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Educating Parents of Children in Sport about Abuse using Narrative Pedagogy

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17 **This is a copy of the final pre-print accepted manuscript, which will be published in the**  
18 **Sociology of Sport Journal. Readers are recommended to access the final manuscript**  
19 **from the Sociology of Sport Journal at <http://journals.humankinetics.com/journal/ssj>**

**1 Abstract**

2 Research on abuse in sport reveals that sporting environments are unique contexts where  
3 athlete abuse can occur. An international panel on 'safe sport' identified the need to  
4 implement strategies to ensure sport is safe for all. One strategy identified as a way of  
5 preventing abuse from occurring in sport is to educate the parents of athletes. This study  
6 centres on an education intervention implemented with 14 parents from a gymnastics and  
7 swimming context where narrative pedagogy (e.g. athletes' stories of abuse) was used. As a  
8 result of engaging with narrative pedagogy, parents were able to identify unacceptable  
9 coaching practices. However, the extent of several dominant cultural ideologies (e.g.  
10 competitive performance ideology) became known through the parents' responses and  
11 influenced the way they took up the athletes' abuse stories.

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33 **Key Words:** Athlete abuse; Physical abuse; Emotional abuse; Field-based intervention; Child  
34 athlete protection; Parents of children in Sport.

1 Sport is often regarded as a functional and positive space for children. In 2014, the  
2 International Olympic Committee (IOC) released a statement stating that the entire sports  
3 process for the child athlete should be pleasurable and fulfilling. However, a darker side to  
4 child sport participation exists, which is often unacknowledged by sport insiders and  
5 stakeholders (Owton, 2016; McMahon, Penney & Dinan-Thompson, 2012). For instance,  
6 numerous sport and exercise researchers (e.g., Brackenridge, 2001; Bringer, Brackenridge &  
7 Johnson, 2002; Burke, 2001; Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009; Hartill, 2013; Parent, 2011;  
8 Owton & Sparkes, 2015; Stirling & Kerr, 2009) have explained how sporting environments  
9 are unique socio-cultural contexts that offer possibilities for athlete abuse and exploitation to  
10 occur. Consequently, the aforementioned researchers, along with others (i.e. Gervis & Dunn,  
11 2004), have found various (e.g., emotional, sexual, and physical) and extensive athlete abuse  
12 to be occurring in many sporting contexts (e.g., gymnastics; swimming).

13 Emotional abuse is one form of abuse found to be occurring in sport (i.e. Kerr &  
14 Stirling, 2012; McMahon et al., 2012; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Gravely & Cochran, 1995;  
15 Kirby, Greaves & Hankivisky, 2000). Emotional abuse can be described as “a pattern of  
16 deliberate noncontact behaviours by a person within a critical relationship role that have the  
17 potential to be harmful [to an individual’s emotional well-being]” (Stirling & Kerr, 2008, p.  
18 178). Within the sporting context, the most common forms of emotional abuse are shouting,  
19 belittling, threats and humiliation (Gervis & Dunn, 2004). In their study with child athletes in  
20 the United Kingdom, Gervis and Dunn (2004) found emotional abuse to be widespread,  
21 occurring in sports such as diving, football, gymnastics, hockey, netball and track and field  
22 athletics. In a different study which focused on the sport of swimming, Stirling and Kerr  
23 (2007) found emotional abuse to most often occur in the coach-athlete relationship (Kerr &  
24 Stirling, 2012). Emotional abuse was found to be normalized by many cultural insiders and

1 seen as necessary in order to produce successful athletic performance (Kerr & Stirling, 2012;  
2 McMahon et al., 2012).

3         The coach is in a position of considerable influence and power leaving the athlete,  
4 particularly the child athlete vulnerable if this influence/power is misused (Gervis & Dunn,  
5 2004). Many researchers (Brackenridge, Johnston, Malkin, 2000; Brackenridge, 2001;  
6 Bringer et al., 2002; Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009; Owton & Sparkes, 2015; Johansson,  
7 2016; Owton, 2016) have reported cases that demonstrate coaches abusing their position of  
8 power resulting in the sexual abuse of athletes. For example, in their analysis of 159 cases of  
9 sexual abuse in sport reported in the print media, Brackenridge et al., (2008) found that in 98%  
10 of cases, the perpetrators were male coaches, teachers or instructors. Women have also been  
11 shown to commit this type of abuse in sporting environments (Johansson, 2016). According  
12 to Brackenridge et al., (2008), all young athletes are vulnerable to sexual abuse, therefore  
13 there is an inherent need to ensure preventative measures (i.e. parents playing a role) are  
14 undertaken to protect athletes.

15         The meritocratic nature of competitive sport has come to normalise and even  
16 encourage excessive intensive training as a necessary means of achieving competitive  
17 performance (McMahon, 2010; McMahon et al, 2012). However, normalised practices such  
18 as excessive intensive training and training while injured are classified as physical abuse  
19 according to David (2005). A recently published systematic literature review of child abuse in  
20 the context of sport found physical abuse to be occurring in three ways (Alexander, Stafford,  
21 & Lewis, 2011) including:

- 22         (1) Acts of physical assault inflicted on the child athlete by adults or peers;
- 23         (2) Forced overtraining leading to risk of injury; and
- 24         (3) Child athletes being forced or encouraged to train while injured or exhausted.

1 Physical abuse in sport literature exploring age and vulnerability to abuse suggests that young  
2 children tend to be more compliant and therefore more susceptible to physical harm (Farstad,  
3 2007).

4 The consequences of abuse have been extensively outlined in general child abuse  
5 literature and include: physical injury, gynaecological problems (for girls), headaches, asthma,  
6 depression, fear, low self-esteem, poor school performance, inability to trust, anger, sexual  
7 dysfunction, eating and sleeping disorders, fear or intimacy, post-traumatic stress disorder,  
8 and suicide (Unicef, 2010; UN Commission on Human Rights, 2000). Specifically relating to  
9 the sporting context, Mountjoy, Brackenridge and Arrington (2016) recently found that  
10 exposure to abuse in sport can lead to mental health difficulties and other negative impacts  
11 such as disordered eating, low self-esteem, performance loss and drop out of sport. Given the  
12 severe consequences of abuse, the importance of implementing strategies to protect child  
13 athletes is essential particularly as Kirby et al., (2000) and Mountjoy et al., (2016) claim that  
14 no athlete is immune from physical, sexual and emotional abuse with child athletes being  
15 particularly at risk for experiencing abuse.

16 An international expert panel on 'safe sport' identified a growing need to implement  
17 strategies and policies to secure "sport as a place of safety for all" (Brackenridge & Leahy,  
18 2014, p. 2). One way of preventing abuse from occurring in sporting contexts is to educate  
19 the parents of athletes (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Given that parents could play a significant role  
20 in identifying abuses in sporting contexts, it is surprising that little has been published on  
21 field-based intervention research (Harwood & Knight, 2015) with parents focusing on athlete  
22 abuse. Given the extent of athlete abuse occurring in a variety of sporting contexts,  
23 understanding more in regards to the effectiveness of an education intervention with parents  
24 is vital in terms of protecting child sporting participants (Mountjoy et al., 2016). This is the  
25 underlying purpose of this present study.

1 In so doing, this study centres on a field-based education intervention undertaken with  
2 parents from a gymnastics and swimming context where narrative pedagogy was  
3 implemented as an educational tool. The overarching research question that guided this study  
4 was; 1) *what do parents identify in athletes' stories of abuse as a result of engaging with*  
5 *narrative pedagogy?*

6 As outlined earlier, little field-based intervention research (Harwood & Knight, 2015)  
7 has been conducted with parents centring specifically on athlete abuse. Brackenridge (1998)  
8 did conduct research with parents to explore the assumptions they made about their daughters'  
9 health and safety in the sports coaching context, however her study did not specifically focus  
10 on education or educative outcomes. However, other researchers (i.e. Dorsch, King, Dunn,  
11 Osai, & Tulane, 2017; Lafferty & Triggs, 2014; Richards & Winter, 2013; Vincent &  
12 Christensen, 2015) have conducted research with parents focusing on education. For example,  
13 Vincent and Christensen (2015) conducted a four-session workshop with 32 parents whose  
14 children were involved in an elite soccer program. The educative sessions centred on the  
15 roles of parents in youth sport; parental influence; the parent-coach-athlete triangle and how  
16 parents can work effectively to balance the demands of elite sport. Overall feedback from the  
17 parents involved was largely positive in terms of educative opportunities (Vincent &  
18 Christenson, 2015). In another study, Tator (2012) conducted education sessions with parents  
19 and other sporting stakeholders (e.g. trainers, players) involved in impact sports on  
20 concussion education and prevention. The purpose of Tator's (2012) study was to provide  
21 parents and stakeholders with strategies to be able to better identify concussion symptoms  
22 and seek the necessary help immediately. While the aforementioned studies were educative in  
23 nature, none focused on the topic of athlete abuse. Further, they were presenter based and led  
24 (i.e. presenter is the bearer of knowledge who disseminates information to parents) rather  
25 than it being a reciprocal type approach.

## 1 **Narrative Pedagogy - an educative tool**

2 Narrative pedagogy was chosen as the educative tool to be used with parents in this  
3 study primarily because it has previously achieved successful educational outcomes and  
4 subsequent social action (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Nelson, Groom and Potrac (2016)  
5 specifically identified narrative pedagogy as a contemporary theory of learning, education  
6 and social interaction with potential application to sports coaching. Goodson and Gill (2011)  
7 were indeed influential in the development of narrative pedagogy with their thinking and  
8 theorising about it stemming from the idea that narratives<sup>1</sup> (e.g. conversations, text based  
9 stories, oral stories) are not only a rich and profound way for humans to make sense of their  
10 lives, but also a process of pedagogical encounter, learning and transformation (Goodson &  
11 Gill, 2011; McMahon & Smith, 2016). Through extensive research, Goodson and Gill (2011)  
12 found that by engaging with narratives (i.e. reading a person's story of experience) and then  
13 swapping the narrative/s with another (i.e. exchanging stories about the story), pedagogic  
14 encounters (i.e. learning opportunities) arose. In this respect, narrative pedagogy does not  
15 centre on learning as an individual endeavour, but rather, requires an individual to reflect,  
16 revisit, and collaborate with a meaningful other/s in order to generate new understandings or  
17 an alternate way of knowing about an issue. This reciprocation and the role of the 'other' in  
18 the process is something which sets narrative pedagogy apart from other narrative research  
19 (i.e. where text based stories are examined by an individual). Thus, the *narrative pedagogy*  
20 process requires those involved (i.e. researcher and participant) to take on the role of both  
21 learner, listener, teller and pedagogue as they embark on a narrative journey of inquiry in a  
22 reciprocal type arrangement (McMahon & Smith, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> Like many other researchers who have made use of narrative in their research (i.e. Goodson & Gill, 2011; McGannon & Smith, 2015; Smith, 2016), 'stories' and 'narratives' will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. This is because 'stories' are seen as equivalent to 'narrative' (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Further, narrative relies heavily on the stories embedded in human experience and the inherent meaning that participants extrapolate from them. Polkinghorne (1988, 1992) believes that equating 'narrative' to 'story' is essential for social science researchers.



1 ***What does narrative pedagogy look like in action?***

2 *Narrative pedagogy* involves a reciprocation of narrative encounters between a person  
3 and another (e.g. researcher and participant) (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Goodson and Gill  
4 (2011) explains how narrative encounters involve a number of stages:

- 5 1) Narration (preparing and sharing narratives of an individual's lived  
6 experience which may include creative methods such as text-based stories,  
7 poems or drawings).
- 8 2) Collaboration (after the initial sharing, narratives are examined, questions and  
9 challenges are posed in a collaborative manner for the purpose of better  
10 understanding the lived experience).
- 11 3) Location (links made between the individual's story to personal story,  
12 locating in their wider contexts which include social and cultural practices).

13 Engagement with each of these stages is important as it can initiate a more holistic  
14 understanding of experience with transformative potential (i.e. further theorising) (Goodson  
15 & Gill, 2011). *Narrative pedagogy* is therefore based on a theory of social constructivism  
16 whereby knowledge, experiences and the self are constructed with another through a sharing  
17 of stories, artefacts and meanings (McMahon & Smith, 2016). Indeed, engaging with  
18 narrative pedagogy should not be a rushed process (i.e. 30 minute interview) but takes  
19 extensive time over an ongoing period<sup>2</sup>. Relating to this research specifically, the specific  
20 narrative encounters that we implemented will be expanded on in the method section below.

21 ***The potential of narratives and/or narrative pedagogy?***

22 Despite Nelson et al., (2016) highlighting the potential of narrative pedagogy as a  
23 contemporary theory of learning, education and social interaction, little research has been

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the time constraints and busy lives of the parent participants, the narrative pedagogy process in this study occurred over two sessions which lasted for numerous hours in each session. This was because parent participants could not commit to any further time.

1 conducted in sporting contexts which has either used or examined this approach to learning.  
2 However, elements of this approach (i.e. reading stories and responding) have been  
3 incorporated by some scholars. Douglas and Carless (2008) presented their research in the  
4 form of stories and poems to professional golf coaches in an effort to evoke and communicate  
5 the lived experiences of elite professional golfers. Specifically, the stories and poems were  
6 used to provide coaches with the opportunity to enter the mind of the athlete – to hear their  
7 stories of experience, feeling their emotions and dilemmas. Coaches were then required to  
8 provide written responses to the stories and poems which were in turn analysed by the  
9 researchers. The analysis revealed that the coaches engaged with the athletes’ stories in three  
10 ways which in turn could have positive benefits for their practice. The first included  
11 ‘questioning’ in the form of the action of challenging, seeking further information and  
12 reflective practice. The second response included ‘summarizing’ and active listening that led  
13 to coaches drawing their own conclusions. Finally, the coaches responded to the stories  
14 through ‘incorporating’ (i.e. incorporation of the athletes’ story into their own experience, as  
15 well as displaying emotional reactions to stories such as empathy). Douglas and Carless’  
16 approach had positive outcomes, however they did not employ dialogic interaction. The  
17 benefits of employing dialogic interaction is that it provides the opportunity for a holistic  
18 understanding of the lived experience to occur (e.g. learner utilizes his/her own experiences  
19 in the process of constructing knowledge; views experiences through numerous senses)  
20 (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Goodson and Gill (2011) explain that when you see a person’s  
21 experience in a text based representation without the opportunity for reciprocation and  
22 discussion to occur, it puts you in “danger of losing sight of human subjectivity” (p. 118).

23 The broader use of narrative research has been acknowledged as making a difference  
24 for those who engage with it by providing the opportunity to see the world in different ways

1 (Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Douglas & Carless, 2008). In terms of the potential outcomes for  
2 those who engage with narrative, specifically story-telling, Frank (2000) explains how;

3       Those who accept an invitation into the storytelling relation open themselves to seeing  
4       (and feeling and hearing) life differently than they normally do. Listening is not so  
5       much a willing suspension of disbelief as a willing acceptance of different beliefs and  
6       of lives in which these beliefs make sense ... Those who have accepted the invitation  
7       to the story may not choose to remain in the world of the story, but if the story works,  
8       then life in their worlds will seem different after they return there (p. 361).

9 In this respect, stories have the potential to turn the ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’ of the  
10 world into a meaningful place by assisting us to order events, providing a template to make  
11 sense of things, teaching us what to pay attention to, and showing us how to respond to what  
12 we attend to (Frank, 2010).

### 13 **Parent participants**

14       Once ethical approval<sup>3</sup> was gained from Author 1’s institution, snowball sampling  
15 was utilised to recruit participants from both a swimming and gymnastics context in Australia.  
16 These two sporting contexts were chosen because the athletes’ experiences (stories) that will  
17 be used in the first phase of the learning process actually occurred in these two specific  
18 sporting contexts. Thus, we felt that by recruiting parents from these two contexts they may  
19 be able to better resonate and understand what was occurring in the stories.

20       Snowball sampling was chosen over other recruitment methods (i.e. emailing clubs  
21 for potential participants) as both the gymnastics and swimming cultures can be closed off to  
22 cultural outsiders for fear of evoking potential criticism about practice (Barker-Ruchti, 2010;  
23 McMahon, 2010; Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Snowball sampling provided Author 1 with the  
24 means to access what can be seen an impenetrable social grouping (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

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<sup>3</sup> Further ethical considerations undertaken by the research team throughout the interview and the four phase narrative pedagogy process will be expanded on below in the method section.

1 The only criteria the Authors implemented in terms of recruitment was that parents' had to be  
2 a parent/guardian of a child who is currently participating in a gymnastics and/or swimming  
3 context. 14 parents consented and were subsequently recruited to participate in this research  
4 shared across both sporting contexts.

## 5 **Method**

6 In the next section, the four phases undertaken as part of the narrative pedagogy  
7 process will be expanded upon. The research team was reticent about expanding on the  
8 process because narrative pedagogy goes beyond a set of procedures that can be followed  
9 because of the many variables involved in pedagogical/learning encounters (Goodson & Gill,  
10 2011).

11 While the narrative pedagogy process was divided into four phases in our research, it  
12 is important to note that there was a natural flow which occurred between each phase which  
13 involved an interplay of sharing, listening and storytelling<sup>4</sup>. For instance, as soon as the  
14 parents had read the three athletes' stories in phase one, they immediately started conversing  
15 with Author 1 about what they felt about the story, what was happening in the story and  
16 applied some aspects of the story to their own lived experiences. They did this without being  
17 prompted to do so.

18 Prior to phase one commencing, trust and rapport with the participant needed to be  
19 built. Building trust with the participant is personal and complicated, however is essential to  
20 the narrative pedagogy process (Goodson & Gill, 2011). If one party is apprehensive, the  
21 learning outcome can be affected. Power relationships may also affect one's ability to  
22 effectively engage in a meaningful exchange with another (McMahon & Smith, 2016). As  
23 such, Author 1 followed a number of strategies provided by Goodson and Gill (2011) and  
24 Smith and Sparkes (2016) in order to build rapport with the participants and re-configure

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<sup>4</sup> Reciprocity is not always equal or consistent because individuals respond to each other and narratives differently (Goodson & Gill, 2011).

1 power relations and formality that is often associated with the interview process. For instance,  
2 the place of choice for the interview and time was decided by participant. Further, Author 1  
3 spent extensive time getting to know the participants before the interview even started (e.g.  
4 up to 30 minutes) asking them about their own involvement in sport as well as their child's  
5 involvement etc. Author 1 also considered body language (e.g. body facing the participant)  
6 and seating distance to limit power issues and formality (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). There were  
7 also no time constraints imposed on the interview because participants can feel rushed when  
8 time limits are imposed and this can also limit the possible learning outcomes (Goodson &  
9 Gill, 2011). Further, the participants had control over the speed of the interview. This  
10 occurred by Author 1 asking the parent if they were ready to move on to the next phase.  
11 Parents were provided with information in regards to the format of the interview (i.e. what  
12 they could expect) and reiterated the purpose of the research (this was also outlined in  
13 information sheet) prior the commencement of the actual interview. This meant that parents  
14 were well informed that their responses were going to be used for publication and that the  
15 purpose of this research was educative in nature.

### 16 ***Phase 1: Presenting three athletes' stories to the parents***

17 The first phase involved the sharing of three athletes' stories (i.e. lived experiences)  
18 with each parent. These three stories were co-constructed by the athletes who feature in each  
19 of the stories and Author 1 (Author 1, 2010). The three athletes' stories contained coaching  
20 practices where physical and emotional abuse were present. When the stories were presented  
21 to each of the parents, they were simply asked to read each of them. The three stories  
22 presented to parents in this phase feature directly below.

#### 23 ***'The nine year old gymnast'***

24 *At gymnastics training, the kids stand in a line. Most of the kids in this group are aged*  
25 *9 years. They begin the session by doing stretching. The coach and the assistants have been*

1 *focusing on stretching recently explaining to the parents and kids how important it is for*  
2 *gymnastics success. The coaches want the best for the kids. The coach and the assistants push*  
3 *the kids down into an extended split position. Some of the kids are really flexible, some are*  
4 *not and you can see on their faces that they are wincing in pain. Some of these kids also have*  
5 *tears welling in their eyes. When the coaches are not assisting with the stretching, they pace*  
6 *behind the kids. They yell at any child who is not doing their stretching correctly. As the head*  
7 *coach is pacing behind the kids, she stops behind one of the girls. She pinches her bottom and*  
8 *says, "you are not going to get anywhere in this sport with that."*

9 ***'Do it right the first time'***

10 *In the pool, the coach divides up the lanes according to the swimmers' preferred form stroke*  
11 *(i.e. backstroke, breaststroke or butterfly). Carly who is 11 gets in the butterfly lane because*  
12 *that is her preferred form stroke.*

13 *Coach: "Right, you guys have 20 x 50s jump outs on 60 seconds, doing your form*  
14 *stroke for the entire set. I want you to hold times that are 3 seconds off race pace."*

15 *Carly needs to hold 34 seconds for each 50 metres as her personal best time is 31.*

16 *The coach is yelling out times for each swimmer who touches the wall.*

17 *Coach: "Carly, 35."*

18 *By the time that Carly lifts herself out of the pool, she only gets about 10 seconds break*  
19 *before she has to dive in for the next 50. At the second 50, Carly lifts her head out of the*  
20 *water to hear her time.*

21 *Coach: "Carly, 35. Carly, if you don't hold 34"s, I am going to make you repeat this*  
22 *set at the end of the session."*

23 *On the third 50 metre, Carly really works her streamline and finish. She touches the wall and*  
24 *listens for her time.*

25 *Coach: "Carly, 34."*

1 Carly finally makes the time. She slugs her way through the next ten laps. With each lap that  
 2 passes, she just makes the time but she is becoming fatigued. On the fourteenth lap, she  
 3 touches the wall to hear her time. This time the coach is yelling angrily at her.

4 Coach: “Carly, 35! You are making this set up at the end of the session.”

5 Carly is deflated.

6 It is 6.30pm and the rest of the squad gets out of the pool but Carly is not allowed as she has  
 7 to repeat the set.

8 Carly: “Why do I have to stay in?”

9 Coach: “You better get on with it otherwise we are going to be here all night.

10 Champions don’t complain.”

11 Carly dives in for the first 50 and swims as hard as she can.

12 Coach: “34. Right, just need to do another 19 at that pace.”

13 At the end of the second 50, Carly’s mother arrives to take her home. By the look on her face,  
 14 she realises that Carly has to stay in because she has not done something the coach has  
 15 asked of her.

16 Carly completes the next five laps.

17 Coach: “You are dropping off Carly, get a move on.”

18 Carly climbs out of the pool and instead of diving in for the seventh 50 metre, she sits on the  
 19 side of the pool and refuses to go any further (Author 1, 2010).

20 **‘Golden gaytime<sup>5</sup>’**

21 It is week two of hell week camp. I now feel so experienced. The swimming camp lived up to  
 22 its name and I am so exhausted.

23 It is 2.30 in the afternoon. I meet some of my teammates who are running to the pool.

24 The pool is six kilometres away. If I am going to be a champion, I have to do extra and that

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<sup>5</sup> Golden gaytime is an ice-cream, made and distributed by the Streets confectionery company in Australia.

1 *includes running to the pool. As we start running to the pool, I feel a sense of achievement, as*  
 2 *I know I am doing everything it takes to be the fastest 11 year old in the state. As I get into a*  
 3 *rhythm, one of the other swimmers suggests that we stop for an ice cream at the corner store.*  
 4 *We all agree that it would be a great idea so we all stop. After standing at the freezer, I*  
 5 *finally make my choice – a Golden Gaytime.*

6 *Outside the shop as we are eating our ice-creams and the white team bus with the*  
 7 *swimmers who didn't run passes us. My coach is driving. As it starts to disappear down the*  
 8 *street, some of the boys hang out the bus window and yell.*

9 *“Busted!”*

10 *I hope my coach didn't see me otherwise I will be in trouble.*

11 *After we finish eating our ice-creams, we finish running the remaining four kilometres to the*  
 12 *pool. As I enter the pool gates, I automatically begin my stretching routine before I get ready*  
 13 *to get into the pool. As I approach the end of the pool, my coach says,*

14 *Coach: “Did you enjoy your ice cream? I hope it was worth it”*

15 *Oh no, he did see me!*

16 *Later that night, as I am climbing into bed with a belly full of mince from dinner, I*  
 17 *recall the events of the day. It feels like my eyes are only closed momentarily when I hear*  
 18 *banging on the window and my name being called. I look at the clock beside my bed and it is*  
 19 *11pm. It is pitch black. The banging on the window continues. I realise that it is my coach*  
 20 *and I can hear him calling my name.*

21 *Coach: “Get up Carly, you need to run off that ice-cream you ate today! Get your*  
 22 *running shoes on; you haven't burnt it off yet!”*

23 *Carly: “What do you mean? It is 11pm?”*

24 *Coach: “Get your running shoes on and get out here! You haven't burnt off that ice-*  
 25 *cream yet!”*



1 *I fumble in the dark as I put my running gear on. I find everything but my socks so I go*  
2 *without them. When I appear from my dormitory, I notice the assistant coach is also outside.*

3 *Coach: "You've got 11 kilometres kiddo! Need to burn off that ice cream you ate."*

4 *Clay (the assistant coach) is running with me. As we start running, I am cautious because I*  
5 *cannot see the terrain properly. After about 20 minutes of running, my feet become so sore*  
6 *from not wearing socks and from all of the other running that I have been doing (McMahon,*  
7 *2010; McMahon et al., 2012).*

### 8 **Phase 2**

9 After the sporting parents had read the three athletes' stories, they then served as a  
10 reference for the narrative exchange that followed (Goodson & Gill, 2011). The parents were  
11 reminded by Author 1 that if they shared any stories of abuse that they had witnessed, it  
12 would need to be reported to the relevant child protection authorities (an ethical requirement).  
13 The following guiding questions were used as a point of reflection in the narrative exchange:  
14 1) *what do you think is happening in the story? (Sub-question: what is the central plot of the*  
15 *story?)* 2) *Do you think the coach's approach is acceptable? (Sub-question: are there any*  
16 *themes emerging from his/her practice?)*

17 Each parent then had the opportunity to talk as much or little as they wanted about  
18 each of the three athletes' stories while Author 1 listened. Then Author 1 shared her own  
19 stories based on her own experiences in sport and as a parent. Each other's stories were  
20 valued and respected during this phase. This phase alone took up to 90 minutes in length.

### 21 **Phase 3**

22 As physical and emotional abuse has been found to be normalised in sporting contexts  
23 (Kerr & Stirling, 2012; McMahon et al., 2012) in the name of achieving competitive  
24 performance, the Authors felt it was essential to add an additional phase to the narrative  
25 exchange. In this third phase, the Authors felt it was important to share academic literature on

1 abuse with parents, in particular what abuse constitutes and what it might look like in practice  
 2 in the sporting context. In this respect, we drew on others (i.e. sport researchers of abuse) to  
 3 better highlight abuse in sport for the parents. At this point, we felt we could indeed be  
 4 alerting parents’ consciousness to abuse in sport for the first time. Therefore, the table below  
 5 (Table 1.0) which contains key points relating to what emotional and physical abuse in sport  
 6 is, looks like and the subsequent effects was purposely constructed for this phase. Certain key  
 7 points have been underlined as a way of emphasising them to the parents. This table  
 8 purposely contains small sections of text on abuse rather than sharing full academic papers as  
 9 a result of feedback given by a parent in the practise run of this project<sup>6</sup>. In the initial practise  
 10 run, two academic papers relating to physical and emotional abuse were shared with a  
 11 consenting parent. However, the research team was informed by the parent that the reading of  
 12 the two papers was time consuming and in parts difficult to comprehend. On reflection,  
 13 having parents engage with the two academic papers disrupted the flow of the interview and  
 14 narrative exchange, therefore we omitted them.

15 **Table 1.0: An introduction to abuse in sport.**

<b>Key Point</b>	<b>Evidence</b>
Coaching practices can have long term effects on child/adolescent athletes.	Carly who features in two of the stories s that you read was the best 11-year-old in the country during her time as a swimmer. Her coach produced multiple Olympic Gold medallist swimmers. She did not go on to represent Australia as she developed <u>numerous injuries</u> and <u>glandular fever</u> at around age 14. She is now 30 years old and struggles with body dysmorphic disorder, bulimia, and depression and has not been in a pool since she quit swimming at 14 years of age (McMahon et al., 2012).
Sport should be fun.	In 2014, The International Olympic Committee (IOC) said that the entire sports process for the child athlete should be <u>pleasurable</u> and <u>fulfilling</u> .

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<sup>6</sup> Author 1 respects and values the participants’ time and energy. Therefore, Author 1 implemented this study with a consenting and informed participant before it was implemented with the 14 parents. This was in essence a practise run to ensure the process was as streamlined as possible.

<p>Emotional abuse in sport.</p>	<p>Emotional abuse is occurring in sport. According to Gervis and Dunn (2004), the most common forms of emotional abuse in sport are <u>shouting</u>, <u>belittling</u>, <u>threats</u> and <u>humiliation</u>. “The behaviour of some coaches is a threat to the psychological well-being of child athletes” (Gervis &amp; Dunn, 2004, p. 215).</p> <p>Emotional abuse is occurring in a large number of sports such as diving, football, gymnastics, hockey, netball, swimming and track and field athletics (Gervis &amp; Dunn, 2004).</p> <p>A “win at all costs” approach by coaches is problematic and creates a position of vulnerability for the athletes. So much emphasis can be placed on winning performances in sport that little attention is given to the methods involved in achieving them (Gervis &amp; Dunn, 2004).</p>
<p>Physical abuse in sport.</p>	<p>Sporting contexts expose young athletes to physical abuse and violence which are often normalised in the name of competitive performance. In sporting contexts, the most common types of physical abuse are <u>excessive intensive training</u>, <u>excessive training that leads to injury</u> and <u>being made to train while injured or sick</u> (David, 2005).</p>
<p>Coach-athlete relationship.</p>	<p>The coach-athlete relationship has been shown to be an unbalanced one, with the coach having power over the athlete by virtue of his or her age, expertise, experience, and access to resources and rewards (Thomlinson &amp; Strachan, 1996). As the influence a coach has over an athlete becomes more significant, the potential for abuse in this relationship increases (Stirling &amp; Kerr, 2008).</p>
<p>Long term effects of normalised coaching practices.</p>	<p>McMahon, Penney and Dinan-Thompson (2012) found that some coaching practices that adolescent athletes are subjected to effect the athlete in long term, 10-30 years after they have left the sport. Such effects include lack of interest in sport, eating disorders, depression.</p>

1

2 **Phase 4**

3 In this final phase, the parents had the opportunity to revisit the three athletes’ stories

4 (presented in phase 1). Specifically, they were asked by Author 1 the following guiding

5 question, “*after reading the information in table 1.0, what do you think is happening in each*

1 *of the stories? (Sub-question: do you seen any common themes in the coach's practice?).*

2 Further conversation and reciprocal story telling then took place centring on the athletes'  
3 stories, the abuse literature and the parents and Author 1's individual experience/s and stories.  
4 This phase was also extensive and took between up to two hours to complete.

5         At the conclusion of the interview, the entire interview which had been audio  
6 recorded<sup>7</sup> was immediately typed up by Author 1 so it could be shared with the entire  
7 research team. The typed transcripts were extensive and varied in length between 15-30 pages  
8 highlighting the extent and richness of the narrative exchange between Author 1 and each of  
9 the parents. The parents were offered the opportunity to read the typed manuscript of their  
10 responses/interview however none of them took up this opportunity. However, the parents did  
11 communicate their interest in hearing about the findings of this research, in particular what  
12 the other parents' responses were. The research team saw their interest as a further educative  
13 opportunity for an additional narrative exchange to occur. Therefore, the parents were  
14 subsequently invited to meet again with Author 1 so they could discuss/read the findings.  
15 Therefore in a time and place of convenience for the parents, they were provided with an oral  
16 summary of the findings (their preferred choice over text based findings) and more stories  
17 were subsequently exchanged between the parents and Author 1. Parents noted how  
18 beneficial this process had been and also offered advice and strategies on what could be  
19 further implemented to this process in future iterations. The researchers will indeed be  
20 implementing the parents' ideas in the next iteration of this study highlighting the valued and  
21 respected reciprocity of this project.

## 22 ***Thematic analysis (TA)***

23         Inductive thematic analysis (TA) was employed (Braun & Clark, 2006) to analyse  
24 parents' responses. Inductive TA was purposely chosen because it involves a process of

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<sup>7</sup> Parents were informed and consented to the having the interview audio recorded.

1 coding without fitting data into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researchers' analytic  
2 preconceptions (Braun & Clark, 2006). This approach was most applicable as narrative  
3 encounters are an individual learning process and various outcomes and responses can result  
4 (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Therefore, this form of TA was participant response (i.e. data)  
5 driven. The TA process was primarily undertaken by Author 1 making use of six phases  
6 outlined by Braun et al., (2016). The first two phases involved familiarisation and coding  
7 which was achieved through data immersion along with the re-reading of the extensive  
8 transcripts using an 'analytical lens.' It was during the re-reading when Author 1 made notes  
9 and reflected on the process and the parents' responses. Phases 3-5 involved theme  
10 development, refinement and naming. Specifically, Author 1 organised and revised codes of  
11 the data and settled on the final themes. Throughout these phases, Authors 2 and 3 acted as  
12 critical friends offering additional interpretations (Smith & McGannon, 2015). Constant  
13 comparison was utilised within and between themes generated during these phases to  
14 determine if the analysis 'fit well' across the data and into a coherent story relating to the  
15 research question. Phase six involved the writing up of the analysis. This was partially  
16 realised through phases 1-5, and the discussion section, thus revealing the analytic and  
17 interpretive story of our analysis through the illustration of themes via specific extracts and  
18 links to relevant literature (Braun et al., 2016).

## 19 **Discussion**

20 Phase six of our TA is shown under a central theme: *the coaches' approaches are*  
21 *unacceptable but necessary for performance*. This central theme will be first outlined  
22 highlighting how the parents were able to identify unacceptable coaching practices but also  
23 struggled with tensions in regard to such approaches being necessary for competitive  
24 performance but could potentially impact upon athlete welfare. After this central theme is  
25 outlined, a singular sub-theme of *the coach knows best* will be outlined and discussed.

1 **The coaches' approaches are unacceptable but necessary for performance.**

2 Meritocracy or the competitive performance ideology has been found to saturate  
3 sporting cultures influencing coaching approaches (e.g. coaches implementing high volumes  
4 of training) and also athlete practices (e.g. extreme dieting) (McMahon, Penney & Dinan-  
5 Thompson, 2012; Smoll et al., 2011; Lang, 2010; Purdy, Potrac & Jones, 2008). Some have  
6 attributed (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kerr & Stirling, 2008) the use of these techniques of  
7 dominance to the power of the discourse about the importance of winning (Smits, Jacobs &  
8 Knoppers, 2017). The central theme '*the coaches' approaches are unacceptable but*  
9 *necessary for performance*' highlights how the competitive performance ideology (i.e.  
10 importance placed on winning) was used by parents' to make sense of the coaching practices  
11 in the three athletes' stories. Coaching practices and pedagogy (e.g. staying in to repeat a  
12 session that has not been completed properly) were perceived by parents as necessary in order  
13 to enhance the competitive performance output of athletes (McMahon, 2010; Evans, Rich &  
14 Holroyd, 2004). We draw on two parents' responses to highlight the emphasis placed on  
15 competitive performance and how this ideology influenced the interpretation of what was  
16 occurring in the three athletes' stories.

17 **Parent 4:** *If I look at both of the Carly stories, I think I can see that Carly is*  
18 *incredibly talented. She should have known that she should not be eating an ice-*  
19 *cream. I think that the coach thinks Carly could be the greatest and he is coaching*  
20 *her in a way so she achieves that.*

21 **Parent 3:** *If I look at Carly being kept in, I see the coach as pushing her. The child is*  
22 *obviously talented and the coach wants the best out of them. I think it is important*  
23 *that the coach has expectations and that they remind the swimmer that they have got*  
24 *the talent and that they should be pushing themselves.*

1 While Kerr and Stirling (2012) have previously identified that many abusive practices in  
2 sport are seen as necessary in order to produce successful athletic performance, Coakley  
3 (2006) offers another scenario. Coakley (2006) explained that parents may place such a high  
4 level of importance on performance outcomes in the sporting context as a result of a neo-  
5 liberal view that child development is shaped by parents' decisions and practices. In this  
6 respect, parents have come to believe that the success or failure of their child in sport is a  
7 measure of their parenting skills (Coakley, 2006). For example, if the child succeeds in sport,  
8 they are perceived to have done something right in their parenting, while if the child fails,  
9 then the parents have failed (Coakley, 2006). This highlights one possible reason as to why  
10 performance is such a priority for parents.

11 The normalisation or acceptance of abusive coaching practices as necessary in terms  
12 of achieving competitive performance outcomes is also exemplified in the parents' responses  
13 via statements such as: "*they have got the talent and that they should be pushing themselves*"  
14 *and "if I look at Carly being kept in, she obviously has talent and the coach is trying to get*  
15 *the best out of her."* However, through the acceptance of such practices, parents contribute to  
16 the legitimisation of coaching practices that are inappropriate or indeed abusive. A number of  
17 studies in sport research (e.g. Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Kerr & Stirling, 2012; Markula,  
18 1995, 2001, 2003) have investigated how various sporting practices come to be normalised  
19 by those immersed in sporting cultures (i.e. officials, coaches and athletes). These studies  
20 revealed that parents' acceptance of abusive coaching practices in the name of enhanced  
21 competitive performance may occur a result of their socialisation. In this respect, the parents  
22 involved in this study have been socialised in a specific way in relation to what is needed for  
23 successful competitive performance which has indeed influenced the way they interpreted the  
24 three athletes' stories. The speed and effectiveness of the socialisation process for those  
25 immersed in sporting contexts was explored by Dorsch et al., (2015). They found that over

1 the course of a season, parents' goals and aims for their children began with fun and learning  
2 about sport, but quickly changed to outcomes focused (e.g. performance) (Dorsch et al.,  
3 2015). This offers some insight into how the wider social setting of sport can have a  
4 significant influence on parents' perceptions and behaviours.

5 Markula (2003) offers another explanation for the acceptance and normalisation of  
6 ideologies and practices as was identified in this study. Specifically, it was revealed how  
7 sporting cultures constrain the participants from making decisions and acting on judgements  
8 that are meaningfully their own (Markula, 2003). In this way, parents are likely to make  
9 decisions and respond in such a way that reflects that common acceptance of the culture.

10 Lastly, parents normalising cultural practices may be a form of coping strategy. For  
11 example, Burgess, Knight and Mellalieu (2016) found that in order to cope with the stressors  
12 they experience in sport, parents of elite youth gymnasts attempted to normalise demands and  
13 emotions experienced by themselves and also their children (Burgess et al. 2016). While  
14 there was no specific reference made to normalising abusive coaching practices, the findings  
15 of Burgess and colleagues' research provides an alternate insight into why the parents  
16 involved in this present study rationalised and/or normalised the practices occurring in the  
17 three athletes' stories.

18 While there is a perceived acceptance of the abusive practices in the stories by the  
19 parents, this central theme also highlights the tensions or stress the parents experience in  
20 relation to what is involved for the child in order to achieve competitive performance. Two  
21 parents' responses below exemplify the tensions associated with achieving competitive  
22 performance and the potential of associated harm.

23 *Parent 3: If I look at Carly being kept in, I see the coach as pushing her. The child is*  
24 *obviously talented and the coach wants the best out of her. I can almost see the*  
25 *psychological damage unfolding. So too is the relationship between the coach and*



1 *Carly dissolving. I don't think Carly would be feeling respected by the coach. She has*  
 2 *been intimidated into performing. If Carly was my daughter and she was the best 11*  
 3 *year old in the state, I would be trying to build her up at home. I would be saying*  
 4 *things like: 'he would not be pushing you so hard if he did not believe in you.'*

5 **Parent 4:** *I think there is going to be a huge divide between Carly and the coach and*  
 6 *she is going to become anxious about everything she does in relation to swimming,*  
 7 *everything she puts in her mouth, every choice she makes, even if it is with others.*

8 While the parents' responses exemplify some tensions when they read about abusive  
 9 coaching practices, it also highlights the difficulties parents face when they perceive that  
 10 athlete success can only come at a cost of athlete welfare (Visek, Mannix, Mann, & Jones, in  
 11 press).

12 Notably, parent 3 (above) expressed how it was their responsibility to '*build up*' the  
 13 child outside of the sporting environment (e.g. at home) as a way of counteracting the  
 14 emotional damage caused by the coach. This finding is not surprising given previous  
 15 research has found that parents in the elite sporting context may accept that coaching  
 16 practices come at the cost of athlete welfare (Visek et al., in press). However, none of the  
 17 parents were aware at the time the study was conducted that the drive for success and desire  
 18 to win should not be at the cost of the individuals involved" (Grey-Thompson, 2017).

#### 19 ***Sub-theme one - The coach knows best***

20 Within the sub-theme, '*the coach knows best*,' the power differentials occurring in the  
 21 parent-coach relationship becomes evident. Inequitable power relationships are described as  
 22 occurring when one person guides, conducts or directs the actions of another person (Markula  
 23 & Pringle, 2006). In the sporting context specifically, coaches guide or facilitate the actions  
 24 of both athletes and parents. However, Norman (2010) warns that unbalanced power  
 25 relationships can lead to systems of oppression (e.g. submissiveness) in sporting contexts.

1           The submissiveness of the parents involved in this study was noted through their  
2 responses. For example, several of the parents voiced that they *‘do not have a right to*  
3 *question coaches’ approaches as they are the experts.’* Further, parents positioned  
4 themselves in way where they do not have as much knowledge or expertise as coaches,  
5 therefore are inferior to the coach in the sporting context. For example, parents viewed the  
6 coach in each of the three stories as being the bearer of all knowledge and necessary in terms  
7 of the child achieving competitive performance. A selection of parents’ responses below  
8 highlight this point.

9           **Parent 1:** *“At the end of the day, the coach is qualified to coach. I am not.”*

10           **Parent 3:** *“At the end of the day if that coach is the ticket to your child’s success, they*  
11 *might take them to the next level.”*

12           **Parent 7:** *“I think if any of those athletes in the stories were my children, I would let*  
13 *the coach do his/her thing. They are the experts. But, I think it is my responsibility to*  
14 *nurture the kids at home and ensure they are ok.”*

15 However, by parents letting the coach take over due to their perceived expert status, they are  
16 taking a step back from being the central person in the child’s life (Clarke & Harwood, 2014).  
17 Clarke and Harwood (2014) offers an explanation as to why parents readily take a step back  
18 and let coaches take over. They found that many parents feel they have a duty to support their  
19 children and enable them to have the best chances possible to achieve success if they  
20 demonstrate talent (Clarke & Harwood, 2014). The specific findings in this study also align  
21 with what Smits et al., (2017) found and that is that parents believed that coaches would help  
22 their children achieve their goals. In so doing, they trusted and had faith in a coach’s  
23 knowledge (Smits et al., 2017).

24           Questioning coaching practices was expressed as a contentious issue for one parent.  
25 Specifically, this parent noted that if the coach had achieved success in terms of competitive

1 performance, then parents should not question his/her approaches. We draw on parent 8's  
2 response:

3 *Parent 8: "If the coach has achieved success with the kids' performances, who am I*  
4 *or anybody to question his/her approaches. At the end of the day, we all want our*  
5 *children to perform."*

6 However, Denison (2007) and Dension and Anver (2011) explain that when a person is  
7 unable to voice their concerns, docility may result. If parents feel they do not have the right to  
8 question coaches' approaches, it illustrates how hierarchies sustain the acceptance of abusive  
9 practices in the name of competitive performance.

10 Another reason for parents being apprehensive about questioning coaching practices  
11 is offered in the findings of a study conducted by Purdy, Potrac and Jones (2008).  
12 Specifically relating to the coach-athlete relationship, Purdy et al., (2008) found that when  
13 dissent occurs, it can lead to unfair treatment of athletes (e.g. refused selection in future  
14 teams). This finding might in some way offer an explanation as to why parents involved in  
15 this study feel they should not question coaches' approaches as there may be some potential  
16 consequence/s for the child. Brustad (2011) explains how youth sport contexts are complex  
17 and cause problems for parents because they may feel powerless to respond to concerns about  
18 the lack of a sufficiently healthy sport environment for their child.

## 19 **Conclusion**

20 Implementing education interventions with parents in sport is one important way of  
21 preventing abuse from occurring in sport (Mountjoy et al., 2016). In this present study, we  
22 implemented narrative pedagogy as the primary educational tool with 14 parents from a  
23 gymnastics and swimming context. Narrative pedagogy was purposely chosen as the  
24 educative tool in the hope that it would provide parents with the opportunity to better identify  
25 physical and emotional abuse occurring in coaches' approaches.

1 Through inductive TA (Braun & Clark, 2006), the overarching theme of ‘*the coaches*’  
2 *approaches are unacceptable but necessary for performance*’ was identified in the parents’  
3 responses. The identification of this overarching theme allowed us to understand how  
4 meritocracy and the dominant competitive performance ideology have been part of the  
5 parents’ socialization in sport which in turn has impacted their thoughts in regard to coaching  
6 practices. This work has shown that education interventions centring on athlete abuse are not  
7 straightforward, but suggests how they can contribute to parent learning thus ensuring “sport  
8 as a place of safety for all” (Brackenridge & Leahy, 2014, p. 2). The sub-theme, ‘*the coach*  
9 *knows best*’ allowed us to identify the disproportionate power relationships occurring  
10 between a parent and a coach and how parents are not empowered to reflect and act on  
11 coaching practices.

12 As Goodson and Gill (2011) explain, narrative pedagogy is highly dependence on  
13 post-interactive reflection (reflection and reciprocation after interactive discussion, sharing of  
14 stories) which means learning and transformation occurs in an ongoing way. This aligns with  
15 Smits et al., (2017) who explains how “sense-making is a sequential process that never stops”  
16 (p. 79). Further investigation is needed to understand what has occurred for the parents  
17 involved in this study *post* narrative pedagogy. In particular, whether narrative pedagogy was  
18 transformative for them and disrupted the dominant social and cultural narrative (i.e.  
19 meritocracy) (Goodson & Gill, 2011).

20

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