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### **Paper:**

Harwood, C., Drew, A. & Knight, C. (2010). Parental stressors in professional youth football academies: a qualitative investigation of specialising stage parents. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, 2(1)-55.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19398440903510152>

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Parental stressors in professional youth football academies: A qualitative investigation of  
specializing stage parents

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Date of Submission: 31/07/08

Running Head: PARENTAL STRESS IN YOUTH FOOTBALL

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## Abstract

1  
2  
3 In order to improve our understanding of parental experiences in elite youth sport, the present  
4 study investigated those stressors specific to parents within the subculture of professional  
5 football (i.e., soccer) academies in Great Britain. Focusing specifically upon the specializing  
6 stage of athlete development (Côté & Hay, 2002), a total of 41 parents attended six focus  
7 groups targeting those stressors specific to parenting during the early (U9-U12 years) and  
8 later (U13-U15 years).phases of the specialising stage. A process of inductive content analysis  
9 led to four general dimensions: academy processes and quality of communication; match-  
10 related factors; sport-family role conflict; and school support and education issues. Parents  
11 across the entire specializing phase identified uncertainty of their son's retention in the  
12 academy and quality of communication as significant ongoing stressors. Unfamiliar coaching  
13 and match practices emerged as stressors for early stage parents, whereas the management of  
14 school and academy demands were most prominent for later stage parents. A follow-up  
15 survey of 23 additional sets of parents served as a method triangulation procedure that  
16 verified the validity of these general dimensions. The findings support the academic value of  
17 studying competitive, organizational and developmental stressors from the perspective of the  
18 youth sport parent. Strategic implications for practitioners, coaches and youth sport  
19 organisations are presented

20  
21 Key words: parent, stress, football, development, youth sport  
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1 Parental stressors in professional youth football academies:

2 A qualitative investigation of specializing stage parents

3 It is perhaps a sad indictment of today's youth sport culture when we read reports of parental  
4 abuse towards young athletes (DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997), tragic fights between parents,  
5 young athletes and referees (CBS, 2006; Wong, 2001), and one tennis father's recent  
6 conviction for manslaughter after he drugged his teenage son's opponents causing one of  
7 them to be fatally injured (Lichfield, 2006). In a recent survey of 189 US youth sport parents  
8 and 803 young athletes, 14% of parents reported having yelled or argued with a referee, with  
9 13% disclosing having angrily criticized their child's performance (Shields, Bredemeier,  
10 LaVoi, & Power, 2005).. This latter finding was supported by 15% of young athletes  
11 reporting parental anger if they hadn't played well at sports. Programs in youth soccer within  
12 the United States have inaugurated fan behavior induction seminars for parents and 'Silent  
13 Saturdays or Sundays' as a behavioral deterrent against excessive verbal abuse, inappropriate  
14 coaching from the sidelines and sideline rage (see Wong, 2001).

15 Yet whilst there is an extensive body of popular literature and research on the roles  
16 and behaviors of parents from both negative and positive perspectives (Baxter-Jones &  
17 Maffuli, 2003; Fish & Magee, 2001; Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes & Pennisi, 2006, 2008;  
18 Hellstedt, 1990; Holt, Tamminen, Black, Zehn & Wall, 2008; Hoyle & Leff, 1997; Leff &  
19 Hoyle, 1995), there is a limited academic understanding of the stressors and issues  
20 experienced by parents as they support their child through the stages of sport development  
21 (Côtè, 1999). Stress is widely acknowledged as an inherent part of competitive sport and  
22 continues to receive extensive research attention amongst athletes and coaches (Frey, 2007;  
23 Giacobbi, Foore & Weinberg., 2004; Hanton, Fletcher & Coughlan, 2005; Holt & Hogg.  
24 2004; Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008). It is sensible that only by  
25 understanding the role that stress plays in the lives of athletes and coaches will their  
26 performance and psychological well-being be optimized. Nevertheless, if youth sport

1 programs and organizations seek to optimize the role of sport parents, then it is equally  
2 important to appreciate the inherent stressors that may impact on the quality of their  
3 'performance' and role with the child-athlete (see Gould et al., 2006, 2008; Holt et al., 2008).

4         The roles of parent and child in the youth sport environment are clearly very different.  
5 Parents serve as provider, interpreter and role model for the young athlete who is effectively a  
6 user or consumer of the sport experience (see Green & Chalip, 1997; Fredricks & Eccles  
7 2004; Wuerth, Lee & Alfermann, 2004). The provision of logistical opportunities, finance,  
8 and transport as organizational demands, are equally matched by the emotional demands of  
9 competition and the importance of reacting to all competitive events in adaptive and  
10 supportive manners. According to Fredricks and Eccles (2004) the degree to which these  
11 roles are fulfilled by parents serves to influence a child's beliefs and values and in turn, their  
12 motivated behaviors and performance.

13         In the mainstream literature, parents have identified time pressures, expectations for  
14 children to achieve and financial pressures as particularly stressful aspects of parenting  
15 (Sidebotham, 2001). Within the sport context, the time commitment required from parents can  
16 impede their occupational, social, and family life (Kirk et al., 1997b), causing particular strain  
17 if their time and attention becomes centered upon one child-athlete at the expense of non-  
18 sport siblings (Anderson & Anderson, 2000). From a financial perspective, Kirk and  
19 colleagues (1997a) concluded that the economic costs of junior sport involvement can  
20 negatively affect both a child's sport participation and impact more widely throughout family  
21 life. Baxter-Jones and Maffuli (2003) corroborated these findings within a tennis-specific  
22 sample identifying that approximately 12% of the family budget was spent on tennis, with  
23 16% of parents reporting severe financial hardship as a consequence.

24         From a conceptual perspective, researchers in the sport domain have made the  
25 distinction between those stressors linked specifically to competition and competitive  
26 performance (i.e., competitive stress) with the stressors associated primarily and directly with

1 the organization within which the individual is operating (i.e., organizational stress; Hanton,  
2 et al., 2005; Hanton & Fletcher, 2005; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Whilst this research to date  
3 has focused exclusively on athletes' perspectives, it is clear that many of these stressors may  
4 be shared by parents. Indeed, within the youth sport context, organizational stressors such as  
5 finance, travel, sport policies and interpersonal conflict are more likely to frame the parent's  
6 experience as opposed to the child-athlete's.

7 In establishing a line of research into stress from a parental perspective, Harwood and  
8 Knight (2008a) investigated the stressors articulated by 123 British tennis parents. The wide  
9 range of stressors emerging from their open-ended survey coalesced into seven core themes of  
10 parental stress. These included stressors associated with attendance at competitive matches  
11 and tournaments; coaches behaviors and responsibilities; financial and time demands placed  
12 upon the family; sibling resentment and inequality of attention; inefficiencies and inequalities  
13 attributed to tennis organizations; and developmental concerns related to educational and  
14 future tennis transitions.

15 An acknowledged limitation of this research was the inability to focus on parental  
16 stressors associated with a specific stage of their child's sport development. Côté (1999)  
17 identified four stages of participation: sampling, specializing, investment, and recreation. His  
18 model traces sport participation from early childhood to late adolescence and identifies  
19 differences in the experiences and requirements of athletes during each stage. The role and  
20 requirements of parents have also been noted to change throughout the sampling to  
21 investment stages (see Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002).

22 In the sampling years, the emphasis is on fun and deliberate play with time devoted to  
23 a number of sports activities (Durand-Bush, Salmela & Thompson, 2004). Parents are  
24 required to be committed to their child's range of sports, leading to altered family routines  
25 and increasing emotional and financial support. During the specializing stage, sport-specific  
26 skills develop through deliberate practice, and a more intense focus on training and

1 competition prevails (Côté & Hay, 2002). Parents take a growing interest in their child as an  
2 athlete and make an increasing financial, emotional and time commitment (Côté, 1999;  
3 Durand-Bush et al., 2004). The time commitment is such that other opportunities are often  
4 sacrificed for a child's sport. These demands continue into the investment stage where the  
5 adolescent intensively trains in one single sport with the aim and prospect of reaching an elite,  
6 professional level.

7 Harwood and Knight's (2008a) study was subsequently extended by conducting  
8 qualitative interviews with eighteen tennis parents whose children were currently at one of  
9 these three stages of participation (Harwood & Knight, 2008b). Their results reinforced the  
10 prominence of competitive, organizational and developmental stressors identified through the  
11 survey. However, stage-specific analyses suggested that the specializing stage parents  
12 experienced and shared the greatest range of stressors compared to the other two phases.

13 These prior studies of parental stress targeted a range of parents within an individual  
14 sport, serving to assist coaches and relevant tennis organizations in empathizing with parental  
15 demands and identifying appropriate organizational strategies and parent-educational needs.  
16 However, these research outcomes do not yet encompass the experience of parents in an  
17 organized team sport context. Consequently, in progressing knowledge in this area, the  
18 present study investigates parental stressors within a team sport, focusing specifically on  
19 parents in the specializing stage of athlete development.

20 British football (i.e., soccer) parents whose children had signed for a professional  
21 football club academy were purposely selected for the project as they represent a rather  
22 unique subculture of specializing stage parents. Within British football, talented players are  
23 scouted and inaugurated into an academy system at as young as eight years of age with  
24 professional coaching offered for up to seven more years before players enter the professional  
25 (i.e., investment stage) domain at 16 years of age. Over this period of time, children may still  
26 enjoy and compete in other sports but considerable time commitment is required from players

1 and parents including three training sessions per week and matches most weekends  
2 throughout August to May. In this respect, the specializing stage of development is a lengthy  
3 process, with parents potentially experiencing a variety of different stressors as their child  
4 progresses through this stage.

5 To summarize, the present study focuses on the experiences of academy football  
6 parents across the specializing stage and with appropriate attention to the differing stressors  
7 associated with younger and older players within this phase of development. With support  
8 from the Football Association of England (the FA), the study aims to provide insights for  
9 professional clubs and coaches into the issues facing parents and potential avenues towards  
10 enhanced parental support and education.

#### 11 Method

12 The study was conducted in two qualitative stages in order to fully understand the  
13 phenomenon and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings through method and data  
14 triangulation (Johnson, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The first and primary stage  
15 incorporated a focus-group methodology with parents from three different professional youth  
16 academies. Focus groups are well suited to gaining in-depth responses and facilitating a large  
17 amount of group interaction on a topic over a small period of time (Morgan, 1998). In this  
18 case, focus group interviews were particularly useful in gathering the perspectives and shared  
19 experiences of parents as well as stimulating new insights into stressors associated with their  
20 academy role.

21 The second, follow-up stage utilized an open-ended survey methodology where a  
22 different sample of parents from two further professional academies articulated key stressors  
23 in their role. This secondary qualitative survey data was used to verify the emergent themes  
24 from stage 1 as well as to consider additional stressors expressed during this developmental  
25 phase.

26



### 1 *Stage 1: Participants*

2 Participants were drawn from three professional football club academies within the  
3 north, midlands, and south of England. The criterion for selection was that each participant  
4 had a son who had a signed contract with the academy and committed to the full weekly  
5 training and playing schedule. In total 41 participants, 25 fathers and 16 mothers, participated  
6 in one of six focus groups. In order to investigate whether specific stressors develop or  
7 change across the specializing stage, focus groups were conducted with parents from two  
8 academy age ranges: The U9's to U12's and the U13's to U15's. 22 parents took part in one  
9 of the three U9-to-U12 focus groups and 19 parents participated in one of the three U13-to-  
10 U15 focus groups. Parents in the U9-U12 groups (labeled as early specializing stage)  
11 considered themselves to have been in the role of 'football parent' for an average of 5.25  
12 years ( $SD:1.76$ ). The U13-U15 parents (labeled as later specializing stage) reported an  
13 average of 7.26 years ( $SD:2.38$ ) experience as football parent.

### 14 *Procedure*

15 Following completion of all ethical clearance procedures, Academy Directors from  
16 three football academies were approached via logistical assistance from the FA. Each  
17 academy showed an interest in allowing parents to participate in the project, and assisted the  
18 researchers in recruiting a cross section of parents who were willing to be involved in the  
19 focus groups. Participants were sent a letter prior to the focus group, explaining the purpose  
20 of the study, as well assuring the confidentiality of their responses. Demographic information  
21 was collected along with participants' informed consent.

22 In line with existing focus group guidelines, each group consisted of between five to  
23 eight participants (Morgan, 1997). All focus groups were moderated with a semi-structured  
24 questioning route that was designed in line with a process proposed by Krueger and Casey  
25 (2000). All participants received a standardized introduction, explaining the aim and format  
26 of the focus group and the role of the moderator. Main questions and probes were designed to

1 facilitate a responsive interview. Interview questions were based on the findings of Harwood  
2 and Knight (2008a,b) and explored topics associated with competitive, organizational, and  
3 developmental themes. Beyond the two primary investigators, the third author, a research  
4 colleague who also possessed qualitative interview experience, reviewed the questions to  
5 ensure that they provided a suitable, discussion-friendly structure. An introductory question  
6 allowed parents to get to know each other before focusing the interaction on their general  
7 experiences of entering the youth academy. Subsequent questions and probes covered topics  
8 associated with matches and training, coaches and academy systems, financial and time  
9 demands, personal and social demands, and education and development. Closing questions  
10 allowed the moderator to check parents' had shared all experiences that they felt were  
11 important to them. Each of the focus groups were videoed and recorded, ranging from 53 to  
12 65 minutes length ( $M: 57.5$  minutes;  $SD:4.65$ ).

### 13 *Data analysis*

14 Data from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analysed inductively using  
15 Krueger and Casey's (2000) framework. Field notes and video footage were checked in-  
16 between groups in order to ensure the moderators' ongoing insight and familiarity with the  
17 emerging data. Following data collection, meaningful comments and quotes from the raw data  
18 that were interpreted as a stressor were coded as a meaning unit or essence phrase (Maykut &  
19 Morehouse, 1994). These essence phrases enabled the development of raw data themes that  
20 essentially represented a list of similar quotes emerging from the parents. This analytical  
21 process then progressed inductively to a higher thematic level whereby raw data themes were  
22 clustered around a common, underlying higher order category. Further hierarchical  
23 categorizations that represented these higher order categories and their raw data themes,  
24 emerged in the form of general dimensions. These general dimensions represented the  
25 phenomenon of parental stress for specializing stage parents. In replicating Gould et al.'s  
26 (2008) approach to data presentation, the number of themes at each hierarchical level were

1 counted alongside identification of the focus groups that contributed to that thematic finding.  
2 In this study, however, the authors were able to ascertain whether certain reported stressors  
3 were shared by both early and later specializing stage parents, or specific to either alone (see  
4 Results section).

5         The trustworthiness of the findings in stage 1 was facilitated by two main methods  
6 focused on enhancing credibility and minimizing researcher bias related to the interpretive  
7 analysis of the second author (Johnson, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Firstly, investigator  
8 triangulation processes involved the first and third authors independently coding one separate  
9 transcript from each focus group classification (i.e., early and later specializing) as part of an  
10 inter-coder consistency check on the initial interpretations of the second author (Lincoln &  
11 Guba, 1985). Following satisfactory reliability and agreement at this stage, the first author  
12 reviewed the interpretive allocation and labelling of the raw data themes into their higher  
13 order theme. He repeated this verification process for the allocation of higher order themes  
14 into subsequent general dimensions. Interpretations were openly discussed and challenged  
15 appropriately with a final consensus achieved. At this end stage, the third author then served  
16 in the capacity of a peer-debriefer or ‘critical friend’ (Cresswell, 1998) by reviewing the  
17 emergent framework as a whole and critically probing for explanations of certain decisions  
18 made by the two other research colleagues.

19         Secondly, a comprehensive member check was conducted in order to gain participant  
20 feedback on the interpretive accuracy of the results and emerging framework. Documents  
21 were sent out to a randomly selected review panel of participants in each focus group. Parents  
22 were asked to verify the accuracy of the transcript and to review quotes and emergent themes  
23 so as to attest that the information suitably reflected what was discussed in their specific focus  
24 group. They also received an illustration of the finalized hierarchy and an explanatory  
25 summary related to all of the focus groups. The entire review panel validated the information

1 and interpretations related to their group, and agreed that the final hierarchy was an accurate  
2 representation of parental stressors across the specializing stage.

### 3 Stage 1: Results

4 Over the six focus groups, 77 raw data themes emerged from the analysis. These themes  
5 coalesced into 23 higher order sub-themes which were subsequently categorized into four  
6 general dimensions of parental stressor. These were: academy processes and quality of  
7 communication; match-related stressors; sport-family role conflict; and school support and  
8 education issues. Using the representation recently employed by Gould et al., (2008), Figure 1  
9 illustrates the content of these four dimensions, their corresponding themes, and the number  
10 of focus groups who raised these particular themes. Each general dimension will be  
11 elaborated upon using specific quotes from parents. Each quote is identified by a parent ID  
12 number. (e.g., P3), the number of the focus group (e.g., F2) and whether it was a later or early  
13 specializing stage group (e.g., *P3;F2;Later*).

#### 14 *Academy processes and quality of communication*

15 All focus groups raised stressors that were inherent to the processes and systems of the  
16 academy, particularly with respect to the flow of communication and information to parents  
17 related to the security of their child's place. Firstly, a sense of fear and uncertainty about signing  
18 their child with the academy emerged for a number of parents. One parent stated:

19 A parent's natural instinct is to protect their child and make sure they feel confident in  
20 themselves. Therefore, anything that may open them up to failure or lowering their self-  
21 esteem. you worry about; you want them to have the opportunity, but you want to protect  
22 them"(P1, F3, Early).

23 Fear of signing was inextricably related to the fear of failure and prospect of release from the  
24 academy. Parents expressed that their sons' potential reactions to release and the possibility of  
25 any long-term effects due to release were particularly stressful. The following extract from focus  
26 group 3 (later specializing) captures the essence of the theme here:

1 P1: There were some lads who'd all been together since they were 8 (years old) and  
2 quite a few of them went (i.e., were released). I was stood out there having my cup of  
3 tea and players were coming out [of the meeting] like this (wiping tears) and having  
4 to walk in there [the dressing room] to the rest of the lads.

5 P5: You feel like they've had a big failure and I wonder what knock on effect it'll  
6 have in later life.

7 P2: One of my son's friends was at XX academy from 8 to 16, when he got released  
8 he was on valium and all and in a right mess.

9 P6: You know the longer they are in, the harder they fall cos they are in it longer and  
10 longer. And as they get older there are so many things going on in their lives which  
11 you're worried about...and you really want to prepare them for something that's  
12 going to be as devastating as this to these guys. By the time they've been doing it for  
13 this long they really really do want to do it, they're so keen, and it's a huge blow.

14 P2 (whose son was in that specific team): My son said to me, 'Dad, if I get released I  
15 don't want to go through there [i.e., the door back to the dressing room]'. He didn't  
16 want all the people coming to him saying 'sorry'. He wanted to go out of that door  
17 [he points to the fire escape]. So if he'd got released we'd have gone out of that door,  
18 and we'd have gone home.

19 Parents understood that difficult decisions about player retention had to be made by  
20 coaching staff, yet this did not counteract the feelings of uncertainty concerning decisions about  
21 their own child and the lack of preparation or forewarning that was perceived. Additionally,  
22 parents in later stage focus groups referred to how releases are handled by the academy citing  
23 examples of insensitive comments and processes where players are released prior to training  
24 sessions. Many were concerned about the lack of empathy or due consideration for the future  
25 welfare of their child and the time devoted to the academy. One parent stated:

1 My son was at XX Academy for three months and his coach comes up to us and says  
 2 'I'm really pleased with this squad and I've got no reason at all to change this for a  
 3 year' and I said to my son 'well you're fine then'. The following week it was 'you,  
 4 you, you, you and you are finished'. That was a week after they were told they were  
 5 gonna be there for a year! (P1, F3, Later)

6 Early specializing parents in all focus groups referred to difficulties they  
 7 encountered through the limited information they received from their academy before and  
 8 on signing their child, and a lack of education about expectations and procedures ("It's the  
 9 unknown when you join a club like this and the lack of information"(P3, F2, Early). This  
 10 was also closely aligned to perceptions of poor feedback that caused some parents stress  
 11 when their son was on trial for the academy: "It was stressful for me not knowing whether  
 12 he was in or not. I mean it had been that long....three months and no information. As a  
 13 parent you get stressed and you're thinking 'is it worth it?' " (P3, F1, Early).

14 Many parents noted the inadequate communication after their son joined the  
 15 academy. A consistent theme from each of the six focus groups was the poor quality and  
 16 regularity of feedback that parents received about their son's progress. A sense of  
 17 frustration was evident not only in terms of frequency of feedback, but also the validity and  
 18 inconsistency of the feedback. One parent challenged feedback quality, targeting the  
 19 superficiality of their academy's simple grading system:

20 We had a report after every game but he wasn't taking him to one side and saying how  
 21 to sort a problem out. You can get given a D because you aren't doing it correctly, and  
 22 the next week he is given a B and he hadn't changed anything! And he's not actually  
 23 told him how to change it either. (P5, F2, Later)

24 Finally, parents cited stressors associated with the inconsistent behavior of coaches and how  
 25 they sometimes failed to support and appreciate the logistical and personal demands of their  
 26 family role. One father recalled:

1 We couldn't make a particular Sunday game and I'd seen the coach the week before and  
 2 he'd said 'don't worry, no problem'. Then the Wednesday game comes along, which is  
 3 quite important, and he says 'sorry you can't go [i.e., my son can't play] because you  
 4 never turned up! [on Sunday]. They don't see the other side of it when you're at home  
 5 trying to console your upset child saying 'don't worry about it!' (P3, F2, Early)

6 Perceptions of limited empathy and understanding when faced with difficult family choices or  
 7 circumstances was exemplified by three further parents. One stated: "You know I'm dashing to  
 8 drop one lad off at XX Academy boys training and then shoot off over here with another lad.  
 9 It's a given really isn't it in this sort of environment, they expect that at 7 o'clock the fairies  
 10 will drop them off" (P2, F2, Later). The second parent recounted:

11 It was my son's best friends birthday party and he wanted to go so I rang the coach  
 12 early that week to let them know that he couldn't play. The next time we went to the  
 13 academy the look we got from the coach...it made you feel 'ahhh, may be we shouldn't  
 14 have said or done that' but at the time we felt it was the right thing to do because our  
 15 son was only 8 years old. (P4, F3, Early)

16 While the third parent recalled:

17 My son broke his arm in pre-season training this year and I was really upset that we  
 18 didn't get a phone call from the club. It affected my boy as well because he couldn't  
 19 understand why the coach or whoever didn't ring to see how he was doing. He's been  
 20 missing for seven weeks and I think they've got to understand the stress the boys are  
 21 under. (P3, F2, Early)

## 22 *Match-related stressors*

23 All focus group parents shared a number of stressors associated with their son's  
 24 participation in competitive matches, although their child's performance [and resultant  
 25 anxieties around mistakes] emerged as a theme in only one late specializing focus group:

1 Watching him play – that is stress. I mean it’s the most stressful time for me. I mean  
2 when they played XX team that was awful – I wanted him to come off in case he made  
3 a mistake. He’s a defender as well and with the youth team coach coming to watch, I  
4 thought if he touches the ball and makes a mistake, then that’s it! (*P3, F3, Later*)

5 Another parent, in the same group, followed up by disclosing how she only watches the game  
6 if the other goalkeeper [i.e., not her own son] is playing:

7 It’s just a nightmare, I can’t even watch.....I’m more relaxed watching the other goal  
8 keeper because it’s not my son in goal. But when he’s actually in goal I’m just scared.  
9 I mean I don’t know why I put myself through it, I should just sit in the car, I don’t  
10 know why I bother I really don’t. (*P5, F3, Later*)

11 Later specializing parents also discussed the stress around their sons’ reactions to losing  
12 matches and the negative anticipation of what the after-match mood was going to be like  
13 which they felt they had to deal with.

14 A further cluster of match-based stressors revolved around coaching and coaches’  
15 decision-making regarding players and tactics in matches. Some early stage parents  
16 struggled to resist interfering in matches by coaching or instructing their son from the  
17 sidelines, whilst most focus groups raised the issue of coaches rotating players and making  
18 incomprehensible substitutions: “As long as I live I will never ever work out coach  
19 decisions, when they take people off when they put people on and I'm not alone. We sit  
20 there going ‘why’ve they done that?’” (*P6, F3, Later*). Some early stage parents also found  
21 the practice of moving their son into different playing positions stressful, and in some  
22 cases, with insufficient feedback and explanation to the player and parent as to why.

23 Interestingly, this issue was closely associated with the stress for some parents of match-  
24 winning situations being sacrificed in favour of achieving developmental goals. A number  
25 of parents cited the strain of watching matches where the team were winning, only for the  
26 coach to change the team or tactics [for developmental reasons]:



1 I find it straining that they'll put the best team on with the lads playing their  
2 positions and then when they are 2 or 3 [goals] up in the last 20 minutes they'll say  
3 'right' and put different lads on,,,,,,and then we end up losing the game (*P5, F1,*  
4 *Early*)

5 Another group of early specializing parents also reacted negatively to the  
6 introduction of small sided (5-a-side) mix-in games that had been organized in favour of  
7 full competitive fixtures. They viewed these developmental games as just another training  
8 session that they felt did not test players competitively and many cited that they would not  
9 watch these types of games if they knew in advance that this was the format.

10 Negative encounters with other football parents were reported as  
11 infrequent, however, a number of parents disclosed the stress of unpleasant touchline  
12 comments directed at their son which they found personally difficult to cope with: "I find  
13 it hard to deal sometimes with parent's comments that you can hear if they stand there; it's  
14 really hard and I stand there and I'm quite shy so I don't react - so it's really hard."(*P5, F3,*  
15 *Later*).

16 Finally, stressors associated with injury existed in the experiences of parents  
17 supporting both early and late specializing players. Fear of injury appeared to increase in  
18 conjunction with the increased physicality of the game and physical development of  
19 players. However, due to the pressured competition environment characteristic of later  
20 specializing players vying for contracts, the negative compensatory behaviors of  
21 overtraining, and masking injuries were cited as stressors by parents of older players. This  
22 is illustrated in the quote below:

23 "See that's a stress as well for me - rushing them back from injury; they rush  
24 themselves back. This player goes out and plays with an injury he's trying to mask it  
25 but you knew his parents weren't there and XX, the coach goes 'what's wrong with  
26 X' and then they tell them off for not having said. But the player is thinking 'my

1 contract's coming up in a few weeks' and so players try to stretch it another month."

2 (*P4, F3, Late*).

### 3 *Sport-family role conflict*

4 Six higher order sub-themes reflected components of the overall sport-family role  
5 conflict that emerged in all focus groups due to the demands of academy commitments  
6 impacting on normal family routines and lifestyle. Few, if any, parent resented the demanding  
7 travel routines and the resultant work sacrifices that also impacted financially on the family.  
8 However, the stressful nature of these logistical and time issues were clear across each focus  
9 group:

10 Getting the lad here is stressful to me, you know – Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and  
11 then the game on Saturday and if you've got work commitments as well. That's the  
12 biggest stress – getting here as I have to drive 60 miles each way (*P5, F2, Late*)

13 Another parent relayed the same sentiments when disclosing that their travel routine utilized  
14 only public transport:

15 I've been doing it for 3 years – getting the train from X to here and a taxi from the  
16 station to here and back again. Catching the train at 8.20pm on a Tuesday and  
17 Thursday night and we're not getting home till 11.30pm. And then he's up at 7.30am  
18 next day for school (*P2, F2, Later*).

19 It was evident that having a son or several sons in an academy was a financial strain  
20 for nearly all parents. This was particularly true for those parents who had farther distances to  
21 travel, due to ensuing petrol costs, and those who worked at weekends resulting in loss of  
22 earnings. One single mother stated, "It is a big stress for me – my other kids go without so my  
23 son goes here"(*P7, F2, Early*). However, a number of parents agreed that "If they weren't  
24 doing football it would be doing something else you'd be funding"(*P5, F1, Early*) suggesting  
25 that for some parents the stress identified did not transcend normal family financial demands.

1           Whilst some parents developed relationships with other football parents, many parents  
2 discussed how their personal and social lives had become one dimensional and non-existent  
3 due to their commitment to football. One early specializing parent stated:

4           It's the lack of time at home and splitting the family, and lack of family time due to  
5 being here the whole weekend so you can't have a day out with the family or see  
6 relatives. Just everything stops because you are always saying 'Sorry, I'm at football'  
7           *(P4, F2, Early)*

8           To which another early stage parent, concerned for how future involvement would impact on  
9 their lives, added:

10           "When it gets to U-16 you have to remember some of those lads in those teams are  
11 only 14/15 years old; they are training here everyday in the Summer holidays,  
12 everyday in the Easter holidays and if you think your life's messed up now, how are  
13 you gonna cope with that? *(P7, F2, Early)*.

14           Finally, parents with other children raised the issue of sibling inequality as a  
15 prominent stressor and their resultant experience of guilt associated with perceptions of  
16 neglect. Some parents disclosed how they tried to compensate their other children by  
17 spending more of their time doing things for them, as one parent reported, "You sometimes  
18 try to compensate for that by taking them somewhere else, driving them about where you  
19 wouldn't normally."*(P3, F1, Late)*. Another parent echoed this sentiment hinting at the  
20 problems of resentment felt by siblings:

21           It's hard to give the other children the attention when you're away Tuesday,  
22 Thursday nights and Saturday mornings. We've got two girls aged 7 and they do  
23 feel their noses are being pushed past. Then they play up when you do see them and  
24 they wind you up even more, so it's a vicious circle *(P8, F2, Early)*.

25

26

1 *School support and education issues*

2           The final dimension of parental stress encompassed specific factors associated with  
3 school, school work, and reconciling the demands of education with the demands of academy  
4 participation. These issues were almost exclusively related to late specializing parents when  
5 academy demands were greatest and general educational pressure was heightening with  
6 examinations and homework. Early stage parents had not yet reached this transition and  
7 indeed many successfully used completion of homework and good schoolwork as basic,  
8 contingent criteria for their young sons attendance at the academy (i.e., fail to do your  
9 homework = no football).

10           Two later stage focus groups discussed at length their concerns about their sons  
11 physical tiredness from the training and match regime alongside homework and exam  
12 pressure. One parent stated:

13           He does all his schoolwork on the Wednesday in between the Tuesday and Thursday  
14 night sessions. My wife has to wake him up on the Wednesday morning and he comes  
15 in at 3.30pm. The next thing happens is I walk in at 4.45pm and I'm waking him up  
16 off his bed because he's just flaked out. (*P2, F2, Later*).

17 Parents at this later stage also exchanged their problematic experiences of managing pressure  
18 for their son to participate in school sport with sometimes the direct conflict of attendance at  
19 the academy. A number of parents referred to the behaviour of certain PE teachers towards  
20 their son in these circumstances when they could not attend a school fixture. The following  
21 quote serves as a good representation of the issue:

22           He (son) plays badminton for the school, does reasonably well at it and he's told  
23 he'll never play for school again...what impression is that making on the kid? And  
24 he's (teacher) saying that my son has got an attitude problem! (*P3, F1, Later*).

25 A number of parents also acknowledged concerns over the treatment of their child from an  
26 educational perspective because they attended the football academy. The issue not simply

1 being a lack of school support for football, but a fear of unfair academic treatment by teaching  
2 staff. Two fathers whose sons had conflicted with a PE teacher over school football  
3 attendance were now concerned with how the teacher would treat their sons as an assessor of  
4 their examination in sport:

5 P1: My concern with it now is my son is going to do his GCSE [British examination at  
6 16 years old] in Sport

7 P4: Snap

8 P1: Is this teacher gonna hold it against them because a lot of the assessment is done by  
9 the teacher watching them play sport?

10 P4: I said to the teacher 'is this gonna affect him next year? Because I certainly hope it  
11 doesn't'. So we have one or two issues with the school, yes.

## 12 *Stage 2: Participants and procedure*

13 The second stage of the investigation comprised twenty three sets of specializing  
14 stage parents whose son(s) trained at two further professional academies in the North of  
15 England. They reported being a football parent for an average of 6.1 years (*SD*:1.8). An  
16 open ended survey was developed that asked parents to identify the issues and demands  
17 that they experienced through having a son in the academy. In order to help assess the  
18 degree to which the results corroborated with Stage 1 themes, a series of open questions  
19 focused on detailing any stressors associated with matches, the academy and coaches,  
20 personal lives, school/education-related issues and any other important or meaningful  
21 areas.

22 Parents were accessed using similar procedures as stage 1 with surveys distributed to  
23 parents who were present at an academy training evening for home completion. Twenty  
24 three sets of football parents subsequently returned the completed surveys.

25

26

1 *Data analysis and results:*

2           Content analysis of the survey responses utilized both deductive and inductive  
3 processes. Firstly, raw data themes were created in a similar manner to stage 1. These  
4 themes were then deductively analyzed by filtering relevant themes into the higher order  
5 categories that emerged in stage 1. Those themes that did not conceptually fit underwent  
6 further inductive analysis leading to new higher order themes that would be additional to  
7 stage 1 findings.

8           The results of the survey served to verify the four general dimensions of parental  
9 stressor with raw data themes filtering into each of the higher order sub themes that had  
10 emerged from the stage 1 focus groups. However, two additional higher order stressors  
11 were reported by parents which extended the general dimension associated with *academy*  
12 *processes and quality of communication*. These were labelled as *poor quality of*  
13 *communication with child* and *perceived coaching favoritism*. Specifically, seven parents  
14 cited issues with the way that coaches communicated with their son either in matches or  
15 training. Raw data themes included: conflicting advice from different coaches; confusion  
16 when the coach says one thing and then does another; misinterpretations by player due to a  
17 lack of clear explanation; and lack of confirming understanding with the child and follow-  
18 up feedback. This theme also included the stress experienced as a result of the coach  
19 constantly shouting their son's name in matches and not following a negative comment  
20 with positive reinforcement [in both match and training scenarios]. One parent articulated:

21           With my son having ADHD, when he started playing football I panicked when they  
22 shouted at him. My heart would race because when they pressure him, he panics  
23 and it made him worse. It took him out of the game mentally.

24           With respect to perceived coaching favoritism, four parents cited stress arising from  
25 feeling that coaches had their individual favourites who would occupy the favored  
26 positions and gain more playing time than others. One of these parents who had cited

1 frustrations with limited communication from coaches overall, stated; 'I have a feeling  
2 some players are just making up the numbers so that they [the coaches] can look after the  
3 ones that they like.'

#### 4 Discussion

5 In extending the developing knowledge base on parental stress in youth sport, the  
6 current study targeted the experiences of professional youth academy football parents. This  
7 facilitated an understanding of those parental stressors that were specific to a team sport  
8 subculture within which the talented player progressed through a lengthy specializing stage of  
9 athlete development (Cote, 1999). Previous research into tennis parents (Harwood & Knight,  
10 2008b) suggested that the specializing stage of development was the most demanding with  
11 respect to the range of competitive, organizational and developmental stressors experienced  
12 by parents. By using multiple focus groups, the current study illustrated the range of stressors  
13 that are pertinent to specializing stage parents in football, as well as delineating between those  
14 stressors that were either prolonged across the stage or specific to early and later phases.

15 Firstly, the findings offer further support to the importance of distinguishing between  
16 competitive, organizational and developmental-based stressors when supporting parents in  
17 their sport role with their child (Hanton, et al., 2005; Hanton & Fletcher, 2005; Harwood &  
18 Knight, 2008b). Competitive stressors emerged through a range of factors associated with  
19 matches, some of which appeared to be more pertinent to certain developmental time points.  
20 A number of early stage parents making the transition to the academy from local youth  
21 football appeared to struggle with certain academy expectations and practices. Professional  
22 academies tend to adopt strict policies of parental touchline behavior that appropriately forbid  
23 coaching and instruction. It is also common developmental practice in the early stages to  
24 move players around different positions to aid their understanding of positional demands and  
25 to assess the players 'fit' for the future. Whilst a substantial number of parents across the  
26 focus groups understood and praised the developmental focus of the academies, including

1 shared game time for all squad players, there were parents at each stage who disclosed  
2 stressors associated with certain substitution practices and the lessened focus on winning and  
3 intra-squad competition. These parents almost exclusively believed that winning matches and  
4 having the best team on the pitch served as the greatest source of confidence for their son and  
5 the team.

6 Fear of injury emerged as a stressor across the specializing stage, but was heightened  
7 in the later stages due to the increased physical nature of the game and potential consequences  
8 regarding career progression. Linked to these consequences, their child's level of performance  
9 and the anticipation of their son's negative post-match reactions became more specific  
10 stressors discussed within later stage focus groups. This is potentially attributable to the  
11 enhanced focus on retaining a place at the academy and the increasing pressure for success  
12 and opportunities that are more relevant at 14 and 15 years of age. The results suggested that  
13 whilst the majority of parents viewed their son's participation at the academy as a  
14 developmental privilege and applauded mastery-oriented coaching approaches (Smoll &  
15 Cumming, 2006), a number of parents revealed more normative motives and, with them, an  
16 ego-oriented tension to their son's involvement (see White, 1998). The philosophies,  
17 behaviors and stressors of these particular parents corresponded with some of the negative  
18 parenting practices in tennis identified by Gould et al. (2008).

19 Beyond competitive stressors associated with matchplay, it was organizational  
20 stressors that appeared to hold a day-to-day prominence in the lives of academy parents.  
21 Adapting the organization-based work of Cooper, Dewe, and O'Driscoll (2001), Hanton and  
22 Fletcher (2005) forwarded five dimensions of organizational stressor in sport: factors intrinsic  
23 to the sport (e.g., finances, time, travel, training, injury); roles in the sport organization (e.g.,  
24 role ambiguity; expectations; managing role conflicts); sport relationships and interpersonal  
25 demands (e.g., with other parents; coaches; teachers); organizational structure and climate of  
26 the sport (e.g., selection policies; autonomy in decision making; match schedules); and



1 athletic career and performance development issues (e.g., security of position/retention;  
2 funding support).

3       Until recently, these dimensions had only been applied in research related to the  
4 experiences of elite athletes towards their sport organizations. However, the substance of  
5 these dimensions resonated with those stress themes in parents specific to academy processes,  
6 communication and sport-family role conflict. Firstly, even though academies typically try to  
7 maintain a careful and sensitive developmental approach, they still remain as professional  
8 businesses that release young players who not attaining the appropriate standard. This model  
9 of organised youth sport created uncertainty in parents both before and after signing their  
10 child for the football academy.

11       The stress of their son's potential release at the end of a season was a preoccupation  
12 for all focus groups. However, this was not aided by parents' perceptions of the limited  
13 information, feedback and communication that they received from their relationship with  
14 coaches or the academy overall. In some cases, it appeared that the role that parents wanted  
15 to play either did not correspond with or was not information-rich enough in respect to the  
16 norms of the academies. Early stage parents recalled concerns about the availability of  
17 information and education related to themselves and their sons' involvement in the academy.  
18 All focus groups lamented being somewhat excluded from the communication loop, unable to  
19 assist in their son's development, and being treated with a lack of empathy given the personal  
20 and social sacrifices that parents were making. This particular finding is an almost exact  
21 replication of the stressors emergent in specializing stage parents in tennis with respect to lack  
22 of feedback from national governing body training camps (Harwood & Knight, 2008b). Later  
23 stage focus groups raised anxieties over the process of release and feared degrees of  
24 insensitive conduct on behalf of the academy. Parents cited limited control to help prepare  
25 their sons for what might happen yet anticipated the devastating effect that release would have  
26 on their child.

1           It appears likely that the impact of release worsens later in the specializing stage  
2 because a child is approaching the investment stage (i.e., a professional academy contract)  
3 when his career prospects are dealt a severe blow. Release can therefore be likened to  
4 involuntary career termination (Taylor, Ogilvie, & Lavalley, 2006) and is recognised as a  
5 traumatic experience for athletes. Parents identified with this potential trauma and  
6 experienced the policy of release as a prolonging stressor due to chronic uncertainty and lack  
7 of control.

8           Heavy time, travel and financial commitments [for some] were organizational  
9 stressors intrinsic to the sport that led to greater sport-family role conflict where the role  
10 pressures of being a football parent conflicted with other family activities and responsibilities  
11 (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The lack of attention to other siblings, resultant guilt and  
12 compensatory behavior, corresponded directly with the experiences of tennis parents  
13 (Harwood & Knight, 2008a,b; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). However, many parents maintained  
14 a positive view of their time and financial burden by observing that if they weren't funding  
15 football then they'd be funding something else that might 'keep their child off the streets'.

16           Beyond isolated concerns about the consequences of injury, the developmental  
17 stressors experienced by parents in this subculture were represented within the final  
18 dimension of school support and education issues. The combination of the physical training  
19 regime with school pressures, relationships with the school (including PE teachers) and the  
20 management of sport-education conflicts were the main stressors reported. In concert with  
21 the perceptions of specializing parents of elite tennis juniors (Harwood & Knight, 2008b),  
22 these stressors became prominent in the later specializing stage when demands from academy  
23 football, school sport and school work were at their greatest. In two focus groups there were  
24 clearly strained relationships between the school, the academy and parents that, as a number  
25 of parents voiced, suggested the need for more proactive dialogue between academies and

1 schools in relation to player development and welfare. This included considerations to the  
2 training regimen of players during exam periods and the management of player fatigue.

3 From a methodological point of view, the follow-up survey from two further  
4 academies served as a means of method (and data) triangulation to enhance the credibility of  
5 the four emerging dimensions (Johnson, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Most qualitative  
6 studies within sport psychology rely solely on investigator triangulation procedures whereby  
7 multiple researchers are involved in the analytical process with one set of data collected in a  
8 particular manner. In this study, the additional survey data from similar populations at  
9 different academies served to verify the integrity of stage 1 themes as well adding two further  
10 themes related to coach-to-player communication skills and perceived favoritism.

11 Nevertheless, convergent with findings from the subculture of youth tennis, many  
12 football parents identified stressors but not all of these were accompanied by a sense of strain  
13 and an inability to cope (Lazarus, 2006). A limitation of the current study is that it did not set  
14 out to study sources of strain and coping per se. The focus group discussions did offer  
15 examples of negative appraisal processes and the disclosure of negative emotions. However,  
16 there was evidence that parents used emotion-focused coping by selectively-attending to the  
17 positive aspects of their situation. Namely, that such stressors (e.g., lack of communication  
18 and feedback) were acceptable because of the importance they assigned to the opportunity for  
19 their son to train at the academy. Whilst it would be remiss of this study not to report the  
20 positive tone of many parents about their academy experience, it would be equally negligent  
21 to conclude that there was only limited room for improvement in assisting parents in this  
22 setting.

23 Various applied implications can be drawn from this study that are of central  
24 importance to practitioners, coaches, and sporting academies when dealing with the parents of  
25 talented young players. Emergent themes from the four dimensions, reflective of competitive,  
26 organizational and developmental stressors, offer a clear strategic roadmap. Firstly, there is a

1 continued premium placed on the early education of parents in relation to the psychological  
2 and emotional demands of the specializing stage of youth sport. This youth sport education  
3 policy is important in order to ensure that parents develop the necessary motivation-related  
4 knowledge and cognitive- behavioral skills both to manage themselves and to optimally  
5 influence the development of their child (Gould et al., 2008). For specialist academies this  
6 also critically includes induction protocols (perhaps through compulsory interactive  
7 workshops) where parents gain honest, transparent information on the philosophy and  
8 organizational practices of the academy. It also demands an agreed understanding of the scope  
9 of their parental role and associated expectations. Communication, monitoring, school-  
10 academy relations, and timely feedback pertaining to their child's progress are particularly  
11 sensitive areas for academies to consider alongside greater empathy with the inevitable  
12 personal demands facing parents. Attention to such strategies and consistent organizational  
13 practices are likely to enhance the perceived value, behavioral roles, and well-being of parents  
14 as they progress through this demanding stage of athlete development.

15 In conclusion, the results of this study underscore the tremendous psychological,  
16 emotional, and social investment that characterizes parents of gifted footballers throughout  
17 the early to later specializing phase (Côtè, 1999; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). The intensive  
18 journey of the young academy player is paralleled by a similarly demanding journey for their  
19 sport parent. Only by understanding and appreciating 'sport parent' stress might applied  
20 researchers and youth sport organizations assist in the process of helping parents to enjoy and  
21 optimize their role as a key social agent in their child-athlete's development.

22

23 Acknowledgements:

24 This research was supported by the Football Association of Great Britain (FA) as part of the  
25 FA's Psychology for Football research strategy. The authors would like to acknowledge the  
26 assistance of Dr. Andy Cale, Head of Player Development and Education.

27

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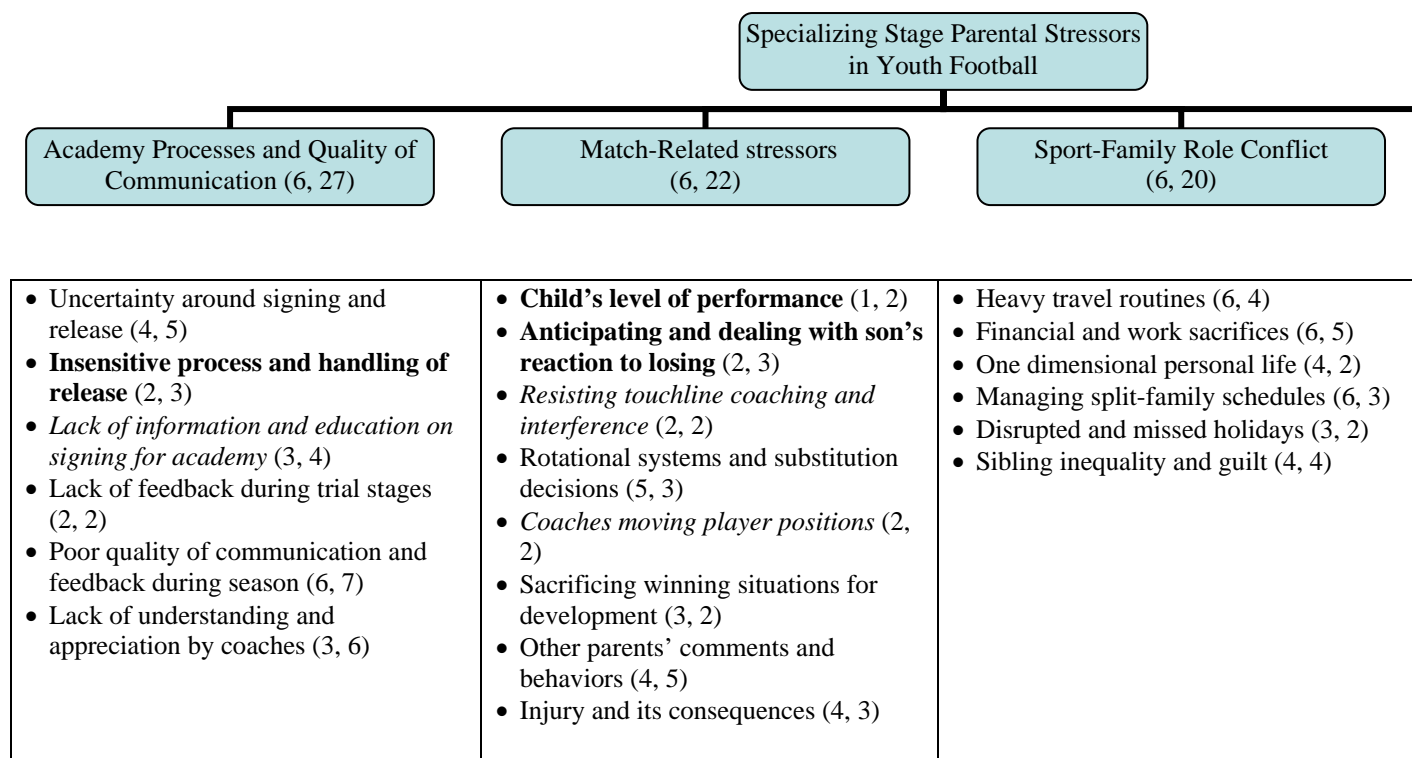
1 Figure Caption

2

3 *Figure 1: Specializing stage parental stressors in youth football*

4

Figure 1



(Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of focus groups in which the theme was mentioned and the number of participants who mentioned the theme. Text in normal font indicates themes emerging from both early and late specializing focus groups; text in **bold** indicates themes emerging from both early and late specializing focus groups; text in *italics* indicates early specializing themes alone.)