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Advancing the study of parental involvement to optimise the psychosocial development and experiences of young athletes

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to review and critique the literature in youth sport that specifically relates to parental influence on the experiences and psychosocial development of young athletes. First, we consider the literature examining the extent to which parental involvement in organised youth sport has been associated with psychosocial outcomes in young people. Within this critique, we draw upon what has been learned from the sport-based positive youth development (PYD) and life skills literature. Second, we address conceptual and methodological limitations of existing literature (e.g., homogeneity of samples, oversimplification of parenting in sport, studying parental involvement in isolation) and target key scientific gaps that exist in facilitating our understanding of optimal parental involvement (e.g., raising parental awareness and facilitating opportunities to support psychosocial development, improving coach education to facilitate parent-coach relationships, collaborating with coaches through well designed interventions, working on the “right” assets at the right time). Such gaps represent how parents appear to have been overlooked within the intentional process of psychosocial development. We offer concluding remarks about the future of youth sport in this area and provide specific recommendations to inspire future researchers and practitioners towards the challenge of empowering parents and more fully enabling their potential.

Key Words: Parenting, Youth Sport, Psychosocial development, Positive Youth Development

44 In a special issue of *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* in 2015, we (Harwood & Knight)
45 proposed that expertise in sport parenting was “demonstrated through parental
46 involvement that increases the chances for children to achieve their sporting potential,
47 have a positive psychosocial experience, and develop a range of positive developmental
48 outcomes” (p. 25). This statement was based upon the belief that success for children
49 and adolescents involved in youth sport cannot, and should not, be measured by athletic
50 performance alone. Rather, we believe that a ‘successful’ sport environment is one that
51 facilitates a child’s on-going involvement in sport and physical activity, supports
52 psychological wellbeing, and provides young people with opportunities to develop
53 transferable life skills.

54 Such aspirations for youth sport have also been reflected by international sport
55 organisations. For instance, in their position statement on youth athlete development,
56 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) expert panel referred to the importance of
57 a *commitment* to the psychological development of *resilient* and *adaptable* athletes
58 (Bergeron et al., 2015). Specifically, the authors articulated a clear, but multifaceted
59 goal for sport: “Develop healthy, capable and resilient young athletes, while attaining
60 widespread, inclusive, sustainable and enjoyable participation and success for all levels
61 of individual athletic achievement” (p. 834). The specific proposition being that sport
62 experiences should equip young people with appropriate coping skills and psychosocial
63 qualities regardless of sporting level/attainments. The panel admonished that “this is a
64 considerable challenge for all stakeholders in youth sports—parents, coaches,
65 administrators, sport governing bodies *and*, especially, youth athletes” (p. 834).

66 Recognizing the challenge and complexity of parental involvement that could
67 help to nurture such positive psychosocial outcomes, we previously posited that parents
68 must engage in a “consistent cycle of triangular responsibilities that revolve around

69 managing and supporting the needs of their child, managing themselves and their own
70 well-being, and managing their interactions with others in the youth sport environment”
71 (Harwood & Knight, 2015, p. 32). This interpretation was driven by an examination of
72 studies in organised youth sport. However, on reflection, we realise that we failed to
73 critically appraise the literature in terms of the balance between studies examining
74 parental influence upon ‘in situ’ experiential consequences (e.g., motivation, affective
75 responses, and sporting behaviour in youth sport situations) and *psychosocial*
76 *development* (i.e., the growth of social, cognitive, emotional and behavioural
77 skills/qualities through sport; Holt, 2016; Pierce, Gould, & Camiré, 2017). Although
78 these ‘consequences’ are likely linked, the latter aspiration, psychosocial development,
79 requires a more proactive and targeted approach from parents. Such aspirations are
80 reflective of the mission of sport-based positive youth development (PYD) and life
81 skills programs, where there exists a clear intentionality to use sporting activities to
82 help young people harness a wide range of internal and external assets (e.g., Bean,
83 Kramers, Forneris & Camiré, 2018; Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012; Holt et al., 2017;
84 Jacobs & Wright, 2018).

85 Given that every young person has a right to high quality, developmentally-rich
86 experiences *in* and *through* sport, we believe there is a responsibility on scholars not
87 only to understand and illustrate how parents can impact the ‘in situ’ sporting
88 experience of a young person (i.e., positive psychological states) but also how parents
89 can nurture more enduring psychosocial attributes as internal resources for adult life.
90 With these points in mind, the aims of this present article are threefold. First, we will
91 critically reflect upon literature examining the impact of parental involvement in
92 organised youth sport on young peoples’ psychosocial outcomes; we consider the
93 impact on motivational, affective, social, behavioural, and developmental indices as

94 well as what has been learned from sport-based PYD and life skills literature. Second,
95 we aim to identify the conceptual and methodological limitations of existing literature,
96 with a particular emphasis on addressing scientific gaps that exist in facilitating our
97 understanding of optimal parental involvement. Third, we aim to inspire future
98 researchers and practitioners in this area by considering challenges and opportunities
99 that exist by empowering parents and their potential capabilities more fully.

100 **Parental involvement in organised youth sport settings**

101 Researchers have committed extensively to understanding how parents may
102 positively or negatively affect the quality of young people's experiences in sport
103 (Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017). When evaluating this body of work, a diversity
104 of what we will term 'psychosocial outcomes' emerges due to different types of
105 parental practices and involvement. Such outcomes range from motivational
106 regulations, affective responses, self-perceptions, moral behaviour, coping strategies,
107 and well-being consequences that have been reported or displayed by young athletes
108 through both quantitative and qualitative investigations (Berrow, Knight, & Hudson,
109 2018; Knight & Holt, 2014). Several elements of parental involvement have been found
110 to influence these psychosocial outcomes including; parenting style; parenting practices
111 across contexts (e.g., used at home, in relation to training, and those displayed at
112 competitions); and parental relationships and interactions with others in the sporting
113 environment. A brief overview of these three areas is provided below (a full review is
114 beyond the scope of this paper, Berrow et al. (2018) provide further details).

115 **Parenting style.** A growing number of studies (e.g., Holt, Tamminen, Black,
116 Mandigo, & Fox, 2009; Juntumma, Keskivaara, & Punamäki, 2005; Sapieja, Dunn, &
117 Holt, 2011) point to the influence of general parenting styles (defined as "a constellation
118 of attitudes toward the child that are communicated to the child and that, taken together,

119 create an emotional climate in which the parent's behaviours are expressed" (Darling
120 & Steinberg, 1993, p. 488) on certain psychosocial outcomes in children. Specifically,
121 research indicates that autonomy-supportive or authoritative parenting positively
122 impacts on children, by reducing amotivation and increasing more self-determined
123 forms of motivation (e.g., Chew & Wang, 2010; Gagné, Ryan, & Bargmann, 2010).
124 Further, an authoritative parenting style is associated with enhanced sport satisfaction
125 (Juntumma et al., 2005) and higher rates of healthy and non-perfectionism (Sapieja et
126 al., 2011), while an autonomy supportive approach is associated with enhanced well-
127 being (Gagné et al., 2010). In contrast, controlling or authoritarian parenting styles have
128 been associated with reduced self-esteem and vitality (Gagné et al., 2010) as well as
129 increased likelihood for young athletes to engage in norm-breaking behaviours
130 (Juntumma et al., 2005).

131 **Parenting practices across contexts.** Researchers in youth sport have made a
132 frequent distinction between parental behaviours or practices that are perceived to be
133 supportive and those that are viewed as pressuring. Generally, positive psychosocial
134 outcomes are associated with supportive behaviours displayed at home, in training and
135 at competitions, while negative or detrimental psychosocial outcomes are associated
136 with pressure, particularly in relation to competitions (Knight et al., 2017). For
137 instance, the provision of tangible support, particularly in the form of money and time,
138 from parents is especially important (e.g., Baxter-Jones & Maffuli, 2003; Wuerth, Lee,
139 & Alfermann, 2004). Such tangible support is identified by athletes as a necessary
140 requirement to ensure children's participation and progression in sport (Knight, Boden,
141 & Holt, 2010; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005) and thus is the basis to subsequent
142 psychosocial development. The provision of tangible support from parents
143 demonstrates to children that they value their sporting involvement (Boiche, Guillet,

144 Bois, & Sazzarin, 2011), which can enhance feelings of enjoyment (Fraser-Thomas,
145 Côté, & Deakin, 2008), competence (Hassell, Sabiston, & Bloom, 2010), motivation
146 (Knight, Little, Harwood, & Goodger, 2016) and persistence (Dunn, Dorsch, King, &
147 Rothlisberger, 2016). However, athletes can become aware of their parents'
148 commitment and subsequently perceive pressure to "repay" their parents (Lauer,
149 Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010).

150 Recent research has shown a direct relationship between the amount of money
151 parents commit to their child's sport and subsequent perceptions of pressure reported
152 by child-athletes (Dunn et al., 2016). When children perceive pressure from parents, it
153 can impact on continued engagement in sport (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2009),
154 their sport enjoyment (Amado, Sanchez-Olivia, Gonzalez-Ponce, Pulido-Gonzalez, &
155 Sanchez-Miguel, 2015; Babkes & Weiss, 1999), anxiety levels (Power & Woolger,
156 1994; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986), and engagement in unsporting behaviours (Leo,
157 Sanchez-Miguel, Sanchez-Olivia, Amado, & García-Calvo, 2015). Further, at
158 competitions, if parents are focused on winning, punish children, or provide critical
159 feedback it can reduce children's perceptions of competence (Babkes & Weiss, 1999;
160 Knight, Dorsch, Osai, Haderlie, Sellars, 2016), and increase both anxiety (Bean,
161 Jeffery-Tosoni, Baker, & Fraser-Thomas, 2016; Elliott & Drummond, 2017) and fear
162 of failure (Sagar & Lavallee, 2010). It is also noteworthy that high parental expectations
163 and concerns about parental criticism is associated with unhealthy or negative forms of
164 perfectionism (Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Miller, 2006; Sagar & Stoeber, 2009).

165 In contrast, when children perceive their parents focus on effort, self-referenced
166 achievement, and personal improvement at competitions and in relation to training
167 (creating a parental task-involving/mastery climate) athletes report higher levels and
168 quality of motivation (Knight et al., 2016; McArdle & Duda, 2004), commitment

169 (D'Arripe-Longueville, Hars, Debois, & Calmels, 2009), perceived competence
170 (Atkins, Johnson, Force, & Petrie, 2013), enjoyment (Morris & Kavussanu, 2008),
171 effort (Gutiérrez, Caus, & Ruiz, 2005), self-esteem (O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, &
172 Cumming, 2014), and sporting behaviour (Davies, Babkes-Stellino, Nichols, &
173 Coleman, 2016). Further, praise and encouragement with constructive feedback after
174 competitions can facilitate motivation (Keegan, Spray, Harwood, & Lavalley, 2010;
175 Knight et al., 2016) and increase confidence and positive affect (Elliott & Drummond,
176 2017). Positive reinforcement can increase perceptions of competence and effort
177 (Babkes & Weiss, 1999) and help athletes rationalise their thoughts and feelings
178 (Connaughton, Wadey, Hanton, & Jones, 2008).

179 However, the impact of parental feedback on psychosocial outcomes,
180 particularly the feedback provided at competitions, appears to be influenced by
181 children's individual preferences and their perceptions of their parents' knowledge
182 (Knight et al., 2010; Knight et al., 2016). In general, children have reported that when
183 parents have appropriate knowledge about their sport (either as a result of playing or
184 coaching experience) or possess pertinent life or sport experiences, the provision of
185 sport-specific information in relation to competitions (i.e., tactical or technical
186 feedback) is positively received and enhances enjoyment, concentration, and
187 confidence. In contrast, unsolicited sport-specific feedback before or after competitions
188 from parents deemed to be lacking in the necessary knowledge or experience is
189 described to lead to feelings of confusion, frustration, or pressure (Knight et al., 2010;
190 Knight et al., 2016).

191 **Parental relationships and interactions with others.** Parents engage with
192 many other individuals within the youth sport environment (i.e., other parents, coaches,
193 and officials; Harwood & Knight, 2015). Although surprisingly limited in scope,

194 available research indicates that the quality of parental interactions with other
195 individuals impacts on children's sport experience (cf. Holt et al., 2009; Omli & LaVoi,
196 2011). For instance, when parents engage with other parents (either of children on the
197 same team, or opposing team) in a respectful and supportive manner, children report
198 that it enhances their enjoyment of sport (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009).
199 Similarly, children have explained that encouraging and congratulating other children
200 on their team and their opponents can also enhance their enjoyment, increase
201 motivation, and reduce embarrassment (Knight et al., 2010). In contrast, if parents
202 engage in angry exchanges with other parents it can lead to children feeling
203 embarrassed or anxious (Knight et al., 2010; Omli & LaVoi, 2011).

204 The way in which parents interact with their child's coach is also reported to
205 affect children's sport experience (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2009; Jowett & Timson-
206 Katchis, 2005). For instance, athletes and coaches have explained that if parents
207 question coaches or interfere with practices it can result in feelings of pressure or
208 anxiety for children (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2008; Lauer et al., 2010).
209 In contrast, open and honest relationships between parents and coaches can increase a
210 child's trust in their coach, help parents to learn about their child's sport and be more
211 optimally involved, and enable parents to help children to solve athlete-coach conflicts
212 (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005; Knight & Holt, 2014). Further, parents and coaches
213 can both actively influence the development of athlete's coping strategies (Tamminen
214 & Holt, 2012; Tamminen, McEwen, & Crocker, 2016) by questioning and reminding
215 athletes of previous coping attempts, sharing their own experiences, and initiating
216 conversations about coping. If coaches and parents work together to implement these
217 strategies, it is likely that athletes' development of coping strategies will be enhanced.

218 **Methodological caveats and limitations of the literature.** The body of
219 evidence reviewed above offers extensive insights into the types of parental
220 involvement that have been positively and negatively associated with a range of
221 psychosocial outcomes in child-athletes. However, there are several methodological
222 points that are important to share at this juncture. First, we would caution the reader
223 against simply concluding what is ‘good or bad’ sport parenting particularly given the
224 lack of research on certain areas. For instance, when considering the “best” parenting
225 style to use within youth sport there is tremendous homogeneity in the populations
226 being studied (Berrow et al., 2018; Harwood & Knight, 2015) and this limits our
227 understanding of cultural and developmental influences. Moreover, family structure is
228 seldom reported within existing literature which restricts our appreciation of the roles
229 or influence of parental involvement outside that of traditional heterosexual parenting.

230 Second, we are at great risk of oversimplifying parenting and parental
231 involvement in sport (cf. Knight et al., 2017) because behaviours within studies are
232 often broadly categorised as supportive or pressuring. The meaning of these terms is
233 often vague and can be applied to a range of individual practices from autonomy-
234 support, support of basic psychological needs, tangible, informational, and emotional
235 support, and positive-reinforcement (Berrow et al., 2018). Furthermore, distinct
236 concepts are occasionally conflated and labelled ‘support’, such as the facilitation of
237 sport participation and autonomy-support (Anderson, Funk, Elliott, & Smith, 2003).
238 Consequently, when we talk about pressure or support, we might actually be making
239 reference to a range of different practices that may make their own unique contribution
240 to children’s sport experiences and developmental outcomes.

241 The exact impact of different parental practices on children is further
242 complicated because how children perceive their parents’ behaviours appears to be

243 influenced by the timing of the behaviour (e.g., comments before competitions may
244 have a different impact to those after events; Elliott & Drummond, 2015, Knight et al.,
245 2010), the presence of others within the environment (e.g., the coach-created
246 motivational climate might mediate the impact that a parent-initiated climate has on a
247 child; Amorose, Anderson-Butcher, Newman, Fraina, & Iachini, 2016), and also
248 specific parent and child characteristics such as parent beliefs or goals regarding sport
249 involvement or the quality of the relationship between a parent and child (Knight et al.,
250 2017). Thus, when we consider parental involvement in isolation or devoid of
251 contextual information, we risk creating an incomplete and potentially misleading
252 picture of how parents influence young people.

253 Finally, perhaps the most predominant reflection of studies that have employed
254 parent and athlete samples from traditional, organised youth sport settings, is that few
255 have investigated the potential role of parents on the child's perceived or actual
256 development of specific social, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural skills. The body
257 of literature is characterised by quantitative cross-sectional associations between
258 (perceived) parental behaviours (generally situation-specific and negative) and
259 consequences reported by athletes and qualitative (often one-off) interviews with
260 athletes reflecting upon parental involvement usually at competitions. Beyond
261 Tamminen's work on the development of adolescent coping skills (Tamminen & Holt,
262 2012; Tamminen et al., 2016), there appear to be few empirical investigations in these
263 traditional youth sport samples that have examined the parental involvement with a
264 specific focus upon how parents may facilitate the development or growth (perceived
265 or objective) of enduring psychosocial assets that are so important for development
266 (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000; Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005).

267 One potential reason for this is that although the general mission of traditional,
268 organised youth sport programs should be focused on a high quality, enriching
269 experience, the actual focus of youth sport imbalances maladaptively towards athlete
270 skill development and competition outcomes. Forneris, Camiré and Trudel (2012)
271 provide some empirical support for this proposition in their study of high school
272 coaches, parents, athletes, and administrators' perceptions of the youth sport mission,
273 experiences, and expectations. Their findings indicated lapses in awareness of the
274 broader mission of youth sport alongside discrepancies in what stakeholders expected
275 in terms of the integration of life skills and positive sport values compared to
276 perceptions of the degree to which these skills and values were actually being integrated
277 within their programme. As an alternative to youth sport programs that primarily focus
278 on sport skill development, sport-based PYD programs view young people as resources
279 to be developed and intentionally focus on developmentally-rich experiences through
280 their involvement in organised activities (Holt & Neely, 2011; Petitpas et al., 2005).
281 Importantly, parents and family are viewed as key external assets within PYD research
282 (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002) and so it is pertinent to
283 appraise what we know about parental involvement in the context of the sport-based
284 PYD literature.

285 **Parental involvement within sport-based PYD research**

286 A sport-based PYD approach can be applied to all forms of youth sport program
287 whether or not the primary focus is on intervention or prevention to reduce negative
288 adolescent behaviours, life skills development and transfer, or athletic potential and
289 sport skill acquisition (Petitpas et al., 2005). However, in noting the importance of the
290 context within which the activity occurs, the National Research Council and Institute
291 of Medicine (NRCIM, 2002) proposed eight necessary contextual features for

292 optimising development outcomes. These include a physically and psychologically safe
293 environment that has appropriate structure and supportive relationships, integrating
294 school, family, and the community where possible. There also needs to be opportunities
295 to belong and feel valued in order to develop confidence in addition to the presence of
296 positive social norms. Opportunities to build and develop new skills (e.g., both physical
297 and internal, psychosocial assets) must also be present (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, &
298 Deakin, 2005). Aligned with the NRCIM, Petitpas et al. (2005) specifically note:
299 “Parents and guardians who become involved in their children’s activities and
300 demonstrate a clear interest on a day-by-day basis without being intrusive, are in the
301 best position to reinforce appropriate behaviours and attitudes” (p. 70). Côté,
302 Turnnidge, and Evans’ (2014) Personal Assets Framework (PAF) for sport-based youth
303 development also pays attention to the role that parents play in providing appropriate
304 opportunities for young athletes to develop quality relationships that ultimately lead to
305 better psychosocial development (i.e., the 4Cs – confidence, connection, character, and
306 competence).

307 Most recently, Holt and colleagues (2017) used a meta-synthesis design to
308 systematically synthesise key findings from the qualitative PYD literature, resulting in
309 a grounded theory of PYD through sport. Consistent with earlier frameworks, their
310 theory emphasises the salient role of parents and proposes that: (1) distal ecological
311 systems (e.g., community, policy, culture) and individual factors influence PYD
312 through sport; (2) A PYD climate (based on relationships between athletes and peers,
313 parents, and other adults) can produce PYD outcomes (i.e., through implicit processes);
314 (3) PYD outcomes can be attained if a life skills program focus (involving life skill
315 building activities and transfer activities) is in place (i.e., through explicit processes)
316 and in the presence of a PYD climate; (4) The combined effects of a PYD climate and

317 a life skills focus will produce more PYD outcomes than a PYD climate alone, and; (5)
318 Gaining PYD outcomes in and through sport will facilitate transfer and enable youth to
319 thrive and contribute to their communities. The theory offers an important extension
320 and contribution to the literature, with its attempt to make a clear distinction between
321 the influence of implicit processes (i.e., intentional yet natural activities and interactions
322 that foster development) and the value of explicit life skill programs in supplementing
323 parent (coach and peer) initiated PYD climates (see Bean et al., 2018; Gould & Carson,
324 2008; Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Turnnidge, Côté, & Hancock, 2014 for reviews).

325 Although each of these latter models implicate parents (alongside coaches and
326 peers) in creating an appropriate social environment for promoting and reinforcing
327 psychosocial development, parents have actually received limited scientific attention in
328 the sport-based PYD literature. Specifically, in Holt and colleagues' (2017) meta-
329 synthesis only 9 (14%) of the 63 studies collected data from parents and very few of
330 these studies placed the parent as an active participant in their investigation (i.e.,
331 collected data on the parent's role-related behaviours and activities per se). The
332 majority of studies explored parents' perceptions of the benefits of sport and the role it
333 can play in their child's development (e.g., Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2009; Holt,
334 Kingsley, Tink, & Scherer, 2011; Light, 2010; Neely & Holt, 2014; Wiersma & Fifer,
335 2008) or their perceptions (alongside coaches and peers) of sport-based PYD program
336 quality (Hardcastle, Tye, Glassey, & Hagger, 2013; Hodge, Kanters, Forneris, Bocarro,
337 & Sayre-McCord, 2017; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2011).

338 Within many sport-based PYD intervention studies (including both implicit and
339 explicit development programs), the role of parents within the processes of
340 psychosocial development have been posited even when parents have not been part of
341 the intervention (see Camiré, Trudel, & Bernard, 2013; Hodge et al., 2017; Strachan,

342 Côté, & Deakin, 2011; Turnnidge, Vierimaa, & Côté, 2012). These studies position
343 parents as potential mechanisms for delivery and reinforcement in explicit PYD
344 programs particularly with regards to supporting key messages and facilitating life skill
345 transfer. For example, in one of the more targeted studies of the role of the family in a
346 sport-based life skills program, Hodge and colleagues (2017) found that parents used
347 specific events (e.g., car rides and dinnertime) as opportunities to recognise and
348 reinforce what children had learned and to ask how such insights could be applied
349 outside of the sporting context. Similarly, Neely and Holt (2014) highlighted how
350 parents seized upon ‘teachable moments’ around lessons learned through sport when
351 documenting the strategies they used to help facilitate PYD.

352 In conclusion, as Dorsch and Vierimaa (2017) surmised, although PYD
353 researchers have procured substantive knowledge on the pedagogical strategies and
354 activities enacted by model youth sport coaches to teach life skills (e.g., Camiré et al.,
355 2012; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007), much less is known about how sport
356 parents can facilitate psychosocial development as part of the youth sport experience.
357 This is largely due to (semi) structured parental involvement and intentional sport
358 parenting strategies (and importantly their impact) remaining absent from empirical
359 interventions.

360 **Addressing gaps in youth sport parenting research and practice**

361 From the outset of this article we have focused intentionally on young people’s
362 right to high quality developmental experiences in and through sport, a right that we
363 believe most, if not all, parents would endorse for their child’s sporting experience.
364 Such experiences are those that comprise positive ‘in situ’ psychological states and
365 social behaviour linked to the sport activity (e.g., recreational play, practice,
366 competition), and those that help to develop more enduring psychosocial attributes as

367 critical resources for adult life (Lerner et al., 2000). Our review of studies in more
368 traditional, organised youth sport suggests parents can influence children's experiences
369 through associations with motivational, cognitive, social, and affective responses.
370 However, the literature falls short of illustrating how parents can proactively and
371 intentionally contribute to their child's psychosocial development. Sport-based PYD
372 researchers have targeted psychosocial development in a range of settings and
373 populations (e.g., after-school, high school programs) through implicit and explicit
374 intervention processes (Bean et al., 2018; Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Turnnidge et al.,
375 2014), yet parents remain 'peripheral' in these studies. Moreover, there is an absence
376 of research which has explicitly examined the impact that parents may have on the
377 effectiveness of psychosocial or life skill development interventions with young
378 athletes.

379 The current evidence base presents opportunities in respect of research
380 questions that remain to be asked, and in more innovative applied research designs
381 incorporating parents. One justifiable question to consider is the degree to which
382 coaches, organisations and governing bodies should intentionally involve parents from
383 the outset to facilitate a youth sport environment and experience that prioritizes
384 children's psychosocial development (both in and through sport). We know from
385 research and personal experience as practitioners that parents are often not afforded this
386 opportunity, potentially limiting the benefits their child (and they) may gain from sport
387 participation. Where an organisation's program focuses on sport skill or talent
388 development, coaches may be less inviting of parental involvement (Gould et al., 2008).
389 Presently, as applied researchers we are frustrated by the underutilisation of parents as
390 a valuable resource to support coaches and other stakeholders for the betterment of
391 child-athletes. Interestingly, beyond Harwood and Swain (2002), we could not locate a

392 single, empirical intervention study where parents and coach(es) have intentionally
393 worked *in tandem* to influence or improve general or specific child-athlete psychosocial
394 factors. In addition, few studies exploring the processes and impact of parent-coach-
395 athlete relationships on athlete factors exist (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005; Smoll,
396 Cumming, & Smith, 2011), but none of these are intervention studies comprised of
397 empirical data from the athletes. From the position, therefore, of advancing more
398 proactive parental involvement to facilitate the development of their child, a number of
399 research avenues and designs emerge as clear opportunities.

400 **Raising parental awareness and facilitating opportunities to support**
401 **psychosocial development.** If one takes a humanistic perspective towards parents as
402 valued resources who are well-intentioned and capable of both learning from coaches
403 and offering insights into optimizing their child's experience, then it is important for
404 researchers to raise parents' awareness of *how* they can explicitly support their child's
405 psychosocial development and facilitate opportunities for parents to engage in this
406 manner. This may include intentionally educating or sensitising parents to the
407 psychosocial qualities and life skills that may be derived through sport (cf. Neely &
408 Holt, 2014), and gaining their perspective on how they can promote and support the
409 development of each attribute. By encouraging sport support staff to work with parents
410 more proactively to raise their awareness and facilitate opportunities for engagement,
411 we will also better understand any challenges they foresee in the implementation of
412 proposed strategies. Qualitative or mixed-methods research may afford scholars a
413 clearer insight into the prospect and feasibility of parents contributing to the
414 development of their child's psychosocial assets in sport and across different settings
415 (see Johnston, Harwood & Minniti, 2013).

416 **Improving coach education to facilitate parent-coach relationships.** We believe
417 that making parental involvement more focused and targeted towards facilitating
418 psychosocial development is largely dependent upon the philosophy of the coach or
419 organisation. In many respects, coaches are the ‘gatekeepers’ to a child-athlete
420 development program and our experience is that parents are often kept ‘at arms length’
421 by coaches and National Governing Bodies. The limited study of the processes of
422 parents and coaches working together for the child-athlete is indicative evidence of this.
423 The continual referral to ‘pushy’, ‘overinvolved’ and ‘demanding’ parents reflects a
424 well-ingrained discourse that still appears to irrationally dominate pockets of the youth
425 sport sector (Knight & Newport, 2017). Mindful of the implications of such negative
426 views, researchers could seek to better understand the landscape of coach education and
427 development in relation to a coach’s understanding of the needs and skills of parents,
428 as well as the psychology of parent-coach relationships.

429 In reviewing the strategies employed by high school coaches to facilitate PYD
430 through sport, Camiré et al. (2012) noted that coaches developed a well-considered
431 coaching philosophy and presented it to parents and athletes to ensure everyone knew
432 the approach that the coach was going to take that year. Intentional planning of
433 developmental strategies into coaching activities and opportunities to practice life skills
434 in sport were also deliberate features. These coaches appeared educated to purposefully
435 offer the athlete opportunities to facilitate their athletic/talent development in tandem
436 with their psychosocial development (see Harwood & Johnston, 2016). Integrating
437 parents within this process would therefore appear pertinent and it is perhaps timely for
438 researchers to appraise how coach development, education, and qualification systems
439 prepare coaches (see Bean & Forneris, 2016) to collaborate with parents to enhance
440 performance and psychosocial development. Only by addressing how applied

441 researchers may influence coaches and coach development systems to inherently value
442 and enact a psychosocial approach (Bean & Forneris, 2016; Lacroix, Camiré, & Trudel,
443 2008; McAllister, Blinde & Weiss, 2000) will we ‘open the door’ for parents to be fully
444 integrated into programs and recognised as valuable collaborators (Strachan et al.,
445 2011).

446 **Collaborating with coaches through well designed interventions.** Research
447 indicates that the interactions parents have with others in youth sport contexts impacts
448 the child’s experience (Gould, Pierce, Wright, Lauer, & Nalepa, 2016; Knight & Holt,
449 2013; Omli & LaVoi, 2011). However, little attention has been given to actually
450 understanding what underpins successful or effective coach-parent or parent-parent
451 relationships (Holt & Knight, 2014). As applied researchers, two of the most common
452 questions we are asked is how can coaches’ work better with parents? And how can
453 parents develop better relationships with coaches? Yet there is a dearth of empirical
454 research that has explicitly examined relationship development and the subsequent
455 impact that improving these relationships might have on children’s psychosocial
456 outcomes (Knight & Gould, 2016). Longitudinal, intervention designs serve as
457 promising mechanisms to answer such questions. For example, grounded in an elite
458 youth soccer academy, Harwood (2008) reported on the support roles of parents to
459 coaches and players in conjunction with a psychosocial coaching efficacy intervention.
460 The primary focus here was placed on educating and empowering coaches to more
461 explicitly integrate the psychosocial concepts of commitment, communication,
462 concentration, control, and confidence into soccer practice. Parents were sensitised to
463 the 5Cs in group workshops and supported the coaches in helping their sons to complete
464 training and match reflection journals focused on demonstrations of the 5Cs in soccer.
465 Findings over the three-month intervention supported improvements in coaching

466 efficacy to integrate the 5Cs as well as perceived developments in the squad. In
467 qualitative follow-up interviews, parents noted the value and perceived impacts of the
468 work, but no data on parent practices or behaviour was gathered.

469 The future direction here lies in attention to more sophisticated and novel designs.
470 Applied researchers and practitioners should look to incorporate parents more fully in
471 the psychosocial education and delivery process and seek to observe and examine the
472 combined effects of parent education, working in parallel with the coach / coach
473 education, on indices of psychosocial development in the athlete. Opportunities for
474 parent-coach collaborations exist for team and individual sports, and it would be
475 interesting to generate knowledge on different sport types and cultures in terms of
476 successful pedagogical strategies and challenges encountered.

477 **Working on the “right” assets at the right time.** A final, more advanced
478 consideration for applied researchers working in this field of youth sport is to achieve
479 a more detailed understanding of when and how parental involvement may most impact
480 on an athlete’s developmental assets. It is recognised that there are certain
481 developmental stages where parental influence upon the child is more salient (e.g.,
482 Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). However, our scientific appreciation of questions such
483 as: ‘Do mothers versus fathers have greater impact on helping adolescent daughter-
484 athletes to master their emotions?’; ‘At what age should parents encourage greater
485 ownership, organisational, and decision-making skills?’, or ‘Which life skills
486 introduced to adolescent athletes are particularly easy for parents to reinforce, and
487 which are most difficult?’ is empirically limited. It may be that parental influences
488 through facilitating child input, role modelling, feedback, support, and ‘teachable
489 moments’ are less impactful and salient than the parallel roles of coaches or peers at
490 different ages. However, we need data to arrive at any evidence-based conclusions.

491 **The Next 50 Years: Challenging Systems and Improving Policies**

492 Acknowledging the 50 years of FEPSAC as the leading body in European Sport
493 and Exercise Psychology, it is fitting to provide some concluding remarks that reflect a
494 vision of what progressive research should be striving to achieve for incoming
495 generations. Improving the study of parental involvement and, by definition, the
496 experience and development of young athletes means urging scholars towards research
497 initiatives that will raise the profile of parents within the fulfilment of youth sport
498 developmental goals. This can involve efforts to inform the policies and practice of
499 youth sport federations or governing bodies to more skilfully empower parents,
500 recognising that organizations often require or request guidance regarding how to best
501 integrate research into practice (Holt et al., 2018). To achieve this, researchers must
502 look beyond knowledge acquisition and consider knowledge translation and
503 dissemination when designing research studies to narrow the research-to-practice gap
504 and ensure findings make more of a contribution to practice in youth sport settings (see
505 Gould, 2016).

506 Our four priority areas of research conceptually challenge the functioning of
507 systems in which parents and athletes are stakeholders. Drawing from
508 Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological theory, it is clear that much of our research on
509 sport parents has existed within the ecological *microsystem* – the ecological niche or
510 context that is closest to directly influencing the child. However, microsystems
511 comprising coaching or parental attitudes and behaviour are influenced by a series of
512 more distal outer systems or contexts (see Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008)
513 including *mesosystems* and *exosystems* (e.g., restrictions on parental involvement due
514 to work pressures/culture; how a coach is evaluated in his/her job environment by an
515 employer; how parents are perceived by coaches and administrators within different

516 clubs and sports organisations; the coach education and qualification framework of a
517 national governing body; traditions regarding parental involvement). Notably, the
518 wider social, cultural, and political context within which these inner environments
519 operate is known as a *macrosystem* and this system sets the aims, operating standards,
520 and measures of effectiveness. Consequently, perhaps the most effective manner
521 through which we might see changes in our practices relating to sport parents is if a
522 change occurs within the macrosystem. For example, if governments and their funded
523 national sport federations adopted a stronger political stance on the duty of care,
524 psychosocial development, and well-being of young athletes (e.g., as requested by
525 DCMS, 2016), the criteria against which sport programs and coaches are judged would
526 start to change. Ideally this would translate into improved coach education, more
527 holistic philosophies, and a clearer parental engagement and empowerment strategy in
528 clubs and youth sport settings to ensure that all individuals within an athletes'
529 microsystem could successfully, effectively, and appropriately contribute to athletes'
530 psychosocial development and wellbeing. Such a chain of conditions and consequences
531 aligns with Holt and colleagues (2017) model – beginning with the most distal
532 ecological system.

533 With the ideal of macrosystem change in mind, we believe that researchers can
534 employ stronger designs in consideration of Bronfenbrenner's model that offer better
535 data on what improvements in child development are possible through youth sport with
536 more proactive parental engagement. Recent studies have illustrated the value of
537 delivering intentional group-based or online sport parent interventions (i.e., Dorsch,
538 King, Dunn, Osai, & Tulane, 2017; Thrower, Harwood, & Spray, 2018) through
539 improvements in parental confidence, task-orientated parent-child communication,
540 support, and warmth. However, although such initial findings are important in the

541 context of relational factors that underpin a PYD climate (Holt et al., 2017),
542 interventions with parents targeting specific ‘in situ’ (e.g., enjoyment, reduced anxiety,
543 focus) and long-term child developmental outcomes (e.g., enhanced confidence,
544 emotional regulation and coping skills, communication skills, self-awareness,
545 leadership) are necessary. Applied researchers interested in this area are encouraged to
546 draw upon the well-established, mainstream parent education and training literature
547 base (e.g., Breitenstein, Gross, & Christophersen, 2014; Kaminski, Valle, Filene, &
548 Boyle, 2008).

549 A diversity of research designs may serve as pertinent mechanisms for capturing
550 how more empowered parents can exert their capabilities in engaging with coaches and
551 the youth sport community in best practices to help their child’s developmental growth
552 and overall experiences in and through sport. Longitudinal mixed methods approaches
553 with attention to education, relationship development, support, and reinforcement
554 practices, as well as targeted organisational and club change are perhaps most exciting
555 as they may combine intervention, observation, and participant reflection with multiple
556 stakeholders (e.g., parents, coaches, athletes, other parents, peers). We recognise that
557 such research may be time consuming and not without organisational, political and
558 cultural barriers (see Dorsch et al., in press). Nevertheless, the last 25 years of research
559 in sport psychology is characterised more by studies ‘*of parents*’ opposed to ‘*with*
560 *parents*’; it is timely that we more closely examine what parents are capable of as
561 opposed to studying them as incidental consumers and ‘influencers’ in environments
562 that can purposely limit their engagement with the research process and subsequent
563 practice.

564 In conclusion, we have adopted a vantage point in this commemorative article
565 that intentionally critiques and questions the health of sport parent research in terms of

566 its scientific contribution to the developmental goals of sport participation for young
567 people. In the United Kingdom, we are presently in the midst of a political discourse
568 characterised by cultural worries over a lack of duty of care, safeguarding, athlete
569 mental health, and inappropriate environments for young people involved in sport
570 (Knight, Harwood, & Gould, 2017). Such environments may foster delays and deficits
571 in life skills as opposed to progression, and may not be unique to the UK. We believe
572 that parents are more than capable, especially when equipped with the right support
573 from others in the youth sport environment to ensure more positive developmental
574 outcomes and sustained participation in youth sport, yet research has not examined the
575 facets of this proposition fully. We trust that researchers will engage the challenges
576 presented here.

577

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