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1 Running Head: PARENTING IN COMPETITIVE TENNIS

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10 Parenting in Youth Tennis: Understanding and Enhancing Children's Experiences

11 Camilla J. Knight & Nicholas L. Holt

12 University of Alberta

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1 **Abstract**

2 *Objective:* The overall purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory of optimal  
3 parental involvement in youth tennis.

4 *Design:* A Straussian grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Corbin & Strauss,  
5 2008) was used. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with 90 youth  
6 tennis players, ex-youth players, parents, and coaches from the United Kingdom. Data were  
7 analyzed through a process of open and axial coding, and theoretical integration. Through this  
8 process data were broken down into smaller units (concepts), relationships between concepts  
9 were identified, and a substantive grounded theory was developed.

10 *Results:* The grounded theory of optimal parental involvement in tennis was built around the core  
11 category of ‘understanding and enhancing your child’s tennis journey.’ The core category was  
12 underpinned by three categories: (a) Share and communicate goals, which referred to the need  
13 for parents and children to have the same aims for the child’s tennis involvement; (b) develop an  
14 understanding emotional climate, which accounted for the need for parents to continually seek to  
15 foster an environment in which children perceived parents understand their experience, and; (c)  
16 engage in enhancing parenting practices at competitions, which denoted the specific behaviors  
17 parents should display in relation to competitive tennis.

18 *Conclusion:* The theory predicts that consistency between goals, emotional climate, and  
19 parenting practices will optimize parenting in youth tennis.

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21 Key Words: youth sport, parenting practices, parenting styles, emotional climate

## 1           **Parenting in Youth Tennis: Understanding and Enhancing Children’s Experiences**

2           Parents have a substantial influence on children’s initial involvement and long-term  
3 participation in sport (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999). Parents provide children with the  
4 opportunity to participate in sport, help children interpret their experiences, and act as role  
5 models for participation (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). Through these avenues parents can have a  
6 positive or negative influence on children’s sporting development and experiences. For example,  
7 positive parental involvement has been identified as an important factor in helping children  
8 achieve an elite level in sport and is one of the main sources of enjoyment for child-athletes  
9 (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Leff & Hoyle, 1995; McCarthy, Jones, & Clark-Carter, 2008). On  
10 the other hand, negative involvement has been associated with burnout and dropout (Bois,  
11 Lalanne, & Delforge, 2009; Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996). Hence, it is important to  
12 understand the types of parental involvement that will enhance rather than hinder children’s  
13 sporting participation and performance (Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010).

14           Given the potential consequences of parental involvement in sport, researchers have  
15 sought to identify the specific parenting practices (whereby parenting practices can be defined as  
16 “specific, goal-directed behaviors through which parents perform their parental duties” Darling  
17 & Steinberg, 1993, p. 488) that are associated with positive or negative outcomes. For example,  
18 Gould and colleagues (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006, 2008; Lauer, Gould,  
19 Roman, & Pierce, 2010a, 2010b) conducted a series of studies examining the role of parents in  
20 the development of junior tennis players. Through interviews, focus groups, and surveys with  
21 coaches, players, and parents these studies highlighted numerous positive and negative parenting  
22 practices that could influence children’s tennis development. Negative practices included parents  
23 overemphasizing winning, criticizing their child, and lacking emotional control. In contrast,

1 parental behaviors perceived to positively influence players' development were the provision of  
2 unconditional love, logistical and financial support, and parents holding children accountable for  
3 on-court behavior. Parents' behaviors varied throughout their children's tennis careers and  
4 influenced the type of relationships parents and children developed (Lauer et al., 2010a, 2010b).

5 Children have also reported specific preferences regarding parenting practices at sport  
6 competitions (e.g., Omli & Weise-Bjornstein, 2011). Research conducted with children who  
7 participated in tennis (Knight et al., 2010) and various team sports (Knight, Neely, & Holt, 2011)  
8 identified that children preferred parents to show respect, positive body language, and practical  
9 support, and did not wish to witness parents being overly loud or embarrassing, attempting to  
10 coach, or making negative comments. Further, children indicated that certain behaviors were  
11 preferred at specific times. For example, prior to competitions children preferred behaviors  
12 related to game-preparation. During competitions children wanted their parents to focus on effort  
13 rather than outcome, but children did not want parents to coach, interfere with officials, or draw  
14 attention to themselves. After competitions, children indicated a preference for parents to provide  
15 positive and realistic feedback about their performance (Knight et al., 2011).

16 Overall, the studies reported above have revealed important information about positive  
17 and negative parenting practices and children's preferences for parenting practices in youth  
18 sport. However, to develop a more complete understanding of parental involvement in sport it is  
19 necessary to also examine the broader context of parenting (i.e., the overall environment parents  
20 create) rather than focusing only on discrete parenting practices (Holt, Tamminen, Black,  
21 Mandigo, & Fox, 2009). Such a focus on the broader context of parenting is necessary because  
22 the context in which specific parenting practices are displayed will likely influence the  
23 effectiveness of such practices (Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

1           One way of defining and studying the context of parenting is by using the concept of  
2 parenting style. Parenting style is a characteristic of the parent and is defined as, “a constellation  
3 of attitudes toward the child that are communicated to the child and that, taken together, create  
4 an emotional climate in which the parent’s behaviors are expressed” (Darling & Steinberg, 1993,  
5 p. 488). Emotional climate is the tone or mood that exists in the environment in which parents  
6 and children relate to each other (cf. de Rivera, 1992; Kavanagh, 2011). The most popular and  
7 widely researched conceptualization of parenting styles is Baumrind’s (1971, 1978) typology.  
8 Baumrind (1971, 1978) distinguished parenting based upon degrees of parental control or  
9 authority, leading to three parenting styles labelled authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive.  
10 Maccoby and Martin (1983) extended this typology based on parental responsiveness (the  
11 support parents provide in response to their child) and demandingness (parents’ degree of control  
12 over their child). This resulted in four parenting styles labelled authoritative (demanding and  
13 responsive), authoritarian (demanding but not responsive), indulgent (responsive but not  
14 demanding), and neglecting-rejecting (neither responsive nor demanding). Of the few youth  
15 sport parenting style studies published it has been demonstrated that authoritative styles of  
16 parenting are associated with more positive outcomes. For example, children from authoritative  
17 families reported enhanced satisfaction with ice hockey, which was displayed through obeying  
18 rules, team cohesion, and continued engagement in hockey (Juntumaa, Keskivaara, & Punamäki,  
19 2005). Authoritative parenting has also been associated with healthy (rather than unhealthy)  
20 perfectionism in youth soccer players (Sapieja, Dunn, & Holt, 2011).

21           However, one limitation of literature examining parenting styles in sport is that, just as  
22 studies of parenting practices have not considered parenting styles, studies of parenting styles  
23 have generally not included parenting practices (Holt et al., 2009). To advance this literature it is

1 necessary to examine the broader parenting context in conjunction with (rather than separately  
2 from) parenting practices (Horn & Horn, 2007). One study which partially addressed this issue  
3 used a combination of observations and interviews with 34 players and 56 parents on girls soccer  
4 teams to identify the parenting styles and practices parents used (Holt et al., 2009). Holt and  
5 colleagues adopted Grolnick's (2003) framework, which distinguishes parenting based on the  
6 degree to which parents are autonomy-supportive versus controlling, provide structure, and are  
7 involved in their children's lives. Parents who had an autonomy-supportive style provided  
8 appropriate structure for their children and allowed them to be involved in decision-making.  
9 Parenting practices associated with this style were that parents were able to read their children's  
10 mood and reported open bidirectional communication. On the other hand, parents with a more  
11 controlling style did not support their children's autonomy, were not sensitive to their children's  
12 mood, and reported more closed modes of communication. Holt et al. concluded that the  
13 "findings supported the complexity of youth sport parenting and the need to be sensitive to a  
14 range of perceptions and behaviors rather than single variables in isolation" (p. 54).

15 Holt and colleagues' (2009) study highlighted the importance of examining parenting  
16 styles and practices together to more fully understand parental involvement in youth sport.  
17 Further, the findings indicated that there might be some benefit of an autonomy-supportive  
18 parenting style combined with certain parenting practice. The current study was designed to  
19 build on Holt et al.'s findings by specifically seeking to identify the parenting practices and  
20 broader parenting context that could lead to optimal parental involvement in sport. That is, the  
21 current study sought to go beyond identifying the parenting styles and practices that appear  
22 beneficial by seeking to understand how these factors come together to optimize parental  
23 involvement in sport. Thus, the purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory of





1 (see Table 1). Initially, county and national tennis players aged between 12 and 15 years were  
2 recruited because they were regularly competing in competitions and committed to tennis. These  
3 individuals were purposefully sampled to be ‘information-rich’ cases who would provide a good  
4 starting point for data collection. Parents and coaches of county and national players were also  
5 sampled. Later in the study, based on the principle of theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss,  
6 2008), the sample was broadened to allow further examination of concepts identified during  
7 initial data collection and analysis. In particular, participants who had positive and negative  
8 experiences of parental involvement were sought to ensure negative cases were included in the  
9 study. Participants who were new to tennis or nearing the end of junior tennis were sampled to  
10 allow concepts to be examined throughout the tennis journey. Additionally, participants with  
11 different goals (e.g., wanting to be a professional tennis players or playing tennis to make  
12 friends) were interviewed to highlight the role of goals on parental involvement.

### 13 **Data Collection**

14 Prior to data collection institutional research ethics board approval was obtained. Having  
15 obtained ethics board approval an e-mail outlining the study and enquiring into the possibility of  
16 collecting data at their centre was sent to the head coach or manager of four High Performance  
17 Tennis Centers (HPCS - centers designed to meet the needs of the highest-level performance  
18 players), three satellite tennis centers (feeder clubs for HPCs) and one tournament organizer. As  
19 data collection continued a similar e-mail was sent to the head coach/manager at the National  
20 Tennis Center (NTC) and three International High Performance Centers (IHPCS). In total,  
21 agreement for data collection was obtained from head coaches/managers at two Satellite Clubs,  
22 three HPCs, two IHPCs, the NTC, and the tournament organizer. These coaches/managers were  
23 then provided with pertinent sampling criteria and individuals fulfilling the criteria were

1 identified. Coaches/managers then contacted potential participants because they were not able to  
2 share contact information directly with the research team. Interested participants were asked to  
3 contact the lead author to arrange interviews or focus groups.

4 At the outset of all interviews and focus groups participants were provided with a verbal  
5 explanation of the study, informed their participation was voluntary, and reminded of issues of  
6 confidentiality. All adult participants provided written informed consent and parents of players  
7 aged under 18 years provided written consent for their child and children provided oral assent.

8 **Individual Interviews.** In total, 72 individual semi-structured interviews were conducted  
9 (with 27 youth players, 4 older players, 10 ex-youth players, 17 parents, and 14 coaches).  
10 Interviews ranged from 30 to 64 minutes, lasting on average 44 minutes. Initial interview guides  
11 were based on previous studies examining athletes' preferences for parental behaviors in youth  
12 sport (e.g., Knight et al., 2010; 2011) and parenting styles (e.g., Holt et al., 2009). The interview  
13 guide was piloted with two players, one parent, and one coach. Consistent with the principle of  
14 theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), the interview guide was consistently revised as  
15 new concepts emerged.

16 The interview guide followed the structure recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2012).  
17 Across all participants introductory questions focused upon demographic information and an  
18 understanding of the participant's tennis history. The main questions examined perceptions of  
19 parenting in general and in tennis. For example, players were asked to describe the role their  
20 parents played in their life, their involvement in tennis, and the consequences of such  
21 involvement. Parents were asked to comment on their roles and involvement in specific  
22 situations (e.g., training and competition). Coaches discussed different types of parental  
23 involvement they had seen. Summary questions asked participants to specify types of parental

1 involvement they perceived to be most and least helpful in tennis. Copies of the interview guides  
2 are available from the lead author.

3       **Focus Groups.** Three focus groups were conducted with a total of 18 participants (6  
4 current players, 6 older players, and 6 coaches). Focus groups were used to supplement the  
5 interview data and evaluate the emerging theory because they provided an opportunity for  
6 multiple individuals to discuss the emerging concepts (Kreuger & Casey, 2000). As such, the  
7 focus groups were also used as a member-checking tool, whereby ‘experts’ could assess the  
8 applicability of the emerging theory to their experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### 9 **Data Analysis**

10       Analysis started after the first interview was conducted and continued throughout and  
11 after data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Immediately following  
12 each interview the lead researcher made notes about concepts reported by participants and  
13 possible relationships between these concepts. Each audio file was then reviewed and additional  
14 notes about important ideas, concepts, and relationships were recorded. As many interviews as  
15 possible ( $n = 42$ ) were transcribed and coded during the main data collection/analysis phase.  
16 Transcription and further analysis of the remaining interviews continued after the fieldwork.

17       **Coding.** Transcription produced 1278 pages of single-spaced data, which were analyzed  
18 following the procedures recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).  
19 Initially open coding was conducted during audio and written analysis of the data to identify the  
20 smallest individual units of data (concepts), their properties, and dimensions relating to parental  
21 involvement. Through axial coding relationships between concepts were identified and some  
22 individual concepts were grouped together. The final stage of coding involved theoretical  
23 integration (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), which began once initial concepts and relationships were

1 identified. Through theoretical integration the core category was identified and other concepts  
2 were related to the core category.

3       **Methodological Rigor.** Corbin and Strauss (2008) provided a number of criteria against  
4 which grounded theories can be evaluated. However, they advised that “rather than applying  
5 standard criteria for judging different types of grounded theory studies, some core characterizing  
6 traits of quality research can be identified and thoughtfully applied within the parameters of a  
7 given study” (p.411). This aligns with Sparkes and Smith’s (2009) suggestion that rather than  
8 using an absolute set of criteria for assessing the quality of all qualitative research, studies should  
9 be assessed based on the extent to which they fulfill the characterizing traits of the chosen  
10 methodology. Thus, we suggest the methodological rigor of this study should be evaluated, at  
11 least in part, on the appropriate implementation of techniques and methods associated with the  
12 specific variant of grounded theory used in the study (Holt & Tamminen, 2010).

13       In addition to the methods already described (use of focus groups, iterative process of  
14 data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling), we selected four further analytical tools  
15 recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to enhance methodological  
16 rigor. Throughout the process of data analysis data were subjected to constant comparison, which  
17 is “the analytic process of comparing different pieces of data for similarities and differences”  
18 (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 65). Ninety-five memos (ranging from a paragraph to two pages)  
19 were recorded during data collection and analysis. The memos covered a range of topics from the  
20 role of players’ interpretations to the consistency of parents’ messages, and the intricacies of  
21 developing independence. Questions about the data, emerging concepts, relationships, and the  
22 developing grounded theory were posed throughout data collection, analysis, and manuscript

1 preparation. Finally, diagrams were used to ensure relationships between concepts were clear and  
2 that data were viewed at an abstract level.

### 3 **Results**

4 Data collection and analysis led to the development of a substantive grounded theory of  
5 optimal parental involvement in youth tennis. Based on the views of the participants, optimal  
6 parental involvement was defined as involvement that enhanced children's enjoyment *and* their  
7 performance. For example, when discussing the outcome of optimal involvement, a male  
8 national player said, "I think it's a mixture really, I want to enjoy my tennis, but I also want to be  
9 able to play well in my tennis" (Player 36). Thus, the proposed theory aims to illustrate how  
10 parents can be optimally involved to help make their child's tennis experience successful while  
11 ensuring it is also enjoyable. The theory is constructed around the core category of  
12 'understanding and enhancing your child's tennis journey.' Three categories underpin the core  
13 category: (1) Share and communicate goals; (2) Develop an understanding emotional climate;  
14 and, (3) Engage in enhancing parenting practices at competitions. In the following sections the  
15 core category and underpinning categories are presented followed by the overall grounded  
16 theory, which illustrates the links between these categories.

#### 17 **Core Category: Understanding and Enhancing Your Child's Tennis Journey**

18 Participants explained that participation in competitive youth tennis occurred over many  
19 years (often more than a decade) and was a journey shared by children and their parents. During  
20 the journey, children (and parents) experienced numerous tennis and life transitions and were  
21 likely to have a variety of positive and negative experiences. It was apparent that the extent to  
22 which parents were able to adapt their involvement in response to such transitions and challenges  
23 would largely influence the appropriateness of their involvement. As one of the national coaches

1 described, “There’s going to be... a rocky road. There’s going to be ups, there’s going to be  
2 downs, and it’s very much how you [the parent] handle these situations, because it will certainly  
3 rub off on the child” (Coach 5).

4 Further, participants explained that each child’s journey was unique and would  
5 consequently require different types of involvement from parents. As one parent summarized,  
6 “The role of the parent ... should be dependent upon what the child wants because every child’s  
7 different aren’t they? It’s about knowing your own child and focusing on what they need”  
8 (Parent 8). Similarly, a former national player explained that parents’ involvement would be  
9 different because, “Every player’s different and every parent is different and dialogue needs to  
10 be had around parental involvement based on that” (Ex-player 1). Thus, understanding the  
11 individual and extended nature of the tennis journey appeared critical to optimal parental  
12 involvement in tennis.

13 Participants also made it clear that optimal involvement was dependent upon parents  
14 seeking ways to enhance children’s opportunities for success and enjoyment in tennis. As one  
15 performance coach stated, “A parent should always be involved in helping them [players] to do  
16 whatever they need to do to... to sort of be happy and to be enjoying what they’re doing” (Coach  
17 10). Similarly, a female national player reiterated the thoughts of many participants when she  
18 summarized, “I think the role [of parents] is mostly to be supportive of exactly what your child is  
19 doing.... You have to be really on the ball... if they’re unhappy about something you have to be  
20 there and support them” (Player 29). In fact, participants perceived that parental involvement  
21 motivated by anything other than trying to enhance a child’s experience would be extremely  
22 detrimental. As such, the proposed grounded theory indicates that optimal involvement is  
23 achieved through parents understanding and enhancing their child’s tennis journey.

## 1 **Category 1: Share and Communicate Goals**

2           The foundation of optimal parental involvement appeared to be parents and children  
3 sharing and communicating about goals for tennis. That is, parents and children needed to ensure  
4 their reasons for being involved in tennis and the long-term outcomes being sought were the  
5 same. A player who perceived his parents' involvement very positively explained, "It [tennis]  
6 works 'cause we think the same...we're [parents and player] on the same page" (Player 11). In  
7 contrast, drawing from negative experiences with his father, an ex-player said, "If the child's  
8 aims vary from their parent's aims I think it turns into the parent's lifestyle a little bit too much  
9 rather than the kid like leading the way... and that leads to pressure" (Ex-player 10).

10           The importance of shared goals was highlighted when participants with different goals or  
11 goals that differed from their parents discussed their perceptions of parental involvement. For  
12 example, players who wanted to become professional were often concerned about their  
13 performance and indicated a desire for their parents' feedback to reflect this performance focus.  
14 In such cases, if parents were more concerned with their child's enjoyment and did not provide  
15 performance feedback they could be perceived as unsupportive. A county player explained:

16           My mum always says, "oh it's only a game," but I'll still want to win...so when she says  
17 "oh it's only a game," I feel like there's no point really doing it, if they think it's only for  
18 fun. It's frustrating cause I've put all this effort in to try and win" (Player 8).

19 In contrast, if parents provided feedback on performance and children just wanted to play tennis  
20 for fun it could result in parental involvement being perceived as pressuring. A player  
21 highlighted, "If the kid doesn't want anything, he just wants enjoyment... and his parents want  
22 him to achieve something and he knows this...the kid might feel pressure into playing to win,  
23 playing competitively, whereas really he just wants to play for fun" (Player 9). It was clear

1 children's perceptions of different types of parental involvement was dependent on the goals  
2 they were trying to achieve.

3         Given the importance of shared goals participants indicated that it was not sufficient for  
4 parents to assume they held the same goals as their children. Instead, as a national coach  
5 explained, "Communication is also key, whether they agree the goal, ultimately that kid has to  
6 agree [with] that goal, otherwise it's [achieve the goal] going to be difficult to do" (Coach 7).  
7 Such communication regarding goals appeared particularly important to ensure parents could  
8 adapt their involvement if necessary. For example, many players and parents indicated their  
9 initial goals for tennis were to have fun, but the focus changed as children progressed in tennis.  
10 A former player described his changing goals, "My original aspirations were just to have a bit of  
11 fun and just to play another sport... Then I decided I wanted to become at least a county level  
12 player and then I just wanted to continue getting better (Ex-player 2).

13         If parents were unaware of changes in their own or their child's goals it could result in  
14 previously appropriate involvement becoming less than optimal. However, by communicating  
15 about goals parents could adapt their involvement as required. For example, the father of an ex-  
16 player explained how his involvement changed after he spoke to his daughter about her goals:

17         As things went on and we talked about how tennis was going, the goals evolved over  
18 time to, "I can reach this goal but I'm not going to play professionally, but I quite like  
19 playing tennis and I want to become the best I can." So we continued travelling but not so  
20 far and we cut down the number of lessons because they weren't necessary (Parent 15).

21 By communicating regarding goals this father was able to ensure he made changes to his  
22 involvement and kept it aligned with their shared aims throughout their tennis journey.



1           **Factors that influence goals.** Numerous factors appeared to influence the goals children  
2 and parents were aiming to achieve. These factors included the standard of the player, years of  
3 tennis experience, the age of the player, parents' previous sporting experience, and school  
4 transitions. Further, it was apparent that changes in children's (and parents') goals were  
5 associated with certain tennis experiences. For example, being selected for county or national  
6 teams, winning certain tournaments, moving-up age groups, or experiencing an extended losing  
7 streak were all recalled as triggers for shifting goals and expectations. As such, re-evaluating and  
8 discussing goals following such transitions and experiences seemed necessary to ensure parents  
9 remained optimally involved throughout the tennis journey.

## 10 **Category 2: Develop an Understanding Emotional Climate**

11           Participants indicated that the general climate parents produced (in addition to the  
12 specific practices parents displayed) would influence children's experiences. For example, when  
13 discussing the influence specific practices and the overall environment he created had on his  
14 child, one father explained, "You can't separate what you do, the way you are and they way you  
15 view life and tennis and the way you behave...it's the overall environment you create, the  
16 understanding that is important" (Parent 16). As indicated in this quote the most pertinent feature  
17 of the broader parenting context appeared to be parental understanding because, as one player  
18 simply said, "If your parents are in the know [understand tennis] they're going to be less  
19 judgemental" (Player 27). Similarly, a national coach stated, "There are times when it [parental  
20 involvement] can actually be very positive. If you've got somebody who understands tennis I  
21 think it can be very useful" (Coach 3). Thus, the grounded theory proposes that a defining feature  
22 of optimal parental involvement in junior tennis is the development of an understanding  
23 emotional climate.

1           An understanding emotional climate was conceptualized as an environment in which  
2 children perceived their parents understood, or were striving to understand, the experience they  
3 were having. To create such an emotional climate parents needed to continually show they  
4 understood the challenges inherent in competitive tennis, the intricacies associated with tennis  
5 development and performance, the influence of external factors on children's tennis experiences,  
6 and how tennis fitted within children's lives. Participants discussed various ways a lack of  
7 understanding could be displayed. For example, participants perceived a lack of understanding  
8 when parents focused too much on winning or match outcomes and thus appeared not to  
9 understand how difficult it was to succeed in tennis. As a mother explained:

10           Every game is different. We used to think [name of son] had to win all the games, he is  
11 wonderful. But as we learn, as the time goes by, we learn no, that's not the right thing, he  
12 is going to lose a lot of games, he's going to win a few games and we have to respect him  
13 and let him know that's OK rather than be angry at him (Parent 1).

14 If parents did not understand the difficulties of winning matches it could result in children  
15 feeling under pressure to win matches or experiencing anxiety. For example, the child being  
16 referred to in the above quote described the consequences of his parents initially expecting him  
17 to win every match. He said, "Then they put pressure on you...when they have expectations.  
18 They put pressure on you and you're also putting pressure on yourself and ... that's really what  
19 can make the performance worse" (Player 29).

20           Similarly, participants perceived that parents criticisms of performances was an  
21 indication they did not understand the difference between training and competing, what was  
22 realistic for children to achieve, the different factors that might influence a performance (e.g., the  
23 level of the opponent) or how hard children were trying. A player shared his feelings about his

1 parent's feedback during matches. He said, "If I'm losing or playing really badly, when I change  
2 ends he'll shake his head, ...I get a bit annoyed, 'cause he doesn't know if it's hard, or I'm  
3 finding it hard to do it or something" (Player 3). Another player explained:

4       Once I played a match and I felt that I tried really hard and then I came off and my dad  
5       was shouting at me because he said I didn't try and I was like "yes I did" and he was like  
6       "no you didn't." It's different if you're watching and playing. I felt like I tried like really  
7       hard but he obviously didn't think that I tried (Player 31).

8       Finally, if parents were unable to understand the emotional reactions children had on  
9       court it was perceived that parents did not understand their child or the frustrations inherent in  
10      competitive tennis. For example, a male national player spent considerable time explaining how  
11      irritating he found his parents because they did not appear to understand the psychological side  
12      of tennis. He explained:

13       It's the fact they don't understand what's going on in your head. They're like "You  
14       missed your forehand and you throw your racquet, what's going on?" and I'm like,  
15       "You've never been there, you don't know what the anger is like" and that's what pisses  
16       me off... they don't understand the whole aspect of being on court (Player 22).

17      In contrast, if parents displayed an understanding of different outcomes and performances,  
18      recognized the influence external factors had on matches, and empathized with their child their  
19      involvement was perceived more positively. A player summarized, parents should, "just be there  
20      and understand, remember that if you were in the child's position, what would you want from the  
21      parent?" (Participant 16).

1           **Strategies for creating an understanding emotional climate.** Participants shared  
2 numerous strategies for creating an understanding emotional climate. The strategies are outlined  
3 below and aim to increase parents' tennis knowledge or reduce the focus on match outcomes.

4           ***Maintain a strong parent-coach relationship.*** All participants discussed the importance  
5 of the parent-coach relationship in increasing parents' understanding of their child's tennis. In  
6 fact many participants expressed sentiments similar to the following from a male national coach,  
7 who said "It [the parent-coach relationship] is without question the single most important and  
8 significant aspect of the job...it is the bit that can ultimately decide success and failure" (Coach  
9 6). Participants indicated that when parents had a good relationship with coaches they were able  
10 to receive more guidance from coaches regarding how to support their child, had opportunities to  
11 find out what their child was learning, and identify their child's changing goals. Additionally,  
12 coaches had opportunities to help parents understand the effort children put into tennis and the  
13 importance of reducing the focus on match outcomes. One coach explained, "I speak closely  
14 with all parents I coach and just say, 'if the kid puts 100% on the line every time, shows focus  
15 and commitment to every shot, then at the end if they lose at least they've given everything'"  
16 (Coach 4). By accessing this information parents would be better positioned to create an  
17 understanding emotional climate because they knew more about their child's experience.

18           ***Engage in independent learning.*** Most participants perceived that parents with a high  
19 level of tennis-playing or coaching experience would be more likely to understand what their  
20 child was experiencing. For example, an ex-player shared this view, "If they've played  
21 competitive tennis they'll realize that sometimes the better player will lose, that tennis is not  
22 about how hard you can hit the ball, how good your strokes are, but it's the mental aspect and  
23 being a fighter" (Ex-player 5). However, participants also indicated that parents should actively

1 seek information to ensure they were knowledgeable about tennis and understood all the factors  
2 influencing their child's tennis journey. This was something one mother advocated for because,  
3 as she said, "When [name of son] started tennis I had no idea about tennis...and then he got into  
4 matches and games and winning then I realized I have to learn everything about tennis to be able  
5 to help him" (Parent 1). A former player reiterated this point, explaining, "At the end of the day  
6 if they [parents] don't know anything how can they support the kid going through it? They can't  
7 because they don't know what they are going through, they can't comprehend a bit of it" (Ex-  
8 player 6). However, the importance of parents recognizing the limits of their knowledge was also  
9 discussed and appeared to be an pertinent part of generating an understanding climate.

10 ***Keep tennis in perspective.*** An important component of an understanding emotional  
11 climate was understanding that different outcomes could occur, children's performance could be  
12 variable, and children react differently in different situations. For parents to be able to display  
13 this understanding to children participants indicated it was important for parents to keep tennis in  
14 perspective. As a female ex-national player explained, "A lot of people get too intense with it,  
15 you know, you have to be able to sit back and see the bigger picture, because if you can't then I  
16 think that defeats the whole point of the game" (Ex-player 5). If parents were unable to keep  
17 tennis in perspective participants thought parents might become too focused on match outcomes,  
18 which could result in players perceiving their parents did not fully understand tennis. A player  
19 explained parents should, "Not be too focused...because they [parents] need to be understanding  
20 to the child. If they're angry cause you lost or sad cause you've lost then they aren't being  
21 understanding" (Participant 16).

22 ***Focus on the multiple benefits of tennis participation.*** To create an understanding  
23 emotional climate participants highlighted the importance of parents recognizing the multiple

1 benefits children might gain through tennis. The benefits participants associated with tennis  
2 included confidence, concentration, interacting with adults and peers, enhanced schooling  
3 opportunities, and the chance to travel. For example, a development coach explained that parents  
4 should understand, “Everything you’re [the parents] putting in is giving your child a massive  
5 enjoyment of a sport, massive enjoyment of competing, and huge intrinsic rewards... getting fit,  
6 socializing... interaction with your own peers” (Coach 2). By understanding the benefits  
7 associated with tennis it was perceived that, independent of match outcomes, parents would be  
8 able to identify positives in children’s matches. In doing this parents were more likely to react in  
9 a manner that showed an understanding of the challenges associated with competitive tennis.

#### 10 **Engage in Enhancing Parenting Practices at Competitions**

11 Participants described the importance of parents engaging in parenting practices aimed at  
12 enhancing children’s competitive experiences by increasing the potential for children to be  
13 successful and enjoy their time at tournaments. Participants indicated that such parenting  
14 practices were specific to individual children and flexible to different situations. The specific  
15 practices participants identified were attending to their child’s needs at competitions, teaching  
16 children skills to cope with competition, and parents’ managing their own emotions.

17 With regards to attending to children’s needs at competitions participants indicated that  
18 different children would require different things from parents before, during, and after matches.  
19 A former player summed up the overall perception of participants when he said, “Parents should  
20 recognize what they [children] need and just understand what’s needed really” (Ex-player 3). For  
21 example, some participants described the importance of not focusing too much on the match  
22 before they played. This was important for a male international player, who explained, “I don’t  
23 like to talk about the match... ‘cause that puts too much pressure on me” (Player 40). In contrast,

1 a county player said, “Dad often talks to me about my opponent and the game plans ... and how  
2 well I’ll play and what he expects me to do. So, it’s really helpful having him there sometimes”  
3 (Player 20). If parents were not cognizant of and attentive to their child’s needs it could lead to  
4 conflict. An ex-player shared her experience, she said, “We [her and her mother] argued a lot,  
5 particularly after I’d lost, because I just wanted her to leave me alone and she would insist on  
6 talking about it. It would become a massive argument” (Ex-player 1).

7 In addition to attending to children’s needs, participants continually discussed the  
8 importance of parents helping children to develop skills to cope with competing and the  
9 associated challenges they might encounter. As one parent said, “I think it’s to do with how you  
10 teach your child to be rather than trying to fight their battle for them” (Parent 9). Players  
11 described negative consequences if parents did not teach children to cope with difficult  
12 situations. For example, one player said, “I’ve seen it when a child really depends on their parent  
13 and say they did a mistake, they’ll look up to their parent and say, actually shout, ‘why’? Your  
14 parents can’t really do much to help you and they’re lost.” (Player 7). Teaching players how to  
15 cope in challenging situations was seen as necessary to ensure players did not become distressed  
16 or distracted during matches, which could prevent them being successful and enjoying playing.

17 Finally, participants acknowledged that attending competitions could be difficult for  
18 parents as they helped manage their children’s emotions, empathized with their children, and  
19 could experience pressures associated with match outcomes. A mother explained, “It is difficult  
20 in matches especially... if they’re having a bad day. I mean sometimes I’ve often been at the  
21 court and I’ve been in tears because I thought why does she put herself through this?” (Parent 5).  
22 However, participants explained that parents needed to be able to cope with their own emotions  
23 because otherwise their child might not enjoy the experience. A development coach summarized:

1           What we're talking about is actually going to a competition and the whole environment  
2           and everything is changing, it's a flux from one match to the next, from one minute to the  
3           next, one day to the next. It's completely out of your [the parent's] control, and therefore  
4           you have got to be able to cope with all the crazy situations (Coach 1).

5   By managing their own emotions participants perceived that parents would be better able to  
6   support their children, attend to their needs, and enhance their experience.

7           **Strategies to engage in enhancing parenting practices for competitions.** A variety of  
8   strategies appeared useful in helping parents to engage in enhancing parenting practices for  
9   competitions. These strategies are outlined below.

10          *Communicate regarding needs.* For parents to be able to successfully attend to their  
11   children's needs, they first had to identify what children needed. Thus, communication between  
12   parents and children regarding what children liked or wanted before, during, and after  
13   competition was important. For example, a father explained that his son was, "Confident in  
14   communicating about these things [competition needs]" (Parent 19), and therefore, he was able  
15   to appropriately attend to these needs. Similarly, a player explained how his parent's  
16   involvement improved when, "I said to them [his parent] that I don't like talking about it [the  
17   match] and they never talked about it again" (Player 27). In contrast, if parents did not  
18   communicate with their child it could be difficult to appropriately attend to their needs.

19          *Understand perceptions of parental behaviors.* In addition to talking to children about  
20   what they needed from parents at competitions, participants highlighted the importance of  
21   parents understanding how children perceived different reactions, comments, and court-side  
22   behaviors, so changes could be made if necessary. For instance, seemingly supportive practices  
23   from parents could actually be perceived as pressuring by children as a player explained, "There



1 can be too much clapping and too much support, trying to will me on. Doesn't she understand  
2 I'm playing as well as I can? I feel too much expectation, she's expecting me to win" (Player,  
3 16). It was also important to recognize that children do not only considered parents' behaviors as  
4 supportive or pressuring (as they are often classified). Rather, children described behaviors as,  
5 among others, encouraging, embarrassing, distracting, annoying, intimidating, confusing, and  
6 lacking interest. For example, describing their parent's behavior, one player said his mother's  
7 behavior could be, "Embarrassing because she gets so uptight" (Player 19), while another player  
8 explained, "Sometimes dad has a really serious face and you're not sure what it means, so it's  
9 sometimes really distracting 'cause you're thinking about what he's thinking (Player 37). Thus,  
10 understanding children's perceptions of various behaviors is important to for parents to  
11 understand the potential consequences of their involvement and make necessary changes.

12 ***Read and react to situations.*** Participants continually discussed how different situations  
13 warranted different types of parental involvement. As such, parents needed to read the situation  
14 and then react to it rather than implementing the same practices in every situations. Participants  
15 discussed a range of factors that could influence what children wanted from parents. For  
16 example, a player said, "When I'm feeling good I'm funny, I'm jokey...when I'm not in the  
17 mood I have a really bad attitude, I go crazy, I'm not in the mood, I scream, I go mad, there's  
18 some days you just wake up on the wrong side of the bed...you need different things then"  
19 (Player 30). Factors related to the match appeared to substantially influence what was required  
20 from parents. For example, describing his preferences for reactions after matches, one player  
21 explained, "It's good to be debriefed a bit, but it depends. If I've lost badly I don't like being  
22 debriefed, I just want to calm down a bit, like forget about it for a bit, but if I've won or whatever  
23 then it's good, then I don't mind it (Player 9). Overall, when considering how to react after

1 matches, it appeared parents should consider the importance of the tournament, how the child  
2 anticipated doing, the child's perception of their performance, and the actual outcome.

3 ***Foster independence.*** Participants frequently discussed the importance of parents helping  
4 to foster independence in their children. As a male performance coach explained children need to  
5 learn to deal with situations alone because, "This is a very individual sport and ... at the end of  
6 the day if you really want to make it then you're on your own, I mean if you're on tour... then  
7 unfortunately you're always on your own." (Coach 20). Fostering independence also appeared to  
8 be related to children's enjoyment at tournaments because the majority of players made reference  
9 to the enjoyment they gained from solving problems and coping with different situations alone.  
10 For example, when explaining what she liked about tennis one player explained "I like the fact  
11 that you're independent when you are out there, I like being on my own to do my own thing"  
12 (Player 1). If parents attempted to guide children too much it could prevent them being able to  
13 enjoy this aspects of tennis.

14 ***Hold children accountable for behavior.*** Participants explained that tennis could be  
15 extremely frustrating and as one player said, "parents have got to understand it's only human to  
16 get a bit annoyed when you're on court" (Player 16). However, participants also indicated that  
17 parents could play an important role by teaching children how to control their emotions so they  
18 did not negatively affect their performance or their opponent's enjoyment. Specifically,  
19 participants indicated that parents could help children control their emotions by holding them  
20 accountable for their actions. An international player explained:

21 I think if their child...is throwing their racquet and shouting and stuff and swearing, I  
22 don't think it's good for the parent just to say unlucky and forget about it. Their child

1 needs to learn what they've done, so the parent needs to be a little bit strict if they've  
2 been behaving badly on court (Player 28).

3 However, other participants thought that rather than disciplining players parents should help their  
4 child understand the emotions they were experiencing. This was the approach a male  
5 international player preferred, as he said, "I don't think they understand how frustrating it  
6 is...you know you can play much better, they need to help us to deal with this" (Player 24).

7 ***Enjoy the experience.*** All participants, but particularly children, indicated that parents'  
8 enjoyment of tournaments influenced the extent to which children themselves enjoyed  
9 tournaments. As one player explained, "They don't really enjoy driving me to the tournaments  
10 but my dad certainly enjoys being at the tournaments...If he didn't enjoy it then there wouldn't  
11 be much point really, I wouldn't enjoy it" (Player 2). Children explained that when parents  
12 enjoyed the experience they appeared more relaxed and were not so focused on their child's  
13 match, thus reducing the pressure they experienced. For example, one player said:

14 I notice that where my mum goes she makes friends everywhere and she keeps in contact  
15 with them...so there's always company for my mum so I know she's not going to be so  
16 focused on my match, she's also enjoying herself as well, I think that's good (Player 29).

### 17 **A grounded theory of optimal parental involvement in junior tennis**

18 The proposed grounded theory (see Figure 1) is centred around the idea that optimal  
19 involvement can be achieved when parents strive to both understand and enhance their child's  
20 experience, recognizing that each child is an individual with specific requirements and that a  
21 child's tennis experience often occurs over an extensive time period. To understand and enhance  
22 their child's tennis journey (i.e., to fulfill the core category), this theory posits that parents and  
23 children should first generate shared goals (i.e., reasons for involvement) and communicate



1 order to be optimally involved in their child's tennis. The grounded theory suggests that optimal  
2 parental involvement is a process that occurs over an extended period of time, is individualized  
3 to different children, and is dependent upon parents understanding their child's experience and  
4 seeking to be involved in ways to enhance it. Critically, the grounded theory highlights the  
5 influence the broader parenting context (e.g., emotional climate) has on perceptions of parenting  
6 practices and overall involvement. Thus, the grounded theory reinforces the importance of  
7 studying these aspects together when assessing involvement.

8         Many of the parenting practices identified in previous studies of parental involvement  
9 and behaviors are embedded within the proposed theory. For example, the importance of parents  
10 keeping tennis in perspective and reducing the focus on match outcomes is consistent with the  
11 extensive body of literature regarding achievement goals and motivational climates (see  
12 Harwood, Spray & Keegan, 2008 for a review). The preference for parents displaying positive  
13 reactions to children's performances (e.g., Gould et al., 2006; Lauer et al., 2011; Knight et al.,  
14 2010; 2011) has been consistently supported in youth sport literature. Similarly, parents being  
15 able to read their child's emotions, educating themselves regarding their child's sport to provide  
16 appropriate information and feedback, and seeing multiple reasons for children to be involved in  
17 sport have all been suggested as appropriate parental practices in sport (e.g., Gould et al., 2008;  
18 Knight et al., 2010; 2011; Lauer et al., 2010a; 2010b).

19         The proposed theory moves beyond descriptions and lists of appropriate and  
20 inappropriate types of involvement. Rather, the proposed theory illustrates how parenting  
21 practices, goals, and emotional climate are related and influence each other to optimize parental  
22 involvement in tennis. By identifying these overarching categories and the relationships between  
23 them, the proposed theory provides insight into *why* certain types of involvement might be

1 perceived positively or negatively. Thus, the proposed theory provides parents with a means to  
2 evaluate their involvement and understand why children might like or dislike their involvement.  
3 Additionally, these related categories highlight the need for parents to individualize their  
4 involvement, which might explain why different parents could employ seemingly contradictory  
5 practices but still be perceived to be optimally involved in their child's tennis.

6         The proposed grounded theory also touches on several characteristics of parenting styles  
7 that have been associated with positive outcomes in youth sport (e.g., Holt et al., 2009; Sapieja et  
8 al., 2011). For example, the proposed grounded theory is founded upon parents understanding  
9 and reacting to the requirements of their children and the situation. A high level of emotional  
10 support (cf., Rees & Hardy, 2000) and opportunities for children to take control of their tennis  
11 involvement are also embedded within certain categories. These aspects are encapsulated within  
12 autonomy-supportive parenting styles (Grolnick, 2003) and authoritative parenting styles  
13 (Baumrind, 1978; Maccoby & Martin, 1993). Thus, the proposed theory could be seen to provide  
14 further evidence for the benefits associated with parents adopting these types of parenting styles.  
15 However, although the theory touches on certain aspects of these parenting styles, a specific  
16 parenting style based on these popular typologies was not included in the theory because the  
17 purpose of this study was not to classify parents based on previously defined parenting styles.  
18 Rather, the purpose of this study was to identify the key aspects within the broader parenting  
19 context that were deemed to optimize parental involvement and it was the generation of an  
20 understanding emotional climate that appeared most pertinent. That is not to say that an  
21 autonomy-supportive or authoritarian parenting style might not be beneficial in sport but rather  
22 an indication that being understanding appeared to be the most important feature. Further  
23 research is required to support this assertion.

1           Finally, the proposed grounded theory identifies the importance of understanding the  
2 different goals parents and children have for tennis. That is, parents and children discussed a  
3 variety of reasons for being involved in tennis and these goals largely dictated the types of  
4 involvement children desired from their parents. To date, limited attention has been given to the  
5 influence of children's goals on their preferences for parental involvement. This may be because  
6 research has generally been conducted with specific populations, for example in reference to or  
7 with elite players (e.g., Gould et al., 2008; Lauer et al., 2010a, 2010b), with competitive juniors  
8 (e.g., Knight et al., 2010) or with children at camps (e.g., Omli & LaVoi, 2011). As such,  
9 opportunities to examine the influence of different goals might not have been available.  
10 However, the influence of parents' and children's goals on parental involvement is largely  
11 consistent with Darling and Steinberg's (1993) contextual model of parenting style. This model  
12 highlighted that parenting style and parenting practices were underpinned by parents' goals and  
13 beliefs for their child's socialization. As such, future research should consider this aspect when  
14 evaluating the appropriateness of different types of parental involvement in sport.

15           By integrating the different aspects of parenting within a sport-specific theory, the  
16 proposed grounded theory has a number of implications for applied practice. First, this theory  
17 points to the importance of parents spending time reflecting on their reasons for encouraging  
18 their child to participate in sport and seeking to identify whether these reasons align with their  
19 child's reasons. Second, the theory highlights the importance of consultants or coaches educating  
20 parents regarding the importance of attending to the overall environment they create and the  
21 specific behaviors they display within this environment – rather than just worrying about specific  
22 behaviors. Finally, it is apparent that parents need to tailor their involvement to their child. Thus,  
23 based on the proposed theory, rather than simply providing parents with lists of behaviors they

1 should and should not display (e.g., Knight et al., 2010; 2011), it is suggested parents engage  
2 their children in conversation to identify their goals for involvement, the areas of competition  
3 they need help coping with, and the types of involvement they prefer. Following this  
4 conversation parents should be encouraged to take the time to learn about their child's sport.

5       The application of this theory must be considered in light of certain study limitations. For  
6 example, player-parent-coach triads were not exclusively sampled. Where possible (n = 13),  
7 player-parent-coach triads were sampled and all the coaches included in the sample were  
8 working with players who also participated in the study. However, in a number of instances, the  
9 parents were unavailable or unwilling to participate in the study (e.g., some of the children lived  
10 away at tennis academies and only saw their parents at tournaments) and the inclusion of  
11 additional players was needed to fully explore emerging concepts. Thus, whereas the study  
12 included a range of perspectives, the data were not triangulated per se. Examining the proposed  
13 theory with more triads would be useful in identifying the consistency between parents,  
14 children's, and coaches perspectives.

15       Furthermore, there may be other factors that influence parenting in tennis that were not  
16 accounted for in the current study including child and parent gender, developmental  
17 considerations, and personal characteristics. Thus, future research examining the influence of  
18 such factors, the relationships between the categories, and the relative importance of adhering to  
19 different aspects of the categories is required to test and extend the theory. Examining the extent  
20 to which the proposed theory would explain optimal parental involvement among players making  
21 the transition to university or professional tennis (i.e., players aged 17 or 18+ years) and children  
22 just starting in tennis (e.g., under 10 years) would also be beneficial because optimal parental  
23 involvement might be conceptualized differently at these stages. The proposed grounded theory



1 attempts to cover the whole tennis journey and is focused on three relatively broad categories –  
2 share goals, understanding environment, and enhancing practices. Thus, it is anticipated these  
3 factors might largely explain optimal involvement at different stages but certain aspects might be  
4 more important or additional factors might also need including in different stages.

5           In conclusion, this study offers a substantive grounded theory of optimal parental  
6 involvement in competitive youth tennis. The aim was to create a better understanding of how  
7 parents can best be involved in youth tennis. In creating this theory the aim was to go beyond  
8 describing discrete practices parents should and should not display in youth sport. Rather, the  
9 grounded theory illustrates fundamental concepts parents can adhere to throughout the course of  
10 their child's involvement in youth tennis. In addressing these concepts it is hoped that parents  
11 can ensure their involvement is most suitable to their individual child and his or her aspirations  
12 in tennis.

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## PARENTING IN COMPETITIVE TENNIS

### 1 Table 1

#### 2 *Participant demographics*

Population	n	Player age (years)			Gender		Player standard				Years of experience	
		M	SD	Range	Male	Female	Club	County	National	International	M	SD
Current players	33	13.29	1.21	12-15	15	18	7	10	10	6	5.78	1.72
Older players	10	17	0.67	16-18	8	2	0	1	7	2	8.8	2.25
Ex-youth players	10	21.3	2	19-24	5	5	0	5	3	2	10.8	3.5

### 3

Population	n	Age of children	Gender		Player standard				Years of experience	
			Male	Female	Club	County	National	International	M	SD
Tennis parents	15	11-16	7	8	0	1	7	7	9.12	4.91
Ex-tennis parents	2	25	1	1	0	1	1	0	14.5	2.12
National coaches	10	All ages	9	1	0	0	0	10	12	5.83
Performance coaches	5	All ages	5	0	0	0	5	0	19.6	9.61
Development coaches	5	All ages	4	1	0	5	0	0	12.2	5.07

### 4

## PARENTING IN COMPETITIVE TENNIS

1 Figure 1

2

3 A grounded theory of optimal parental involvement in youth tennis

4

