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Understanding parent stressors and coping experiences in elite sports contexts
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was two-fold. Firstly, to identify the stressors parents encounter when supporting their children performing within elite sports contexts. Secondly, to understand how parents cope with the stressors they encounter. A two-stage design was employed. First, 1299 parents (fathers = 529, mothers = 761, stepfathers = 8, legal guardian = 1, and parent dyads = 187) of adolescent athletes completed an open-ended survey to identify stressors associated with their child's sports involvement. Next, seventeen parents of adolescent athletes participated in semi-structured interviews. Data from both stages were analyzed using hierarchical content analysis. Stage one results indicated that parents encountered a variety of organizational, developmental, competitive, and parental personal stressors, including time, financial, logistical, health, and education concerns. Stage two results highlighted that parents utilize numerous coping experiences to manage their experiences, including: detaching from sport (e.g., sharing parental responsibilities and child's ability to cope), information seeking (e.g., information seeking in their current environment and drawing on past experiences), managing emotional reactions (e.g., emotional release strategies), avoidance (e.g., strategies used by parent or by the child), taking control (e.g., changing their own behaviors or others making changes), and parents providing support to their child (e.g., social support and be present). Overall, findings point to the importance of ensuring that interventions with parents, as well as the practices of sports organizations, need to expand account for a broader range of parental stressors and suggested coping strategies.

Keywords: content analysis; parental involvement; stress; youth sport

47 Parents are highly important in an athlete's development. To help athletes achieve their
48 potential, parents provide financial, organizational, and emotional support (Wolfenden & Holt,
49 2005). However, being a parent of a youth athlete can be challenging (Harwood & Knight,
50 2015) and not all parents engage in appropriate or optimal ways (Knight & Holt, 2014).
51 Unfortunately, certain parental behaviors (e.g., pressure and directive behaviors) are associated
52 with unfavorable outcomes for athletes including increased pre-competitive anxiety, and
53 reduced enjoyment and perceived competence (Amado, Sánchez-Oliva, González-Ponce,
54 Pulido-González, & Sánchez-Miguel, 2015; Boiché, Guillet-Descas, Bois, & Sarrazin, 2011;
55 Bois, Lalanne, & Delforge, 2009).

56 It has been suggested that the demonstration of inappropriate parental behaviors may
57 increase if parents are unable to effectively cope with the stressors they encounter in elite sports
58 contexts (Harwood & Knight, 2009b). That is, if parents find themselves in situations which
59 increase their feelings of strain, they may be more likely to engage in negative or punitive
60 manners (e.g., Belsky, 1984). Thus, it has been suggested that understanding parents' stress
61 experiences in sport is important (Harwood & Knight, 2015). In line with this call to understand
62 parents' stress experiences, the current study sought to understanding the stress experiences of
63 parents of French elite youth athletes, based on the transactional model of stress and coping
64 (Lazarus, 1999).

65 Within this model, the term stressor refers an environmental demand encountered by
66 individuals (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The threatening nature of the stressor arises from a
67 perceived imbalance between environmental demands and an individual's coping resources
68 (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping includes the conscious attempts individuals make to
69 manage situations that they perceive as stressful or which worries them. To evaluate the threat,
70 an individual uses two types of appraisals: primary and secondary (Lazarus, 1999). During the
71 primary appraisal, the individual unearths the personal significance of a demand about his or

72 her own beliefs and values. For instance, one parent could appraise their child living at a training
73 center from Monday to Friday with a fear that they are not able to support their child during
74 moments of doubts. However, another parent may appraise the same situation as an excellent
75 opportunity for their child to develop independence. Secondary appraisal is related to an
76 individuals' exploration of their abilities to cope with stressors (Lazarus, 1999). For example,
77 in the above example, one parent might think that he or she has the resources to cope with the
78 fact that their child is living away from the family, whereas the other may not.

79 Within the sport parenting literature, research examining stressors has recently increased
80 (e.g., Burgess, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016; Harwood, Drew, & Knight, 2010; Harwood &
81 Knight, 2009a, 2009b). Taken together, the findings of these studies indicate that British parents
82 with children involved in tennis and gymnastics experience a large range of stressors (Burgess
83 et al., 2016; Harwood & Knight, 2009a). Such stressors include; competitive stressors, which
84 encompass demands related to their child's participation in competitions, including match
85 preparation, issues with opponents, and their child's own performance and reaction;
86 organizational stressors, which are demands associated with day-to-day logistics, personal
87 investment, and the system/organization in which parents operate, such as the financial impact
88 of sport upon the family, transporting the child to training and competition, and managing
89 injuries, and; developmental stressors, which consist of demands associated with their child's
90 future sporting, educational, and personal development.

91 In contrast to studies of stressors, fewer studies have focused on the coping strategies
92 used by parents (Hayward, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2017). Coping is realized through on-going
93 cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage the demands appraised as threatening (Nicholls &
94 Polman, 2007). Parents of elite gymnasts and swimmers reported using several strategies to
95 cope with the stressors they encountered. These coping strategies were broadly categorized into
96 four themes: detaching from gymnastics, normalizing experiences, willingness to learn, and

97 managing emotional reactions. These strategies varied according to the stressor (e.g., time
98 demands or watching their children compete), the situation (e.g., competitive stressors
99 encountered by parents before, during, or following their children's performances), and the
100 temporal period (e.g., at competition or training) at hand (Burgess et al., 2016; Hayward et al.,
101 2017).

102 Although literature has provided a good understanding of parental stressors in sport,
103 there is a need for further research in this area for three reasons. Firstly, research has focused
104 exclusively on British parents, which may not be representative of other countries who have
105 different structures, organizations, and cultural expectations of sport and parenting. Secondly,
106 research has only been conducted in four sports (and only two when considering coping
107 literature). Of these four sports, three of them have been individual sports (e.g., tennis,
108 gymnastics, and swimming) all of which place specific demands on parents (e.g., registering
109 and organizing children's involvement in competitions) which may not be shared in team/other
110 sports. Consequently, it has been recognized that there is a need for further research examining
111 sport parenting to be conducted in a broader range of sports and countries (Dorsch, Vierimaa,
112 & Plucinik, 2019). Thirdly, it has been suggested that sport parenting expertise includes the
113 ability to develop and deploy appropriate coping strategies to manage stressors that parents
114 encounter in sports contexts (Harwood & Knight, 2015). If parents perceive the situation as
115 non-threatening to their values or beliefs (i.e., primary appraisal) and/or feel able to manage
116 stressors that are causing them concern, the situation is less likely to result in feelings of strain
117 and parents would be more likely to adopt positive behaviors (e.g., support, praise, and
118 understanding; Knight, Holt, & Tamminen, 2009). Parents' management and evaluation of
119 situations could benefit for athletes since such behaviors as praise and understanding were
120 positively associated with their enjoyment and intrinsic motivation (Boiché et al., 2011;
121 Sánchez-Miguel, Leo, Sánchez-Olivia, Amado, & García-Calvo, 2013). Therefore, further

122 understanding parents' experiences, particularly the stressors and coping experiences, is
123 essential to improve the experiences of both parents and athletes in elite sports contexts. To this
124 end, the purpose of the current study was two-fold. Firstly, to identify the stressors parents
125 encounter when supporting their children involved in intensive training centers in France.
126 Secondly, to understand how parents cope with the stressors they encounter.

127 **Method**

128 **Methodological and Philosophical Underpinning**

129 This study adopted a qualitative description methodology (Sandelowski, 2010). This
130 design was considered the most appropriate methodology because the researcher can stay close
131 to the data and to the surface meaning of word and events, emphasizing description over
132 interpretation (Sandelowski, 2000). Qualitative descriptive studies offer a comprehensive
133 summary of an experience in the everyday terms of those experiences (Sandelowski, 2000),
134 which was deemed important when seeking to understand the range of experiences that parents'
135 encounter. Further, qualitative description is useful when seeking to conduct applied research,
136 which will be used by practitioners (e.g., coaches, organizations). The aim of this study was
137 always to produce findings which could easily understood and applied by a range of sports
138 organizations, coaches, and clubs across France.

139 The study was approached from a post-positivist paradigm. In approaching this study
140 from a post-positivist perspective, we sought to gain an insight into the parent-participants'
141 realities, which were independent of our own thinking. However, we recognize that objectivity
142 is fallible and that our past experiences, theories, and research will influence our interpretations.
143 In line with a post-positivist and qualitative descriptive approach, we sought to drawn on a
144 broad range of experiences, gained through different data collection methods, to increasing the
145 opportunities of gaining greater insights into parents' experiences.

146 **Participants**

147 **Stage 1.** Overall, 1299 parents participated in this stage. The sample comprised 529
148 fathers, 8 stepfathers, 761 mothers, and one legal guardian. The parents' marital status was as
149 follows: married (73%), divorced (8%), separated (6%), civil partnership (5%), domestic
150 partnership (5%), single (2%), and widower (1%). With regards to their occupations, parents
151 were classified as follows: intermediate occupation (33%), middle manager and higher
152 intellectual professions/liberal profession (30%), employee/agent (19%),
153 craftperson/shopkeeper/head of a company (8%), worker/driver (5%), unemployed (3%),
154 farmers (1%), and retired (1%) (Institut National de la Statistique et des Études économiques,
155 2003). In most cases just one parent per family unit participated, however there were 187 parent
156 dyads (i.e., both parents) included. Participants represented 1108 semi and competitive-elite
157 athletes ($n_{\text{female}} = 382$, 34%; M age = 16.01 years; SD age = 1.53; Swann, Moran, & Piggott,
158 2015) who attended intensive training centers. In France, the federations select the “best”
159 athletes to join intensive training centers. Each sport federation selects athletes based on athletic
160 performance and potential, academic achievement, and their overall behavior. Depending on
161 the center, athletes either live in the center from Monday to Friday (returning home or to
162 competitions at the weekend) or they live there full-time. The athletes trained for an average of
163 15.01 hours per week ($SD = 5.34$) and had been involved in competitive sports for an average
164 of 8.33 years ($SD = 2.89$). They were from 34 different sports, both individual (46%) and team
165 sports (54%)¹, and competed at either national (78%) or international level (22%).

166 **Stage 2.** Sixteen parents (nine mothers and seven fathers) from stage 1 participated in
167 this stage. Fourteen were married, one was in a civil partnership, and one was single. Eight
168 parents were middle managers or had a higher intellectual or liberal profession, six worked in
169 intermediate occupations, one was a worker, and one was retired (Institut National de la

¹ The 34 different sports were: American football, badminton, baseball, basketball, bowling, canoeing, climbing, cycling, fencing, field hockey, football, golf, gymnastics, handball, ice hockey, judo, kayaking, modern pentathlon, orienteering, rowing, rugby, sailing, skiing, softball, squash, surfing, swimming, table tennis, target shooting, tennis, track and field, triathlon, volleyball, and wrestling.

170 Statistique et des Études économiques, 2003). In most cases, just one parent per family unit was
171 included, however the mother and father of one athlete participated. Participants represented
172 fifteen semi and competitive-elite athletes (Swann et al., 2015) ($n_{\text{females}} = 6$; M age = 16.70; SD
173 age = 1.13) attending intensive training centers. The athletes trained for an average of 13.07
174 hours per week ($SD = 3.01$) and had been involved in competitive sports for an average of 6.73
175 years ($SD = 3.24$). They participated in individual ($n = 4$; badminton, cycling, and judo) and
176 team sports ($n = 11$; basketball, handball, rugby, and volleyball), and all competed at a national
177 level.

178 **Procedure**

179 Institutional research ethics board approval was obtained and then the study proceeded
180 in two stages. For stage 1, the researchers contacted sport federations to introduce the study
181 and inquire into the possibility of using their center for data collection. If the federation
182 agreed, they sent a study invitation to coaches, who then forwarded the invitation to parents of
183 athletes at their center. The invitation included a link to an online survey. Participation was
184 voluntary and participants provided informed consent at the start of the survey.

185 For stage two, following stratified random sampling, the lead researcher contacted
186 participants via e-mail from the list of participants who took part in stage 1. Interested
187 participants (response rate = 65%) voluntarily contacted the lead researcher who subsequently
188 arranged a suitable time and location to conduct the individual interview. Semi-structured
189 interviews were selected to provide an opportunity for participants to provide detailed
190 information on the topic. Through semi-structured interviews, it was perceived that the
191 participants would have an opportunity to share their interpretation of their own experience in
192 semi- and competitive-elite sports contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

193 **Data Collection**

194 **Stage 1.** Given the lack of previous research on this topic in France, it was important
195 not to restrict participants to a pre-selected list of stressors. Rather, it was deemed necessary to
196 allow participants to describe stressors and their experience of these stressors in their own
197 words. Thus, an open-ended survey was selected. Following a request for select demographic
198 information, the online survey incorporated three questions to explore primary appraisal of the
199 stressors encountered by parents. First, they described the stressors associated with their child's
200 sport involvement that they found easy to manage. Next, they described the stressors associated
201 with their child's sport involvement that they found difficult to manage. At the end, parents
202 detailed parts of their child's sport that caused them concern. After each question, there was a
203 large space for parents to answer the questions at their own convenience and in as much detail
204 as possible.

205 **Stage 2.** A semi-structured interviewed guide was developed based upon results of stage
206 one and previous research conducted in this area (e.g., Burgess, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016).
207 The guide provided the interviewer with an order of questions to ask, with the semi-structured
208 nature of the interview allowing for changes in response to emerging themes (Silverman, 2013).
209 The first two authors conducted all individual interviews. They took place in a private room in
210 either the participants' home or the researchers' university. The interviews lasted between 19
211 and 57 min ($M = 29.44$ min, $SD = 11.55$ min). Each interview began with introductory questions
212 to establish rapport with the parents. Then, transition questions were used to lead the parents to
213 the two main themes of the interview: (1) to detail the stressors participants had mentioned in
214 stage one (e.g., "In survey, you mentioned that [names of each sub-themes] worry you, could
215 worry you, or are difficult to manage. Do you agree with this summary?") and (2) to identify
216 the strategies used to cope with each of stressor mentioned (e.g., "How do you cope with this
217 particular stressor?"). Finally, parents answered summary questions (e.g., "Overall, what are

218 the main strategies you adopt to cope with each of these stressors?") and provided with an
219 opportunity to make any final comments.

220 **Data analysis**

221 Data from stage one and two were analyzed through content analysis (Côté, Salmela,
222 Baria, & Russell, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994) using the NVivo 11 software to facilitate
223 data organization. For stage 1, the first question was analyzed to identify stressors perceived as
224 being easy to manage, whereas the following two questions were analyzed to identify stressors
225 perceived as being difficult to manage and causing concern about their child's sport
226 involvement. To avoid duplication, answers to question two and three were coded together.
227 Thus, an event mentioned in both question 2 and 3 was coded only once. The process of content
228 analysis then occurred.

229 First, meaning units were created by identifying and paraphrasing the stressors and the
230 coping experiences reported by parents in their survey responses. A frequency count of each
231 meaning unit was conducted for later comparisons (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2009b). Each
232 independent mention of meaning units from a participant was only counted once. Each meaning
233 unit was then coded into a first order thematic category that essentially represented a cluster of
234 similar stressors or coping experiences (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). This analytical process
235 progressed to a higher thematic level (i.e., higher order themes) culminating in a final set of
236 general dimensions that represented the phenomena of stressors and coping experiences.

237 After the completion of the analysis of stage one data, stage two interviews were
238 conducted. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were
239 assigned to each participant to ensure confidentiality throughout the analysis process.
240 Interviews were then analyzed in the same process as the surveys. Overall, the analysis of both
241 the surveys and the interviews was abductive (Mayan, 2009). Initially the data were coded
242 deductively using predetermined categories identified in previous research. Next, data that did

243 not fit into predetermined categories was analyzed inductively, as the data and their
244 interpretation guided researchers towards additional themes and codes.

245 **Methodological Rigor**

246 In line with recent suggestions, a relativist (rather than criterion) approach to enhancing
247 and assessing methodological rigor were adopted in this study (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Firstly,
248 the research team ensured that appropriate individuals were participating in the study based on
249 the research aims (Cresswell, 2007). Secondly, pilot interviews were conducted prior to stage
250 two data collection, which allowed the two-lead researchers to check the coherency of the
251 interview guide and ensure the questions would fully address the aims of the study. Thirdly,
252 depth of description and understanding of the cases was facilitated by the same two interviewers
253 conducting all the interviews, ensuring consistency in the delivery of interview questions.
254 Moreover, the experience of the interviewers as an athlete and coach helped in establishing
255 rapport with study participants. Such rapport was important to increase the potential for
256 participants to share information and ensure the credibility (Tracy, 2010). The lead researcher
257 conducted data analysis but data were also subjected to a prolonged and rigorous peer review
258 whereby the lead researcher engaged in discussion with the second researcher (i.e., critical
259 friends) to provide transparency (Tracy, 2010). Through this process, the development of
260 meaning units, sub-themes, higher-order categories, and dimensions was facilitated and ensured
261 that the experiences of all individuals were accounted for. Finally, to demonstrate coherence,
262 we ensured continuity between the philosophical underpinning of the study, the research
263 question, the data collection, data analysis, and presentation of the results (Smith & Sparkes,
264 2016).

265 **Results**

266 Analysis of each survey question resulted in the identification of four general
267 dimensions of parental stressors: organizational, developmental, competitive, and parental

268 personal stressors. Interview data indicated that parents encountered stressors across each of
269 these categories and reported a wide range of coping experiences to manage these. Parents
270 indicated that they often used several coping approaches to manage one stressor and/or
271 managed different stressors with one coping strategy. In the following sections, a brief summary
272 of the findings from stage one are provided followed by a detailed examination of the stage two
273 data because stressors are enumerated with examples in supplementary files.

274 **Stressors**

275 The analysis resulted in the identification of four general dimensions of parental
276 stressors: organizational, developmental, competitive, and parent-personal. Within each
277 dimension, following the primary appraisal, some stressors were perceived as easy to manage
278 while others were perceived as difficult to manage. Overall, participants listed substantially
279 more stressors that were difficult to manage compared to easy to manage (a ratio of three to
280 one). The vast majority of parents provided answers to all three questions, however 16 parents
281 did not answer the first question and one parent did not answer the second and third question.

282 **Organizational stressors.** Organizational stressors involved demands related to health
283 (e.g., doping and injuries), sport systems (e.g., scheduling, quality of training and coach, and
284 communication), logistics (e.g., domestic tasks and organization), and personal investments
285 (e.g., time and finance). Overall, parents cited 734 times a type of organizational stressor as
286 being easy to manage while they mentioned 2028 times a type of organizational stressor as
287 difficult to manage. For more details, see Supplementary file, Table S1.

288 **Developmental stressors.** Developmental stressors consisted of demands arising in
289 relation to their child's future, their holistic development, engagement in education, motivation,
290 and their interactions. Parents identified 906 times a type of developmental stressor as difficult
291 to manage, while they only reported 366 times a type of developmental stressor as being easy
292 to manage. For more details, see Supplementary file, Table S2.

293 **Competitive stressors.** Competitive stressors encompassed emotional and outcome
294 demands associated with competitions. Parents reported 451 times a type of competitive
295 stressors as being difficult to manage and causing concern, while they only identified 88 times
296 a type of competitive stressors as being easy to manage. For more details, see Supplementary
297 file, Table S3.

298 **Parent-personal stressors.** Parental personal stressors involved demands related to
299 their distance from their child (i.e., their child living away from home) and parents' provision
300 of support and their interactions with other parents. This dimension was the least reported,
301 with 147 quotes for these stressors as being easy to manage and 341 quotes for parental
302 personal stressors as being difficult to manage. For more details, see Supplementary file,
303 Table S4.

304 **Coping experiences**

305 Parents reported using several experiences to cope with the different stressors they
306 encountered in elite sports contexts. These coping experiences were classified into six
307 dimensions: (a) detaching from sport, (b) information seeking, (c) managing emotional
308 reactions, (d) avoidance, (e) taking control, and (f) and parents providing support. Parents
309 utilized strategies that they themselves had put in place or that their child or sport center
310 implemented. The link between stressors encountered by the parents and their coping
311 experiences appear in Table 1 for detaching from sport, in Table 2 for information seeking, in
312 Table 3 for managing emotional reactions, in Table 4 for avoidance, in Table 5 for taking
313 control, and in Table 6 for parents providing support.

314 **Detaching from sport.** Parents detached themselves from their child's sport to cope
315 with the stressors they encountered. Specifically, they attempted to take a step back from their
316 child's sport experience to minimize the impact it may have on them. Parents' attempts to

317 detach from their child's sport was facilitated by (a) sharing parental responsibilities and (b)
318 child's ability to cope.

319 *Sharing parental responsibilities.* One of the main strategies parents used to cope with
320 the stressors was relying on the expertise of professionals from their child's sport center. For
321 example, one mother relied on the expertise of center's dietician to manage her nutrition
322 concerns. However, if there was not access to support or appropriate expertise available at the
323 sport center, parents sought help from other sources. For instance, one mother explained that
324 she worked with a psychologist from outside of the sport center because, as she said, "At the
325 mental level, we were present, so it was ... But, at some point, when I knew she was not well,
326 I had to take her to a psychologist in town". Less frequently, parents also worked with other
327 parents or relied on the expertise of other family members to cope with organizational and
328 competitive demands, such as transporting their child to training and competitions or managing
329 poorly organized competitions. Parents also relied on the hospitality of their child's friends,
330 which helped them to manage stressors related to their child living away from the family home.

331 *Child's ability to cope.* Parents relied on their child's own abilities to cope in different
332 settings and under different demands to facilitate their own abilities to detach from the sport.
333 For instance, several parents recognized that child's independence helped them to manage or
334 reduce their own stressors, as one mother explained in relation to managing the time stressors
335 associated with competitions:

336 He knew enough people to manage his schedule and accommodation/transport to
337 competitions. He finds it easy to develop relationships; he is doing a lot to relieve us.

338 He is contacting the members of the association and asking if he can have a lift.

339 Similarly, several parents indicated that their ability to manage organizational stressors was due
340 to their child's ability to find their own accommodation, as one father explained, "She regularly
341 asks her teammates to accommodate her for the weekend. She can be accommodated by her

342 teammates and school friends.” Finally, parents also explained that the trusting relationship
343 they had with their child allowed them to develop their own autonomy and thus reduce
344 developmental stressors associated with balancing sport, school, social and personal demands.

345 [Insert Table 1 here]

346 **Information seeking.** The parents searched themselves information to facilitate coping
347 in their child’s sports project. Parents enhanced their knowledge by asking advice from others
348 or by reflecting on their own experiences. Thus, the dimension of information seeking contains
349 two higher order category: (a) information seeking in their current environment and (b) drawing
350 on past experiences.

351 *Information seeking in their current environment.* When coping experiences were not
352 available within the environment (e.g., sport center, child, other parents), parents sought to
353 expand their knowledge by asking for advice from the sport center, their child, and other parents
354 or by searching information in the literature and internet. Specifically, when they found a lack
355 of information or feedback from the sport center or had concerns about their child’s future, they
356 sought further advice from a variety of sources. For instance, one mother called the federation
357 to cope with the lack of information she had access to:

358 The most difficult, this at the federation level, to have clear information from the
359 coaches to go to a competition abroad in [name of country] with the French team. We
360 would like to know a little more, we did not know if ... there was an individual
361 tournament or a team tournament.

362 *Drawing on past experiences.* In addition to learning from others, parents also used their
363 own experiences and knowledge to cope with certain stressors (e.g., appropriate support,
364 competitive outcomes, and quality of training and coaching). For instance, one father explain
365 that he used this sports knowledge to manage the behaviors of his child’s opponents during
366 competition:

367 There may be stressors when on a field, your child is targeted because he is the youngest,
368 he is the worst, he is playing in front of a person who's older than he is. So, I play
369 volleyball too and when we play against young people, we put pressure on them because
370 we know we have encounter, that's how, we have psychological influence ... Thus,
371 sometimes on the field, it can be complicated, complicated to live. To do sports, I am
372 cool with this, it's good war. As long as it stays in the field.

373 [Insert Table 2 here]

374 **Managing emotions.** To cope with the negative emotions that parents' encountered as
375 a result of their child's sporting involvement, parents used emotional release strategies and
376 attempted to normalize their experiences.

377 *Emotional release.* Parents reported using emotional release strategies to cope with the
378 stressors they encountered due to time and competitions stressors, issues with coaches, and their
379 distance from their child. For instance, one mother explained that the only way she would cope
380 with the distance from her son was by "crying".

381 *Normalizing parents' experiences.* Parents explained that reappraising demands as
382 normal in the context of their life histories allowed them to cope with their stressors. For
383 example, one mother was able to cope with the stressors associated with watching her child
384 compete by reappraising stress as normal, "I am always stressed when I go to see my son but
385 stress is my nature!". Parents also normalized their experiences to those of other parents in order
386 to reduce the intensity of stressors including time and distance with their child.

387 [Insert Table 3 here]

388 **Avoidance.** Parents sparingly used avoidance and distraction strategies. Parents avoided
389 situations that resulted in negative emotions or they encouraged their children to avoid
390 situations that were difficult for them to manage, such as the quality of training and coaching.

391 *Avoidance strategies used by parents.* Parents chose not to go to competitions to avoid
392 the negative emotions that can arise when watching their child compete. For example, one
393 mother did not go with her husband to their son's tournament because she could not emotionally
394 support his behavior, "We are not going together to the competition, because it is too much to
395 manage."

396 *Avoidance strategies used by the child.* Parents encouraged their children to avoid
397 certain situations that might result in them or their parents experiencing stress. For example,
398 one father explained that he encouraged his son to stop attending his sport center because the
399 quality of coach was causing him concern:

400 I intervened I said now leave him alone. I will quietly return to high school in [name of
401 city] and in his club ... We will say that by mutual agreement, we said we will stop here,
402 we will go back to a club structure.

403 By using this strategy this athlete and father could avoid the situation and subsequently cope
404 with the stressor.

405 [Insert table 4 here]

406 **Taking control.** In some cases, parents tried to change the situation that caused them
407 concern by taking control of the situation. Parents asked people in the environment to change
408 their behaviors or parents provided themselves with a solution to manage the situation. Parents
409 tried to take control by: (a) requiring adaptation from others or (b) adapting themselves.

410 *Adaptation from others.* Parents asked for different people involved in the elite sports
411 contexts to change their behaviors or practices to cope with several stressors (e.g., lack of
412 information, engagement in education, and time). Most often, they requested a change from
413 school or sport center staff. For instance, one mother requested a change in their child's training
414 schedule to reduce her travel on Friday evenings (i.e., return home):

415 If we had the opportunity to stop training at the same time for everybody, we would
416 never have problems with train. The problem is that we cannot. The coach makes sure
417 the younger athletes leave before to keep the older athletes to work a little harder, and
418 we have this train problem ... We asked for a change.

419 Parents also requested changes from their child. They asked them to communicate more
420 about their current performance levels or they told to their child to complete certain behaviors.
421 One mother reported, “Clément, we had to tell him, go to rest, go and lie on your bed, put your
422 phone away, we have to be behind him”. These strategies allowed parents to manage stressors
423 related to health concerns, health practices, lack of communication from the sport organization,
424 and parent-child communication.

425 *Adaptation by parents.* Many parents tried to take the control of the situation by
426 changing their own behaviors. Either parents organized their family and professional life
427 differently or they found another solution to manage stressors (e.g., buying a car, renting a flat,
428 finding a billet family, etc.). For example, one mother explained how she adapted to the distance
429 that separated her from her child, “we organized our life differently without him, and we
430 managed our family life with 3 instead of 4.” In order to be present at competitions and manage
431 the distance from their child, several parents also rented flats at the weekend in the town where
432 their child’s sport center was located, as one father shared, “We got a flat, a tiny little studio in
433 the town where he is”.

434 [Insert Table 5 here]

435 **Parents providing support.** The final dimension details how parents coped by helping
436 their child to better manage difficult moments. Parents used strategies to improve their child’s
437 morale and thus indirectly managed the stressors they encountered. These strategies also
438 allowed them to spend more time with their child to cope with distance-related stressors. The
439 dimension contains two higher order categories: (a) social support and (b) being present.

440 *Social support.* In response to a multitude of stressors, some parents chose to increase
441 the support they provided to their child during difficult times. One father explained how he
442 supported his son after a defeat to manage his stressor associated with the competition
443 outcomes:

444 What I have always learned and what I try to teach him is that a defeat is only a step in
445 the progression. It is not an end in itself. I always try to find positive in what he has
446 done. You have done good things. I as a parent, I am his only support. I am more in a
447 positive approach and I try to bring him, always more, never less.

448 This support helped their child to feel more positive in various situation (e.g., defeat, injustice,
449 or injury) and as a result, parents were less worried about their child and their stressors reduced.

450 *Being present.* Finally, parents developed strategies to help them stay in touch with their
451 child to cope with stressors arising as a result of living away from their child, perceiving that
452 their child was experiencing injustice, and managing to keep up and progress in education. For
453 instance, to resolve the problem that she did not see a lot their child, one mother used
454 competitions to have some vacation days with the family, “We organize to pack up all the
455 family to [name of country], it is far away, we take advantage to bring all family and leave for
456 3-4 days of vacation.” Another mother lived far away from her daughter and regularly made
457 the trip to see her. She explained that she “made the choice to stay home and come and go.”
458 Such strategies allowed parents to spend time with their children, and similarly helped them to
459 check in on their child and ensure they were engaging with their education.

460 [Insert Table 6 here]

461 **Discussion**

462 The purpose of this study was two-fold. Firstly, to identify the stressors parents
463 encounter when supporting their children involved in intensive training centers in France.
464 Secondly, to understand how parents cope with the stressors they encounter. Overall, findings

465 suggest that parents encountered a variety of organizational, developmental, competitive, and
466 parent-personal stressors. Within each general dimension, some parents perceived stressors as
467 being easy to manage while other parents perceived them as difficult to manage and causing
468 concern. To manage stressors, parents employed numerous coping experiences including:
469 detaching from sport, information seeking, managing emotional reactions, avoidance, taking
470 control, and providing support.

471 Results of stage one showed that parents encountered considerably more stressors that
472 were difficult to manage than easy to manage. In addition, different stressors were appraised by
473 parents as threatening or as non-threatening to their beliefs and values. For example, when
474 considering developmental stressors, the fact that athletes were very busy with their sport
475 involvement was experienced positively by some parents because they perceived their child had
476 purpose. However, others parents were worried that such a large investment would ultimately
477 result in their child being limited in their engagement with other activities.

478 Results also show that parents encountered many common stressors such as health
479 concerns, time and finance demands, sport organization issues, and engagement in education.
480 However, not all parents encountered identical stressors. Further, parents did not always report
481 the same coping experiences when faced with the same stressors. For example, to manage the
482 balance between school and sport, one parent relied on the expertise of professionals outside of
483 their child's sport center (i.e., working with a private tutor) whereas another parent relied on
484 their child's independence to manage this demand. The inter-individual differences highlighted
485 in the parents' stressor and coping experiences may result from a range of reasons, including
486 parents' previous stress experiences and their child's response and subsequently through
487 emotional contagion effect (e.g., Hayward et al., 2017). Given such differences it is clear that
488 parents should be considered as individuals rather than groups when sport parent initiatives are
489 developed and delivered (Knight et al., 2016). The teaching of new coping strategies, the

490 appropriation of actual coping strategies, and the orientation toward coping resources should
491 be individualized during parent education programs.

492 The stressors reported by parents in this study are similar to those reported by British
493 parents (Burgess et al., 2016; Harwood & Knight, 2009b; Hayward et al., 2017). The similarities
494 between parental stressors could be are result of the commonalities within the different youth
495 sport environments. However, the differences identified with British parents could have arisen
496 due to differences in the children's competitive level, parents' experience of competitions, and
497 the organization of each federation's sporting excellence program. For example, in France,
498 athlete live at their training centers between Monday and Friday, but this is not the case for the
499 British athletes who have been studied (e.g., Burgess et al., 2016; Hayward et al., 2017).
500 Consequently, the stressors associated with their child's living arrangements were,
501 understandably, only experienced in France.

502 The findings indicated that parents used several approaches to try and manage the
503 stressors they encountered in elite sports contexts. Parents' coping approaches varied according
504 to the stressor and the situation (Burgess et al., 2016). Further, similar to findings from elite
505 athletes (e.g., Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & James, 2005) and aligned with transactional model
506 (Lazarus, 1999), parents often employed multiple experiences simultaneously to cope with one
507 stressor. The coping approaches used by parents were grouped into six dimensions, the most
508 frequently reported being sharing parental responsibilities (Knight & Holt, 2013) and child's
509 ability to manage. These approaches helped parents to take a step back from their child's
510 investment in a dual project (i.e., sport and school) and manage some of stressors that caused
511 them strain. These results extend our understanding of parents' coping, particularly how reliant
512 parents are on their children's ability to cope (cf. Burgess et al., 2016). Consequently increasing
513 athletes' abilities to cope and also teaching parents similar coping strategies (e.g., anticipating
514 what coping strategies to use in response to various stressors and practicing strategies), could

515 be employed to improve parental coping in sport (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Tamminen &
516 Holt, 2010).

517 A novel result was that parents also used sought to take control of the situation to cope
518 with their stressors that caused them strain. Parents tried to make changes in the environment
519 (e.g., requesting change from sport center related staff, spouse, and child) or make changes
520 themselves. For example, parents modified their family and professional schedule, found billet
521 families, bought a car, rented a flat, managed their children's medical appointments, or deleted
522 some of their activities to reduce the stressors they encountered. This result shows that parents
523 are able to manage some of the sport-related stressors themselves, but they also rely upon others
524 within their child's support network making changes as needed.

525 Based on these results, from an applied perspective, it seems appropriate to intervene
526 not only with parents to help them to cope with their stressors but also with children, medical,
527 school, and sports staff. Considering that coping is a skill that can be learned or acquired with
528 experience (Tamminen & Holt, 2010),—parents could benefit from learning to manage their
529 emotions, trusting their child, and offering activities other than sport. Parents could also benefit
530 from interventions carried out with the sport centers. For instance, sports centers could help
531 parents by providing more information and by placing more emphasis on education over sport.
532 The provision of information could also have a positive impact on coping resources because
533 parents rely on the expertise of professionals at sport centers. Finally, parents rely on other
534 parents for support (Burgess et al., 2016; Knight & Holt, 2013) and thus, it is important to help
535 parents learn to work together to reduce feelings of exclusion and anxiety at competitions
536 (Knight & Holt, 2013).

537 **Limitations and future directions**

538 Although this study offers an expanded understanding of parents stress and coping
539 experiences, several limitations should be taken into account. Firstly, stressors are dynamic. As

540 a result, approaches used to cope with them are also dynamic, but this study did not measure
541 the dynamic nature due to one off interviews and survey data. Researchers would benefit from
542 using longitudinal approaches to gain a greater understanding of these elements. As the
543 environmental demands experienced by parents change over time, future research could also
544 focus on their evolution over the course of a season and at different stages of development.
545 Secondly, a selection bias may have been present in this study. Parents who were experiencing
546 the most stressors and/or were not coping effectively with the stressors that cause them strain
547 may be less likely to participate in the research. Thirdly, content analysis used verbatim reports
548 to understand the experiences of individual. Parents who participated may have omitted
549 particular narratives from their experiences because they were unwilling or unable to verbalize
550 them. Finally, due to the use of surveys and limited interviews, the sharing of parental
551 experiences may be limited in detail. Including observations may provide useful and interesting
552 information.

553 **Conclusion**

554 The present study highlights the individual, dynamic, and complex nature of sport parents'
555 stress and coping experiences. Parents reported encountering a wide variety of organizational,
556 developmental, competitive, and parental personal stressors in elite sports contexts. To cope
557 with the difficult to manage stressors, parents used several strategies including detaching from
558 sport, information seeking, managing emotional reactions, avoidance, taking control, and
559 providing support. The study highlights that educational interventions among parents, children,
560 and sport organizations should be expanded to increase the use of effectiveness strategies,
561 improve the effectiveness of other strategies, and reduced the presence of stressors. The benefits
562 could be multiple as it could enhance the experiences of parents, children, and sport staff in
563 elite sports contexts.

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565 All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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