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The Youth Football Journey: Parents' Experiences and Recommendations for Support

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17 **Abstract**

18 The purpose of this study was to understand parents' experiences and offer recommendations
19 for supporting parents within youth academy football. The lead researcher was embedded
20 within a football academy for eight months and collected data through 29 formal interviews,
21 three focus groups, observations, informal conversations, and field notes. Data were analysed
22 using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2018, 2019). Overall, analysis of the data
23 indicated that, while their son was in the academy, parents experience a journey that consists
24 of four individual phases; 1) excited and amazed, 2) dawning of reality, 3) accepting and
25 rationalising, and 4) focusing on the future. Two overarching themes were also present
26 throughout the journey; 1) enjoyment, opportunity, and development, and, 2) sacrifices,
27 commitment, and consequences on personal life. To support parents through these phases,
28 informational and social support, along with cultural changes would be useful. Specifically,
29 parents may benefit from a parent supportive culture in which they are welcomed, respected,
30 and valued, combined with a programme of specific support sessions. Overall, the findings
31 illustrate the complexity of the football academy parent journey and the importance of those
32 providing support to understand parents' journeys and tailor support to their specific needs.

33

34 Keywords: culture; education; parenting journey, support, youth sport

35 Parents are an important part of the youth sport journey, fulfilling numerous important
36 roles (Gledhill and Harwood 2014; Holt and Dunn 2004). For instance, parents provide
37 financial and logistical support to enable children to participate (Harwood, Drew, and Knight
38 2010) and offer emotional support throughout competitions (Elliott and Drummond 2017).
39 Additionally, parents must develop relationships with coaches and other parents, manage
40 their reactions when watching their children compete, and cope with various sport-related
41 demands (Hayward, Knight, and Mellalieu 2017; Pynn, Dunn, and Holt 2019). The extent to
42 which parents ‘appropriately’ carry out these roles may impact upon whether children
43 achieve their sporting potential, have a positive psychosocial experience, and experience
44 positive developmental outcomes (Harwood and Knight 2015).

45 Numerous personal, relational, and environmental or socio-cultural factors influence
46 how parents fulfil the aforementioned roles. For instance, at a personal level, parents’
47 concerns regarding their own behaviour can lead them to regulate the manner in which they
48 are involved in their child’s sport (Knight et al. 2016). At a relational level, the quality of the
49 relationship parents have with their child’s coach, as well as other parents, may influence the
50 comments they make, the questions they ask, and their active engagement in coaching their
51 own child (cf. Clarke and Harwood 2014). Finally, cultural ideals perpetuated by specific
52 sports or the broader youth sport culture may influence parents’ sideline comments and
53 behaviours (Dorsch et al. 2015; McMahon and Penney 2014).

54 Clearly, how parents are involved in their child’s sport is complex. Thus,
55 understanding their experiences is important to ensure appropriate guidance and support can
56 be provided (Harwood and Knight 2016). Some initial work has been conducted in this area.
57 For instance, a number of studies have considered the stressors that parents’ experience when
58 supporting their child in various sports (e.g., Burgess, Knight, and Mellalieu 2016; Harwood
59 and Knight 2009a, 2009b; Harwood et al. 2019; Lienhart et al. 2019). Overall, this literature

60 has indicated a plethora of stressors related to competition, organisational, and developmental
61 concerns. Moreover, it has been recognised that the types of stressors that parents may
62 experience will likely change through the course of their child's sporting involvement
63 (Harwood, Drew, and Knight 2010; Harwood and Knight 2009a), although further studies
64 considering such changes are needed (Knight 2019).

65 Extending beyond parenting stressors, more general considerations of parents'
66 experiences have also been conducted (e.g., Clarke and Harwood 2014; Dorsch, Smith, and
67 McDonough 2015; Dorsch et al. 2015; Wiersma and Fifer 2008). For instance, Clarke and
68 Harwood (2014) conducted interviews with five mothers and five fathers to understand the
69 experience of parenting children during their initial four years at a football academy. Using a
70 phenomenological approach, they identified that being a parent of an elite youth footballer
71 was characterised by; socialisation into the culture, enhanced identity, and increased
72 responsibility. Specifically, parents had to adjust to the transfer of power and increased
73 involvement of coaches, as well as how they personally identified regarding their child's
74 footballing status and what was expected of them. One specific expectation parents'
75 discussed was regarding their involvement on the sidelines. As an emotionally laden aspect of
76 youth sport parenting, competitions have often drawn researchers' attention, with insights
77 being gained into how parents behave, as well as factors that can influence behaviour (e.g.,
78 Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough 2015; Holt et al. 2010; Knight and Holt 2013a; Omli and
79 LaVoi 2012). Such research has indicated that parents' can find it hard to manage the
80 emotions they experience when watching their children compete (Knight and Holt, 2013;
81 Omli and LaVoi, 2012), which can influence both their and their child's experience (Knight
82 et al., 2016).

83 Given the challenges parents can encounter when supporting their child in youth
84 sport, researchers have recognised the need to identify the types of support, strategies or

85 information they may find beneficial to enhance their and their child's experience (Dorsch et
86 al., 2018; Knight, 2019). Some insights have been gained from parents themselves, who have
87 indicated that, through trial and error, past experiences, or simply over time, they developed
88 and implemented a range of strategies to best manage their and their child's experiences in
89 youth sport. These strategies included, conducting personal research, developing and drawing
90 upon a broad support network, developing good quality relationships with coaches, and
91 implementing various emotional regulation strategies (Burgess et al. 2016; Knight and Holt
92 2013; Lienhart et al. 2019). Unfortunately, however, although such insights are interesting
93 and give some suggestions of what parents are currently doing, parents have indicated these
94 may not always be effective or address all of their needs (Knight and Holt 2013a). As such,
95 research explicitly identifying parents' support needs and developing strategies to address
96 these are pertinent.

97 Some insights into parents' support needs have been gained within British Tennis
98 (Thrower, Harwood, and Spray 2016). Based on interviews with 29 participants (five parents
99 of children aged 5-10 years, eight parents of children aged 11-14 years, 12 coaches, and four
100 ex-youth national and international players), Thrower and colleagues identified that, during
101 childhood/mini-tennis, parents need support to appreciate the financial and time demands
102 they will encounter, understand the benefits of engaging in tennis, develop a basic
103 understanding of the sport of tennis, and how to provide organisational, developmental, and
104 competition support to their child. These needs changed as children moved into early
105 adolescence, with parents subsequently requiring information on supporting their child to
106 transition through different levels, as well as understanding the impact of growth on
107 performance and how to balance education and make career choices. Reinforcing the change
108 in needs of parents over time, suggestions from parents, coaches, and administrators in the

109 US also highlighted that parents require education on developmentally appropriate parenting
110 approaches as well as specific technical knowledge (Dorsch et al. 2018).

111 Unfortunately, despite the recognition of the changing experiences and needs of
112 parents over time (e.g., Dorsch et al., 2018; Harwood & Knight, 2009a; Thrower et al., 2016),
113 most studies examining parents' experiences of supporting their children in sport focus only
114 on one time point (Wiersma and Fifer 2008; Omli and LaVoi 2012) or a small part of the
115 parent/child journey (e.g., starting out or transitioning to academies; Clarke and Harwood
116 2014; Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough 2015). Consequently, although we can attempt to
117 piece together parents' experiences, a full and complete understanding of how parents'
118 (positive and negative) experiences may change as their children progress from childhood
119 throughout adolescence is limited. Similarly, aside from the distinction between childhood
120 and early adolescence within Thrower and colleagues (2016) study, little consideration has
121 been given to how the support or guidance parents might need changes in relation to a child's
122 sporting development (Knight 2019). In addition, despite research indicating that parents'
123 experiences may be influenced by environmental and socio-cultural factors (e.g., McMahon
124 and Penney 2014), to the best of our knowledge, studies seeking to identify the guidance or
125 support parents need has focused exclusively on what can be given to parents, rather than
126 what could be changed or altered in the environment to help parents.

127 To this end, the first aim of the current study was to understand the experience of
128 parents across the lifespan of an academy footballer. Specifically, we sought to understand
129 the experiences of parents with children aged from 8 - 16 years. The second aim of this study
130 was to develop recommendations for supporting parents at different stages of their child's
131 sporting journey, considering both individual and cultural factors. Recognising that parents
132 do not know what they do not know (Thrower, Harwood, and Spray 2016), and that parents'
133 involvement in their children's sport does not happen in isolation (Knight et al. 2017) to fully

134 address the second aim, this study drew on the perspectives of parents, coaches, and support
135 staff.

136 **Method**

137 *Methodology and philosophical assumptions*

138 This study was conducted using an interpretive philosophical paradigm (Denzin and
139 Lincoln 2018), drawing on a constructivist epistemology and relativist ontology. A
140 constructivist epistemology is the belief that knowledge is based upon our experiences and
141 perspectives, with no knowledge being devoid of human construction. A relativist ontology
142 recognises there is no one common reality and that each interpretation varies in value based
143 upon their credibility and utility. A case study approach was chosen for the current study as it
144 aligned with these philosophical assumptions, while also addressing the aims of the study.
145 Specifically, a case study design was congruent with the interpretivist paradigm because it
146 utilises multiple perspectives to gain an in-depth understanding of complex multi-faceted
147 social phenomenon (e.g., person, group, project, event, programme, or organisation), while
148 retaining the characteristics of the everyday context in which it was studied (Crowe et al.
149 2011; Yin 2018). As such, a case study design allowed for an appreciation of the parents'
150 coaches', and support staffs' individual thoughts, beliefs, and experiences, within the specific
151 context of academy football (cf., Schwandt, 2000). Moreover, an understanding of the parent
152 experience and the development of recommendations for supporting parents could be co-
153 constructed using the multiple perspectives and lead researcher's interpretations.

154 There are various types of case studies (e.g., instrumental, intrinsic, and collective)
155 and for the current study, an instrumental case study was used. An instrumental case study
156 uses one particular case to gain a broad understanding of a phenomenon (Hodge and Sharp
157 2016). For this study, an instrumental case study provided the foundations for an exploration
158 of parenting within academy football, drawing upon the experiences of parents and

159 perspectives of other stakeholders within one specific academy as the case (c.f. Stake 1995).
160 Beyond enabling a detailed insight into the phenomenon of being a parent of an academy
161 footballer, a case study was deemed useful for this study because gave a voice to those whose
162 voices are less heard (Schwandt and Gates 2018). Although there is an ever growing body of
163 evidence pertaining to sport parents, within sporting environments parents' voices are often
164 not heard or acknowledged as the culture dictates that parents relinquish control over to their
165 child's coach and stay in the background (Kerr and Stirling 2012; Jacobs, Smits, and
166 Knoppers 2017). Additionally, parents are often deeply immersed within the sporting culture
167 and live the role of a sports parent, so do not question the sporting culture (McMahon and
168 Penney 2014). This is particularly true within the football academy environments where
169 parents often have limited input due to the cultural expectations and codes of conduct
170 restricting their involvement (Clarke and Harwood 2014). As such, a case study approach
171 was seen as a beneficial approach to ensure that parents' voices could be acknowledged
172 within a naturalistic football academy environment.

173 *The case*

174 An important element within a case study is defining the case and going through a
175 process of "casing," where the boundaries of time and place are set (Crowe et al. 2011). For
176 an instrumental case study, where the social phenomenon within the case is the focus, a
177 "typical" case can work well (Crowe et al. 2011; Yin 2018). Thus, for the current study, this
178 particular football academy was chosen for being a typical example, and consequently
179 hopefully offering access to a broad understanding of the parent experience. The case was a
180 Category 1¹ British boys youth football academy, which was seen as "typical" of other
181 football academies due to the strict regulations imposed by the national governing body. The

¹ A category 1 academy is the highest status awarded to a British football academy by the Premier League for a high level of facilities and quality coaching.

182 children train for eight to 12 hours per week and can travel for up to 90 minutes to attend
183 training. They engage in regular home and away matches, tournaments, and festivals
184 throughout the year. Children aged 10 years and older have the option to take part in the
185 hybrid programme, where they attend the academy instead of school for one day per week
186 (completing compulsory education alongside their training). Within the academy there are
187 full and part-time professional coaches with a range of playing and coaching experiences.
188 Additionally, there are numerous support staff including an academy manager, education
189 officer, welfare officer, medical staff, physiotherapists, and strength and conditioning
190 coaches. The training venue contains a gym, classrooms, office space, and a mixture of grass,
191 3G, and indoor pitches. There is also a parents' lounge where parents may spend their time
192 during training sessions. The boundaries of the case were set as the foundation (under-9 to
193 12) and youth development phase (under-13 to 16), studied over a period of eight months.

194 *Participants*

195 The participants in this study included parents, coaches, and support staff. Based on
196 the aims, parents, coaches, and support staff were purposefully sampled to capture a range of
197 experiences from across the age groups within the youth football academy. The sampling
198 criterion was: 1) being a parent, guardian, or carer of at least one boy within the youth
199 football academy, and; 2) their son trained and played matches for the under-9 to under-16
200 teams. The sampling criterion for the coaches and support staff was; 1) be a full or part-time
201 member of staff within the youth football academy, and; 2) to work with the under-9 to
202 under-16 age group teams.

203 Informal data was obtained through the lead researcher's fieldwork in the form of
204 observations, informal conversations, and group discussions were collected over an eight-
205 month period. The researcher's role within the environment was that of a sport psychology
206 practitioner-researcher who, alongside the research for this case study, delivered monthly

207 parent meetings and a psychology programme to the players aged under-9 to under-16. This
208 data was supplemented with formal data collected through semi-structured interviews and
209 focus groups. The formal data collection occurred with 36 participants; 26 parents (three
210 parents took part in an interview and focus group), five coaches, and five support staff. The
211 parents were aged between 30 and 60 years, of children aged 9 to 15 years old, and 72%
212 described their ethnicity as White-British². A sample size of 36 was chosen to ensure parents
213 from each of the eight age groups across the academy were represented, to enable
214 experiences and recommendations for support to be understood developmentally. Coaches
215 and support staff were aged 20 to 60+ years (see Tables 1 and 2 for further details).

216 *Procedure*

217 Following University Ethics Board approval, a football academy was approached to
218 identify their interest in participating in this study. Following agreement, an information
219 sharing event was held for parents, players, coaches, and support staff to explain initial
220 research plans. At this session, parents were informed of the purpose of the study, the
221 combination of informal and formal data collection methods. A brief open-ended
222 questionnaire was also handed out to parents to gain their initial thoughts on support that may
223 be beneficial and their experiences. One example of the questions included was, “please
224 indicate the key areas in which you think you need support or guidance as a parent of a child
225 at the football academy.” The foundation phase session was attended by 58 parents and the
226 youth development phase session by 42 parents.

227 Following the introductory session, it was decided that, as part of the practitioner-
228 researcher role, the lead researcher would deliver monthly parent meetings. These meetings

² Due to the small number of Category 1 academies in the UK, and the relatively small numbers of parents associated with the academy, there were concerns regarding protecting the anonymity of the participants. The collection of any further demographic information (e.g., family structure, parental employment, household income) relating to each parent was deemed to threaten their anonymity and thus was not collected.

229 were introduced to enable parents to share their experiences, learn from each other, and seek
230 information from the researcher that may enhance their or their son's football experience.
231 These meetings played an important role in the data collection process, providing a 'real-life'
232 opportunity to identify the types of support parents needed and wanted. These meetings were
233 also important in ensuring that rather than only *using* participants for their insights, the
234 research team were able to provide immediate feedback and information to parents, enabling
235 them to benefit directly from their involvement. This mutually beneficial arrangement
236 facilitated the development of relationships, enabled both the participants and the research
237 team to have their needs met, and provided an opportunity for parents to reflect on
238 information they were provided with and subsequently indicate if this information did/did not
239 address their needs. Attendance at these meetings was voluntary, with attendance ranging
240 from one - 58 each month.

241 ***Data collection***

242 *Observations and fieldwork*

243 The lead researcher was embedded at the academy for eight months to gain an in-
244 depth understanding of the academy environment and culture, carrying out 1120 hours of
245 fieldwork. Parents, players, coaches, and support staff were informed, at the aforementioned
246 information sharing event, that observations would be taking place as part of this study. All
247 individuals were told that if they did not want to be included in any observations, they could
248 contact the lead researcher at any time. Additionally, prior to each observation, the researcher
249 would greet those present and make them aware that she was observing, which allowed
250 anyone who did not want to be observed to explicitly indicate this to the researcher or move
251 away if they wished. Following each observation, the researcher thanked and said goodbye to
252 those present to provide a clear ending to the observation.

253 The observations and subsequent fieldnotes were guided by Thorpe and Olive's
254 (2016) suggestions regarding when, how, and where to observe. The researcher observed
255 parents, coaches, and support staff at training sessions and matches, during player signings, at
256 performance review meetings, and parent meetings. Observations pertaining to parent
257 behaviours, discussions with parents, discussions about parents, the information that was
258 provided to parents, and the academy culture in relation to parents were recorded.

259 *Informal conversations*

260 A conversational approach was used to gain rich, naturalistic data from parents,
261 players, coaches, and support staff throughout the data collection period. These were free
262 flowing conversations that took place in a variety of locations, including at home and away
263 matches, the parents' lounge, office space, and in the canteen. The details were recorded as
264 field notes and within the researcher's reflexive diary. Informal conversations included
265 discussions around the tangible support parents were provided, coaches engagement with
266 parents, and the emotions parents experienced on match days.

267 *Formal interviews*

268 Twenty nine participants took part in formal semi-structured interviews. Interviews
269 were arranged for a mutually convenient time and took place in a semi-private room. The
270 interviews started after the lead researcher had been embedded in the academy for three
271 months. The interview guide was based upon previous research examining parent experiences
272 and support (Clarke and Harwood 2014; Harwood, Drew, and Knight 2010; Thrower,
273 Harwood, and Spray 2016). Initial questions focused on participants' history and experiences
274 within football (e.g., "what has been your experience as a football parent this season so
275 far?"). These were followed by the main questions that focused upon the transition from
276 grassroots to academy level football, perceptions of the current parent support provided, and
277 recommendations for future parent support. There were further specific questions for parents

278 for example, their beliefs on providing support to their son and relationships with
279 coaches/support staff (e.g., “how would you describe your relationship with your child’s
280 coach?”). Coaches and support staff also discussed their relationship with parents (e.g., “what
281 has been your experience of coach-athlete-parent relationships?”). Interviews concluded with
282 summary questions and an opportunity for participants to provide any further information
283 (e.g., “overall, summarise your experience of being a football parent this season”). Interviews
284 ranged from 15 to 113 minutes ($M = 38$ min, $SD = 21$ min), with additional time spent before
285 and after the interview discussing ideas more informally. To minimise additional pressures
286 for parents, interviews took place while their son was training. However, this resulted in
287 parents, on occasions, being called away unexpectedly to support their child (i.e., when
288 injured) and interviews were cut short. Despite the short length of these interviews they still
289 provided valuable insights, especially when combined with the other data.

290 *Focus groups*

291 Three focus groups were conducted with 10 parents, of which three also completed an
292 individual interview. Focus groups ranged from 43 to 77 minutes ($M = 46$ min, $SD = 18$ min)
293 and were conducted to enable group discussion among parents to facilitate more explicit
294 identification of similarities and differences in parents’ experiences and recommendations for
295 support. Focus groups began with parents detailing their background and experiences within
296 football, followed by discussions regarding their relationship with the coaches and support
297 staff, their experiences of attending their sons’ matches, the support they felt was currently
298 available, and the support they may benefit from. These topics were selected based on the
299 earlier interviews and observations.

300 *Data analysis*

301 The lead researcher analysed all data using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and
302 Clarke 2018, 2019, 2020; Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016). Reflexive thematic analysis is a

303 flexible process in which a researcher creatively identifies patterns of meaning within a
304 dataset relating to the research questions through reflexive and thoughtful connection with the
305 data (Braun and Clarke 2018, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen for the current
306 study as it enabled insights into each participant's individual thoughts, beliefs, and
307 experiences to be identified, which aligned with the lead researcher's philosophical approach.
308 Moreover, this analysis approach recognises the researcher's role in constructing the findings
309 from the information shared by the participants.

310 To conduct the analysis, the lead researcher first became immersed in the interview
311 and focus group data by listening back to the audio files and reading through the transcripts
312 several times. Alongside, she also re-familiarised herself with her fieldnotes, informal
313 conversations, and notes recorded in her reflexive diary. Throughout this process, the lead
314 researcher reflected on her reading of the data and documented her reflections in a notebook.
315 Initial thoughts were shared with critical friends the help her expand her thoughts and
316 reflections by questioning her understanding. She subsequently spent time contemplating the
317 data, before writing further reflections and considering how it would have felt to be a parent
318 of an academy footballer in order to fully immerse herself within the detailed experiences.

319 Next, the lead researcher generated initial codes from all the data based upon
320 recognised features to give basic meaning to the data. Themes were developed by collating
321 the codes generated and grouping them together. A mind map was used to combine the raw
322 themes together and integrate data into main themes and subthemes. For example, data
323 relating to parents' initial experiences, transitioning into the academy, excitement
324 experienced, the professionalism of the environment, and amazement of the opportunity,
325 were coded under the sub themes of *amazement of the opportunity* and *overwhelmed with*
326 *excitement*. Following this, the main themes were refined, reviewed, and reflected upon and
327 subsequently defined and named. For instance, a main theme was *excited and amazed with*

328 the sub themes of *amazement of the opportunity* and *overwhelmed with excitement by the*
329 *transition*. Specifically, the initial interpretations of data were questioned, and varying
330 representations of the initial themes were produced (Braun and Clarke 2019).

331 To enhance the researcher's reflexivity, other members of the research team continued
332 to serve as critical friends to provide an alternative perspective and encourage enhancement
333 of thought (Smith and McGannon 2017). As the data were being interpreted and the themes
334 developed, the lead researcher wrote analytical notes as preliminary ideas for the final
335 themes. She spent some time going through a process of contemplating the themes, spending
336 time away, and then returning to revise and edit as appropriate. Finally, the themes were
337 organised in relation to the research questions and a coherent account of parents' experiences
338 and recommendations for support were detailed. The process detailed helped the lead
339 researcher to identify not just the overt themes on the surface of the data, but also the implicit
340 meaning behind the detail within the data.

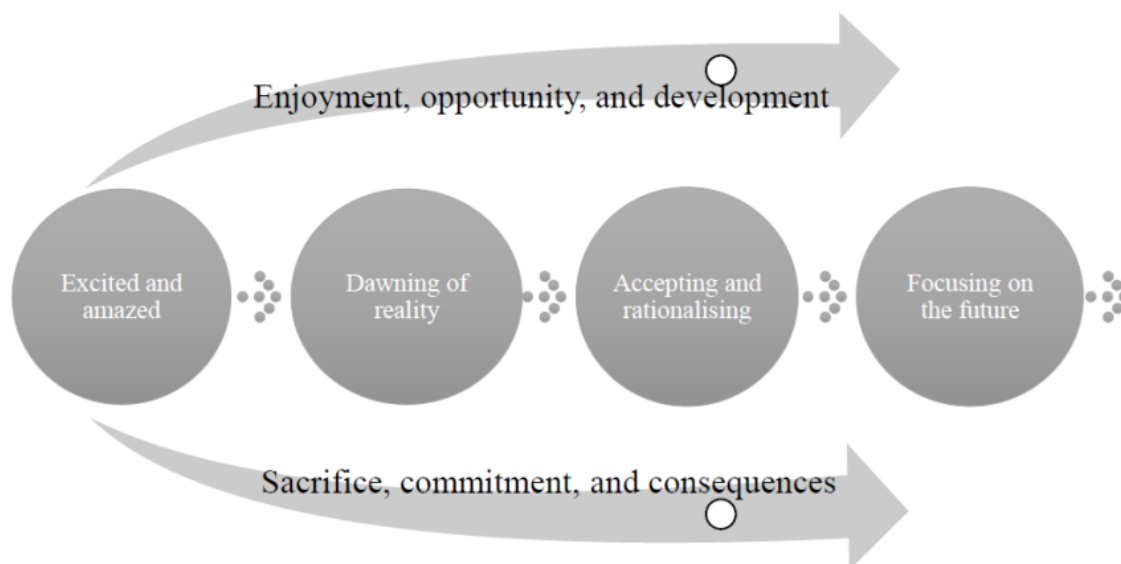
341 ***Methodological rigour***

342 Aligned with a relativist approach for judging rigour (Sparkes and Smith 2009), the
343 specific criteria for evaluating case studies was considered and applied throughout this study
344 (Stake 2005). The first criterion is to clearly identify a unique case where maximum learning
345 can occur. In an attempt to fulfil this criterion, the unique case of a British Category 1 boys
346 youth football academy where the parent experience and support recommendations would be
347 explored was selected and a detailed description provided. To create maximum learning from
348 a variety of perspectives this study included the triangulation of multiple views by using
349 interviews, focus groups, observations, informal conversations, and the lead researcher's
350 reflexive diary. Stake's second criterion is to study a small number of cases at length. This
351 was fulfilled by the lead researcher focusing on one particular case in the form of one football
352 academy, which was then studied in-depth over an eight-month period. The third criterion is

353 the appropriateness of the chosen case. Given the purpose of this study was to examine
354 parents' experiences and support recommendations in academy football, an established top
355 level academy was selected. The final criterion is to what extent the researcher will advocate
356 their position and be themselves within the research process. To fulfil this final criterion the
357 researcher kept a reflexive diary before and during the data collection process, and
358 throughout the data analysis. Within the diary the lead researcher reflected on their previous
359 experiences and their perceptions of the current case. In addition, the second author was used
360 as a critical friend to provide an alternative perspective, thus challenging and developing the
361 lead researcher's interpretations of the data.

362 **Results**

363 The purpose of this study was to understand parents' experiences and offer
364 recommendations for supporting parents within youth academy football. Two specific aims
365 were forwarded: 1) to understand the experience of parents across the lifespan of an academy
366 footballer, and 2) to develop recommendations for supporting parents at different stages of
367 their child's sporting journey. With regards to the first aim, it appeared that parents'
368 experience an ever-changing journey in the academy, comprising four distinct phases,
369 accompanied by two overarching themes (see Figure 1). In relation to aim two, the
370 development of a parent supportive culture, alongside the delivery of specific parents'
371 support sessions appeared to be particularly beneficial.



372

373 *Figure. 1. The factors within the parent journey through youth academy football.*

374 ***The football parent journey***

375 *Excited and amazed*

376 Players usually join the academy system at eight years of age (under-9 team), but they
 377 can be recruited after this. The excitement that parents experienced as their son completed
 378 their initial signing with the academy was evident throughout this study. Parents described
 379 being proud of their son achieving something other children had not and potentially having a
 380 successful football career ahead of them. Parents entered the environment amazed by the
 381 facilities that were available and the opportunities provided, such as professional coaching up
 382 to five nights per week, large amounts of free kit, and national and international travel. One
 383 under-9 father shared during an interview:

384 It was amazing. Still is amazing. Like I still can't get over it. You want to slow time down,
 385 because it's already January... I thoroughly enjoy it. I come down here with a smile on my
 386 face. You go and see where he's training. The facilities he's using. The people he's playing
 387 with. The people he's met. Where he's travelling... it's really incredible.

388 While a member of the support staff added in their interview, “what you tend to find is the
389 parents initially they’re all excited, they’re all buzzing to come in here to see what we’ve got,
390 to see what’s on offer.”

391 However, the academy environment is very different to parents’ and players’ previous
392 football experiences. So, although the parents were excited by the opportunity their son had,
393 they also appeared to be somewhat amazed by the professional nature of the environment and
394 the need for both them and their son to adapt their behaviours to align with this. One under-
395 10 mother commented on this transition during an interview:

396 Obviously, there is a big jump from grassroots to academy in the way that everything is run...
397 especially with physio, if they’re injured and obviously they get looked after. With grassroots
398 I suppose it is, you have to look at getting aftercare for them if they are injured... the standard
399 of football is [also] much higher.

400 *Dawning of reality*

401 Once children had been at the academy for around two years, the demands and
402 expectations of being involved appeared to become draining. In an interview one member of
403 the support staff said:

404 The expectations of the number of training sessions, the expectations of transporting them to
405 and from games, the commitment mum and dad have to give in terms of having to bring them
406 back and forth to the academy on their night, if they’ve got other children its difficult, I
407 couldn’t do it.

408 When joining the academy, parents had recognised the need to be committed, but the extent
409 of support required exceeded expectations. In addition to the day-to-day support needed to
410 maintain their son’s place, parents described encountering numerous unexpected demands.
411 These included, for example, completing online tasks, encouraging children to watch video
412 clips, and facilitating additional training sessions. As one under-11 mother shared during a
413 focus group, “we didn’t realise what kind of commitments it involved, it’s not that you don’t

414 know you're coming to training three times a week, but you don't realise now with the add-
415 ons, with the extras involved in it." The lead researcher had also described such frustrations
416 in her reflexive diary following an informal conversation with some coaches:

417 During a monthly meeting I had with the U11 and U12 parents, they appeared to be frustrated.
418 They do not feel they are being listened to, their views are not being heard and have become
419 frustrated by the system. My view is that the system needs to change rather than this
420 continuous frustration from both sides and continually arranging individual meetings to
421 'problem' manage.

422 Combined with the additional demands, parents also described becoming increasingly
423 aware and anxious of the review and release system³. Parents started to discuss their concerns
424 with each other, the coaches, and the research team. They explained that being out of control,
425 and unable to influence the decision regarding their son's future was particularly hard.
426 Parents' concerns regarding their son being released was made more difficult because they
427 were unsure how to provide the necessary emotional support. In an interview one under-11
428 father described:

429 The hardest part of being a parent in the academy, is trying to prepare them for that [review].
430 Because you never know, every review they go to, you don't know whether they are going to
431 say this is the last game you're playing... or not, so it's quite difficult to try and juggle that as
432 well as trying to keep their moral quite high as well... it just seems really cutthroat for
433 children so young.

434 *Accepting and rationalising*

435 After around four years at the academy, parents seemed to have accepted the
436 sacrifices and commitment needed to support their son. Parents became accustomed to the
437 culture and developed strategies to manage the demands; they made changes to their lifestyle

³ There are two times during each season (usually mid-season and towards the end of the season) when players may be released from the academy.

438 to maximise their time and reduce the impact on their careers and family life. Parents
439 described actively reducing their social life and focusing on gaining social support from other
440 parents within the academy. Such changes were made because parents accepted that they
441 were necessary if their son was to progress. As one under-13 mother described in an
442 interview:

443 ...it's the acceptance of, actually, if you want to support your son through this process you
444 have got to give things up. So, it's either, we carry on as normal and [son] loses out on the
445 opportunity, or your friends change. Your friends become the other parents of the academy
446 boys.

447 Accepting the demands of supporting their son, combined with their son becoming
448 more independent, resulted in parents feeling that the 'football parenting experience' was
449 now less demanding. For instance, their sons could now prepare their own food and kit before
450 training reducing organisational demands, as one under-14 mother described in an interview:

451 It's easier now that he's getting older and he can come home from school and he can get
452 himself ready and get his own food ready. But those earlier years were tough, because the
453 academy are putting their sessions on earlier because they're younger, but it's that logistic of
454 picking them up from school and getting them fed and getting them to [training venue].

455 *Focusing on the future*

456 Finally, as the children approached the end of compulsory education (age 15/16
457 years), parents appeared to become more aware of the pressures that their son was under at
458 school and the need to perform in football to secure a scholar⁴ contract. Parents wanted their
459 sons to have a backup plan in case they did not get a contract, but this was as parents were
460 often unsure of the available options. Consequently, parents relied on their social support

⁴ The scholar contract is the first contract a player receives that involves being paid to play football. As a scholar, players will attend the academy daily, while also completing some educational qualifications.

461 network to provide their sons with the informational support needed, as one under-15 mother
462 said during a focus group:

463 The child then has to make a decision really whether it's a football career that they want, at
464 this stage, or whether they want to continue on with A Levels? So, say, my son was absolutely
465 academically graded, A-Star grade in Maths and English and Science, and he wanted to be a
466 doctor,... then he would have to follow that route and football wouldn't necessarily be the
467 way forward for him.

468 Parents also indicated that providing emotional support to their son during this stage
469 was particularly hard. They wanted to help their son manage the pressures of football and
470 school, but struggled to communicate with them, often asking for advice on the adolescent
471 brain. Numerous fieldnotes were recorded on this topic, such as, "today parents raised
472 concerns about their lack of communication with their son. They described how they try to
473 engage in conversation, but he just grunts. They know he thinks deeply yet can't get any
474 information from him."

475 *Enjoyment, opportunity, and development*

476 Throughout the process of navigating the aforementioned individual phases, parents
477 described feelings of enjoyment arising from seeing their son's enjoyment and development.
478 The mutual enjoyment of football between parents and sons created a shared passion and was
479 one of the main reasons parents continued to support their son's involvement. Describing
480 such enjoyment, one under-10 father shared in an interview:

481 It is a journey, my son's journey that he's taking me on. I'm just happy to be part of it. The
482 hours have gone up massively, but so has the joy. I love watching him play. I'm the one that
483 will just stand and watch him and enjoy watching him play, and he loves the training.

484 Additionally, parents enjoyed supporting their son in the academy because they believed they
485 had an opportunity to gain more than just football skills. They recognised that it was unlikely
486 their son would become a professional footballer, but they thought the life skills their son

487 gained were equally, if not more, important. For instance, explaining why she supported her
488 son's involvement, an under-13 mother recalled during an interview:

489 He [her son] said "the academy has taught me so much". That was coming from his words
490 and I thought, the confidence, the comradery, what I really like is the respect he has for the
491 coaches; the shaking of the hands, the high fives. He takes that into his everyday life, he has
492 confidence to go up to anyone of our friends and shake hands whereas a lot of boys their age
493 don't like that or are uncomfortable.

494 Similarly, parents described the value they placed on the opportunities their sons had to
495 attend tournaments and festivals, which provided them with their first opportunities to stay
496 away from home and travel abroad. Parents particularly valued these opportunities because
497 they knew they were not available to many children.

498 *Sacrifice, commitment, and consequences.*

499 Although parents experienced continual enjoyment, they also experienced a
500 continuing sense of sacrifice and commitment, which had negative consequences for them
501 and their sons. Particularly, parents were concerned by the sacrifices their sons made to be
502 part of the academy, as one under-10 father shared in an interview:

503 Knowing what I know now I may have held him back from the whole academy structure and
504 kept him playing with his friends longer...I would say he's lost a lot of the friendships
505 through school and sleepovers on a Saturday night. He can't have them now, it's gone.

506 Parents also encountered their own sacrifices, which a coach recognised during his interview:

507 The amount of time the parents spend driving their kids, picking them up, driving them quite
508 a number of days of the week plus on a Sunday morning when it is a very early start,
509 supporting them in that is massive, the mileage on their cars must be unbelievable.

510 These sacrifices had personal consequences for parents. For example, parents described limits
511 to their career progression due to the time they had to commit to football, an under-10 father
512 shared in an interview, "it's probably held [me] back a little bit [...]because I would say up

513 until [son] started with the [academy] football I ...was thought of really highly but I've had to
514 take more of a back seat because I need to get him to training." Beyond their career
515 progression, the hardest thing for parents was sacrificing time with other children and family
516 members. One under-14 mother described during a focus group, "it does sometimes make me
517 feel guilty about my other kids, because they're obviously left alone... sometimes I do feel,
518 well I'm leaving them there on their own again."

519 ***Recommendations for supporting parents***

520 As outlined above, parents experience an exciting but challenging journey as their son
521 progresses through a football academy. Based on the lead researcher's observations, informal
522 conversations, and interpretation of the parent, coach, and support staff interviews it appears
523 that a combination of two key considerations are likely to have the greatest positive influence
524 on parents through this journey: The creation of a "parent supportive culture" alongside the
525 embedding of a "programme of support".

526 ***Creating a parent supportive culture***

527 Observations and informal conversations indicated that the experience of parents is
528 largely influenced by the culture that is created within the academy. A parent supportive
529 culture, created through small day-to-day actions, may help promote a positive culture
530 regarding parents, which increases the support they perceive and receive. Particularly, it
531 appears that the creation of a parent-positive culture, in which parents feel *welcomed*,
532 *respected*, and *valued* as a positive member of their son's support team, rather than a problem
533 to be dealt with, may lead to parents feeling better equipped to manage the academy parent
534 journey.

535 ***Facilitate an environment that is welcoming for parents.*** An academy environment
536 where parents receive a friendly greeting and are included as part of their son's learning and
537 development appears valuable because, as highlighted above, when entering the academy

538 environment, parents are excited and amazed before they enter the dawning of reality phase.
539 Creating a welcoming atmosphere may help parents adjust to the academy structure more
540 quickly and experience a smoother transition from grassroots to academy football. One
541 member of the support staff suggested during an interview that parents could be welcomed
542 into the academy by:

543 Coaches could do a session saying this is what we've been working on with the players,
544 philosophy of the club, how we work, and what we want the end product to be. Parents would
545 get a better understanding of what we're trying to do, as they need to know what's happening
546 to their child.

547 Moreover, if parents feel welcome in the academy, they will likely spend more time there,
548 engage with the support provided, and get to know other parents. Subsequently they can
549 access valuable information which will help them understand their son's experience, develop
550 coping strategies, and create a support network with other parents, all of which may be useful
551 as they enter the second phase of the journey. One under-13 mother commented during an
552 interview:

553 The parental support, having this building and the room upstairs is a big one, there's only so
554 much shopping that anyone can do. It's nice to be able to come up here and you can have a
555 chat, sort of find out what other information or confirming whatever was in an email or stuff
556 like that.

557 Overall, one member of support staff summed up, "it's important to embrace them [parents]
558 as much as we can, because they're an integral part of what we do."

559 ***Respect and appreciate parents' commitment.*** Throughout their child's footballing
560 journey, parents commit much time, money, and emotion, and make sacrifices in other areas
561 of their lives. These sacrifices and commitments are ever present, but particularly exacerbated
562 during the second stage of their journey. To support parents and help them to cope with the

563 sacrifices they are making it appears important to recognise their commitment and ensure that
564 parents are treated with respect. As a member of the support staff said in an interview:

565 You've got to respect the amount of time, financial commitment, effort, parents put in and
566 you have to respect that and you can't be blasé about it. Because when they're here 4 or 5
567 times a week and they're travelling distances, you've got to give them that respect, you've got
568 to really appreciate what they do.

569 Such respect is important as it demonstrates to parents empathy and understanding of the
570 challenges, stress, and pressure they experience. Overall, providing parents with respect may
571 be beneficial through all phases of the parent journey, but particularly useful to aid parents
572 transition into the *acceptance and rationalising* phase. It was noted within the researcher's
573 reflexive diary, "respect and support from the academy may help parents to feel more
574 supported and enhance the development of coping mechanisms."

575 Numerous strategies to demonstrate respect for parents are available. For instance,
576 recognising the organisational demands that parents may be facing and ensuring information,
577 particularly regarding changes to training or matches, is communicated in advance. As one
578 coach recognised, "[parents] need to know what is going on because they put a lot of time in,
579 so keep them informed about what we do." It was further noted in the researcher's fieldnotes,
580 that "when parents aren't communicated with they feel pushed out and that the academy does
581 not appreciate their commitment and the sacrifices they make." Thanking parents for their
582 time and commitment may also be an easy way to enhance parents' feelings of respect, as one
583 under-11 father shared during an interview, "that's all we want is just more respect.
584 Sometimes we feel like there's no understanding there about what we've actually got to go
585 through to make this happen."

586 Finally, recognising the challenging decisions that parents and players are having to
587 make during the final stages of the journey (*focusing on the future*) and respecting parents'
588 concerns and decisions relating to the educational offerings that are made available within

589 and beyond the academy seems valuable. Within the lead researcher's fieldnotes it was
590 recorded, "for some the academy has a positive impact on their education, as it gives them
591 motivation and focus. However, for others they appear to have a tough time combining
592 education and then find it challenging making career choices at 16." Thus, working with
593 parents to try and accommodate individual desires to study specific courses or qualifications
594 may be useful.

595 *Value input and feedback from parents.* To maximise parents', and subsequently
596 players' experiences, the final consideration within the culture that appears important is
597 ensuring parents are valued. Valuing parents for their role within their son's footballing
598 development is important, especially as parents' transition into the academy. Parents are
599 excited that their child has been chosen as one of the best youth footballers in the area and
600 want to support their son to maximise the opportunity. During a focus group a father of an
601 under-10 said:

602 I say to him "okay perhaps you need to have a look at this," but I'm not sure what they [the
603 coaches] are telling them in the training session, what they need to work on,... I'd like to
604 know the answer...personally I get frustrated that I can't help [my son].

605 It appears that demonstrating that the feedback parents provide is valued and acted
606 upon can help parents to feel more involved in their son's development. For instance, one
607 support staff member suggested during an interview:

608 Everyone can learn from feedback...If parents do suggest things, then it's taken on board and
609 one person might not be giving you the right information, but I hope that it is taken on board
610 and we can learn from that kind of feedback that we get and improve and implement different
611 things.

612 Similarly, parents shared during informal discussions that open lines of communication
613 between parents and coaches, with formal and informal opportunities to provide feedback and
614 suggestions for improvement, would help them feel heard. This may subsequently minimise

615 some of the frustrations parents encountered, particularly during the second and fourth stages
616 of their journey. The lead researcher recorded from the under-11/under-12 monthly meeting:

617 The parents erupted into an explosion of emotion, they had kept all of these frustrations to
618 themselves for quite some time as there was limited opportunity to express their feelings or
619 have their voice heard. Therefore, offering them an opportunity have these feelings heard on a
620 regular basis may help to reduce this built up emotion.

621 Additionally, getting to know the parents individually and understanding their
622 experiences may help coaches and support staff to build strong relationships with parents and
623 show that the academy values their involvement. For instance, one support staff member
624 recommended in an interview, “parents have only got the coaches to work with every six
625 weeks. Having a structure where there’s constant and regular opportunity to discuss what’s
626 going on with people other than the coaches, is important.” This genuine interest in parents
627 could help to minimise the challenges experienced throughout the journey, but particularly
628 during the dawning of reality phase because parents may perceive themselves as valued and
629 supported and subsequently more capable of managing the demands they encounter. One
630 coach recalled in an interview the challenges that one family faced:

631 From past experience of working with boys who have nothing, they tend to be the ones that
632 the parents will do anything to get them here... one lad used to get a train in on his own.
633 Fifteen and he would cycle from the train station up to the training ground and cycle back. We
634 found out the kid had nothing, he had no money, the parents used to let other siblings of his
635 go without just to give him money to come on the train.

636 By understanding this child’s family circumstances, the coaching staff could provide more
637 tailored support both to him and his parents to help enhance their experience at the academy.

638 *Deliver a programme of support*

639 In addition to cultural considerations, the provision of a formal programme of
640 support, tailored to different stages of the parent and child’s journey, was deemed valuable by

641 parents, coaches, and support staff. One under-13 mother recommended during an interview,
642 “help us be more supportive of our children that is conducive to their success,... anything that
643 the academy can give me to help me be a better parent to support him through the process
644 would be more than welcome.” The provision of a parent support programme may help
645 parents to anticipate the next phase of the journey and the upcoming demands. When
646 considering the development of such a programme, focusing upon tailored content with a
647 flexible and creative delivery approach, seemed most important as an informal conversation
648 with a coach illustrated, “some element of the delivery will need to be through informal drop-
649 in sessions or other resources to allow parents the opportunity to come in at a time that suits
650 them, rather than putting extra demand on parents.”

651 ***Provide developmentally tailored content.*** At the first phase of the journey (*excited*
652 *and amazed* phase), offering parents a formal induction can be beneficial. For first time
653 academy parents, a formal induction may be particularly beneficial because, as parents enter
654 excited and amazed, they may inadvertently increase the pressure children feel to succeed. In
655 an interview one coach suggested:

656 The biggest one for me is the parent’s expectations and managing them. You know because
657 the minute that their son steps over the gate to sign, the majority of parents think that their
658 son’s going to be a world beater and he’s going to be a multi-millionaire in a few years and
659 the stats back up that that’s not going to happen.

660 Helping parents to manage their expectations from the outset of the journey by, for instance,
661 offering parents realistic prospects of their son becoming a professional footballer may be
662 particularly valuable. One member of the support staff recommended during an interview:

663 I think it’s just educating them when they come in on the way we do things and why we do
664 things the way we do. Because a lot of parents don’t understand it, they come in here and see
665 us. They see the facilities and a lot of them can’t grasp the idea that their son might not be
666 ready to be here when they think they are.

667 Additionally, helping parents to understand the range of psychosocial benefits and life
668 skills their son will be gaining at the academy may provide parents with a better perspective
669 of the upcoming journey. The lead researcher noted within her fieldnotes, “the under-9s and
670 under-10s were keen to learn more about the journey ahead as they were unsure of what to
671 expect.”

672 Beyond the initial induction event, ongoing support sessions that comprise key
673 information and guidance tailored to parents’ and players’ current phase may help parents
674 manage their own experiences and provide more optimal support to their son. For instance,
675 when parents are approaching or in the *dawning of reality* phase, it may be useful to have
676 support sessions tailored to them offloading their demands, normalising their experiences,
677 and developing coping strategies. Plus, increasing their awareness of the performance review
678 process and increasing their feelings of being in control of the retain/release process. It was
679 recommended by a support staff member during an interview, “understanding the review
680 process, release process and how the decisions have arisen... have workshops where the
681 parents actually put themselves in our shoes and they understand what it’s like to sit at the
682 table and give a review.”

683 Leading into and during the *acceptance and rationalising* phase parents may find
684 support focused upon enhancing the effectiveness of their coping strategies, plus guidance
685 and information on the psychological and social development that occurs during the teenage
686 years helpful. Additionally, parents suggested that information to help them support their
687 child through injuries and becoming more independent may be useful at this time. It was
688 noted in the fieldnotes from the first monthly meeting, “the parents of the under-15 and
689 under-16 players wanted support to help them with the teenage years and overcoming
690 challenges, such as injuries and losing.”

691 Finally, leading up to and during the *focusing on the future* phase it may be helpful for
692 parents to be provided with more information regarding the scholarship process, expectations,
693 and their son's education options should they be provided with a scholarship. Parents may
694 also benefit from guidance regarding providing emotional support to their son during
695 particularly pressurised football and schooling phases. It was noted in the lead researcher's
696 fieldnotes, "managing the pressure on their children and the emotional demands of football
697 was a prominent stressor for parents."

698 ***Adopt a flexible delivery approach to meet parents' needs.*** As illustrated, providing
699 parents with various information and support through different sessions may be useful.
700 However, these sessions will only be useful if the delivery accounts for parents' competing
701 demands and interests. The lead researcher recorded in her reflexive diary, "the demands and
702 stressors on parents appears to be all consuming, so even though they want the support,
703 engagement is challenging." Thus, considering the best way to deliver such sessions to
704 minimise additional demands is important. For instance, face-to-face sessions (which
705 appeared to be most desirable within this academy) can be particularly beneficial because
706 they provide an opportunity to get to know parents and understand their background (e.g.,
707 education levels, football experience, work demands etc), which is useful to help guide the
708 specific information they need and how they would like to receive it (e.g., through formal
709 PowerPoint presentations, informal discussions, Q & A sessions etc). One under-14 mother
710 suggested during an interview, "dynamic, interactive, a classic group sort of thing. You could
711 get loads of flowing discussion...sit round a table discussing and debating...come away
712 thinking about all of those things." However, attendance at face-to-face sessions may be an
713 issue, as one under-12 mother said during an interview:

714 It's the time factor, because you have already got the traveling, getting them to
715 training...that's my time that has gone. Whereas if it was delivered in a different way, or it

716 was online, through newsletters or information, something interactive I could do that any
717 time.

718 Thus, scheduling sessions to coincide with training but also offering catch-up or drop-in
719 sessions that parents can attend around their busy schedule could facilitate maximum
720 engagement from parents within all phases. To minimise demands and increase attendance, it
721 might also be beneficial for parents to be able to bring other children or for other family
722 members (e.g., grandparents) to attend in their place. By encouraging parents to bring other
723 children and making sessions family-friendly, it may reduce parents' guilt. A coach
724 recommended in an interview, "when the sisters and brothers can come, the kids and the
725 siblings have got an activity to do. It could be some multisport thing, someone who did face
726 paints, some balloon making, like that type of thing."

727 **Discussion**

728 The purpose of this study was to understand parents' experiences and offer
729 recommendations for supporting parents within youth academy football. In support of Côté's
730 (1999) work, it was evident that parents experience a complex journey with their sons and the
731 support parents may benefit from changes in line with both their and their son's development.
732 Given such complexity, simply educating parents regarding "appropriate" behaviours or
733 involvement is insufficient. Rather, the findings of this study offer recommendations for
734 support taking into consideration the experiences of parents across the developmental phases
735 (Knight and Holt 2013b; Thrower, Harwood, and Spray 2016). Moreover, the findings point
736 to the importance of not only targeting support to parents through formal education or support
737 programmes, but also addressing the broader culture to enhance the overall sport parenting
738 experience (cf. Knight and Newport 2017; Knight 2019).

739 Within this study, the first phase that parents' experience supports previous research
740 suggestions that parents go through a transition when entering a new sporting environment,
741 such as a football academy, which requires parents to adapt to different relationships,

742 expectations, and experiences (Clarke and Harwood 2014; Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough
743 2015). It is important to consider this first phase when developing support for parents, as
744 parents' level of excitement may need managing to prevent it from inadvertently adding
745 increased pressure on to their son. As Anderson, Funk, Elliot, and Smith (2003) highlighted,
746 parents may start off providing support with good intentions, but even well meant support can
747 result in adding pressure to a child and reducing their enjoyment. The current study provides
748 further evidence of the importance of managing parents' expectations and helping them to
749 prepare for the journey ahead.

750 As found in other research (e.g., Burgess, Knight, and Mellalieu 2016; Knight and
751 Holt 2013b), although parents may learn the information as they progress through the journey
752 they would benefit from being provided with guidance and information upon entering the
753 academy. When they enter an environment parents may appear challenging and difficult to
754 manage, but they are often mis-informed and time should be spent providing them with
755 information and facilitating relationships (Gould et al. 2016). Given that parents may
756 unintentionally add pressure to their children, it is recommended that parents are provided
757 with an induction meeting early in their journey to help manage their excitement, and
758 establish realistic prospects for their child. In addition, creating a culture where parents feel
759 *welcomed* may help to maximise attendance and seek information from coaches and support
760 staff when required.

761 After a phase of excitement, the realities of being an academy football parent appear
762 to become apparent and the effects of the demands start to weigh heavily on parents. This
763 second phase aligns with the competitive, organisational, and developmental stressors
764 previously identified in football and tennis (Harwood, Drew, and Knight 2010; Harwood and
765 Knight 2009a; 2009b). These demands can have a negative impact on the parent experience
766 (e.g., Wiersma and Fifer 2008) and are often mutually shared between parent and child

767 (Hayward, Knight, and Mellalieu 2017). In addition, unique to academy set ups, parents
768 experience stress from the review and potential release process. Such stress may arise due to
769 parents having adjusted their identity and increased their sense of responsibility for their
770 son's football development (Clarke and Harwood 2014). Thus, providing a support
771 programme to inform and guide parents on how to support their child, cope with their own
772 emotions, and manage the organisational demands was understandably seen as important in
773 the current study. Furthermore, treating parents with respect and appreciating the
774 commitment that they give to supporting their child will go a long way in creating a
775 supportive culture for parents and potentially reduce the demands they encounter.

776 Although parents experience a number of stressors and demands, after becoming
777 accustomed to the culture and commitment required, they develop coping mechanisms such
778 as *acceptance and rationalisation*. The suggested strategies align with previous research
779 (e.g., Burgess, Knight, and Mellalieu 2016; Harwood et al. 2019), particularly recognising
780 that parents learn through trial and error, and past experiences. Previous research has
781 however, raised concerns about parents learning through trial and error (e.g., Burgess,
782 Knight, and Mellalieu 2016) because this will likely result in parents making mistakes before
783 the learning can occur, which could have a negative impact on their son's enjoyment and
784 development. Additionally, the current study suggested that it could take up to four years of
785 being an academy parent before parents' learn to manage the demands. This is four years in
786 which their and their son's experiences may be muted or diminished. Thus, actively creating
787 a culture that seeks to understand and minimise demands on parents could reduce the
788 emphasis on learning through trial and error, while also maximising parents' chances of
789 providing optimal support to their son (Knight, 2019). However, not all the stressors and
790 demands on parents can be reduced or avoided. Therefore, as highlighted in the current study,

791 combining a parent positive culture with an evidence based programme of support is
792 important (Lienhart et al. 2019).

793 In line with previous literature (e.g., Harwood and Knight 2009b; Lauer et al. 2010),
794 as players aged and approached the end of their compulsory schooling, the parents in this
795 study started to become increasingly concerned about their son's future. Parents wanted more
796 information on how to support their son to make career choices, as well as providing
797 teenagers with the emotional support to manage the increased sport investment and
798 educational demands (Elliott, Drummond, and Knight 2018). The findings indicate that
799 parents did not feel they had the necessary information or skills to provide the appropriate
800 emotional and information support to their son. Thrower, Harwood, and Spray (2017)
801 previously demonstrated that educating parents can go some way to overcome this limitation,
802 but the suggestion from the current study is that a parent positive culture, combined with an
803 education or support programme, would likely be more effective.

804 Running throughout the parent journey was a sense of *enjoyment, opportunity, and*
805 *development* as well as *sacrifice, commitment, and consequences* for parents and their sons.
806 This sense of enjoyment arising from seeing their son succeed and enjoy their sport, as well
807 as recognising the opportunities they were gaining supports previous research (e.g., Holt,
808 Kingsley, Tink, and Scherer 2011; Wiersma and Fifer 2008). Although such positive
809 emotions and experiences will hopefully have a positive influence upon children, ensuring
810 that these are not inadvertently interpreted as a source of pressure is important. Moreover,
811 given the strength of parents' own emotions, as they progress along their journey, ensuring
812 their goals and reasons for encouraging their child to participate align with their child's
813 motives seems particularly important (cf., Knight and Holt 2014).

814 Countering their enjoyment, the parents within the current study shared numerous
815 concerns regarding not only their own sacrifices and commitments, but also those of their

816 sons. Such concerns echo previous literature pertaining to parenting stressors (e.g., Harwood
817 and Knight 2009a, 2009b), but also illustrate parents' awareness of the demands being placed
818 upon their sons. Parents are often unaware of, or in some instances, actively encourage, their
819 children to engage in overly demanding training schedules at the expense of other areas of
820 their lives. However, this study clearly suggests that this is a concern for parents and one
821 which may require further consideration when developing schedules and also sharing them
822 (and their underpinning rationale) with parents.

823 *Limitations and future directions*

824 The findings of the current study are based on eight months of observations, informal
825 and formal interviews and group discussions, and extensive reflections. Nevertheless, the
826 findings should be considered within certain study limitations. Firstly, this study is a case
827 study and although these findings can be transferred to other environments, it is recognised
828 that this study was carried out in one academy and may not apply to all academies. There
829 may be cultural and contextual variations, for example the extent of the travel demands and
830 ethnicity of the parents, as the majority of the participants identified themselves as White-
831 British, so this may need consideration. Alongside this the family structures of the
832 participants within the case study are not known and as such may not be representative of a
833 diverse range of family arrangements. Consequently, it is recognised that future research
834 would benefit from exploring parent experiences within youth academy football across a
835 range of family structures and arrangements. Further, although this research provides
836 suggestions and an insight into the support that parents may find beneficial it does not
837 provide evidence on the effectiveness of the suggestions made or the practicalities of their
838 application. Future research examining the effectiveness of the parent support suggestions
839 and practicalities of implementing creative support methods would be useful. Furthermore,

840 the content of the support sessions requires identification and testing to provide guidance on
841 the topics that may be beneficial for parents.

842 ***Conclusion***

843 Overall, this study demonstrates the complexity of the parent experience within
844 academy football, along with recommendations for ways in which parents can be provided
845 with support. It has clearly illustrated that the parent experience is not the same for all parents
846 and that there are numerous changes that occur as children develop and progress through an
847 academy. Parents progress from feelings of excitement and amazement, to a period of stress
848 and challenge, followed by an acceptance of the experience before finally progressing to
849 concerns regarding their son's future and development. Given such ever changing
850 experiences, it is important that coaches, practitioners, and support staff spend time
851 developing relationships with parents to understand their current experience and subsequently
852 provide tailored support programmes within a supportive culture in which parents feel
853 welcomed, valued, and respected.

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1007 Table 1. Parent descriptive information.

Age of parent	Parent Gender	Age of child	Age group	Time at the academy	Children's years in football	Distance travelled to academy	Children in football
-	Male	8	U9	On trial	-	-	-
-	Male	9	U9	On trial	-	-	-
-	Female	8	U9	-	-	-	-
31-40	Male	9	U9	11 mths.	3 yrs.	50 mins	1
31-40	Male	9	U10	3 yrs.	6 yrs.	5 mins	1
41-50	Male	10	U10	1.5 yrs.	4 yrs.	60 miles	3
31-40	Female	10	U10	1 week	7 yrs.	60 mins	5
31-40	Female	10	U10	2 mths.	10 yrs.	56 miles	1
31-40	Male	11	U10/U11	6 yrs.	8 yrs.	2 miles	2
-	Female	10	U11	-	-	-	-
-	Female	11	U11	-	-	-	-
41-50	Female	10	U11	1.75 yrs.	6 yrs.	1.5 hrs.	1
41-50	Male	11	U11	3.5 yrs.	4 yrs.	52 miles	2
41-50	Female	11	U11	4 yrs.	6 yrs.	20 miles	1
31-40	Male	10	U11	2 yrs.	5 yrs.	15 mins.	1
31-40	Female	11	U12	4 yrs.	7 yrs.	15 mins.	1
41-50	Female	11	U12	4 yrs.	9 yrs.	5 miles	2
41-50	Male	11	U12	2 wks.*	8 yrs.	20 miles	1
51-60	Female	12	U13	1.5 yrs.	8 yrs.	40 mins.	2
41-50	Female	12	U13	7 mths.	13 yrs.	45 mins.	2
51-60	Female	13	U13	5 yrs.	7 yrs.	30 mins.	1
41-50	Female	14	U14	2.5 yrs.	7 yrs.	60 miles	1
41-50	Female	14	U14	2.5 yrs.	7 yrs.	1 hr.	2
51-60	Male	15	U15	5 wks.	11 yrs.	4 miles	1
41-50	Female	15	U15	6 wks.*	5 yrs.	45 mins.	1
31-40	Female	15	U15	3 yrs.	7 yrs.	20 mins.	2

1008 * Child was previously at the academy, but was released at a younger age.

1009

1010 Table 2. Coach and support staff descriptive information.

Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Time involved in football
20-30	Male	White - British	1.5 yrs.
20-30	Female	White - British	12 yrs.
20-30	Male	White - British	3 yrs.
20-30	Male	Mixed White and Asian - British	20 yrs.
31-40	Male	White - British	30 yrs.
61 +	Male	White - British/ Australian	61 yrs.
31-40	Male	White - British	5 yrs.
61 +	Male	White - British	50 yrs.
20-30	Male	White - British	6 yrs.
20-30	Male	White - British	-
41-50	Male	White - British	-

1011

1012