical support for parents at different time points and transitions.

The current investigation forms stage three of this program, offering coaches an opportunity to discuss their stressors in order to ultimately facilitate improved parent-coach interactions. In advancing upon the existing research of broader coaching stressors in a variety of sports, this study focuses specifically upon understanding coaching stressors directly pertaining to, and initiated by, parents in the tennis system. As children progress in sport, the requirements and relative importance of parents and coaches change, altering the dynamics in the parent-coach relationship. Indeed, the transitions in roles fulfilled by parents and coaches can result in complex transitions within the athlete-coach-parent triad [29]. As

such, depending upon an athlete's stage of participation, coaches may perceive different parent-related stressors. To this end, we continued to use Côté's [1] model as a framework for studying the similar and differing perceptions of coaches whose work with players and parents centrally located in either the sampling, specializing, or investment developmental stage of participation [1, 27].

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The sample comprised 70 British tennis coaches (58 male and 12 female), ranging in age from 20 to 48 years ($M = 31.6$, $SD = 7.23$). Coaches had an average of 10.3 years experience ($SD = 5$, range = 2 to 29 years). Ninety percent of the sample held a level four or five coaching qualification (the highest two qualifications available in the United Kingdom). Participants were placed into one of three groups: sampling, specializing, and investment. Coaches' group allocation was based upon the developmental stage of sport participation [1] of the majority of their players.

Players were classified into the three developmental stages using criteria developed from the characteristics of the sampling, specializing, and investment stages. The criteria for stage classification were: a) the focus upon deliberate play or deliberate practice in training; b) players involvement in other sports; and c) the focus upon general motor skill versus tennis-specific skill and tactical development in coaching sessions [27]. Twenty-eight coaches were classified as working predominantly with sampling stage players, 24 with specializing stage players, and 18 with players in the investment stage.

PROCEDURE

A purposive sampling strategy was initially used to identify appropriate participants. The Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) was contacted and dates when several coaches would be available to participate were identified. Individual coaches and clubs were also contacted via e-mail to identify their interest in taking part in the study. Snowball sampling was then employed to use information from coaches on other potential participants.

Focus-group interviews were selected as an appropriate method of data collection for this study. Focus group interviews allow in-depth information to be gained from a range of perspectives [30]. Focus groups also allow for dynamic interaction within the group, offering coaches an opportunity to share their experiences in a way that provides direct evidence of similarities and differences between experiences [31].

The focus groups contained between two and eight participants ($M = 4$). Small focus groups do limit group interactions and information sharing. However, previous research has successfully used focus groups with only two participants to gain extensive detail on a novel topic (e.g., [32]). The majority of the participants were self-employed with varying working hours. Thus, logistical constraints prevented larger focus groups from being conducted.

At the start of each focus group, participants were provided with a verbal and written explanation of the study. Issues regarding confidentiality were discussed and written informed consent was gained. A definition of stress and stressors was provided to ensure participants understood the use of these terms [10, 33]. The focus groups ranged from 35 to 84 minutes ($M = 56$ minutes, $SD = 12$ minutes).

A semi-structured questioning route, based upon the coaching stress, parent-coach relationship, and sport parenting literature was employed to moderate the focus groups. The questioning route comprised opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending questions [30]. Opening questions were designed to gain demographic information and encourage

participation. The introductory and transition questions aimed to stimulate initial discussion regarding tennis parents and allowed time for participants to become familiar with the topic. Key questions focused upon coaches' perceptions of parents as stressors in relation to training situations (e.g., during individual or group training sessions), the competition context (e.g., in relation to or at tournaments), and external factors (e.g., aspects external to the coaches "on-court role", such as schooling). Finally, the ending questions asked the coaches to summarize the stressors they experience in relation to parents. The second author reviewed the questioning route and a pilot interview (74 minutes) with three specializing coaches was conducted. Necessary modifications were then made, including the removal of two questions and the addition of questions regarding injuries and other hobbies. A copy of the questioning route can be obtained from the first author.

In total, 17 focus groups were conducted: four sampling, five specializing, five investment, and two mixed groups. Fifteen groups were composed of one category of coaches to enable identification of stage-specific stressors. However, the inclusion of two mixed groups highlighted differences in experiences between different classifications of coaches.

DATA ANALYSIS

Each focus group was audio-recorded and video-taped to allow analysis of verbal and body language. The focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analyzed immediately after each focus group and prior to the next. Transcripts were analyzed through content analysis following the stages outlined by Côté *et al.* [34] and Miles and Huberman [35]. A combination of focus group interviews and content analysis has been successfully employed in previous sport psychology studies [e.g., 3, 23, 32].

The interviews were read and reread to ensure immersion in the data and coded for confidentiality. The transcripts were then analyzed in two stages. Firstly, meaningful segments of information were identified and secondly, this information was categorized into an organizing system that emerged from the data [34]. These raw data themes were then assigned meaning units and grouped by content into first-, second-, and higher-order themes [35]. Each individual focus group interview was analyzed. Interviews were then grouped by stage and analyzed. Finally, analysis of the whole data set occurred. Constant comparison of the data occurred to ensure that data included in each theme was similar to each other but distinct from other categories. Data matrices containing the raw data, lower-, and higher-order themes were produced for each category of coaches to allow comparison of themes across the three stages of participation [35].

METHODOLOGICAL RIGOR

It was necessary to incorporate various strategies during and after data collection and analysis to enhance the methodological rigor of the study. First, concurrent data collection and analysis provided the opportunity to identify any threats to the validity of the findings before the next focus group. For example, questions that dictated responses or projected a judgment on responses could be removed.

Second, the first author undertook the data collection and the initial analysis. Therefore, in order to reduce potential researcher bias, an inter-rater check was conducted with the second author and a graduate student. The researchers were provided with the interview transcripts, the analyzed data set, and the data analysis notes. The transparency of the data analysis and interpretations of themes were confirmed by these researchers.

Third, member checking was also implemented as an important step for establishing credibility [35]. All participants received an electronic version of their interview transcript

and the draft themes. The transcripts were coded so that participants were only aware of which statements they had provided. Participants were asked to comment on the accuracy of the transcription and the interpretation of the data. All participants agreed with the data analysis. Eight coaches provided further evidence to support statements they had already made or supported findings from other groups. Six additional coaches also reviewed the data themes to provide external confirmation of the findings [36]. These coaches indicated that the findings supported their own experiences.

RESULTS

The analytical process revealed 327 raw data themes, 74 first-order, 26 second-order, and 8 higher-order themes of parent-related stressors. These themes were classified into three general dimensions: direct coaching stressors, player-related stressors, and external and system-based stressors (see Table 1). This section will outline each general dimension across the stages of participation, using quotations to illustrate the lower-order themes.

General Dimension One: Direct Coaching Stressors

Direct coaching stressors encompassed stressors that arise directly from coaches' interactions with parents. The four higher-order themes in this dimension accounted for behavior of parents, parents' perceptions of the coach, parents' understanding of tennis, and parental demands on the coach (see Table 1).

Behavior of Parents. Coaches perceived multiple parental behaviors as stressors. Variations in parental involvement were a constant stressor cited by coaches, for example, "Some parents almost expect you to take over their role... and then you can also be coaching another player and the parent wants total control." Parents viewed as being overly involved in their child's tennis was a stressor because, as one coach explained, "They're just there all the time, always wanting answers and information." On the other hand, less involvement can also become a stressor because coaches are required to do more for the player.

Parents' Perceptions of the Coach. Coaches in every focus group expressed stressors relating to the poor perceptions they felt parents had of them. Many coaches discussed parents' perceptions of their knowledge, as one coach stated, "They don't see you as the expert, they see themselves as the expert and they try and tell you how you should be doing things." Another coach explained, "Half the parents they love their coach and the other half don't trust the coach, always asking questions, not quite sure why you're doing certain things." Parents' perceptions that their children are not in the correct squads emerged as a prominent stressor relating to trust.

Parents' Understanding of Tennis. Squad issues also emerged as a stressor relating to parents' understanding. As one coach said, "That's very hard yet again for a parent to understand, they always think their son/daughter to get better needs somebody better to keep pushing them." Parents' lack of understanding regarding the requirements of tennis was a further stressor for these coaches. As one coach explained, "It's these protective [parents]... 'I want everything, all the superficial things like rankings and all that, but I'm not willing to sacrifice x, y, and z, that causes me stress'."

Parental Demands on the Coach. A number of coaches also described a lack of understanding by parents regarding the demands that coaches' experience. For example:

All my friends and my girlfriend hate my job 'cause it just takes your time up all the time... I think parents just need to appreciate that a bit more. I think some do and some don't. Some just pick up the phone at any time and I think that's stressful!

Table 1. Overview of Parent-Related Coaching Stressors

Example First Order Themes*	Second-Order Themes	Higher-Order Themes	General Dimension
Blaming coaches for loss Emotional response to matches	Parents' response to matches	Behavior of parents	Direct Coaching Stressors
Parents who are overly involved Parents who are lacking involvement	Parents' involvement in matches/training		
Parents comparing results Gossiping about other parents	Competition between parents		
How parents approach coaches (e.g., defensive, aggressive, questioning)	Interactions between parents and coaches		
Parents' trust in coach's ability Parents' respect of the coach's role	Parents' trust and respect of their child's coach	Parents' perceptions of the coach	
Understanding the training structure Understanding different coaching philosophies	Understanding of player development	Parents' understanding of tennis	
Knowing the requirements of parents Understanding the demands coaches experience	Understanding the requirements of tennis		
Having unrealistic expectations for their child Lack of understanding of how sessions are run	Understanding child's ability		
Not understanding what behavior is acceptable Understanding how tournaments are organized	Understanding of tournaments/competition		
Phone calls to coaches in personal time Demanding coaches spend more hours on court	Imposing on coach's time	Parental demands on the coach	
Parents asking questions at inappropriate times Parents asking inappropriate questions	Communication required from coaches		
Perceptions of favoritism if coaches attend some players matches but not others	Coach's attendance at matches		
Parents expecting their child to have all the attention of the coach	Parents' perception of coach's commitment		
Parents' inappropriate response to matches Parents being overly results orientated	Coaches witnessing parents pressuring their children	Empathizing with players	Player-related Stressors
Parents being overly involved in child's tennis Parents not providing sufficient support	Parents' level of involvement in their child's tennis	Parents' impact upon player development	
Understanding of long-term player development Understanding how sessions are structured	Parents' understanding of the development process		
Obtaining differing opinions about the child Using inappropriate information for advice	Parents' access and use of inappropriate information		
Lack of organization for tournaments Being late and disorganized for training	Organization/disorganization of parents		
Parents making excuses for match outcomes Parents making excuses for player progression	Parents' making excuses for their child		
Parents having unrealistic expectation for child Parents having too low expectations for child	Parents' expectations for their child's tennis		
Parents' perceptions of coaching as a job Parents' perceptions of British tennis	Parents' perceptions of sport	Socio-cultural aspects	
British attitudes towards success Lack of drive for success Britain having a blame culture	Influence of British culture on parents		
Parents' concerns for their child's safety Economic climate	Current social climate		
Perceptions that the LTA is failing Perceptions that the LTA is disorganized	Parents' perceptions of the LTA		
Issues regarding the ratings/ranking system Continual changes in the British system	The British tennis structure	Organizational aspects	
Inconsistencies in the provision of programs Different methods of employment of coaches	The organization of programs in clubs and counties		
Coaches are dependent on parents for employment	How tennis programs are provided		

Parents' demands on coaches emerged as one of the main stressors these coaches encountered. Particularly pertinent was parents imposing upon coaches' personal lives. One coach articulated this stressor: "It's when you get that phone call, when it's in your own personal time and it's like 'Sorry to bother you on a Saturday but'... but don't call me on a Saturday!" Further demands coaches discussed related to parents' desires for more coaching and the expectation that coaches should attend tournaments.

Direct Coaching Stressors: Stage-Specific Comparisons. There was much similarity between coaches' stressors across the higher-order themes. However, coaches working with players at different stages of development recalled certain lower-order themes more frequently (see Table 2).

Two stressors appeared particularly pertinent for coaches working with sampling-stage players: parents' understanding of tennis and perceptions of the coach's role. Sampling coaches frequently stated stressors relating to parents' understanding of mini-tennis sessions. The next quote illustrated a common feeling for these coaches:

With mini tennis, they don't understand why you do all the ABCs [agility, balance and coordination]... and warm ups and that sort of thing, and the fact that you've only got the racquet in your hand for probably half of the session. It is quite hard to get across, but generally when you move on to performance, they know how a lesson is structured.

Further examples were also provided, such as "I sometimes feel that I have to justify... if they don't pick up a racquet until half way through a lesson." Parents' lack of understanding is perceived as a stressor, because coaches constantly have to answer questions and explain why they are doing certain things.

Parents' perceptions of tennis coaches, particularly a lack of respect for the role of tennis coaches emerged as a substantial stressor for sampling coaches. Coaches described this stressor in terms of being treated as the "hired help" or a "babysitting service". Coaches working with players in the later stages of participation did not discuss such stressors. This is probably because they are seen to have a more technical and specific role in player development.

Coaches working with players in the specializing and investment stages discussed stressors relating to parents' behavior and perceptions of the coach that were not expressed by coaches of sampling stage players. Specifically, competition between parents, parents gossiping about other parents, and parents gossiping about the coach were all widely discussed by these coaches. As one coach explained, "I find it hard when parents talk about other parents in a negative way and I'm stood there in the conversation." Such stressors were perceived to arise as parents developed cliques. Coaches working with specializing players also discussed stressors resulting from parents comparing players. For example, coaches expressed stressors due to parents discussing players' funding, questioning why certain players were improving, and parents wanting their child to have more of the coach's attention. As one coach explained, "Parents will always hear about what somebody else is getting at another club and want to try and sort of play you off against them."

Investment-stage coaches also indicated stressors in relation to parents' behavior at tournaments in response to match outcomes. These stressors were only discussed by investment-stage coaches as they were the only ones frequently travelling to tournaments. For example, these coaches highlighted stressors that arise from sitting with parents during matches, "It's the comments that they come out with, they can just make you just want the

Table 2. Stage-Specific Direct Coaching Stressors

All coaches	Coaches of sampling stage players		Coaches of specializing stage players		Coaches of investment stage players	
	2 nd order themes	1 st order themes	2 nd order themes	1 st order themes	2 nd order themes	1 st order themes
Behavior of parents	Parents' response to matches	Blaming coaches for loss Emotional response to matches	Parents response to matches	Blaming coaches for loss Emotional response to matches	Parents response to matches	Blaming coaches for loss Emotional response to matches Behavior at tournaments
	Parents' involvement in matches/training	Parents who are overly involved Parents lacking involvement	Parents involvement in matches/training	Parents who are overly involved Parents lacking involvement Differing involvement levels	Parents involvement in matches/training	Parents who are overly involved Parents lacking involvement Differing levels of involvement
	Interactions between parents and coaches	How parents approach coaches (e.g., defensive, aggressive, questioning)	Competition between parents	Parents comparing players Gossiping about other parents	Competition between parents	Parents comparing players Gossiping about other parents
Perceptions of the coach	Parents' trust and respect of their child's coach	Trust in coach's ability Respect for coach's role Respect for coach's knowledge Approaching other coaches	Parents trust and respect of their child's coach	Trust in coach's ability Respect for coach's knowledge Parents gossiping about their coach Approaching other coaches	Parents' trust and respect of their child's coach	Trust in coach's ability Parents gossiping about coach Approaching other coaches
Parents' understanding of tennis	Understanding of player development	How training is structured Differing coaching philosophies Understanding long-term focus How players progress	Understanding of player development	What is required for improvement Understanding long-term focus	Understanding of player development	What is required for improvement Understanding long-term focus Understanding how improvement is measured
	Understanding the requirements of tennis	What is required from parents What demands coaches face What demands players experience	Understanding the requirements of tennis	What is required from parents What demands coaches face What demands players experience	Understanding the requirements of tennis	What is required from parents What demands coaches face
	Understanding child's ability	Unrealistic expectations for child	Understanding child's ability	Unrealistic expectations for child How child fits into training sessions	Understanding child's ability	Unrealistic expectations for child How ability and success are related
Parental demands on coach	Imposing on coach's time	How parents should behave How tournaments are organized Phone calls during personal time Demanding coaches work more hours	Imposing on coach's time	Phone calls during personal time Demanding more time with coach Expect to receive all coaches' time	Imposing on coach's time	Phone calls during personal time Dictate coaches' holiday times Expect coaches to organize matches
	Communication required from coaches	Questions at inappropriate times Asking inappropriate questions	Communication required from coaches	Questions at inappropriate times Asking inappropriate questions	Communication required from coaches	Questions at inappropriate times Asking inappropriate questions Questions in inappropriate places
	Coach's attendance at matches	Not understanding financial implications of watching matches Perceived favoritism at matches	Coach's attendance at matches	Not understanding financial implications of watching matches Excessive demands of at matches	Coach's attendance at matches	Not understanding financial implications of watching matches Perceived favoritism at matches
	Parents' perception of coach's commitment	Expecting coach's attention Questioning coach's commitment to player	Parents' perception of coach's commitment	Expectation for coach's attention	Parents' perception of coach's commitment	Expectation for coaches' attention Questioning coach's commitment to player

ground to swallow you up, it's like why did they just say that... and they're just saying the wrong thing at the wrong time."

A number of investment-stage coaches did indicate that some direct stressors were reduced or more manageable than they had been. For example, these coaches perceived that the amount of respect they were afforded often increases as they work with higher-level players. As one coach summarized, *"I suppose on court you're the boss and what happens goes."* Many of these coaches have also developed strategies to reduce the impact of direct parent-related stressors. For example, while recognizing that parents can be demanding, some investment-stage coaches acknowledged that they have learned to accept this:

I mean, sometimes you have to speak to parents when you've had a long day and it may be unsociable hours, but that's part and parcel of the job we do, you choose to either go and teach adult tennis... you don't get any calls and it's just your hours done or you do the type of coaching that we do, I think it's part and parcel of it.

General Dimension Two: Player-Related Stressors

This dimension encapsulated stressors experienced by coaches due to the effect they perceive parents have upon their child. Player-related stressors arise indirectly from parents because they depend upon the child's response. As one coach described, *"There is a real stress triangle from the player, the parent, and the coach that has to be managed."* In total, 85 raw data themes were classified into 21 first order, seven second-order, and two higher-order themes: empathizing with players and parents' impact upon player development (see Table 1).

Empathizing with Players. Empathizing with players incorporated the stressors that coaches experience, because they witness parents placing pressure upon their child. As one coach explained:

I think that when you see the parent that's sort of, you know, arms always crossed, pacing around, will sort of hit every ball, that has to have an effect on the actual child, so that's the only kind of stressor for me really.

Many of the coaches expressed empathy for players because they themselves had had similar experiences and they worry for children in this situation. One coach explained, *"It stresses me out when I see them [parents] white knuckled on the balcony and little Johnny's looking up at them and you worry about the car journey home."*

An awareness of the long-term implications of parental pressure also appeared to enhance this stressor for coaches. As one coach stated:

The parents are going to be what they are, but. . . really and truly it's the kid that you're worried about . . . if they feel that intensity and that pressure, then there's a good chance they won't enjoy it, and if they don't enjoy it, they won't [play].

Witnessing parental pressure was not always perceived as a stressor by coaches. Some coaches felt it was dependent upon the child and how he or she responded. The following quotation highlights this sentiment, *"I think it really depends on the kid . . . because there are some kids out there that actually . . . want somebody behind them just permanently on their case."*

Parents' Impact Upon Player Development. The second higher-order theme within this dimension relates to parents limiting their child's tennis development. Coaches identified an array of parental behaviors and attitudes that they perceived could impact upon player development. As one coach highlighted, *"That causes stress because you're trying to help the kid and you're not getting where you want to get because the parents are stopping them from progressing."* The quality and success of a coach is often based upon the improvement and results of their players. As one coach stated, *"Players are a reflection of us [our work as coaches] therefore we need it to be seen that they are improving."* Consequently, when parents prevent players from improving coaches can appear less effective, which is perceived as a stressor.

Parents were perceived to influence player development by preventing children from developing independence (parents are overly involved), not providing appropriate opportunities for their child (disorganized parents), and distracting the player during training sessions. Consequently, coaches expressed stressors relating to the ongoing education of parents regarding their role in their child's development. As one coach stated, *"It's probably the biggest [stress] ... trying to educate the parents on actually what they have to do for their children competitively, what is required of them."*

Indirect Coaching Stressors: Stage-Specific Comparisons.

Player-related stressors were highlighted across all the focus groups. However, coaches working with players at the higher two stages of participation provided wider discussion of these stressors (see Table 3). Coaches working with players in the sampling stage recalled that the emphasis for these players is upon fun, as one coach summarized, *"The parents aren't amazingly worried about how much better their kids getting, as long as they're having fun."* Consequently, limited discussion was provided regarding parental pressure and any subsequent stressors for these coaches. However, some coaches' felt that a small number of parents were over-involved at this stage. These parents were associated with stressors for sampling-stage coaches. However, because competition situations are the most common time for parental pressure, such stressors were limited at this stage.

Sampling-stage coaches did indicate a range of stressors relating to parents' involvement and long-term player development in relation to parents' impact upon player development. For example, parents who are overly involved in their child's tennis try to teach their child themselves, resulting in them contradicting the coach. When parents contradict the coach, it can limit players' development because the players get confused or learn bad habits. Additionally, parents of sampling-stage players have a lack of understanding of the development process. Specifically, this lack of understanding is regarding the movement between mini-tennis stages and the specialized equipment that is used with young children. One coach explained, *"They're standing there with a 4 year-old, with a proper tennis ball bouncing over their head. You see so many parents just smacking it at them and you know it's going 20 ft past them."* Using the incorrect equipment with young children results in bad habits and techniques developing, which subsequently limits children's long-term development.

Specializing-stage coaches expressed a wider range of stressors relating to parental pressure than sampling-stage coaches. Specializing coaches particularly provided greater discussion regarding parents' inappropriate response to matches and parents' emphasis upon results. The specializing coaches also introduced two further first-order themes: parents' excessive expectations and parents viewing their child as an investment. When considering parents' expectations for their child coaches provided statements such as, *"When players lose... the parent is shocked. They question what the coach is doing and what the player is*

Table 3. Stage-Specific Indirect Coaching Stressors

All coaches	Coaches of sampling stage players		Coaches of specializing stage players		Coaches of investment stage players	
	2 nd order themes	1 st order themes	2 nd order themes	1 st order themes	2 nd order themes	1 st order themes
Coaches' empathizing with players	Coaches witnessing pressuring their children	Inappropriate response to matches Parents overly involved in matches Parents emphasis on results Parents projecting their desires on child	Coaches witnessing pressuring their children	Inappropriate response to matches Parents overly involved in matches Parents emphasis on results Parents projecting their desires on child Viewing child as an investment Parent's excessive expectations	Coaches witnessing parents pressuring their children	Inappropriate response to matches Parents overly involved in matches Parents emphasis on results Parents projecting their desires on child Viewing child as an investment Parent's excessive expectations
Parents' impact upon player development	Parents' level of involvement in their child's tennis	Over involvement in tennis Limited levels of involvement	Parents' level of involvement in their child's tennis	Over involvement in tennis Limited levels of involvement	Parents' level of involvement in their child's tennis	Over-involvement in tennis Lack of consistency of parental involvement
	Parents' understanding of the development process	Understanding of LTPD Understanding the importance of competition Understanding of different stages Understanding requirement for specialized equipment	Parents' understanding of the development process	Understanding of LTPD Understanding the importance of competition	Parents' understanding of the development process	Understanding of LTPD Understanding session structure
			Parents' access and use of inappropriate information	Obtaining differing opinions about the child	Parents' access and use of inappropriate information	Obtaining differing opinions about the child Using inappropriate information for advice Parent's changing coaches
			Organization/disorganization of parents	Not organizing tournaments Being late and disorganized for training	Organization/disorganization of parents	Not organizing tournaments Being late and disorganized for training Not helping child to get school work done
			Parents making excuses for their child	Excuses for the match outcomes Excuses for player progression		
			Parents' expectations for their child's tennis	Having unrealistic expectations for child Having too low expectations for child		

doing. It can cause a loss of confidence in the coach and in the player, because the parent's expectation isn't realistic."

Specializing-stage coaches also indicated many more stressors relating to parents' impact upon player development. Again, these coaches expanded upon the stressors highlighted by sampling-stage coaches regarding parental involvement and their understanding. For example, specializing coaches provided examples of these stressors in relation to tournaments (whereas sampling coaches had only discussed training situations). An additional four first-order themes were also discussed by specializing-stage coaches: parents' access and use of information, parents' organization, parents making excuses for their child, and parents' expectations for their child's tennis. Examples such as the following began to emerge, "*We were expecting a certain player at a tournament and he just didn't turn up,*" and, "*They come back with all this interesting stuff, yeah some kids cheat, but if a players gone out and lost 6-1, 6-2, that guy must be a fantastic cheat to have beaten his son so well!*" Coaches explained that such statements become a stressor, because players miss matches and start making excuses for themselves rather than improving weaknesses.

Investment-stage coaches identified similar stressors as specializing-stage coaches in relation to both higher-order themes. Some additional stressors were also discussed. Regarding parents' responses to matches, coaches indicated stressors relating to parents bullying players. One coach summarized, "*If the parent is bullying the child, that's me done [coach will stop working with the child] I'm afraid.*" Coaches indicated that such behavior appears to be related to parents viewing their child as an investment. As one coach explained, "*With the performance players, they are investing money in winning, they're not interested in just partaking... that's the pressure that can be projected onto the coach and player if they start losing.*"

Two additional stressors were also presented relating to parents' impact upon player development. Firstly, these coaches were the only coaches to discuss stressors relating to players actually dropping out of tennis due to over-involved parents. One group of coaches discussed this stressor widely, concluding, "*You know when the kid has had enough of it [involvement from parents], then they are going to give up, you know, and we will lose them from tennis all together... that's stressful, we don't want that.*" Secondly, these coaches discussed the stressors they encounter when parents decide to change coaches because they perceive other coaches to have better or more up-to-date information. As one coach explained, "*The coach is always blamed for everything and if the player wins matches fantastic, coach is doing a great job. But if he loses then it's the coach is crap, right who's next on the list?*" Consequently, players might have to leave their program, work with a new coach, and change their technique. Such changes can cause players' improvement to plateau.

However, a number of investment-stage coaches indicated that due to their experience and the experience of the parents and players, coaches' appraisal of parents as stressors is reduced. As one coach summarized, "*You just hope that the children will be able to know what's right and know what the information they need's right and prepare themselves as best they can.*" Investment coaches also indicated a reduction in many player-related stressors, because they have methods to prevent them. As one coach explained, "*It's one of my rules that parents aren't allowed to set one foot on the court, it's not that I don't want them being involved, it's very simply that the kids have a tough enough time as it is.*"

General Dimension Three: External and System Based Stressors

The third dimension highlighted factors inherent in the coaching environment that were perceived to moderate stressors arising from parents. Such factors were perceived to impact

upon parents' attitudes, perceptions, and behavior and as such enhance the direct and player-related stressors. Two higher-order themes were established, socio-cultural aspects and organizational aspects, comprising 57 raw-data themes (see Table 1). All British tennis coaches work within the same environment, thus no distinction was made between stages.

Socio-Cultural Aspects. Socio-cultural aspects are elements of British society that influence coaches' experiences of parents. For example, when considering parental under-involvement, one coach explained, "I think it's a lot to do with the way our country's run... I don't think there's that hunger and determination at all and everything's handed to them [parents] on a plate." Similarly, it was felt that parent-related coaching stressors may arise due to British attitudes to success, "We're very much a nation of mediocrity... we don't recognize talent, we don't recognize winners... so no one will push to achieve this success." On the other hand, it was perceived that parental involvement might have increased due to safety concerns in society, as one coach stated:

I think that's, you know, the way it's changed because within four years, more and more parents have got involved. I mean, we are talking about quite young children here, so again, with possibly with society as it is, you know parents of nine- and ten-year-olds don't want them going away with strangers.

Many focus groups discussed the impact of the economy on parents' behavior, as one coach explained:

I think that because now money is tight... they [parents] are investing money and they are looking at it as a business. They are investing money and they want a return. If the positive results are not coming and you are investing in a company that's not giving you any return, then the coach is going to be put under a lot of pressure.

The perceptions of tennis coaching as a profession was frequently identified as an issue for coaches when they are interacting with parents, as the following quotation highlights:

I think one thing where our industry's got to go is being much more professional in everything that we do and hopefully some of those difficulties [with parents], which perhaps exist to lesser degrees in other countries where coaching is regarded as more of a serious profession, are alleviated.

This perception of coaching was indicated as a barrier to coaches gaining parents' trust and respect.

Organizational aspects. Similar feelings were expressed regarding perceptions of the LTA, as one coach articulated, "I really don't think, because of our British track record of producing players, parents really trust that we can do the job."

Coaches consistently identified factors inherent in the structure of British tennis that moderate the stress they experience from parents. A number of statements similar to the following were provided, "It's not the parent that's causing me any stress, it's more the system." Numerous aspects of the British tennis structure were perceived to augment the stressors experienced by coaches. For example, the rating structure can result in parents placing excessive pressure upon their children, as one coach highlighted, "I think there is a lot of pressure from the LTA that makes parents put pressure on their kids." The continually changing tennis structure was also perceived to increase stressors, as one coach described,

“In this country our competition structure’s changed, our ratings systems changed, our ranking system’s changed... and I think that causes stress between the coach and the parent.” One coach summarized this issue, explaining, *“It’s probably the one you get the most of, or the most regularly and it’s not a direct stress on me, but they vent their stress through me... people have grievances with the LTA, the systems.”*

Finally, it was highlighted that many of the stressors coaches encounter are enhanced because their livelihood depends upon parents. As such, coaches are aware that they must provide the service that parents expect. The following quotation sums up such sentiments, *“We’re a service industry aren’t we and ... they’re the paying customer. If they don’t like what you’ve got, they’ll go elsewhere.”* As such, coaches expressed stressors associated with maintaining their business, as one coach articulated, *“If you’re not delivering what people want and they’re [players] not improving, then your business will go down the chute.”*

DISCUSSION

The focus of this study was to provide a detailed insight into the stressors that coaches encounter due to their interactions with parents. This study also aimed to identify whether stressors differed depending upon the player’s developmental stage of participation [1]. All but three coaches identified stressors in relation to parents, supporting previous research examining parent-coach relations and coaching stress [e.g., 6, 18].

Three dimensions of parent-related stressors were derived from the data. These dimensions accounted for stressors arising directly from coaches’ contact with parents, indirectly through parents’ interactions with their child, and organizational and cultural factors coaches perceived to moderate parent-related coaching stressors. The wide range of stressors and means through which these stressors are experienced provide some indication of the complexity of the parent-coach relationship [9]. This study also offers further support for the importance of qualitative studies to fully understand the stressors experienced by coaches [7].

This research was based upon studying one specific relationship stressor that coaches may encounter. On the broadest level, these stressors are representative of the sport relationship and interpersonal demands dimension of organizational stressors [37]. Researchers interested in athletes’ sources of stress have recently made the conceptual distinction between those stressors linked specifically to competition and competitive performance (i.e., competition stress) and the stressors associated primarily with the organization within which the individual is operating (i.e., organizational stress; [38-40]). By adapting Cooper et al.’s [41] work in an organizational setting, Fletcher et al. [37] forwarded five dimensions of organizational stressors in sport: factors intrinsic to the sport; roles in the sport organization; sport relationships and interpersonal demands; organizational structure and climate of the sport; and athletic career and performance development issues. Through their interview process, Thelwell et al. [14] identified a similar distinction within coaching stressors. The detailed examination of parent-related coaching stressors indicates that all the dimensions of organizational stressors are interrelated and appear to be represented within the stressors coaches associated with parents. As such, the sections below examine each dimension of parent-related coaching stress in relation to research on organizational stress in sport and previous literature on parent-coach relationships.

DIRECT COACHING STRESSORS

The direct coaching stressors that emerged from this study support previous research that identified problems coaches have with parents. For example, inconsistencies in parental

involvement, parental over-involvement, and parental under-involvement were highlighted as stressors for these coaches [2, 15, 42]. Excessive demands on coaches, particularly during their personal time, was a main stressor that coaches associated with parents [5]. Parents' understanding of issues relating to tennis was also related to a variety of stressors for coaches [23].

The sheer number of stressors that coaches identified suggests that previous broad examinations of parents will not have sufficiently examined this area. For example, conflict between parents and coaches has regularly been identified as a coaching stressor [2, 15, 18, 24]. However, in this study, conflict itself was not indicated as a source of stress. Rather, stressors arose due to factors that underpin confrontation, such as squad selection. Similarly, communication problems are often cited between parents and coaches [2, 42], and such problems were apparent in this study. Nevertheless, the stressors associated with parents arise due to the implications of these problems, such as the impact on coach's time. Parent and coach education needs to consider the underlying issues within the parent-coach relationship rather than the behaviors that result from them.

A number of the direct stressors that coaches associate with parents appear to relate to confusion, inconsistencies, and conflict in the roles of coaches and parents. Such role ambiguity and conflict account for one dimension of organizational stressors [37] and have also been identified as a stressor across many occupations [11]. For example, it has previously been identified that tennis parents perceive a large number of demands from the LTA, but the parents do not always understand what is required or why [26]. As parents attempt to establish their role, it can result in stressors for coaches. Also, there are no set rules or guidelines regarding what a coach's role is; different coaches provide varying amounts of support to players. As such, parents may be unsure what demands they can place upon coaches. This variation in support and involvement from different coaches may be one of the reasons that parents perceive stressors in relation to coaches [26]. It appears that parents and coaches do not clearly understand each other's roles.

The direct coaching stressors also clearly represent sport relationship and interpersonal demands for coaches. The stressors inherent in maintaining good relationships with parents were apparent throughout the data. Coaches provided examples including answering questions, finding time to talk to parents, educating parents, and coping with parents' behaviors as stressors associated with maintaining relationships. Similar stressors have been identified for athletes in relation to coaches and governing bodies [38] and for coaches working with other coaches and with athletes [14]. Additionally, the specific demands parents place upon coaches, such as demands for time and attention, are representative of interpersonal demands from many service-type industries [41].

PLAYER-RELATED STRESSORS

For a large proportion of coaches, their main stressors arose due to the effect parents can have upon players. The negative impact that parental pressure can have on child-athletes has been widely explored (e.g., [43-44]). However, to the authors' knowledge, previous research has not identified the subsequent stress that is experienced by coaches. Considering the strong relationship that coaches develop with athletes [9] and the role coaches can play in buffering the parent-child relationship [25], it is understandable that coaches may experience stressors if their players are experiencing pressure. Gould et al. [3] identified a variety of ways that negative interactions arise between tennis parents and players; for example, parents exhibiting an outcome orientation. Similar parental behaviors were described as player-related stressors in this study, indicating that coaches appraise witnessing such negative interactions as a stressor.

Coaches indicated that the stressors they experience regarding parents are enhanced if parents cannot detach themselves from their child's results. As such, parents increase the pressure upon their child and the coach. This may occur through parents projecting fulfillment wishes from their youth onto their children [43]. Conversely, parents may fall into a reverse-dependency trap, whereby they over-identify with their child and become dependent upon them [42]. Alternatively, Coakley [45] explained that when children excel in sport it is often directly attributed to their parents, which may lead to excessive pushing from parents.

The stressors represented within this dimension appear closely related to the organizational-stress dimension regarding athletic career and performance development. Just as athletic success can be attributed to parents, coaches' reputations are also built upon athletes' success and improvement. Occupational stress research has highlighted the effect that working in a performance-related environment that is open to public evaluation has on coaches [7, 13]. If parents limit athletes' development, they are clearly enhancing stressors that coaches are already experiencing.

Beyond the requirement for players to achieve for coaches' reputations, coaches also identify with their athletes and want them to develop and enjoy the sport. Coaches fulfill many roles in the lives of young athletes, including taking a responsibility for their overall social and psychological well-being [46]. Coaches spend a relatively large amount of time with their athletes and watch them develop not only as athletes but as young people. As such, it is little wonder that coaches will experience stressors if they feel players are under pressure.

EXTERNAL AND SYSTEM-BASED STRESSORS

When studying relationships, it is necessary to not only consider individual's behavior but also the context [4]. To fully understand the dynamics that influence relationships within the coaching process, it is essential to consider contextual factors inherent within a coach's occupational and social world [47]. Contextual factors, such as level of competition and years of experience, were identified as key factors affecting college coaches' stress experiences [7]. Such sentiments were replicated in this study, with numerous social and organizational issues perceived to moderate parent-related stressors.

The external and system-based stressors replicate a variety of organizational stressors that are experienced by athletes, parents, and coaches [14, 28, 37]. A number of system-based stressors represented factors intrinsic to the sport. For example, replicating the findings of Gould et al. [3], these coaches recognized that the financial demands that tennis places upon parents might subsequently increase the demands parents place upon both players and coaches. Similarly, the tennis structure demands parents to become quite involved in their child's tennis [48]. Coaches acknowledged that driven or pushy parents were necessary to an extent for parents to reach their potential [15]. However, these coaches felt that as involvement from parents is a requirement of tennis, parents felt they had more rights to be involved. Striking the balance between over- and under-involvement, both in relation to players and coaches, then becomes a stressor [3, 24].

Additionally, external and system-based stressors correspond closely to the organizational structure and climate stressors identified by Fletcher et al. [37]. Coaches perceived that the competition structure and the emphasis the LTA place upon winning and ratings points enhance the pressure parents might place upon players and coaches.

STAGE-SPECIFIC COMPARISONS

There was much agreement among all the coaches regarding parent-related stressors. However, there were certain stressors that were only discussed by coaches working with players at certain stages of participation. When considering stressors by stage, there was greater discussion and more identification of stressors by specializing-stage coaches than sampling-stage coaches. The emphasis upon fun rather than competition and the limited amount of training during the sampling stage [27] may explain the reduced number of parent-related stressors at this stage.

The increase in stressors for specializing-stage coaches may be due to the increasing role of coaches in athletes' lives at this stage [1]. Previous research has indicated that the specializing stage can be associated with problems between parents and coaches due to the large role both parties play in athletes' lives [17]. There is an increase in the number of interactions between coaches and parents, enhancing the opportunities for direct coaching stressors to arise.

Additionally, the specializing stage is associated with an increase in structured practice and competition [27], corresponding to the increase in stressors relating to parental pressure and behavior at tournaments. The specializing stage has also been associated with an increase in the financial, time, and emotional commitment required from parents [1, 17, 43]. It is associated with greater levels of parental stressors [26, 28]. Coaches' stress can be transferred to athletes [7] and it is possible that a similar issue is arising with parents translating their pressures onto coaches.

The role of parents usually decreases in the investment stage, which has been recognized as a potential cause of conflict between parents and coaches [9, 24]. Investment coaches did recall stressors regarding parents imposing on their role at this stage. However, a reduction in the number of stressors was also indicated. This may result because parents are less involved, and thus interactions are decreased. Coaches also perceived that parents had more trust in them and stressors were reduced due to the experience of parents, players and coaches themselves. It appears that coaches' appraisal of parents and situations are different at this stage, reducing their stressors. For example, these coaches can afford not to work with players whose parents are difficult.

APPLIED IMPLICATIONS

From an applied perspective, this research highlights a number of means through which parent-related stressors could be decreased. The underpinning factor identified throughout the focus groups was a lack of parent education. Coaches indicated that education to enhance parents' understanding and their behavior is necessary. The British tennis structure also affects the parent-coach relationship. Changes within the organization and structure of tennis are required to address many of the issues identified in this study.

Teaching coaches to cope with the stressors associated with parents would also be particularly beneficial for coaches. Although the main purpose of this study was not to identify coping mechanisms adopted by coaches, it was found that the majority of coping mechanisms were problem-focused, aiming to change parents' behaviors or level of understanding. Specifically, coaches encouraged parents to chart matches to reduce parents' emotional response to matches; coaches implemented rules to restrict parents entering the tennis courts during training to reduce interference and questions; coaches dedicated specific times to answering phone calls from parents and dealing with queries; and some coaches also required parents to write any questions and leave them in a box so coaches could respond to them when they had time rather than when they were trying to coach. To enhance

communication and increase parents' understanding, a number of coaches had begun to carry out termly parents' evenings to discuss children's progress and termly reports were also produced to inform parents about their child's improvement and goals.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study aimed to identify British tennis coaches' perceptions of parents as part of an ongoing research project. The use of focus groups allowed a large amount of in-depth information to emerge. However, focus-group research aims to indicate trends rather than produce results that can be generalized. Therefore, caution must be used when applying these results to other coaches. This is particularly pertinent given the contextual factors this study identified. Quantitative research with more coaches may help to confirm these findings.

Differences between the stages of coaches can be inferred through the recall of themes in focus groups. However, extraneous factors such as age and experience and the group nature of focus groups prevent firm conclusions regarding differences being drawn. Additionally, the allocation of coaches to different stages was based upon the predominant stage of participation of their players. Coaches may have recalled stressors relating to parents of players at different stages. Historical recall with investment coaches to explicitly explore stressors across the developmental stages would help substantiate these findings.

To extend this study, future research examining the strategies coaches use to cope with parental stressors would be beneficial. This may allow for the eventual development of an intervention to improve parent-coach relationships. A study examining the interaction of stressors experienced and influenced by all members of the athletic triangle would also be beneficial to maximize positive interactions in youth sport. Finally, it may be beneficial to examine whether parents are aware of how their behavior impacts coaches and athletes.

CONCLUSION

British tennis coaches perceive multiple stressors in relation to parents, with certain stressors appearing more prominent at different developmental stages of participation. The findings highlight the complexity of parent-related stressors perceived by coaches and the importance of both contextual and individual factors. It is hoped that this study will help to reduce the stress experienced by coaches and enhance parent-coach relationships by increasing parents' awareness of their impact upon coaches.

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