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Junior Tennis Players' Preferences for Parental Behaviors

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This is the final accepted manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Applied Sport Psychology in 2010. The final online version is available from: 10.1080/10413200.2010.495324

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify junior tennis players' preferences for parental behaviors at competitions. Eleven focus groups were conducted with 42 high performance tennis players (*M* age = 13.5 yrs, *SD* = 1.2 yrs). Analysis revealed several themes describing athletes' views of supportive parental behaviors. Specific preferences were that parents should not provide technical and tactical advice, but they should comment on effort and attitude, provide practical advice, respect tennis etiquette, and match nonverbal behaviors with supportive comments. By providing a children's perspective, these findings offer guidance to optimize parental involvement in tennis.

Junior Tennis Players' Preferences for Parental Behaviors

Parents play an integral role in youth sports programs. Fredricks and Eccles (2004) suggested that parents fulfill three crucial roles in youth sport: interpreter, role model, and provider. They act as interpreters of children's sporting involvement by communicating beliefs and values regarding sport development, performance, and success. Parents can influence children's attitudes and behaviors by role modeling appropriate and inappropriate behavior in sport environments. Finally, parents provide sport experiences by transporting their children to practices and matches, paying registration fees, supporting their children at competitions, and, in some cases, coaching, organizing, or refereeing junior teams and leagues (Côté, 1999; Kirk et al., 1997a; 1997b; Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). Such positive parental involvement has been associated with athlete enjoyment and sport adherence (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; McCarthy & Jones, 2007; McCarthy, Jones, & Carter-Clark, 2008).

As such, many parents invest substantial amounts of money, time, and emotional energy to aid their children's sport participation (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2008). Although researchers have recently started to examine parental behaviors at youth sport competitions (e.g., Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008), little research has examined *children's* preferences for their parents' behaviors at sport events. The current article addresses this gap in the literature in order to provide information that can be used to optimize parental involvement in sport.

It is important to study children's preferences for parental behavior because research has shown parents can have a negative influence on their children (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). For example, a survey of 250 junior tennis coaches in the U.S. indicated that athough coaches perceived 58.6% of parents had a positive influence on their children's tennis, 35.9% of parents were perceived to impede their children's tennis development (Gould, Lauer, Rolo,

Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006). Another survey of 189 U.S. youth sport parents identified that 14% of parents had yelled at or argued with the referee and 13% had criticized their children's sport performance (Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, & Power, 2005). Over 20% of parents of 101 tennis players were reported to have displayed negative behaviors in relation to their child's tennis performances (DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997), and a recent study showed that children, parents, and athletes reported instances of angry verbal, nonverbal, or physical interactions – although the frequency by which such incidents were recalled was fairly low (Omli & LaVoi, 2009).

Young athletes have reported overinvolved parents as a source of stress (e.g., Reeves, Nicholls, & McKenna, 2009). Overinvolvement includes parents overemphasizing winning, having unrealistic performance expectations, or providing excessive criticism following competition (e.g., Gould et al., 2006; Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996). Such overinvolvement may reduce children's enjoyment of sport (Brustad, 1996; Hellstedt, 1990), lower their self-confidence and self-esteem (Gould et al., 1996; Leff & Hoyle, 1995), and increase anxiety (Norton, Burns, Hope, & Bauer, 2000; Ommundsen & Vaglum, 1991). Ultimately, overinvolvement may contribute to children burning out or dropping out of sport (Dale & Weinberg, 1990; Gould et al., 1996; Hellstedt, 1987).

Hellstedt (1987) identified a continuum of parental involvement from under to overinvolvement. Underinvolved parents were those who did not invest financially, emotionally, or functionally in their child's sport. Overinvolved parents were those who took an excessive interest in their child's sport and often made attempts to coach their child. However, placing parental involvement on a continuum from over- to underinvolvement likely oversimplifies the role of parents in youth sport. Researchers must seek to differentiate different dimensions and types of parental involvement to advance the literature in this area. As Fredricks and Eccles (2004) recognized, "Much more attention needs to focus on

unpacking the constructs of parent involvement, encouragement, and support in the athletic context" (p. 59).

One study which 'unpacked' constructs of parental involvement was conducted by Stein, Raedeke, and Glenn (1999) who measured relations between amount and degree (i.e., perceived quality) of parental involvement and children's perceptions of pressure and enjoyment in sport. Quality of involvement was more important than amount of involvement. Specifically, children who reported higher rates of perceived quality of parental involvement generally reported lower pressure and more enjoyment. As the authors acknowledged, further research is required to identify factors that influence the quality of parental involvement and parental behaviors that result in children perceiving their parent's involvement as a source of enjoyment versus a source of stress in sport. One way to advance the literature in this area is to examine children's preferences for specific elements of their parents' behavior during competition.

Parental behaviors during competitions have been examined. Kidman, McKenzie, and McKenzie (1999) observed 250 parents of 6-12 year old athletes at 147 team sports competitions. Parents' comments were separated in terms of positive and negative valance. Results showed that 47.2% of parents made positive comments during competition and 34.5% of recorded comments were negative. Goldstein and Iso-Ahola (2008) examined the determinants of 'sideline rage' among parents while watching their children compete in sport. Results showed that parents who were more control oriented reported higher levels of ego defensiveness (a need to protect their own ego when watching children compete) and pressure. Such parents had higher levels of anger than parents who reported less ego defensiveness and pressure.

Similarly, a study of parental involvement at youth soccer competitions identified a continuum of parents' verbal reactions from supportive to controlling comments (Holt et al.,

2008). Specifically, Holt and colleagues reported that parents provided praise and encouragement, performance contingent feedback, instructions, a balance between positive and negative remarks, negative comments, and derogatory comments. A link between the context in which parental behaviors were occurring (i.e. competitive environments, critical matches, critical points) and the comments that were being made was also suggested.

Most recently, Bowker et al. (2009) examined parents' comments via observations of 69 youth hockey games. Consistent with previous research, the majority of comments (66%) were classified as positive, with only 33% classified as negative. Negative comments were more frequently directed at the referees and positive comments at the players. The nature of parents' comments appeared to vary with competition level (more negative comments were made at competitive games than recreational ones) and gender (female parents made more positive comments than males).

These studies provide an indication of how parents actually behave at youth sports events. However, a number of issues warrant further research attention. Researchers (e.g., Bowker et al., 2009; Holt et al., 2008) have coded the positive or negative valence of parents' comments based on their own (i.e., the researchers') interpretations. What researchers (or parents, or coaches) deem positive or negative may not be interpreted by children in the same manner. There continues to be a need to understand the specific parental behaviors that *children* find supportive and pressuring during competitions (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008; Stein et al., 1999). Furthermore, as the Bowker et al. and Holt et al. studies acknowledged, it is not yet clear if children even hear and respond to comments their parents make during competitions. Finally, it is quite likely that verbal comments parents make are accompanied by certain nonverbal behaviors; however, little is known about if and how children perceive and interpret their parents' nonverbal behaviors during competitions. The current study addresses these important gaps in the literature by examining children's

preferences for their parents' behaviors during competition. Such information may be useful for optimizing parental involvement in sport.

The current study examined children's preferences for parental behaviors in the sport of tennis. There are several reasons why tennis provided a useful context for studying parental behaviors. As an individual sport, players have 'nowhere to hide' and their performance successes and failures can be clearly observed by parents (whereas, for example, in a team sport individual performances may be less discernable). Tennis requires high levels of financial and time investment from parents and players (and parents) may receive lucritive rewards if players are successful (Gould et al., 2006). Furthermore, parents are usually present before, during, and after matches and can have considerable influence upon young players (Harwood & Swain, 2002). Indeed, there are numerous examples of parents who have been perceived to be inappropriately involved in their child's tennis. Headlines such as, "Tennis superbrats and their over-pushy parents" (Pearson, 2009) and "Pushy parents poisoning junior tennis" (Gerard, 2008) may sensationalize the situation, nevertheless they provide an indication of a possibly deep-rooted problem that is present within junior tennis (Gould et al., 2008).

Researchers and sport governing bodies have recognized the importance of studying parental behaviors. In response to the concerns regarding tennis parents the United States Tennis Association (USTA) and the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA: The organizing body of tennis in the United Kingdom) commissioned research to aid the development of educational materials for tennis parents (Gould et al., 2006; 2008; Harwood & Knight, 2009a; 2009b). Gould and colleagues conducted a three-part research project to identify the role of parents in tennis players' lives, focusing specifically on positive and negative influences. This project consisted of a survey of 250 junior tennis coaches, focus groups with 24 high level junior coaches, and interviews with nine elite adult players, eight of their parents, and nine of their

coaches. The majority of parents were reported to have a positive influence on their children's development. However, a number of negative parental behaviors were identified, including parents focusing on match outcomes rather than player development, interfering with training, demanding too much of the coaches' time, and being overly involved in their child's tennis. This information is clearly beneficial to parents, coaches, and the organizing body. However, the majority of information was gained from coaches and junior athletes were not provided with an opportunity to discuss their preferences for parental behaviors.

Similarly, Harwood and Knight (2009a; 2009b) conducted two studies for the LTA aiming to understand the stressors parents of junior tennis players experienced. Data were collected through 123 open-ended surveys and 22 interviews with tennis parents. Primary stressors for parents related to their children's involvement in competitions. This stressor was exacerbated because parents reported that they did not know what to say or how to act before, during, or after competitions. Overall, these studies suggest that there are examples of positive and negative parental involvement in tennis, and that parents are actually unsure of the most appropriate ways to act around competitions. The literature can be advanced by asking children what types of parental behaviors they prefer.

In summary, this study was designed to advance the literature by seeking to unravel different types of parental involvement in youth sport. However, children's preferences for parental behaviors in tennis have rarely been examined. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify junior tennis players' preferences for parental behaviors at competitions.

Method

Participants

Participants were purposefully sampled (Patton, 2002) from high performance tennis squads in western Canada. Selection criteria was based upon age (i.e., 12 to 15 years old) and playing standard. The age range was selected because it reflects the specializing stage of

youth sport participation, which is when athletes become committed to a sport and parents are highly involved, particularly with regard to competition (Côtè & Hay, 2002). In terms of playing standard, players were required to be regularly competing (at least once a month) in provincial level competitions, as an indicator of their commitment to the sport. Thus, these participants were identified as individuals who would be able to provide rich-information regarding parental behaviors at competitions.

The sample was comprised of 42 junior tennis players (26 male and 16 female) aged 12-15 years (M = 13.5 yrs, SD =1.2 yrs). Participants had played tennis for between one and ten years (M = 5.3 yrs, SD = 2.6 yrs). Players trained on average 14.8 hours per week ($S.D$ = 5.8 hrs) and most competed in approximately two competitions per month. All participants competed at the provincial level, and 52% had gone on to compete at a national level, and 12% had competed internationally. An additional five participants (three male and two female) took part in a member checking focus group. These participants had been playing tennis for between one and five years and competed at a national level.

Procedure

Research Ethics Board (REB) approval was obtained and data were collected through focus group interviews at six tennis centers in one province. Coaches at each center were contacted by telephone to gain permission to approach their players. Players and parents (if they were present) were then approached at a local tournament or following a training session at different centers. Potential participants who met the sampling criteria were given an information letter and a consent form for their parents. If parents were present and interested in the study their contact details were obtained. If parents were not present but received the information letter and consent form they registered their interest either directly with the researchers or through their child's coach. A time and date when interested participants were available to take part in a focus group was arranged with the respective coach and parents.

Data Collection

Focus groups were selected as the data collection method. They are a type of group interview well suited to providing data in response to exploratory research questions because they allow in-depth information to be gained from a variety of perspectives (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1997). Given the purpose of the current study, the focus group approach was particularly useful because participants were required to discuss relatively public social displays (i.e., preferences for parental behaviors during competitions), discuss their opinions, and provide personal examples when necessary. Indeed, we chose focus groups because we anticipated participants would have different opinions and experiences about parental behaviors, and that focus groups would allow the identification and discussion of shared or diverse views to emerge relatively easily (Patton, 2002).

Eleven focus groups (plus one member checking focus group) were conducted. At the outset of the focus group parental consent forms were obtained, participants were provided with a verbal explanation of the study, given further opportunities to ask questions, and thus assented to be involved in this study. It was reemphasized that their participation was voluntary and the information they provided was confidential. As a requirement of REB approval, participants were requested not to discuss information that arose in the focus group once it had finished.

Focus groups ranged from 41 to 86 minutes (M = 55 minutes) and each included three to five participants. Although the preferred size for focus groups on noncommercial topics is between five and eight, smaller focus groups are acceptable in research contexts (Kreuger & Casey, 2008), particularly for research involving children (Gibson, 2007). Focus groups comprised males and females within the age range who trained together. As such, the groups were relatively homogenous as the participants were of similar playing standard, age, and had similar levels of competitive experience. This enabled the focus groups to capitalize on

shared experiences between the participants (Kitzinger, 1994). Additionally, the participants were comfortable with each other because they trained and traveled together and were used to conversing (Morgan, 1997).

A semi-structured questioning route was used to moderate the focus groups (Morgan, 1997). The questioning route was created based upon sport parent literature (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2009a; 2009b; Holt et al., 2008) and parental guidelines and codes of conduct (e.g., English FA, 2008; USTA, 2006). A pilot focus group was conducted with three 12 year old tennis players to confirm the suitability of the questions and provide an opportunity for the moderator to become more comfortable with the questions (Morgan, 1997). No major modifications were made to the questioning route after the pilot group.

The questioning route comprised opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending questions (Kreuger & Casey, 2008). The opening questions were designed to put participants at ease and gain demographic information. Introductory questions aimed to initiate general conversation regarding athletes' perceptions of positive and negative parental behaviors during tennis competitions. Transition questions focused upon players' awareness of their parents' behaviors. Key questions examined players' preferences for parental behaviors before, during, and after matches. The ending question asked participants to identify the best ways parents could help them in tennis.

An activity-based exercise was included at the end of the focus group. Such activities have been recommended for focus groups with children because they provide a different way for children to express their opinions (Colucci, 2007). Such activities encourage all participants to contribute, particularly those children who may be less inclined to express their opinions in front of the group (Hennessy & Heary, 2005). During the final activity participants were asked to compile a list of parental 'do's and parental don't's'. This activity

helped summarize participants' verbal responses, gave less vocal participants a chance to be heard, and were incorporated as a verification technique into the analysis.

Focus groups are useful because they allow participants to share experiences and opinions and provide researchers with an opportunity to examine the perspectives of different individuals within the group (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). This valuable, rich information is lost if focus groups are analyzed as if they are merely a series of individual statements. Thus, throughout the analyses of these data particular attention was given to the conversations between participants.

Data Analysis

Each focus group was audiorecorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were coded to ensure confidentiality and read and reread by the lead researcher to ensure immersion in the data (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The transcripts were then analyzed through content analysis following the steps outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). The transcripts were coded to identify meaningful segments of information (raw data themes). These raw data themes were then assigned meaning units and grouped by content into lower and higher order themes and then more abstract general dimensions. However, rather than only coding individual sentences (as with individual interviews), consecutive and nonconsecutive sections of data consisting of statements from several speakers were coded together (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). These sections of data were then subjected to more detailed coding to identify different viewpoints and more substantive content. Constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was used. This involved comparing raw data themes and meaning units to identify similarities and differences, and grouping similar themes under higher level descriptive concepts. This type of analysis helped to differentiate themes from one another. Data collection and analyses were conducted concurrently to enable the researchers to make a

judgment that the data were adequately saturated and thus no further participants were required.

Methodological Rigor

Two techniques were conducted following analyses to assess the reliability of the data analysis process. First, as mentioned previously, an additional focus group interview was convened to serve as a member-checking group. This focus group interview provided an opportunity for players not included in the study to examine the initial themes and interpretations that were emerging from the analysis. These players provided feedback on the researchers' interpretations of the data in relation to their own experiences. Therefore, this focus group played a valuable role in the development of labels for certain categories and helped confirm the accuracy of the analysis. Second, an interrater check was conducted with the second author. This researcher was familiar with the data as she had attended seven of the focus groups and had read all the interview transcripts. She was given a list of the umbrella theme and associated themes and a third of the focus group quotes (40 pages of data) to code. There was 96% agreement between the two coders in relation to the general principle identified and 88% agreement regarding the associated themes. The differences in coding emerged because the labels attributed to these themes were unclear. Following an in-depth discussion these themes were reworded to more accurately portray the data. Through this discussion and questioning the final coding scheme was agreed upon.

Results

The results describe the players' preferences for their parents' involvement in tennis. Five primary preferences, which were common across the focus groups, are reported. These more specific preferences for parental behaviors were grouped under a general 'umbrella' principle of being involved in a supportive way.

Umbrella Theme: Athletes' Views of Supportive Parental Behaviors

The majority of discussions in all 11 focus groups centered on the tension between parents being supportive rather than pressurizing players. At the broadest level players wanted their parents to support their engagement and development in tennis without pressuring them to achieve certain outcomes or performances. While the players used the general term 'overinvolvement' they were able to specify particular types of behaviors that represented support rather than pressure. For example, Tom said, "overinvolved parents are parents that will do anything to make their child win. Like if it actually came down to it… they would ... go and actually ... physically try to make the other player lose." And the following exchange showed that several players shared this perspective:

Chris: Well if the parent gets too much involved it's...not really about...getting the ball…

Marcy: It's just about winning then.

Chris: and it's just about winning and losing. And it's just like hard to focus…

Additionally, it appeared that parents' comments that (we assumed) were intended to reflect belief in the children's ability were inappropriate if they focused on performance. For example, one group discussed their thoughts regarding their parents looking past the 'easy' rounds of a draw to the harder matches:

Jianti: Um, I hate when my parents they, they look at your first match and then they say, "Oh your second match is this, and then your third..." Like they expect you to win all the time.

Jaime: I don't like that.

Question: How does it make you feel when they do that?

Jianti: I don't know, like nervous.

Question: So what do you think parents should do when they see the draw?

Jessica: Just tell us who we play and do nothing else.

In addition to placing pressure upon players, such parental behaviors may be counterproductive with respect to helping young athletes remain focused upon each point, game, and match.

Similarly, Simon explained, "Before the match they [my parents] say, 'Ah you're gonna win, you can do it.' Then first point, when they've told me that you've got to win, I go and double fault." Although players wanted to know their parents were confident in their abilities and would continue to provide them with support throughout their matches, expressing this support by expecting success was perceived as pressuring in all the focus groups. Therefore, we argue that players wanted supportive involvement from their parents. In the following sections we detail specific types of behaviors that represent supportive involvement.

Do not provide technical and tactical advice. The majority of players indicated that they did not like their parents to give them technical or tactical advice before matches because it confused them. Matthew said "[parents] shouldn't give tips 'cause it kinda messes up how I think I should play instead of what they want me to play." Concerns over parents giving technical and tactical advice were especially apparent if players felt that their parents did not have sufficient knowledge to be making such comments:

> Richard: I think it depends on what they're saying. ... I know they're trying and whatever but sometimes they, they try to comment on technical things that um, I think you couldn't really know unless you've played the sport for a long time… it's hard for them to really understand like what's going on on the court, 'cause they don't play.
>
> Tim: Or even if they do play, like it's, if they're not at the level that you play at.
>
> Richard: Yeah it's like a different game and sometimes they try to um, try to coach you.

The exception, however, was if players perceived their parents to be knowledgeable about the sport. That is, players did not mind receiving tactical or technical advice from their parents if they were a tennis coach or they had competed at a sufficiently high level in the sport. For example:

> Bethan: The stuff they [parents] can say, your behavior is bad and you need to contain it more but anything like about how you played I think should be left to the coach.
>
> Charlie: Well, yeah, dad's a bit different because he's a coach.
>
> Katherine: Yeah, well my mom ...she tells me how I was hitting or stuff and it's like [as if speaking to mom] "you don't really know what you're talking about." Like it just kinda gets me mad because she was never really an athlete. And my dad gives the right advice because my dad used to be a professional athlete [not a tennis player] so he ... knows the whole mental side of it but he doesn't really know any of the technical stuff. And he never ... tells me about the technical part so that's good.

Thus, it appeared that players wanted the advice their parents gave them to be appropriate to the knowledge and experience that they (the parents) have of tennis or high level sport.

Comment on effort and attitude, not performance. Players expressed feeling concerned after a poor match when they knew their parents were going to be angry, as the following exchange revealed:

> Tom: Then you wanna run away.
>
> Question: Does it affect you when you're playing?
>
> Tom: Yeah, it's like, "Oh crap, I hope they're not mad after the match" and then…
>
> Kristy: Well you know…
>
> Tom: All of a sudden the match is over, and then…

> Kristy: You know [you wonder] what's coming for you… [If] you have a very very very crappy match and you, you walk out of those gates and you know what's gonna happen [when you see your parents].

The subtle distinction in the players' preferences was that they did not want to be criticized for performance-related issues after a match. However, they did express a preference for receiving feedback regarding their effort and attitude, even if the feedback was critical. As Marcy explained, "I don't mind if my parents yell at me [after a match] because I didn't try. But what I don't like is [if] parents would yell at you but you tried and just didn't play well, you know." Similarly, when asked how he thought parents should react to a player with a bad attitude, Charlie responded, "They should be hard on you". In summary then, players preferred their parents to comment on effort and attitude (factors players have control over) rather than performance.

Provide practical advice. One type of advice that most players did want from their parents was practical advice. Players discussed that they liked their parents to help them prepare for and recover from their matches, as one group explained:

> Question: You guys said you quite like getting tips, what sort of tips?
>
> Danielle: Mmm it depends.
>
> Jianti: I guess, yeah, Your mom does…
>
> Danielle: Like if it's about nutrition and eating like this, um, a few hours before your match, then yes.
>
> Jianti: Yeah.
>
> Danielle: And like keeping warm, doing warm ups, but if it's anything to do with your technique or game plan [shakes head].

Such involvement from parents was perceived as an appropriate way parents could show they cared about their child and their child's tennis. However, if players chose not to act upon their

parent's advice, players reported feelings of annoyance if their parents kept repeating the advice. For example, Scott said, "Well my mom she acts like really fussy and she, she always says 'have you eaten enough? Do you have enough water?' and it gets kinda annoying." Further, some players felt that parents should allow players to be in control of organizing their warm-up and prematch preparation because it allowed them to develop autonomy, which will aid tennis development. The following conversation illustrated this:

> Marcy: Well everyone thinks they should only do that [i.e., help children prepare for matches] in the beginning and the later on they should kinda let you go.
>
> Question: So do you mean when you're younger?
>
> Marcy: Like they taught me how to do it, so now I don't think they should be carrying on for me and going, "Oh do you have this."
>
> Question: So do you feel that's something you can take care of yourself now?
>
> Marcy: Yeah, especially now being that we travel like without parents sometimes and you have to do it on your own.

So, parents should provide practical advice but they should also try to 'read' their children and not be repetitive.

Respect tennis etiquette. Discussion in all focus groups illustrated the importance of parents behaving in accordance with tennis etiquette. As Carl explained, "tennis is a gentleman's game for a reason and parents should behave like it." To ensure fulfillment of tennis etiquette players perceived that parents must be respectful of everyone involved in tennis. One particularly important issue for these players related to parental support during one sided matches. As one group explained:

> Carl: If it's a close game, then yeah [parents should clap] but if they're [the opponent] losing by a lot or you're winning by a lot, then no I don't really think parents should cheer. But if it's a close game…

Question: But not if there is a big difference?

Carl: Well if you're winning then uh, I think it will make the other person not feel too good if your mom's cheering you on if you're winning like 5-1.

Mike: I think, I think it's appropriate to clap and like, yeah clap mostly and when you're down or it's a close game, but mostly not when you're winning.

Another way to show respect was not to get involved in the match or shout at anyone. For example, Kirsty said, "Parents sometimes will try and like intimidate the other player [their child's opponent]... they'll go and sit there [by the court] and try and clap for the other player... or they roll their eyes when you hit a good shot or something." Similarly, Sarah provided the following story:

I've been playing this girl… and her parents were coaching during tournament and I was thinking 'this isn't allowed in tournaments.' Her dad would come from behind and say 'c'mon, use your forehand, and more, harder, blah, blah, blah'...giving her tips during tournaments. It's like doing a test in Math and it's not OK, it's cheating.

Parents who behave in a disrespectful manner were perceived to be too concerned with match outcomes, resulting in perceptions of pressure from players. On the other hand, parents who were friendly and respectful to other people at the tournaments helped to create a supportive environment for all players who were competing.

Match nonverbal behaviors with supportive comments. Players recognized subtle aspects of their parents' behaviors during matches. Two players discussed this issue and said:

Justin: You know if they're smiling, maybe they like what they see…. [But if] they're shaking their head, if they're shaking their head it means they bring your confidence down.

Mark: Or just like giving you a flat face or something, they're not really enjoying it.

Inconsistencies between parents comments and their tone of voice are also noticed by players, as Natasha explained, "When I'm losing, my mom, she'll like say, 'Let's go Natasha' but her tone says 'I'm doing bad and should pick it [my game] up.'"

The fact players discussed their parents' facial expressions and the tone of voice showed some of the subtle ways in which players perceived their parents' behaviors during competition. Additional findings showed that players attended to their parents' nonverbal and verbal cues, such as their posture, tone of voice, and the comments they made. For example, one group explained the balance they would like their parents to achieve:

> Question: Yeah? And so how would you prefer your parents to look? Like if you could choose how your parents looked how would they look?
>
> Jessica: Just sitting there like this [leaning back in the chair].
>
> Jaime: Just something like this [leaning back], they're talking to somebody or something.
>
> Danielle: They're not so like, just like staring right at you. I don't know.
>
> Question: So maybe…
>
> Tracey: So they're like more relaxed.
>
> Danielle: Yeah that's [it].
>
> Jianti: Not too relaxed like having ... your third beer during your match or falling asleep on the bench. So like my dad, half the time it's he'll watch and he goes upstairs to the bar.

Participants explained how inconsistencies in parents' behaviors or changing behaviors during a match might cause a shift from perceptions of support to pressure. Most players provided examples of differences they noticed in their parent's behavior when they started losing matches. This was illustrated in the following conversation regarding parents looking too serious:

Mark: If I'm losing the match then they [my parents] get really serious and they don't support me as much.

Question: And how does that make you feel?

Mark: I don't know, not very good 'cause they had high expectations for the match, for me, or something

Question: So would it be easier for you if they could do something differently?

Mark: Maybe be the same throughout the match, like very supportive.

In summary, our interpretation of these data is that, while operating under the general principle showing supportive involvement, parents should work to ensure they appear relaxed yet interested and their verbalizations are consistent with their nonverbal behaviors.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify junior tennis players' preferences for parental behaviors at competitions. The results showed that overall players wanted parents to be involved in their tennis in a supportive manner. Numerous practical directions for parental behavior were identified. These findings are potentially important because previous research has shown that parents report stressors arising from their children's involvement in tennis competitions, and at times parents are unsure as to how they should behave (Harwood & Knight, 2009a). Therefore, the current findings are particularly relevant because they reveal children's views on what they perceive to be appropriate parental behaviors.

The overarching general issue was that children wanted their parents to be involved in a supportive manner. Rather than distinguishing a certain level of involvement, the current findings identified more specific ways in which parents could demonstrate appropriate involvement. These findings reinforced the idea that a continuum of parental involvement (from under-to overinvolved) is too simplistic (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004) and instead the emphasis should be on what types of behaviors highly involved parents should display in

order to assist their child in a supportive way. In other words, we suggest that the quality of involvement is more important that the amount of involvement (see also Stein et al., 1999). However, our findings add to the Stein et al. study by specifying types of parental behaviors that may be indicative of quality involvement from the players' perspective.

Children did not want technical or tactical advice from their parents, unless the parents themselves were highly knowledgeable about tennis. This finding is consistent with the views of coaches interviewed in a study by Wolfenden and Holt (2005). In that study one coach in the Wolfenden and Holt study said, "It may sound bad but they [parents] should support the child in terms of finance, travel, and emotionally and leave the rest to the coach" (p. 118). Our findings support this perspective with the caveat that parents with the necessary expertise and experience can advise their children. A challenge for practitioners may be convincing parents of their 'level of knowledge.' Indeed, Holt et al. (2008) found that parents perceived themselves to be knowledgeable about sports, even though parents' experience in the sport ranged from professional/international to having never played competitively. This may suggest a tendency for parents to perceive themselves to be more knowledgeable than they actually are. Our current findings are important because they suggest that a single set of rules may not be appropriate to govern the behavior of all parents. It may be appropriate to encourage knowledgeable parents to give their children technical and tactical advice, but less knowledgeable parents should avoid making such comments.

Players responded positively when parents commented on their effort and attitude rather than performance, and provided 'common sense' practical (i.e., non-performance related) advice. Comments regarding effort, attitude, and practical aspects could be interpreted as aspects of tennis and life that parents were knowledgeable about. Players reacted positively when parents act in ways that align with appropriate tennis etiquette. If parents act in a way that is not acceptable within a tennis environment it results in

embarrassment for players. This is the opposite of the stereotypical situation where parents are embarrassed by their children's poor sportsperson-like behavior. In this case, the young athletes desire their parents to engage in more mature behavior that reflects respect for the game of tennis. These findings are useful because they give parents an indication of the best ways in which they can help their young athletes.

A particularly important finding was that players could recognize parents' nonverbal behaviors. The extent to which soccer and hockey players hear and respond to parents' verbal behaviors has been highlighted as a limitation of previous research (Bowker et al., 2009; Holt et al., 2008). Our findings showed that tennis players could not only hear their parents' comments, they were also able to process subtle information about their parent's nonverbal behaviors. From a research perspective this is an important finding that reinforces the value of studying the effects of parents' behaviors on children's psychological responses during competitions. That said, we acknowledge that the unique characteristics of tennis (e.g., few players on court, generally a quiet crowd) may be different from team sports played largely in noisy arenas. Therefore, further work is needed across different sport contexts to examine relations between parents' behaviors and children's responses. From a practical perspective, we suggest parents should be encouraged to match their nonverbal behaviors with their verbalizations. Parents should be mindful that their children can tell when parents are frustrated or are 'giving up.'

The strengths of this study included the recruitment of a relatively large sample of young tennis players who were committed to their sport. The choice of focus groups was appropriate because players discussed parents' public behaviors, and the focus groups allowed for exchange of ideas and perspectives, which added to the quality of the data collected. A possible limitation was that the focus groups were quite small, which may limit the range of experiences that were shared. However, smaller groups provide participants with

the opportunity to supply greater detail regarding their experiences (Morgan, 1997) and may be more comfortable for some participants, especially children (Gibson, 2007). Another limitation was that we did not corroborate the children's data with information from their parents. However, given the purpose of this study was to identify children's preferences for their parents' behavior, this limitation did not restrict our ability to fulfill the purpose of the research. Nonetheless, an important direction for future research could involve comparing children's preferences for parental behavior with the views of their parents.

In summary, this study added to the literature by revealing children's perceptions of parental behavior in tennis. The findings provide a number of practical implications to help parents adhere to a general principle of being involved in a supportive way. Most importantly, it appears that parents would benefit from engaging their children in discussions to identify what behaviors they find are supportive when they are competing and what behaviors they find pressuring or unhelpful. Through such discussions, parents may begin to understand how their children interpret their behaviors. These practical implications may also be useful for sport psychologists working in junior tennis and for tennis organizations interested in creating educational materials for the parents of their young athletes. For example, materials providing examples of behaviors that may appear to be supportive but are interpreted negatively by athletes' could be provided (e.g., "You should win this").

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